Published in final edited form as:

J Child Adolesc Psychiatr Nurs. 2008 November ; 21(4): 238–245.

Home is for Caring, School is for Learning: Qualitative Data from Child Graduates of INSIGHTS

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Abstract

Topic—Parent-Child Communication Behaviors

Purpose—The goal of this naturalistic study was to learn more about the communication behaviors that exist between school-aged inner-city minority children who completed a temperament-based intervention study and the significant adults in their life. A paucity of information exists about the communication processes in this population therefore, this paper addresses this gap.

Method—A grounded theory approach was used for data collection and analysis. Data were obtained from multiple sources including individual and group interviews of 36 first and second graders from three inner-city elementary schools, their parents and teachers. Data triangulation, member check and independent audit supported trustworthiness and credibility of findings.

Findings—Child communication behaviors involved being able to read the environment, respect others, do the right thing, and know how best to talk with others. Child findings were congruent with parent and teacher data and indicated that communication was driven by concerns for safety, community violence potential and embedded within strong cultural beliefs.

Conclusions—Nurses are in a unique position to educate both parents and children about the importance of developing and maintaining positive communication behaviors with each other. Positive communication behaviors may serve as a protective factor in promoting child safety in inner-city minority children.

Search Terms

Safety; inner-city; school-age children; respect; minority children; parent-child communication and temperament

Research involving school-aged children presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities. Because of age, developmental maturity level, limited language and conceptual skills and lack of life experiences, young children are not perceived as possessing rich and theory informing data about phenomena that affect them. Viewing children as unreliable and lacking in depth, researchers have often relied primarily on parents as informants and interpreters when examining the experiences of school-aged children. Data collection methods with children, such as individual interviews, art work, observation, or focus groups can also present unique challenges to data analysis and the integrity of the research (Bricher, 1999). On the other hand, it could be argued that the

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generally unguarded and trusting nature of school-age children along with their unique perceptive abilities makes them a contextually good source of sociological data.

Developmentally, the tasks of school-age children ages 6-12 involve mastery of schoolwork, establishment of same gender peer group, beginning competitive play, moving from fantasy to reality thinking, engaging in interactions with authority figures outside of those in the immediate family and developing reasoning and appraisal skills (Morrison & Anders, 1999). A child's developmental trajectory, behaviors and acquired values and beliefs are in part dependent on the quality of relationships and experiential interactions with those in multiple systems directly or indirectly known to and affecting the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

School-age children communicate best via play and simple verbal interactions that do not call for interpretation of nuances or exhaustive exploration of a subject. There are multiple strategies a researcher can use to enhance the child's level of comfort and support sharing of information. They include conducting interviews in a familiar place, using art as an interaction tool, using board games as a warm up activity, using an informal conversation tone, and providing a snack during the interview (Irwin & Johnson, 2005). Other techniques that are likely to facilitate communication with children include interviewing dyads or small groups of children together instead of one child alone, asking questions that are broadly focused and open ended rather than multiple, detailed, or overly specific questions; and using a tape recorder which allows the child or children to listen to their comments after the interview is completed. While a limited amount of research data exist about the communication processes between children and their parents or significant adults, even less is known about these processes in inner city school-aged minority populations.

Multiple studies have explored the relationship between urban neighborhoods, community characteristics (ie. level of violence, condition of buildings, housing availability, substance abuse, school performance, economic profile and employment) and child development and behaviors (Beyers, Bates, Pettit & Dodge, 2003; Roosa, Jones, Tein & Cree, 2003; Sheidow, Gorman-Smith, Tolan & Henry, 2001). When trying to understand behaviors of inner-city minority children, researchers also tend to focus on single parent status, number of children in the household, parenting abilities, social supports and parental employment status (Ceballo & McLoyd, 2002; Klein & Forehand, 2000; McLoyd, 1998; Murry, Bynum, Brody, Willert & Stephens, 2001). Two areas of research that have not received adequate attention are parent-child and teacher-child communication and the cultural context of these communication behaviors. Little information exists about the quality, content and manner in which children talk with adults or factors that dictate how and what parents or teachers communicate to children in general and in situation specific circumstances. Yearwood and McClowry (2006) found that parental communication with inner-city minority children is a complex process primarily driven by safety concerns, child temperament, and parent emotional state (whether the parent is tired, angry, overworked or overextended). Parents reported that their goal was to equip their children with tools that would help them maneuver, what at times, were dangerous community environments.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the cultural meaning of communication between children and their parent (s) and teachers from the perspective of inner-city minority children in first and second grade who had completed a temperament-based intervention. Parent-child and teacher-child communication will be referred to as parent-child communication throughout the paper. This qualitative study was a supplement to a larger quantitative prevention trial. Both studies were funded by the National Institute of Nursing Research (NINR).

INSIGHTS

The data that is presented here were collected from the child participants after they participated in INSIGHTS into Children's Temperament. This temperament-based intervention is a ten week selective preventive program conducted in primary grade classrooms in a large northeast urban city in the United States. The intervention consists of parenting and teacher workshops, and a universal puppet and drama therapy program for the participating children and their classmates. Parents, teachers and children are taught to recognize temperament styles and how the particular style can impact childhood behaviors. Temperament is the consistent behavioral style demonstrated by a child especially during stressful situations or times of transition (McClowry, 2003). The parents and teachers are also taught to use effective child management strategies to reduce common child behavior problems encountered in the classroom and at home. Children are taught empathy skills to improve their interactions with peers and adults and strategies to handle the daily dilemmas they encounter in the classroom, at home, or in the community. The program has shown efficacy in reducing child behavior problems (McClowry, Snow, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2005). A control group of children were exposed to a read aloud attention program only.

Method

Design

A grounded theory approach was used to explain the communication process between inner-city children who had completed a temperament-based intervention and the adults in their lives. Data collection and analysis were grounded in the reality of the experience of participants (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participants

A purposive group of 36 children (18 boys and 18 girls) were the informants in this qualitative research. The children were first and second graders, ages 7 and 8, who attended three urban elementary schools. They were predominately Black, primarily from families with single female head of household, and of lower socioeconomic status. All the children spoke English.

Data Collection

The study was conducted following Institutional Review Board approval. After parents completed the INSIGHTS intervention, they were asked by INSIGHTS team members whether they were interested in participating in parent interviews to explore parent-child communication and whether their child could participate in separate child interviews exploring the same topic. A mail out about the qualitative study was also sent to all parents who had been part of the INSIGHTS intervention study (N=91). Parents who expressed an interest in having their child participate (N= 36) were then contacted by the researcher. After a parent consented, child assent was obtained. All children who were told about the study by the researcher agreed to participate.

Data were collected during an 18-month period of time. All children were told that the researcher was attempting to learn more about how and what they communicated with the adults in their life. A semi-structured interview guide was used with all child participants. A sample of open-ended questions asked are listed in Table 1. Questions were constructed based on review of the INSIGHTS intervention curriculum and videotaped scenarios, temperament profiles and the experience of the research team in working with school-age children.

Data collection proved to be a challenge primarily as a result of data collection which occurred during school hours and in the schools. Access to the children was dependent on the number of children available in a particular school at a particular time and whether permission was obtained from the teacher to take the child or children from the classroom to conduct the interviews. Because of significant lack of space in all three schools during the school day, a consistent meeting space was not guaranteed for conducting the interviews. Data were collected from the children via individual interviews ($n = 4$) and small group format ($n = 13$). The interviews occurred wherever privacy permitted and included available classrooms, an activity room, school personnel office, the cafeteria or the auditorium. Group size was also dependent on school attendance and whether or not the child could be removed at a particular time from scheduled classroom activities from one or more classrooms. Children who participated in an interview with one or more other children were asked to raise their hand when they wanted to respond to a question and not to interrupt when another child was speaking.

The interviews were audiotaped with permission and lasted from 40-70 minutes depending on the size of the group, time of day and gender composition of the group. In most groups, the children asked to listen to a portion of the tape after the interview, a request that was consistently honored. Children tended to be more focused for longer periods in the morning as compared to the afternoon. In groups where only boys participated ($n = 3$) or when the group size was more than 4 ($n = 1$), more effort was necessary to keep the children on task. Allowing those groups some time to draw or play with the tape recorder at the outset helped to promote more active engagement in the task. Nevertheless, there were no interviews cancelled because of disruptive behaviors or refusal to meet with the researcher. Instead the children readily participated and remained engaged in the process. Children in dyad or small groups appeared more enthusiastic and relaxed during the interviews, answered questions from their personal perspective, concurred with their peers or offered additional information triggered by comments from a peer. Children seen individually although less expansive in their responses did respond to the questions posed. The number of children who participated by type of interview can be found in Table 2. Dyad groups ($N = 5$) were groups where two children participated together in the interview.

Data were also collected via persistent observation, attendance at informal parent meetings in the Parent-Teacher Association room, reading community newspapers, attending a school performance by the children, attending community meetings with school personnel, talking with school principals and walking or driving through the community.

Data Analysis

All data were analyzed using the constant comparative method of analysis as outlined by Glaser & Strauss (1967) and Glaser (1978). Transcribed tapes and fieldnotes were reviewed multiple times and key elements were identified, coded and sorted into core categories. Categories, in turn, were analyzed for properties, similarities and differences. Child data, as part of all data collected, were compared to parent, teacher, facilitator (INSIGHTS staff who delivered the parent, teacher and child intervention from the larger study) and observation data and were simultaneously incorporated during analysis. All data served to inform the emerging theory that explained the communication processes that occur between child participants and the adults in their lives.

Trustworthiness and credibility of the data were achieved via triangulation, independent audit and member check. Triangulation was achieved by the use of multiple data sources, multiple sites, different data collection time frames, interview groups of same and mixed gender children and different group sizes. Data collected were shared and discussed with the second author and an independent audit was conducted with two nurse research colleagues

at separate institutions who reviewed raw data, theoretical notes and a draft of study findings. Broad categories that appeared salient to the communication processes in these participants were shared with children as they became clearer to the researcher. For example, children in later interviews were told that the researcher had learned from children interviewed earlier that the week-ends were better times to talk with the adults at home because there was more time, less going on and they had the adult's attention. Other children agreed that this was true. Through this process of member check, the researcher was able to determine the relevance and fit of findings with child participants.

Findings

Findings from the child data included a description of the primary adult with whom the child felt comfortable communicating, the content of these communications, the timing of communications and child responses to adult messages. While the 36 children interviewed presented with a variety of temperament styles, thirteen met the criteria for the most challenging temperament (negative reactivity, high activity) while 4 presented with easier temperaments (cautious, social) as described by McClowry (2002; 2003).

Making things under control—Child participants overwhelmingly resided with females who were their biological, adoptive or foster parent. The primary maternal caregiver was the person with whom they felt most comfortable. One child's comment illustrated how many of the children felt when he said, "She makes things under control." Their maternal descriptions depicted someone who was positive, dependable and comforting. Youngsters described how their mother helped them to calm down when they felt angry or frustrated and also explained things to them. When asked to clarify, one youngster said, "When people explain things, it makes you feel better and you know what to do next time." Another child, however, thought that some adults over-explain things, "It feels like they're talking forever and I'm going into the ground." One female youngster whose father participated in the study said that she liked talking to him because he explained things to her in different ways which helped her to better understand.

Several of the youngsters identified their classroom teacher as someone they felt comfortable talking to especially when they were feeling angry or frustrated. These children viewed their teacher as finding time for them when they were needy and giving them support and helpful prompts that supported their learning within the classroom. In contrast, a number of the children stated that they don't talk to strangers because that could be dangerous.

Getting, doing and going—Getting, doing and going represented the focus of most of the conversations the children reported that they had with adults. Children reported talking to their parent about what they were getting or learning in school (such as reading, working on projects and doing math); situations occurring in their community (such as avoiding bad people, staying away from drugs, not getting jumped, being healthy, avoiding dangerous things and staying close to an adult); household matters (such as cooking or making things); what they found hard or frustrating (such as angry feelings or unacceptable behaviors); objects they wanted to get or places they wanted to go; and family history. In relation to safety, several children reported that their parent encouraged them to be a leader rather than a follower. Being a follower was viewed as being vulnerable, setting oneself up for getting into trouble and putting the individual in a position where they were led by others to do inappropriate things. Leaders, on the other hand, were viewed as independent thinkers who were not swayed by others. One 7 year-old girl stated, "My mother told me not to be a follower, to be a leader and tell other people when they are doing something wrong."

A number of children spoke about the importance of respecting others, especially adults, in their verbal and behavioral communications. Respect was a salient value that parents also reported that they strive to instill in their children.

Watching for the good mood—When asked, “When is the best time to talk to your parents?” the children described being sensitive in “reading” their environment and the people in it. Children reported that they look at facial expressions of the adult to first assess their mood state. If a parent appeared tired, angry or busy, the child tended to wait before communicating. As one child stated, “I see how she looks and acts...I stay away so I don’t get on her nerve.” They also identified times when parents were less preoccupied, not as busy and more attentive to conversation such as the weekend (when there was more time and the parent was not working), on the way to and from school, and just before bedtime. While most children felt that they could talk to their parent about everything, there were a few who responded “nothing” to this question. These children may perceive that they don’t have the type of relationship with significant adults where they feel free to ask questions or discuss a variety of issues or they may feel less skilled at adequately reading the adults in their environment.

The timing of the conversation was also relevant to the children’s own emotional state. One youngster said that when upset, she will first, “Try to calm myself by going to my room and then I will talk to my mother later -- when I am calm.” Other comments and behaviors indicated that the children were responsive to both adult emotional state and environmental cues. At times they chose to avoid worrying or provoking reactivity from the adult with whom they were in contact.

Child responses—Analysis of the child response data revealed three major responses, ‘doing the right thing’, ‘if you do good you get more’ and ‘putting it in a way that I know.’

Doing the right thing—Most of the children were very aware that doing well in school was valued by their parent. Parents viewed academic success as a vehicle for staying out of trouble, promoting self-esteem, and potentially ensuring future success in life. One youngster expressed a different perspective when she stated, “My house is more important than school. My house is for caring and school is for learning.” When asked to explain her comment further, she said that she had learned at home that caring about others and doing good things were the most important things in life.

Doing the right thing also included honesty. Some of the children reported that while they might delay telling their parent when they had problems in school or didn’t do well on a test, not telling at all was not a good option because it resulted in unfavorable consequences when the parent found out. As one youngster put it, “My mom says if you tell the truth and be honest, you won’t get in trouble. But if you lie, you’ll get in trouble and get a punishment. So, I tell.”

One of the ‘right’ things children learned, and in which there was agreement by parents, was to respond to aggression with aggression. All the children were clear that they were told to hit back if someone touched or hit them. Although telling an adult was important, it was not necessarily the first thing they were encouraged to do by their parents. Parents and children felt that not responding to acts of aggression resulted in being viewed as both vulnerable and as a potential victim. In the community where these youngsters lived, such an option was not regarded as safe. However, in the classroom, the teacher expectation was that acts of aggression be reported rather than the child responding to aggression with aggression.

Putting it in a way that I know—Most of the children reported that they felt more comfortable getting the adult at home to explain things in a variety of ways but were more cautious in school asking their teachers to re-explain something they did not understand. . Most of the children used examples from the classroom about what they do when they don't understand what is being taught or asked of them. A few children said they would ask the person talking to slow down. Others said they would raise their hand and tell the teacher that they did not understand or ask the teacher to show them in a different way. One child said that when confused, he starts to think of other things (doesn't stay focused) but, "If they (adults) show me what to do, I can do the rest." Another strategy some children reported using was asking a peer. In classrooms where children described their teacher as less approachable they stated they would not ask for clarification nor did they feel comfortable sharing when they did not understand something.

At home, children reported feeling very comfortable telling their parent that they did not understand. One youngster stated, "My mother is always there for me. She puts it in a way that I know."

If you do good, you get more—Consistent with their ability to 'read' the environment, the children appeared to have a cautious regard for their parent when it involved asking for something like a toy or to stay up late to watch a TV show. All children said they felt comfortable approaching their parent with requests but very few described resorting to nagging, challenging or extreme behaviors. Responses such as "I wait," "I do good in school," "I accept no," or "I earn it / use my own money," were frequently described. Those children who responded differently said they would, "Give her a sad face," "Yell," or have "A temper tantrum." Children reported however that these acting out behaviors rarely worked. Other children used a problem solving approach involving a bargaining process with clear steps to get what they wanted. The first step would be to try to do something that was seen as a value to the parent such as improving their school work or cleaning their room. They would then try to negotiate to achieve their goal The communication behaviors used by participants were chosen based on specific context, situation and perception. For both children and adults, safety was the critical factor in communication behaviors chosen.

Discussion

The realities of day to day events and circumstances within particular environments must be taken into account and balanced with the core elements of the research method that is used. Inner-city minority children are often raised in communities identified with violence, poverty and poor academic performance. Very little data exists describing the communication processes between children and significant adults from these communities. This study sought to learn more about the meaning of parent-child communication, within a cultural context, of an inner-city minority child population that had completed a temperament based intervention.

The findings presented here are what Sandelowski calls a 'subject cut' (2006). Subject cuts refer to the highlighting of data from a subset of individuals from the larger study population to better understand how they informed or influenced the findings. All qualitative data collected from parents, children, teachers and facilitators were analyzed and resulted in a grounded theory, 'Duality in context' (Yearwood & McClowry, 2006) which described the process of preparedness that is central in the parent-child communication behaviors of this population. Communication behaviors between children and adults are based on environmental factors and critical information and skills that the child must have and master in order to succeed and survive. The child data or 'subject cut' described here are congruent

with parent and teacher data and illustrates how the children have incorporated conversations with adults into their thinking and actions.

The children described in this study have been raised in a manner that is intended to keep them safe and knowledgeable. In the context of neighborhood environments that are sometimes dangerous and unpredictable, their ability to quickly make an assessment of the environment and people in it may serve as a protective factor. Most children viewed their parents as dependable and comforting adults who communicated openly and truthfully with them about a variety of things. At the same time they were knowledgeable about when to approach and how far they could push their parent. Some of their caution stemmed from their sensitivity to the fact that most parents were single, working and / or caring for several children. Children verbalized awareness of parental stress and having to work hard, and didn't want to add to parental burden. Children were also fairly sophisticated about negative forces in their community and verbalized ways to avoid falling victim to these forces, information that had been communicated to them from both parents and their teachers.

Parental values of respect, standing up for oneself (verbally and physically), and doing well in school were values that the children frequently talked about. They understood that such values had been communicated to them by caring parents so that they could successfully navigate their community. Respect, as described by Anderson (cited in Rich and Grey (2005) is an informal "code of the streets" and means, "Receiving the deference that one deserves."

Disrespect, on the other hand equates with, "Being a loser or trash" (Walker, 2001). Respect in high-risk urban environments is a central tenet which is frequently discussed and which is frequently demanded. It serves as a protective shield, guarding the individual from physical, emotional or psychological harm. Viewed in this way, any act of perceived disrespect removes the shield, rendering the individual vulnerable. An act of disrespect requires an action / reaction to reinstate the protective shield. Ignoring cultural values and the uniqueness of the individual while focusing on weaknesses, deficits or stigma is also viewed as disrespectful as pointed out by Walker.

Study Limitations

Findings from this study may have been influenced by the fact that child participants had completed a ten-week preventive intervention that taught them skills to improve their interactions with others and to handle common childhood dilemmas. Therefore, because this was a unique population, findings cannot be generalized to other inner-city first and second graders. Another possible limitation was the variability in which the child interviews were conducted (individual, dyad or small group). Lastly, qualitative data were not collected from the Read Aloud Control group of child participants. It would have been worthwhile to compare the communication behaviors of those children with the group that received the INSIGHTS intervention.

Recommendations

Additional studies on communication behaviors among school age inner-city children and the adults they interact with are needed. Obtaining both verbal and nonverbal (observational) data in multiple environments about how children and adults (ie. parents, teachers, clergy and older siblings) interact and communicate with each other around certain issues such as decision making, school performance and peer relationships would be valuable contributions to the sparse body of knowledge that exists on parent-child communication behaviors in inner-city children. It would also be beneficial to follow parent-child dyads longitudinally to assess changes, complexity and effectiveness of their communication behaviors.

Children in this study displayed positive regard towards the significant adult in their life and were clearly learning and using survival skills taught to them. Nurses can play a significant role in developing interventions that support and foster positive communication and relationships between children and significant adults, especially in at-risk communities. These skills may serve as critical protective factors in keeping children safe.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by a National Institute of Nursing Research (NINR) minority supplement grant to the first author.

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Table 1**Sample Interview Questions for Child Participants**

1	Tell me about the types of things that you talk with your parents about.
2	When is the best time to talk with your parents?
3	When you are in a store with your parent and you see something that you want, what do you do?
4	Tell me what happens if your mom tells you it is time to get dressed and you are watching your favorite TV show.
5	What happens when your parent or teacher says something to you that you don't understand?
6	You get upset in school, what do you do or say? When you get home, what do you say to your parent about your day?

Table 2

Child Participation by Interview Type

# of children present by type of interview	Individual interviews	Dyad interview (2 children present)	Small group interviews (3 children present)	Small group interviews (4 children present)	Small group Interviews (5 children present)	Total
Incidence	4	5	4	3	1	17
Total children by type of interview	4	10	12	12	5	*43

* 7 children (3 boys and 4 girls) were seen twice because initial interview was interrupted before completion.