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Paternal Reflective Functioning and Its Impact on Joint Play

Julie Gurgova, Occupational Therapy Doctorate;

Amber Cope, Ph.D. candidate, LIU;

Amiya Waldman-Levi, Ph.D., OTR/L, Katz School; Dr. Sara Haden, Ph.D., LIU

ABSTRACT

Reflective functioning (RF) is the ability of a parent to understand and be more aware of their own internal mental state, thoughts and reasoning. It is unclear if RF influences joint play between fathers and sons, so the purpose of the study was to examine if fathers with higher RF are more supportive in their play with their sons compared to fathers who have both a lower RF and a higher endorsement of traditional masculine ideology. Twenty English-speaking, predominately married Caucasian fathers of typically developing sons ages 3-9 were recruited for the study. Videos of 15-minute, joint-play sessions recorded at home were analyzed using the Parent Support of Child Playfulness Scale. Surveys were given using the Male Role Norms Inventory-Revised scale and the Rumination-Reflection Questionnaire. An analysis revealed a significant correlation between a father's higher RF and a lower view of traditional masculinity ideology, and vice versa. Results also indicated there was no significant correlation between the father's RF and support provided to his son during joint play.

INTRODUCTION

Research illustrates that fathers play a significant role in their child's development (Benbassat & Priel, 2015) and in Western societies, fathers are more involved with their children and with child-care responsibilities (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2021). Although there is an abundance of research evaluating the relationships between mother and child, there is a gap analyzing the relationships between fathers and sons.

Masculinity and gender-role beliefs may impact the relationship between father and child and their ability to participate in joint play (Benbassat & Priel, 2015). Father-son relationships and their manifestation of masculinity can specifically impact aggressiveness and the son's identity and social-emotional development (Casselmann & Rosenbaum, 2014). Father-son relationships can also be impacted by parental reflective functioning (RF), which is the ability for a parent to understand their own feelings, desires, beliefs and the reasons they do what they do in themselves and others (Borelli et al., 2016). Fathers' RF is unique in that it has a role as a socializing agent (Benbassat & Priel, 2014). However, whether play between father-son dyads is impacted by fathers' RF and how he perceives his masculinity is understudied.

This study aims to fill this gap in RF literature allowing occupational therapists (OT) and other pediatric clinicians insight on parent-child relationships and play engagement. Play engagement is linked to the child's ability to emotionally express themselves, self-regulate and higher cognitive processing (Bergan & Fromberg, 2009; Howard et al., 2017).

Hypotheses:

- (a) The higher the father's RF, the more supportive the father is with his son in play.
- (b) The higher the father's endorsement of traditional masculine ideology, the lower his RF.

METHODOLOGY

20 father-son pairs were recruited for this observational study:

- Inclusion Criteria:
 - children with no known neuro-divergent diagnosis
 - children ages between 3 and 9 years
 - understanding of written and spoken English
 - fathers who identify as heterosexual
 - in cases where a parent has more than one child in the age range, the oldest child was recruited for the study
- Exclusion Criteria:
 - no internet or stable connection
 - technology with poor video or audio quality
 - not located in the United States



Measures:

- Parent/Caregiver Support of Child Playfulness (PC-SCP; Waldman-Levi & Bundy, 2016)—assessment tool used to measure parent support of the playful behavior of the child
- Male Roles Norms Inventory-Revised (MRNI-R; Levant et al., 2007)—measures an individual's endorsement of traditional masculine ideology
- Rumination-Reflection Questionnaire (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999)—measures parents' ability to reflect on their parental practices and thought toward their child and child's actions

Procedures:



RESULTS

Sample consisted of 20 typically developing children and their fathers. Fathers were predominantly married (70%), average age 40.4 (SD=5.4). Children's average age 5.9 (SD=1.9; range 3-9 years old). 85% of father-son pairs lived in an urban area. 85% of father-son pairs received a higher education degree (bachelors, master's or doctorate). Fig. 1 presents demographic characteristics.

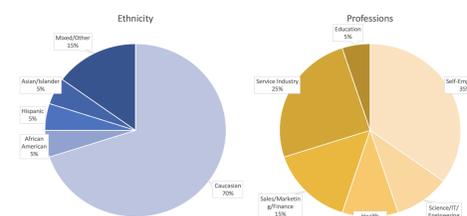


Figure 1: Demographic Characteristics

Table 1 presents the sample of fathers' scoring: they appeared to be supportive in their child's playfulness and scored moderate to high in reflection, low on rumination, and low in endorsement of traditional masculine ideology.

Father Support of Child Playfulness, Child's and Playfulness, Father's Reflective Functioning, and Father's view on male role norms

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean (sd)
PC-SCP Quality	1.76	3.00	2.54 (.35)
Reflection	2.17	4.75	3.71 (.70)
Rumination	1.00	4.58	2.86 (.97)
MRNI Total	1.00	4.42	2.58 (1.09)

Note. N= 19-20; PCSCP- Parent/Caregiver Support of Child's Playfulness; MRNI-R Male Role Norms Inventory

Table 1: Scoring

Table 2 shows the correlation between fathers' RF, his support in play with his child and his endorsement of traditional masculinity ideology.

Associations between Father Support of Child Playfulness, Child's Playfulness, Father's Reflective Functioning, and Father's view on male role norms

	1	2	3	4
1. MRNI	1			
2. PCSCP	.09	1		
3. Reflection	-.51*	-.12	1	
4. Rumination	-.10	.17	.31	1

Note. N=19-20; PCSCP- Parent/Caregiver Support of Child's Playfulness; MRNI-R Male Role Norms Inventory; *p<.05

Table 2: Correlation Values

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

- First hypothesis was rejected; there was no significant correlation between a father's RF and support provided during joint play.
- Second hypothesis was accepted; the higher the father's RF, the lower his endorsement of traditional masculine ideology, and vice versa.
- Identifying paternal behaviors and views can help OTs develop interventions that foster children's development, social skills and future relationships.
- This study presents a subset of a larger study; the current study subsample is small and recruited via convenience sampling method.
- Findings differ from past literature. This may be because this study explored father-son dyads vs. mother-child dyads explored in past studies and/or other variations beyond the scope of this study.

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