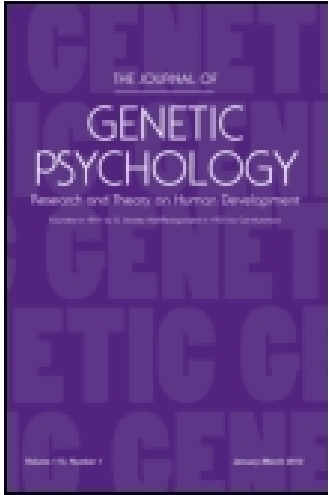


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PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MOTHERS
OF AGGRESSIVE AND UNAGGRESSIVE CHILDREN*

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A. IN A RECENT STUDY

In a recent study Sears, Maccoby, and Levin (1957) have made an important contribution to our knowledge of the way in which methods of discipline adopted by mothers in bringing up their children affect the personality of the child. As far as the child's aggression is concerned, two dimensions of maternal attitude emerged as having a significant effect, namely (1) the degree to which the mothers used physical punishment to try to stop their children's aggression: the effect of physical punishment appears to be to increase the amount of aggression the child displays; (2) the amount of permissiveness the mothers allow towards their children's aggressive behaviour: here it appears that permissiveness of aggression increases the child's aggressiveness.

The present paper reports an investigation whose object is partly to throw light on the possibility that an inheritance factor could account for the Sears findings and partly to integrate Sears' work with the general personality theory advanced by Eysenck (e.g., 1954, 1957). It is evident that if a mother's punitiveness towards aggression or permissiveness of it are related to the personality dimensions underlying aggression, then the possibility that Sears' findings are due to inheritance becomes an important one. It is here that the work of Eysenck has a bearing on the problem, since he has done something to isolate the personality dimensions related to aggressive behaviour. In this work, Eysenck (1954) and his associates have shown that aggression is related to the personality dimension of introversion-extraversion, in that aggressiveness and extraversion are associated. This work has been confirmed by the present writer (Lynn, 1959), who has also found some evidence that aggression is negatively correlated with the personality dimension of neuroticism. These findings, taken together with the evidence from twin studies that individual differences in extraversion and neuroticism are determined to a considerable extent by heredity (Eysenck and Prell, 1951; Eysenck, 1956; Shields, 1958), suggest that the tendency to develop

* Received in the Editorial Office on December 7, 1959.

aggressive techniques may be substantially determined by the inherited constitutional factors of introversion-extraversion and neuroticism.

The possibility that these factors may underlie the findings of Sears and his associates can be tested in the following way: if a mother's punishment of aggression (or permissiveness of aggression) is simply a reflection of her own tendencies to behave aggressively in general, then mothers who score high on punishment of aggression (or permissiveness of aggression) should be extraverted or emotionally stable or both. The present paper reports an investigation designed partly to examine this question and partly to repeat the Sears study using more objective techniques of measurement.

B. THE INVESTIGATION

1. *The Subjects*

The children were the entire population of two village schools in Devon, age range 7-11, $N = 108$. Their mothers were invited to special meetings of the parent-teachers' association at which 48 mothers were tested.

2. *Procedure*

The children were assessed for aggressiveness on a five point scale by two teachers from each school and the scores summed to give an aggression score. As far as the mothers are concerned, extraversion and neuroticism was assessed by the Maudsley Personality Inventory and attitudes of punishment and permissiveness towards children's aggression by two scales devised by Sears. These scales are in the form of statements mothers are alleged to have made about dealing with aggression from their 5-year-old child, and S has to record agreement or disagreement with the mother's attitude on a five point scale. For example, the first statement of the permissiveness scale was "I want my children to know right from the start that it's wrong to disobey their parents." In the present investigation Sears' punishment of aggression scale has been divided into those statements specifically involving physical punishment and those where some other form of punishment is implied. The physical punishment statements are numbers 8, 10, 11, and 13 in Sears' scale, and the first of these was: "When Jim loses his temper, I just give him a good paddling on the rear—this is something he won't forget." This scale is here called the physical punishment scale.

3. *Results*

The product-moment correlations between the variables measured are set out in Table 1.

C. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Sears' finding of a positive correlation between a mother's use of physical punishment and the aggressiveness of the child is clearly confirmed at a significant level. The present finding further does something to dispel criticisms of some of the technical aspects of the Sears study, namely the use of

TABLE 1
PRODUCT-MOMENT CORRELATIONS BETWEEN DIMENSIONS OF MOTHERS' PERSONALITY,
ATTITUDES TO CHILD REARING, AND THE CHILD'S AGGRESSION

	r
Mother's physical punishment × child's aggression	+ .36*
Mother's non-physical punishment × child's aggression	-.16
Mother's permissiveness × child's aggression	+ .07
Mother's physical punishment × extraversion	-.31*
Mother's non-physical punishment × extraversion	-.28*
Mother's permissiveness × extraversion	+ .08
Mother's physical punishment × neuroticism	+ .38*
Mother's non-physical punishment × neuroticism	+ .29*
Mother's permissiveness × neuroticism	-.03
Mother's extraversion × child's aggression	+ .39*
Mother's neuroticism × child's aggression	-.17

* Significant at the .05 level.

the mothers' own comments for the assessment of the aggressiveness of the children and their own attitudes to it; there is a possibility that punitive mothers may have regarded their children as more aggressive without the children being so in objective fact. The present finding of a correlation using fully objective and independent measures of the child's aggression adds confidence to the Sears finding.

The findings concerning permissiveness do not confirm the Sears results so well. The mothers' scores on the permissiveness scale have virtually no correlation with the child's aggression. It is possible that the non-physical punishment scale is really a permissiveness scale (e.g., the first item of the scale was: "Yesterday Mark deliberately dumped a box of soap on the floor, and I decided the best way to handle it was to call off our afternoon walk") but in view of Sears' method of assessing permissiveness by expert evolution of tape recorded conversations with the mothers it is impossible for the independent investigator to be certain of the exact implications of the term. However, assuming that the non-physical punishment scale is a permissiveness scale in Sears' sense, it is perhaps worth noting that the correlation obtained is in the expected direction (i.e., permissiveness produces aggression) and that it is of the same sort of size as Sears' own correlation of + .23. In so far as the present findings fail to confirm Sears', two

explanations can be suggested: first, the different techniques for assessing permissiveness in the two studies; secondly, Sears assessed aggression in the home, while in this study the teachers were necessarily assessing aggression at school. It is possible that the permissively reared child is aggressive to his parents but not to other children. If this were so, the difference between the findings of the two studies would be explained. There is, however, a third point that should be noted: namely that permissive mothers tend to be extraverted and non-neurotic. If the correlations of the mothers' extraversion and neuroticism with the non-physical punishment scale and the child's aggression are partialled out, the partial correlation of non-physical punishment with child's aggression falls to .00. Since extraverted and stable mothers will tend to have aggressive children by virtue of inheritance, it is evidently important to control the hereditary variable if permissiveness is to be established as an important environmental influence.

The child's aggressiveness correlates positively and significantly with the mother's extraversion as would be expected from Eysenck's theory linking aggressiveness with extraversion and his work demonstrating an important inherited factor determining introversion-extraversion. The most striking finding of the investigation, however, is probably the tendency of introverted and neurotic mothers to be more punitive towards their child's aggressiveness. It appears that here is an exception to the general non-aggressiveness of the introvert and the neurotic; presumably introverted and neurotic mothers are more disturbed by signs of aggressiveness in their children and are willing to use greater degrees of physical punishment to achieve (as they think) the greater good of socializing their children to the level of their own high standards.

This finding has two important implications. In the first place, it suggests that Sears' correlation between the mother's punitiveness and the child's aggression cannot be explained by inheritance, since on the inheritance hypothesis the punitive mothers should be extraverted and stable whereas in fact the reverse is the case. It looks therefore as if the amount of punishment of aggression the mother imposes is a genuine environmental variable affecting the aggressiveness of the child.

Secondly, it appears that typically the inheritance factor and the amount of punishment for aggression imposed by the mother work against one another in determining the level of aggressiveness of the child, e.g., a child of an introverted and stable mother will tend to be unaggressive by virtue of his inheritance but aggressive as a result of the high standards of socialisation imposed on him. This suggests that the correlation of the mother's

punitiveness and the child's aggressiveness should rise when the correlation of both with the mother's extraversion and neuroticism is partialled out: and in fact the partial correlation is $+ .69$. The present investigation suggests therefore that the highly aggressive child is a product of three factors, the two constitutional factors of extraversion and emotional stability and the environmental factor of the degree of physical punishment imposed by the mother; and furthermore that it is only atypically that the environmental factor acts in conjunction with the constitutional ones.

D. SUMMARY

Sears, Maccoby, and Levin (1957) have reported that the aggressive behaviour of the child is related positively to the mother's use of physical punishment and her permissiveness of aggression. The present paper reports an investigation designed (1) to repeat this study on English school children using objective and independent measures of aggression and mothers' attitudes; and (2) to test the possibility that the Sears' findings could be due to the inheritance of aggressive tendencies mediated by the personality dimensions of introversion-extraversion and neuroticism.

The following results were obtained: (1) there is a significant tendency for high punishing mothers to have aggressive children and a less clearly marked tendency for permissive mothers to have aggressive children; (2) when the personality dimensions of introversion-extraversion and neuroticism are partialled out, the correlation between the mother's use of punishment and the child's aggression rises substantially but the correlation between the mothers' permissiveness of aggression and the child's aggression falls to zero. The results suggest therefore (1) that Sears' physical punishment factor is a genuine environmental influence determining the level of aggression of the child, but (2) that the maternal permissiveness factor could easily be a reflection of constitutional tendencies and needs to be more clearly established if it is to be accepted as an independent environmental influence.

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