Gender and Parenting Behaviors Among Children with and Without Congenital Neurodevelopmental Conditions

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ABSTRACT
This study examines associations between child gender and parental nurturance in 49 (28 male) children diagnosed with a congenital neurodevelopmental disorder (NDC) and 60 (30 male) typically developing (TD) children. A large literature on gender and parenting suggests that, in general, parents are more nurturing towards girls than boys as a result of cultural norms highlighting girls’ presumed gentle nature and emotionality and boys’ strength and independence. However, these socialization processes may function differently in families with a child with an NDC, as these children may not demonstrate gender-normative behaviors or may be “de-gendered” as a result of their diagnosis and any associated disabilities. In line with this prediction, while parents of TD children in our sample reported more nurturance towards girls than boys, parents of children in the NDC group did not report differences in parenting behaviors as a function of child gender. This TD vs. NDC group difference was particularly pronounced for girls; girls in the NDC group received less nurturance than those in the TD group. Overall, these findings suggest that gender, as a social construct, may function differently in families with typically developing children than in families with a child diagnosed with an NDC, particularly if that child is female.

OBJECTIVES
To date, research has not compared well-established differences in parenting style as a function of child gender across families with and without a child with an NDC. In order to assess the function of gender in shaping parenting behaviors in families with a child with an NDC, the current study compared self-reported nurturing parenting behaviors as a function of gender and diagnosis using a sample of 60 typically developing children and 49 children carrying a diagnosis of spina bifida or cerebral palsy. It was hypothesized that families with children with an NDC would differ from families with typically-developing children in their use of gendered parenting strategies.

METHODS
Participants were 109 children, ages 6-12 years (M = 8.95, SD = 1.88) in grades 1-6. Participants either had a diagnosis of a congenital neurodevelopmental condition (NDC; N = 49, 28 male) or were typically-developing (TD; N = 60, 30 male). Sample characteristics are summarized below. Children participating in the study were recruited as part of larger study, for which they completed a two-hour assessment. All analyses were conducted using General Linear Modeling. Parental nurturance was measured the Nurturance Subscale on the Parenting Dimensions Inventory (PDI). No other PDI subscales differed by gender. Initially, analyses were conducted with demographic variable covariates, but did not have a significant effect on results and therefore, were dropped from the final model. In the NDC group, age was associated with gender (t(47) = 2.12, p < .05). This pattern was reflected in the larger GLM model as a significant two-way interaction between diagnosis and gender (F(1,102) = 4.56, p < .05).

RESULTS
• While parents of typically-developing children reported more nurturing parenting behaviors toward female children than male children (F(1,102) = 4.49, p < .05), this pattern was absent among parents of children with an NDC (F(1,102) = 1.0, p > .3).
• Expressed another way, parents of boys reported equivalent nurturance regardless of whether or not the boys had a neurodevelopmental disorder (F(1,102) = 1.74, p > .1), while females received less nurturance if they had an NDC (F(1,102) = 2.93, p < .1).
• This pattern was reflected in the larger GLM model as a significant two-way interaction between diagnosis and gender (F(1,102) = 4.56, p < .05).

CONCLUSIONS
• Family processes, such as gendered parenting norms, may function differently in families with a child with an NDC.
• Family interventions aimed at improving parenting efficacy should be targeted to the specific needs and dynamics of the family.
• More work on gender in families with children with an NDC, and specifically the ways in which gender does and does not shape parenting behaviors, is needed.

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BACKGROUND

Gender and Parenting
• Parents are more likely to employ nurturing, emotionally-sensitive parenting styles with girls (Lutter & Ronai, 1991).
• Differences in parenting style associated with gendered personality characteristics and lifestyle choices (for review see Valian, 1998).

Gender and NDC’s
• Children, and particularly girls, with NDC’s may not display behaviors typically associated with their genders.
• Children with NDC’s may have less access to other socialization forces outside of the family.
• Children with NDC’s may be “de-gendered” in line with research on adults with disabilities (Borke, Teyler, & Mcite, 1996).
• Other research on parenting and NDC’s has suggested that aspects of parenting, such as attitudes toward autonomy and socialization, vary in families with children with NDC’s (Cunningham, Thomas, & Warschauksy, 2007).

GROUP BY GENDER INTERACTION IN PARENTAL NURTURANCE

CONTRIBUTIONS

- Male
- Female

PDI Nurturance Scores

4.5
5.0
5.5
6.0
6.5
7.0
7.5
8.0
8.5
9.0
9.5

NDC

TD

Note: p < .05 difference within group by gender.