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Do Unfair Experiences Contribute to Anger and Hostility in Young Children? Young Children’s Perception of Unfairness and Its Associated Feelings.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Psychology, at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

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2005
Abstract

Being able to cope in emotionally demanding situations is a necessary skill for both children and adults. Parents use many disciplinary techniques to help children manage their misbehaviour and overtly expressed negative emotions. Although numerous parenting strategies have been described by researchers and professionals, there are limited numbers of studies looking at aspects of disciplinary practices from young children's perspectives. By understanding children's affective responses to discipline practices, it is possible that parents can provide more effective help for their children, and reduce negative moods such as hostility. Based on Evans' model of the development of hostility, the present study investigated how young children's experiences of unfair treatment might influence their predominant affective expression or attitudes toward a parent who is being unfair. Thirty-two children, aged between five and nine years, were recruited from local primary schools and a summer holiday programme. Using a story about unfairness, the children were able to make judgements about the story and report feelings associated with such experiences. Three original tasks were introduced as an indirect measure of level of hostility in response to the experiences of unfair treatment. Although statistical analysis supported the hypotheses that hostility in children increases as a result of unfair experiences, judging from their verbal responses, there is a complex interactive effect of the mother-child relationship on children's feeling.
Acknowledgements

First of all I would like to thank my supervisor and mentor Professor Ian Evans for his guidance, hard work, and encouragement he has given me in the past two and half years.

Thanks also to the members of the Clinical Psychology Lab for their advice in the past year and to my research assistants, Serafine and Michelle, for their time and help. Many thanks to all the children who helped me to learn their culture and shared with me many unique ideas. I appreciate to the childcare centres and kindergartens for allowing me to visit their classes, particularly the school principals and teachers in Parkland school and Tiritea school for their time and assistance.

To my mum for unconditional love; my step-dad and my grandparents for their support for my many years of education in New Zealand.

Finally, I would like to thank my young sister, Yasuyo, for spending very long hours and many days to help me create the materials for this research project, and for being patient with me during the past years. Without your support, I would not be able to rise to the challenge of completing many difficult tasks.
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