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The Phenomenon of Parental Rules in Middle Childhood: A Relational Perspective

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The Phenomenon of Parental Rules in Middle Childhood: A Relational Perspective

Leon Kuczynski [α] & Jane Robson [σ]

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I. Introduction

A central assumption in socialization research and clinical interventions in families is that parents promote children's development by communicating and enforcing rules, limits, and expectations. Parental expectations and rules are assumed to communicate values and norms for appropriate behavior (Grusec, Danyliuk, Kil & O'Neill, 2017) and organize the child's environment with demands and limits (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009). Parental demands for mature behavior also have a pedagogical function that promotes prosocial and instrumental competence (Baumrind, 1973; Kuczynski & Kochanska, 1995). Despite the importance of this parental practice, the processes by which parents set, communicate, and enforce rules and expectations is not well understood.

Dominant conceptions of the nature of parental rules have originated in unilateral theories of socialization that consider parents exclusively in the role of causal agents and children in the role of passive recipients (Kuczynski, 2003). In this literature, parental rules are most often examined as an assumed part of constructs such as firm control (Baumrind, 1971; 2012), effective discipline (Forehand & McMahon, 2003), and parental structure (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009) rather than as naturalistic phenomena that need to be investigated in their own right. These constructs focus on the various ways that parents enforce rules, commands, and prohibitions but do not consider the structure of parental rules, and how rules are set and and enforced in dyadic relationship contexts. As a result, much research relies on implicit, often idealized, ideas about the process of setting and enforcement of parental rules.

For example, Baumrind's (1971) parenting styles are based on the construct of ITALICISE. as in parental structure below which is the degree to which the parent sets and enforces rules, regulations, and limits on children. Baumrind (2012) operationalized firm control as a parent who "confronts when child disobeys, cannot be coerced by child, successfully exerts force or influence, enforces after initial noncompliance, exercises power un-ambivalently, uses negative sanctions freely, and discourages free stance" (p. 38). In this definition, there is no explicit conception of the nature of parental rules. However, the implicit idea is that parents have rules; rules are immutable; and effective parents use their superior power to compel children to comply with their expectations.

A similar unilateral conception of rules and expectations forms the basis of clinical behavioral interventions that train parents to use Italicise. as in Parental structure below, in the home (Patterson, Reid & Dishion, 1992). Parental rules are conceptualized as requests or commands issued by parents to children or standing rules and prohibitions issued in the past (Forehand & McMahon, 2003). In behavioral parent-training interventions parents are trained to issue clear commands and use power assertive discipline to enforce an exacting form of compliance that is complete, immediate, and occurs without negotiation or complaint.

Grolnick and Pomerantz (2009) proposed an updated conception of parental rules in their construct of *parental structure*. In their definition parental structure consists of clear and consistent guidelines, information feedback, predictable consequences and follow through, an opportunity for children to meet expectations and parents as final decision makers

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(Farkas & Grolnick, 2010). In this conception, properly formulated rules should be clearly communicated so that children know exactly what is required of them. Although consideration is given to children's autonomy needs, the unilateral idea is retained that parents are the sole originators of rules and expectations and that parents use their greater power and authority to enforce compliance to their instructions.

Despite differences in theoretical framing, the implicit conceptualization of parental rules that have guided socialization research is that parents have or should have demands and limits for children that take form of explicit rules that parents communicate and enforce independent of the child's influence. More generally, what unites these approaches is a conception of rules as a stable individual characteristic of parents, a linear model of influence, and a neglect of the dyadic social context in which rules are set and enforced.

In family interactions, parents communicate and enforce rules, not in a vacuum, but in an interdependent social relationship where their children are also agents with the capacity to actively negotiate or resist parental wishes (Kuczynski et al. 2018; 2021). The view that children are agents in family life has been incorporated in bidirectional perspectives on socialization processes that recognize children's influence in their own socialization (Maccoby & Martin, 1983) as well as the continuing socialization of their parents (Kuczynski, Pitman et al., 2016). Although the general view that socialization is a bidirectional process is widely endorsed, scholars have been slow to adopt he idea that children importantly influence the nature and outcomes of parental practices (Stattin & Kerr 2000; Kerr, Stattin & Özdemir, 2012). Thus, the task of reconceptualizing parental practices to reflect underlying dynamics of bidirectional influence remains at the frontier of research (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015).

Accumulating research on parenting child social interactions suggests that how parents set and enforce rules is much more dynamic than depicted in traditional models. In an observational study of mother-child interactions with preschool children Crockenberg and Litman (1990) described the protracted transactions that took place in the process of setting and enforcing their expectations. The authors observed that "Obtaining compliance was quite extended; mothers reasoned, persuaded, suggested and adapted their request to what they thought the child would accept" (p. 970). Similarly, Parkin and Kuczynski (2012) found that except for rules concerning their safety, adolescents had difficulty identifying parental rules that were explicit or firmly enforced. Instead, adolescents perceived most rules to be co-constructed between the parent and the child and that parental rules were flexible and afforded room for negotiation.

There is also a body of research that suggests that whether or how parents enforce their demands and prohibitions depends on parents' interpretations of children's behavior. Examples of such interpretative actions include parental attributions of intentionality to the child's behavior (Dix et al., 1986), parental perceptions that the child's behavior has long-term or short-term implications (Kuczynski, 1984), and whether the child's behavior involves issues of personal jurisdiction, social conventions, harm to others, or safety (Smetana 2011).

The purpose of this study was to explore parental rules and expectations as a naturalistic phenomenon from the perspective of mothers of school-aged children. This age group represents middle childhood — a period when parents continually adapt to rapid changes in children's cognitive and social development (Collins & Madsen, 2003). Parents also must adapt to contextual changes as children increasingly engage with peers, schools, and other venues outside the home that are away from parents' direct control. We anticipated that accessing parental perspectives grounded in their experiences with their own children would provide directions for - conceptualizing parental rules and expectations in a new way that could guide future research and practice.

The overarching conceptual framework that guided this study was social relational theory (SRT) (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015). In SRT both parents and children are assumed to be agents interacting within the context of an interdependent long-term relationship that both constrains and enables parents' and children's expression of agency. The theory's focus on parental agency, child agency, and bidirectional influence, guides researchers to explore how parents actively interpret and construct meanings during transactions with children and accommodate their children's displays of agency. As applied to the present study, SRT's focus on the relationship context of parent-child interactions helps to explore how cognitions formed in the history, interdependence and anticipated future of the relationships influence parental choices when they set and enforce rules for their children.

Two additional constructs compatible with SRT, *co-regulation* (Maccoby, 1985) and *leeway* (Goodnow, 1997) served as a source of initial ideas regarding transactional processes that underlie how parents may set and enforce rules. Maccoby (1985) described co-regulation as a process whereby parent adapt their expectations and actions to their children's emerging capacities for self-regulation. More broadly, the idea of co-regulation implies that parental practices should not be considered solely as individual characteristics of parents, but as components of a joint regulatory process to which both the parent and the child contribute.

Goodnow's (1997) conception of leeway provided a model for how parents may accommodate children's agency in specific situations. Goodnow (1994)

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argued that not all values are equally important to parents. Thus, when children resist parental rules, parents may accommodate children's choices by offering them leeway. Goodnow (1997) proposed three forms of leeway: parents may communicate to children that there are acceptable or tolerable options to deviate from what was requested of them, parents may offer leeway regarding the time frame within in which to comply and parents may also offer leeway within specific domains of decision-making where children are specifically encouraged to express their creativity.

The research questions were as follows: How do parents perceive the nature of their rules and expectations for children at middle childhood? We were interested in the implicit structure of these rules. As well we were interested in whether processes analogous to co-regulation and leeway were apparent in the way parents perceived the process of setting and enforcing their rules and expectations.

II. Method

The participants were English-speaking mothers who were recruited from a mid-sized city in Ontario, Canada. The parental data were collected as part of a larger study on socialization during middle childhood that also included child participants. Although the larger study also included parallel procedures for children (see Kuczynski et al. 2019), the present study focuses on mothers' responses only. The study was approved by the University's research ethics board. Families received two $25 gift cards for their participation.

The criteria for recruiting families stipulated families with at least one parent and one child between the ages of 9 and 13 who were attending elementary school. The final sample consisted of 40 English-speaking mothers who had a mean age of 44.4 years. The educational breakdown of the sample was as follows: high school (1), technical college, (8), undergraduate, (20), postgraduate (11). The employment status of mothers was as follows: 23 worked full-time, 13 worked part-time, and 4 did not work outside the home. The ethnic background of the sample was predominantly English Canadian or European in origin but included several participants who identified themselves as Metis, West Indian, and African. Of the 40 children who were the focus of the interviews, 20 children were ages 9, 10, or 11 (10 males, 10 females), and 20 children were ages 12 or 13 (10 males, 10 females).

There were three phases to the study which occurred over a one-week period. In Phase 1 parents and children were visited at home by two research assistants who interacted with the participants separately and together. Both mothers and children were assured that their communications would be kept private from each other. The purpose of Phase 1was to introduce parents and children to the study, build rapport, and train mothers to use the Parent Daily Report (PDR) for Phase 2 of the study. Building rapport was important because parents and children were asked to report on sensitive incidents involving non-compliance and rule transgressions.

Phase 2 consisted of the PDR, a booklet of target incidents that guided parents to systematically track and report target incidents using a digital voice recorder for five consecutive days. The target events were as follows: 1) instructions given to child before they left the house, 2) instructions regarding rules and responsibilities, 3) knowledge of child's thoughts, feelings, activities, 4) enjoyable interactions, 5) disagreements and differences of opinions, 6) cooperation with parental requests, 7) non-cooperation with parental requests. Each page of the booklet consisted of one target incident, followed by prompts that guided the parent to describe each incident in detail. The reports most relevant to this study were in narratives concerning, parental rules, requests, and prohibitions and children's disagreements and resistance to parental instructions.

The PDR methodology served two purposes. First, it contributed to the ecological validity of parental narratives in the Phase 3 interview (Bolger et al. 2003) by providing parents with concrete, recently occurring, contextualized experiences on which to base their responses. Second, it provided complementary data to that obtained in the final interview regarding counts of mothers who reported each theme and detailed descriptions of specific incidents.

During Phase 3, Mothers and children were again interviewed in the home by two research assistants. The procedure for mothers was a one-hour semi-structured interview that capitalized on the rapport and insights generated during the 5-day diary. The interview covered four broad topics: parental rules and expectations, children's resistance to parental requests and prohibitions, recent changes in rules or resistance, behavior away from home, and parent–child intimacy. In practice, information from the digital diaries and open-ended interviews overlapped but provided complementary information, with the digital diaries contributing to the counts and detailed descriptions of specific acts of resistance and the final interview contributing an in-depth understanding of parents' meanings and intentions regarding the events reported during the previous week and parents' views of longer-term changes in their rules and expectations for children

a) Thematic Analysis

Interviews and event reports were transcribed from audio records. Themes, and sub-themes were identified using the procedures for thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The steps of

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thematic analysis included familiarization with data through repeated reading of the transcripts, creating initial categories based on noticeable themes within the data, searching for overarching themes, evaluating themes and labeling and conceptualizing themes. The analyses of parents' narratives used the conceptual framework of interpretive induction (Kuczynski & Daly, 2003). Interpretive induction emphasizes the role of sensitizing concepts in the analysis of qualitative data to identify, describe, and understand phenomena. In the present study, the initial interpretation of the data was sensitized by existing theoretical perspectives on parental practices, however the researchers also were alert to novel ideas expressed by the participants that were not available in the literature.

Constant comparison (Charmaz, 2008) was used to continually assess the similarities and differences between coded segments and themes and between the emerging themes themselves. In qualitative research, the requirements of validity and reliability are met by the criterion of trustworthiness. In thematic analysis, trustworthiness occurs when the researcher actively engages in a precise, exhaustive and thorough data analysis, while still adhering to an iterative and reflective process (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). During this coding process, coding was carried out by the first and second authors who met regularly to review the themes, discuss alternative interpretations, and to ensure rigor in the constant comparison process. Analyses were aided by qualitative data analysis software program, MAXQDA, to ensure the systematic categorization of data and documentation of the analytic process in memos and interpretive comments assigned to narratives and codes.

III. Results

The analyses suggest that during middle childhood parents conceive their rules and expectations as providing structure and guidance in a manner that is contextually flexible and reflects the contributions of their children. We found three principal themes that were expressed by the majority of the participants (Table 1). The first theme is that parental rules and expectations provide a *structure of flexible guidelines* for children's behaviors. The second theme is that rules are set and implemented by a bidirectional process of *co-regulation* which reflect the joint and interdependent influences of parents and their children. The third theme is that most parental rules and expectations afforded children *leeway for agency* that invited or accepted children to exercise their agency in negotiating or evading compliance. The illustrating quotes from mothers are identified by family number and age and sex of child to which the narrative refers.

Table 1: Thematic analyses of Mothers Conception of Rules and Expectations

Themes and Subthemes	Percent of Mothers Reporting
Structure of Flexible Guidelines	
Minimal expectations with bottom lines	63%
Implicit expectations	53%
Co-regulated expectations	
Prompted self-regulation	100%
Developmentally adapted	78%
Leeway for Agency	
Leeway for resistance	70%
Leeway for timeframe	60%
Situational leeway	68%

a) *Framework of Flexible Guidelines*

The broadest theme captured the nature of parental rules and expectations. It was apparent from mother's narratives that most mothers perceived that their rules and expectations for their children provided a flexible framework of demands and limits for guiding

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their actions in family life. Two sub-themes further characterize this flexible structure. They tend to consist of *minimal expectations with firm bottom lines* and parental requirements and limits take the form of *implicit expectations* rather than explicitly stated rules.

Minimal expectations with bottom lines. Most parents described a form of expectations for minimally acceptable behavior, which were clearly communicated and firmly enforced as well as an array of more varied expectations that were dynamic, flexibly adjusted to changing context, and open to negotiation. Mothers used terms such as "bottom lines" or "the basics" regarding foundational rules that generally concerned personal safety and moral values. Mothers were firm on rules that served to protect children from harm. Examples included wearing bicycle helmets, following curfews, and not answering the door to strangers. Mothers also were firm in enforcing moral standards regarding social actions. These consisted of prescriptions regarding respect and kindness to others, and proscriptions against stealing, lying, cheating, or hitting. One mother said, "There is a basic value principle system, under an underlying respect for everybody ... and you have to be a little more authoritative or hard-nosed about those things" (F19, 13-year-old male). Another mother said, "The things they can't cross is lying, and also in terms of respect" (F18, 13-year-old female). Some parents also described explicit and firmly enforced expectations that were idiosyncratic to their families. These included such activities as homework, chores, and music lessons.

Beyond such important but infrequently tested bottom lines, most mothers reported that they had few rules that could be conceived as firm and explicit. Some parents indicated that they were aware that their minimalist approach to rules differed from social constructions of how parents "should" set and enforce rules. For example, one mother said she avoided restricting her child with unnecessary rules:

> I never really considered the rules as being very important {*Laughter*}. So, I never really thought 'Oh, that's a lot of rules, I shouldn't really tell her all these rules.' When we see the need for a rule to come up, we set it up (F18, 11-year-old female).

Some parents said they had few rules during their own upbringing and wanted their own children to have the same experience. For example, mothers stated, "But you know, when I grew up, I don't recall any rules" (F35, 10-year-old female), and "When I grew up I had absolutely not a rule to live by" (F40, 9-year-old female). Other mothers reported: "My mom never had, we never had, you know, these set rules that, you know, we were expected to do something on a certain day" (F41, 9-year-old female), and, "You inherently emulate based on the way that you were raised with your parents...But, I mean, they never handed us a list" (F19, 13-year-old male). Parents also stated that their families functioned well without having many explicit rules. For example, one mother said, "I think we realized that we don't have as many rules as we thought we did…. But I also think that for us it seems to be working because we think our kids are great. We really do" (F18, 13-year-old female).

Mothers also said that although they were firm about the bottom-line issues, they allowed children considerable freedom to negotiate most of their other daily expectations. One mother said, "So I just knew that I needed to make sure my kids were always safe, and they understood why these rules are in place, as well as giving them some freedom to make mistakes and their own decisions" (F40, 9-year-old female). Other mothers talked about choosing their battles by enforcing what was important to them but letting other things slide. For example, when discovering her child was playing a prohibited computer game one mother stated:

> Like, it wasn't really a big major deal, and he is not going to make it a big major deal, and we don't make a lot of things a big major deal either like, we know some parents do {*Laughter*}. We just try and be flexible" (F6, 11-year-old male).

Some parents talked about maintaining a balance between their expectations and children's freedom to explore, "I think foremost it's just recognizing that you know they're still kids they still need to have fun it's just they need-they need rules and regulations and responsibilities but at the same time they also need to be kids as well" (F13, 11-year-old male). Although many parents said that their flexibility in setting and enforcing expectations was a principled childrearing philosophy, some acknowledged that in practice such a strategy required effort.

> I grew up in a household where I didn't have any choices and there was no flexibility. It was you do what you were told, you were seen and not heard. So from a very young age, I knew if I ever had children, I would not bring them up that way. What I didn't realize is that it's very difficult to bring your kids up with giving them choices, and flexibility. It's very hard (F1, 12-year-old female).

Implicit expectations. Approximately half of the participants reported that their expectations for children were implicit, and they did not require explicitly stated rules and prohibitions. Parents stated that some expectations may have been deliberately inculcated in the past but were so deeply engrained at middle childhood that they were taken for granted and no longer had to be discussed or enforced. For example, one parent said, "I consider a rule like to show respect for one another…. 'Don't hit me, don't hit your sister,' that sort of thing, but we haven't talked about that since say we're five years old" (F27, 11-year-old female). Implicit rules had an ongoing presence and were perceived by parents as mutually accepted and inherent in the way the family functioned. For example, one

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mother stated, "I guess the rule is there but… you haven't mentioned that in years because it hasn't come up" (F23, 13-year-old female).

b) Co-regulated expectations

Co-regulated expectations referred to rules and expectations that emerged from a bilateral process to which parents and children both contributed. Generally, parental influence consisted of setting or adjusting expectations in response to children's cues and initiations. Children exerted influence by demonstrating emerging capacities or changes in performance or negotiating changes in parental rules and expectations. Two forms of co-regulation were identified: *prompted self-regulation* and *developmentally adapted.*

Prompted self-regulation. All mothers reported that they provided routine daily reminders for their children to follow through with standing rules that were communicated in the past but not yet internalized. Theoretically, reminders were interpreted as a co-regulatory process in which parents adopted a supervisory role in contexts where children begin to self-regulate but required parental prompts to follow through. One mother explained, "It's just that constant reminder of 'This isn't mine — it's yours', so it's your homework, your school life, your extracurricular activities. You need to have some control and have some responsibility over what's going on" (F31, 11-year-old male).

All parents in this study described multiple instances of daily reminders of standing rules regarding self-care, care of pets, homework, routines, and chores. Parents commented on the repetitious nature of these reminders. For example, one parent stated, "I say the same things everyday…. Did you do your homework?" (F30, 11-year-old male). Many of these prompts were issued in a string of instructions as the child or the parent went out the door for school or work and children were about to be out of the parents' direct supervision. As explained by one mother,

> Getting ready in the morning. Like, I always felt, I had to say: 'Have you?' you know. It's, you know, we kind of watch the clock because certain things have to be done at certain times. So by 8 o'clock it's 'Have you had your breakfast' and then call upstairs 'Are you getting dressed? Are you brushing your hair? Are you brushing your teeth?' Or 'Have you collected your homework?' 'Is your backpack ready?' 'Have you packed your lunch?'(F18, 13-year-old female).

Prompted self-regulation also took the form of scaffolding the child's growing competence to perform requested tasks. For example, mothers said they would keep the child company while the child performed a chore. Another mother described how she would do part of a task with the expectation that her daughter do her part to complete it, "So like if she has clothes to put away for example, I have a basket and I fold clothes and make piles for everybody you know this goes in your room and this goes in your room, this is my stuff" (F15, 11-year-old female).

Mothers also said they proactively reminded children to follow safety rules and expectations to behave in a socially appropriate manner such as being kind to peers, being polite and avoid fighting outside of the home. For example, one mother stated, "While we were at nanny's house for the weekend, S was given instructions to mind his manner, keep the noise level down, play nice, help out, eat his meals" (F2, 10-year-old male). Another mother explained, "I just reviewed with him the safety instructions for being home alone and uh - not opening the door to strangers, how to answer the phone" (F11, 13-year-old male).

Developmentally adapted. Most mothers described engaging in transactions with their children whereby they adapted their expectations in response to emerging developmental changes in their children's capacities, maturity, or autonomy. The nature of these transactions was dynamic with parents constructing new rules as children outgrew old structures or adjusting the nature of their expectations and restrictions in response to their children's performance.

Some parents reported that they set more rules as children developed and sought out new experiences. For example, one mother stated:

> Well, I guess when they are really young you don't really have rules. Like you know it's kind of… well they don't push things, right, or even ask for things. Like, with my little guy there's no real rules because there's nothing. There are no rules for him to break because everything is so controlled (F13, 11-year-old male).

Many mothers indicated that they set up rules, as needed, if the child required additional structure, "When we see the need for a rule to come up, we set it up" (F18, 11-year-old female). Another parent described the setting of rules as an ad hoc process of managing situations as they arose:

> Sometimes, they kind of get into these patterns of behavior that you just see as not working, like they're causing conflict or issues in the family, and then we sort of add in a new rule. And usually, it's temporary. Something like playing a video game in the morning, where they were rushing downstairs, they weren't getting ready for school, and then wanted to get on the video game, and we never had a rules about that before (F7, 12-year-old male).

Most parents reported raising their expectations for the child's performance, as they developed. One mother described how her expectations regarding her son's laundry chores progressed from early to middle childhood from an initial expectation that her son put his clothes into the laundry basket, to carrying washed and folded clothing to his room, to her current expectation that he carries his basket downstairs and sort his clothes and switch a load when asked. She explained, "So you can see, there's kind of that progression in terms of level of responsibility" (F7, 11-year-old male).

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Another mother talked about having higher expectations for socially appropriate behavior as her daughter developed:

> So, as she gets older, certainly my expectations for behavior and standards definitely go up… I tell her that, when you were 5 you could get away with it because you didn't know better, when you're 10 you absolutely cannot get away with it" (F35, 10-year-old female)

Another parent described the process of raising expectations as a gradual process of monitoring the child's capacities and carefully adding new responsibilities in line with the child's development. She explained:

> We just kinda keep testing it right and as he takes responsibility for one area then you add something else and it's using things that are of interest to him too right. So, you know, kitchen stuff and some of those kinds of things you can easily sort of integrate and give him more responsibility that way" (F31, 11-year-old male).

A frequent pattern evident in this study involved loosening up restrictions and allowing greater autonomy as children showed increasing capacity for self-regulation. One mother described how the rules that were in place when her daughter was home alone were based on her daughter's previously demonstrated competence. She stated, "If she's showing responsibility and able to handle the task then we'll build on the task or let her handle it by herself then" (F34, 12-year-old female). Another mother said, "As she gets older I think we allow her to make some of the rules or decisions on her own because I think at age 13 she knows the differences between what is the right way to do something and the wrong way" (F26, 13-year-old female).

However, mothers also said that when they granted more freedom, they expected the child to assume more responsibility. One mother said, "she wants more freedoms for some things… so then our expectations for her showing maturity and responsibility are higher" (F25, 13-year-old girl). Another mother stated, "The rules are a bit more lax now…but the responsibility is more" (F14, 13-year-old female).

Some mothers described decreasing their expectations if the child was not performing successfully. For example, one mother explained, "He sort of just completely looked stressed and kind of decomposed right…so we would just have to pull back on some of those expectations" (F31, 11-year-old male). This mother described how she modified a rule that her son was unable to manage and replaced it with a rule that enabled her child to succeed.

c) Affording Leeway for Agency

In this study, apart from infrequent incidents involving bottom lines, parents allowed children considerable leeway to exercise their own agency to determine whether, when and how much they would comply. Two sub-themes, *leeway for resistance* and *leeway within a time frame* indicated that parents, by their action or inaction, allowed children scope for resistance and negotiation; the third sub=theme *situational leeway* concerned parental flexibility in accepting deviations from their expectations because of contextual circumstances.

Leeway for resistance. Mothers frequently reported that they modified or did not enforce their demands in the face of children's resistance. One commonly reported experience concerned mothers' acquiescence to children's persuasive or coercive negotiations. It is interesting to note that many mothers accompanied their reports of acquiescence with laughter, communicating their ironic awareness that this is not parenting as "should" be. Many mothers also explained that respect for children's agency, rather than compliance was important to them. One mother explained her reasoning about acquiescing to her son's negotiations:

> 'Well, here's why we don't think this rule is fair.' Sometimes it's not quite that articulate, but that's ultimately what comes across. And it's been strange as parents as he gets older, to kind of be open to that, because you're the boss 'Ha-ha!' When they're younger, you're more the boss and, now, you're less the boss. You're more of a facilitator, a leader, and so both he and his brother have been responsible for quite a few rule changes (F7, 12-year-old male).

Another mother described giving her daughter leeway to interpret rules in her own way as a policy that promoted her daughter's receptivity to parental influence in the future.

> I'll work with her and give her some leeway and I think that doing that she'll respect some of my decisions that I do feel strong on. And I think she understands why because I explained them to her. I just don't give her rules and say this is it, my way, or the high way (F40, 9-year-old female).

Some mothers stated that that they would bend their rules depending on the quality of their children's persuasions. For example, one mother stated, "It depends on the situation. If he can back up his 'Yes' or 'No' or whatever it is, that's fine. He can't just be like 'no, no, no, no.' You know, you need to elaborate a little bit" (F6, 13-year-old male). However, there were also many reports of mothers backing down when confronted by children's coercive resistance. One mother stated, "Because it gets to a point where she'll start crying. She's quite a crier. So, she'll start crying or she'll just say 'Please, please, please' and then you get so fed up you just say 'Just go do it' or 'Have it'" (F3, 11-year-old female). Another mother said, "Sometimes, frankly, he just wears me down and I give in" (F22, 13-year-old male).

Particularly interesting were mothers who reported in a matter-of-fact way that they simply accepted children's refusals. For example, one mother

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stated, "When I asked him to do the dishes he said, 'No I don't need to do the dishes today.' So, he didn't do them" (F30, 11-year-old male). Another mother reported with frustration, "Just his bed. We keep coming back to it. His bed! He just refuses to bloody make it and it's – I don't understand" (F21, 12-year-old male). One mother seemed to accept the ephemeral nature of her expectations for her child to make his own bed, "Technically, they are supposed to make their bed, but I let that sort of slide. {*Laughter*} It's an unspoken rule that doesn't really ever happen in a sense {Laughter}" (F6, 13-year-old male). For these mothers, children's choice to refuse their instructions was an acceptable display of agency that did not require parental exertions of firm control.

Leeway within a time frame. This form of leeway referred to departures from the behavior management ideal that compliance should be immediate. Parents explained that they would allow their child a certain amount of time, varying from minutes to hours, to follow through with a rule. This time frame afforded the child the opportunity to choose when they would complete an expected task. One mother said: "Generally now, if she's ignored what I have requested, or if she's been off for 15 minutes and she's been on for half an hour then I'll say "You need to get off in the next five minutes" (F26, 13-year-old female). Another mother indicated that negotiating for and granting leeway within a time frame was an anticipated ritual. "When he resists when I sometimes say things, so I say it early. Because I know he's going to say, 'Oh not right now.' So, I'll say, if we're swimming, I'll say, '15 minutes!,' '10 minutes!,' '5 minutes!'" (F11,13-year-old male). Another mother was resigned to the resulting incomplete and delayed nature of children's compliance after she granted leeway: "I did ask 'Is the room tidy?' 'Yeah, yeah I know' and 'I'll do it later.' So, it was tidied up, in a fashion, later on. But certainly not when I first asked" (F30,11-year-old male).

Many mothers allowed children to express their agency by choosing the timing of their cooperation. However, some parents perceived that their children exploited the leeway created by the time frame as an uncooperative tactic. For example, such children negotiated by requesting "one more minute," or stated they would accomplish the task at another time, for example "after this show." Although they acquiesced, parents often made disparaging evaluations of children's negotiation of time frames for compliance with their requests with terms such as "avoider," or, "delayer".

Situational leeway. Situational leeway referred to contextual considerations in which mothers did not enforce their expectations. Parents made allowances for their children to deviate from the rules when they or their children were stressed, or when circumstances made enforcing the rules inconvenient. Many parents stated when the child was emotionally unsettled, for example, if the child was "tired," "discouraged" or "busy" they made exceptions to whether, when, or to what degree the child was expected to follow standing rules. Rules regarding homework, washing dishes and performing chores were most often adjusted if the child was stressed. For example, one mother explained:

> I also try to take into consideration not only what his day has been, or will be, but also the day or two prior and the day or two after. More so the day or two after, how active or how tired is he (F22, 13-year-old male).

Parents also said that the likelihood of enforcing their expectations depended on their own levels of stress. Parents were more likely to provide leeway for children's agency if they were "tired," or had a "long day." Mothers relaxed their enforcement of rules to avoid the effort involved in reprimanding or discussing rules with their children. One mother explained why she turned "a blind eye" when her daughter refused to clean her room. "Sometimes I'm just over my limit of stress for the day and I might be asking way too much of her or just being not reasonable about expectations or just being rude myself taking it out on her" (F40, 9-year-old female).

Parents also reported being more flexible during birthday parties, at public swimming pools, in the presence of relatives, or at a friend's home. In these situations, parents reported that they did not want to confront or reprimand their child in front of others. For example, one mother reported that she refrained from reprimanding her children when grandparents were present, "I guess tough, because we were at my parents' house and just not wanting that arguing and stuff to happen at other people's houses" (F28, 11-year-old female). Many parents suggested that their children were aware of the leeway that these situations afforded them and would exploit the situation. One mother reported, "It is difficult to fault the boys when they act out. My mom has the final say in matters when we are there, and the boys like that she can trump my decisions... They like being spoiled there" (F2, 10-year-old male).

IV. Discussion

The finding that all mothers communicated daily instructions, limits, and expectations for appropriate behavior underscores the importance of longstanding interest in this parental practice in socialization research and family interventions (Baumrind, 1973; Kuczynski & Kochanska, 1995; Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009; Forehand & McMahon, 2003). However, the findings of this study do not support traditional conceptions about the static nature of parental rules or the process by which rules are set and enforced. The analyses suggest that when assessed in the naturalistic context of parent-child relationships, the setting and enforcement of rules is a dynamic transactional process (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015) whereby parents adapt their practices to the

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social and developmental meanings represented by their children's actions. The three themes in this study, flexible structure, co-regulation, and leeway for agency, provide directions for a relational conceptualization of parental rules for the middle childhood period.

a) Flexible Structure

Parents indicated that their rules and expectations consisted of a flexible structure built on a foundation of bottom lines and implicit expectations. The idea of bottom lines was introduced by Goodnow (1994) who argued that parents communicate a variety of positions with regard to their children's behaviors ranging from what is ideal to what is acceptable, tolerable, or out of the question. In this study, bottom lines were mostly confined to infrequently occurring issues such as ensuring safety and promoting core values such as respect for others and avoiding harm. Such examples of bottom lines correspond to the prudential and moral domains of social domain theory (Smetana, 2011) which are considered to develop in a distinct way from social conventions and personal issues.

Another contribution of this study is the insight that that at middle childhood some rules are implicit. Although existing conceptions of good parenting focus on explicit, clearly articulated rules (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2003), mothers in this study reported that many bottom-line expectations were implicit and taken for granted in the family. Although distinctions between implicit rules and explicitly stated rules have not been described in socialization research, they have been considered in the communication literature. For example, one study found that adolescents who experienced frequent and open communication between family members were less likely to report that their parents had explicit rules about health-related behaviors (Baxter et al., 2005). In the present study, mothers' reports of rules that they no longer communicated or enforced suggest that implicit rules during middle childhood may have developmental significance. We argue that explicit parental rules may predominate during an earlier stage of socialization when children have not yet internalized parental messages. However, parents may rely on implicit rules more often at a later stage in socialization when rules and standards are more likely to be accepted and self-regulated by children.

Another insight regarding the nature of firm control is that in middle childhood, parental bottom lines provide a minimal framework of firm expectations within which there is great flexibility and openness to negotiation. Indeed, the contextual and flexible nature of rules and expectations was so fundamental to parents' experiences that some parents found it difficult to identify firm, explicit rules at all. This finding is consistent with a pattern found previously with adolescents (Parkin & Kuczynski, 2012) who also had difficulty conceiving parental rules as unilaterally imposed, firm and explicit. In addition, some parents reported that they did not experience many rigid rules in their own socialization history, suggesting that the propensity for parents to be flexible in setting and enforcing rules may be part of an intergenerational communication pattern.

b) Co-regulation

An important theme in this study is that parents' expectations were responsively adapted to support their children's and emerging capacities for self-regulation. Conceptually, this suggests that parental rules and expectations should be regarded as a dyadic, co-regulated phenomenon reflecting the joint contributions of both parent and child and not merely an individual characteristic of parents. The findings are consistent with Maccoby's (1984) argument that before the achievement of self-regulation, children's socialization proceeds from a process of external regulation of the child by the parent to a process of co-regulation where the parent has a supervisory role supporting the child's performance of requested behaviors.

This study identified two patterns of co-regulation: prompted self-regulation and developmental adaptation. Prompted self-regulation took the form of reminders of expected behaviors when children were out of the parents' direct supervision as well as reminders of standing rules communicated in the past but were not yet completely self-regulated. The communication of reminders for children to follow through on expectations regarding self-care, safety, appropriate conduct and responsibilities were a ubiquitous, repetitious, daily presence in our middle childhood sample. Reminders can be understood as scaffolds for behaviors that children could not reliably carry out by themselves and serve the developmental purpose of temporarily supporting the child's emerging capacities to self-regulate.

Mothers also reported that they adapted their rules and regulations to children's emerging capacities and expressions of autonomy. Mothers' co-regulated adjustments were complex and ranged from the ad hoc creation of restrictive rules when children discovered new behaviors that needed parental regulation to experimentally increasing or decreasing expectations depending on how well children performed the requested behavior. A particularly complex set of co-regulated adjustments involved bidirectional transactions between children's emerging capacities, mothers' granting of autonomy, and escalating expectations. Mothers reported that they loosened restrictions as children earned their trust by showing responsibility or good judgement. However, in return for greater autonomy mothers expected greater child responsibility. Such reciprocal escalations of

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children's competence and parents' communication of expectations have not been previously identified and require further research.

c) Leeway for Agency

The findings also provided empirical evidence for Goodnow's (1997) argument that parents may signal to children when they are prepared to offer leeway for the performance of parental expectations. We identified three forms of leeway. Parents offered leeway for the time frame within which children could carry out instructions, they ceded leeway in response to children's resistance or negotiation, and they allowed children leeway to exploit situations where enforcement was inconvenient for them or for their child. The phenomenon of leeway is an important contradiction to longstanding linear ideals of firm parental enforcement of compliance by children that is immediate, complete and without complaint (Forehand & McMahon 2003).

Conceptually, we argue that leeway can be more specifically understood as *leeway for agency*, thus extending the existing concept of autonomy support. We suggest that for noncritical issues where core values or safety are not salient, parents may support children's development of autonomy by allowing children leeway to negotiate whether, when or how children choose to cooperate with parental demands. In previous research autonomy support has been conceptualized in several ways. In self-determination theory autonomy support was conceptualized as the degree to which parents take children's perspectives, allow them to solve problems on their own, and encourage initiation (Grolnick, 2003). In our earlier studies we argued that allowing children successful experiences when they exercise agency in an appropriate or socially competent manner may also constitute a form of autonomy support. These include parental receptivity to children's requests of changes in parental behavior (Kuczynski et al. 2016) and tolerating and supporting skillful expressions of opposition from children (Kochanska & Kuczynski 1991; Kuczynski et al., 2021).

Leeway for agency provides a dynamic conception of parental enforcement of rules that accommodates the agency of both parents and children. Parents are agents who set rules and signal where there is room for children to maneuver. Children are agents who infer from the nature of the communication and past experiences of enforcement how much value-stretch their parents' position affords in specific situations and how much leeway there is for their own creative interpretation.

The homogenous composition of the research sample is a limitation of this study. The participants were predominantly educated mothers and represented their families as functioning well. Thus, it is possible that the findings may not generalize to families with different levels of education or families who are encountering socioeconomic or other stresses. Indeed, nuanced patterns of explicit rule setting and firm enforcement may be uncovered in future research. The lack of cultural diversity also limits the generalizations that can be made. In particular, the findings may not generalize to families in collectivistic cultures where conformity and hierarchical power relations are the norm (Trommsdorff & Kornadt, 2003). The absence of fathers in this study is also a limitation of this study. There is evidence that the dynamics of father child relationships differ from those of mothers (Collins & Russell, 1991; Bradley, Pennar, & Iida, 2015). Thus, it remains a direction for future research to determine whether fathers perceive that their rules and expectations also incorporate dynamic adjustment to their children's agency and development.

The finding that parents in this nonclinical sample perceived their own rules and expectations as flexible and affording leeway for children's agency has implications for family interventions and for research. The firm enforcement of explicit, consistent rules is a cornerstone assumption of parent-training programs (Forehand & McMahon, 2003) where parents are trained to resist and suppress resistance. Although such programs may be useful as selectively targeted interventions for severe aggressive or oppositional behavior, we argue that blanket guidelines regarding the firm enforcement of parental rules when children express developmentally appropriate resistance (Kuczynski & Kochanska, 1990; Kuczynski et al., 2021) may be unrealistic. This is important because parents accessing parent education programs and clinical interventions are taught idealized prescriptions about how they should firmly set and enforce rules, and this may clash with their lived experiences of parent-child relationships in which their children are also active agents (Robson & Kuczynski, 2018).

In conclusion, the idea that parents have or should have explicit rules and expectations and that they should firmly enforce compliance to them has long been a focus of socialization research and parenting interventions. Using data collected in the context of natural parent-child relationships, we suggest that rather than viewing flexibility and leeway in parental enforcement exclusively as problematic signs of permissive or chaotic environments, parental flexibility could alternatively be viewed as representing the complex decisions of competent and responsive parents. In this alternative framing, parental flexibility, co-regulation, and leeway may have positive functions for the developing child or for the parent-child relationship.

Author Notes:

Author Contributions: L.K. acquired funding, participated in the conceptualization of the study, participated in formal analysis of data, supervised research assistants, wrote final draft.

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J.R participated in the conceptualization analysis and revision of the data through all the steps in the analysis process using MAXQDA software. She co-wrote early versions of the manuscript reviewed and edited the final version of the manuscript.

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