The Child as an Active Agent in Conflict Situations

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Emma Sorbring

ABSTRACT

In the current study, 14 eight-year-old children (6 girls, 8 boys) in Sweden were interviewed about parenting. The aim of the study was to examine children's active roles in and around conflict situations, using Kuczynski's three criteria about the child: 1) actively creating a meaning about what is happening, 2) intentional acting in the interaction and 3) having an idea about the efficacy of its action. One of the overall goals was to examine the importance of gender in this process.

In the interviews, children described how children were active in creating meaning about what was taking place in a conflict situation, their intentional actions and the effects they believed their action had on the situation. The person who decided in different situations varied, even if, according to the child, it was usually parents who had the right to decide and the child's influence was only marginal. Children had specific opinions about situations creating conflict and how they could influence the direction of the conflict situation. Depending on the source of the conflict, the situation comprised differing courses of events and could, according to the child, be handled with different strategies, with varying degrees of goal orientation. Furthermore, both boys and girls expressed knowledge of gender stereotypes.

INTRODUCTION

During the past decade, changes have taken place in Western societies, in the approach to both childhood and children's roles in the socialization process; children are now seen as having the right to be listened to and to participate in and influence their own situation (e.g. Dencik & Schultz Jørgensen, 1999; Kuczynski, Harach & Bernardini, 1999; Matthews, 2007). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, United Nations, 1989) draws attention to more or less every part of a child's life (Verma, Chen & Miller, 2001). Among many other things, the CRC states that children have the right to be consulted in all matters that affect them. Children's roles in society are viewed as important and childhood is studied as a period in life and not as a phase to pass through in order to reach adulthood. The child is more often viewed as being active in its own socialization process and is no longer seen as the fragile novice, but as an active agent, with the capacity to affect its own development, i.e. "child effect" (e.g. Grusec & Kuczynski, 1997). The increasing changes in such views are fundamental to modern perspectives on child-rearing. The child is viewed as active, unique and important to understand, not only in the socialization process, but also in specific child-rearing situations.

The aim of the current study was to examine children's active roles in conflict situations. Kuczynski's (Kuczynski, et al., 1999) three criteria relating to the active child were used as a starting-point: 1) the child actively creates meaning about what is happening, 2) the child acts intentionally in the interaction and 3) the child is cognitively aware of the efficacy of its actions. Finally, one overall goal of the study was to examine the importance of gender in this process.

Sweden as a particular socio-cultural setting

In the light of the aim of the study, Sweden could be seen as a particular setting. In Sweden, there is a widely-held ambition to strive to achieve a more equal society (Orloff, 1996), with reference to children's rights, as well as more general gender equality. Several Scandinavian researchers emphasize children's rights both to be listened to and to be a part of research from a democratic perspective. According to Qvortrup (2001), childhood is an integrated part of society, as a specific permanent social construction, qualitatively different from adulthood and in need of a specific research focus. It is important not only to study children and childhood but also to give children a voice (Qvortrup, 2001). The most recent Swedish national school curriculum stresses the responsibility of schools not

only to enhance democratic values and develop children's capacity to proclaim their opinions but also to structure the school organization in accordance with the interests and needs of the pupils (Sheridan & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2001). At an early stage, the curriculum also takes account of the issue of gender equality. This is done in conjunction with the objective of ensuring that traditional gender stereotypes should not restrain the development or the individual choice of occupation of both boys and girls (Öhman, 1999).

Furthermore, the legislation that the Swedish Parliament passed in 1979 prohibiting physical chastisement ('aga' in Swedish) and other kinds of humiliating behavior against children contributed to increasing equality between children and adults. The aim of the aga law was primarily to reduce the use of physical punishment by changing attitudes to the use of physical chastisement. Secondly, the Swedish state wanted to offer clear guidelines to parents and professionals. Finally, it was argued that this legislation would lead to the early identification of child abuse, resulting in earlier intervention in cases of abuse (Durrant, 1999). According to Durrant, this goal has been reached. In a recent international study, Swedish parents differed from parents in other countries when it came to the ways and frequency with which they emphasized children's rights in the family and in family life (Harkness, et al., 2001).

The bidirectional socialization process – the active child

A notion of fundamental importance from the perspective of the child as an active participant is the bidirectional nature of the socialization process. In contrast to the unidirectional perspective, a bidirectional perspective means that the child's socialization is affected not only by parents and by the context but also by the child itself (Kuczynski, Marshall & Schell, 1997). The child is active as an interpreter who gradually develops the mental structures required for social interaction. This involves a shift from agent–object to agent–agent, as regards the understanding of parent–child socialization. Furthermore, the perspective embraces the fact that both parents and children constitute their own values, ways of thinking, attitudes and motives (working models) in collaboration with one another. This ongoing process is open to change and takes place throughout every stage of life.

The bidirectional process includes externalization and internalization for both the child and its parents. Externalization means that the individual evaluates and reworks its own working models before manifesting them in the parent–child interaction. Internalization represents different forms of mental activity communicated in the parent–child interaction, such as the interpretation, selection, forgetting, denial or assimilation of the message. Internalization as a result of upbringing is a two-step process. (1) The child has either a correct or an incorrect perception of the parent's message. (2) The child either accepts or rejects the message. The second of these steps is influenced by the child's evaluation of the message, its evaluation of the parent–child relationship and its feeling of having affected the situation Furthermore, the child reorganizes the message based on its own pre-existing references (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). Kuczynski, et al. (1997) argue that the bidirectional perspective helps us to understand the child's active internalization of values. The child as an active agent in the parent–child socialization process could be

discussed by perceiving the child as an active creator of meaning about what is happening, an intentional actor in the interaction and as having an idea about the efficacy of action. Viewing the child as an active agent thus means that the child is active in its choices and decisions and a person not only being the causal factor that determines the directions (both conscious and unconscious) of the parent–child relationship (Knapp, 1999).

In both a social and physical context, *the child is an active creating of meaning* (Kuczynski, et al., 1999), by transforming, selecting and evaluating information that is transmitted (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). Modern research shows that children have certain perceptions of what is happening, as well as of their parents' thoughts and feelings in child-rearing situations. The child has ideas about how the parent will act in a specific situation, the factors that lie behind these actions and the anticipated effect (e.g. Barnett, Quackenbush & Sinisi, 1996). Research on children's perceptions and evaluations of child-rearing reveals that children prefer parents who intervene in conflicts, instead of parents who ignore the situation (e.g. Paikoff, Collins & Laursen, 1988; Siegal & Rablin, 1982). In American and Australian studies, laissez-faire methods were rated most negatively of all methods, with reasoning, time-out, "silent time" and physical punishment all being rated more positively and only withdrawal of love being rated the same as laissez-faire methods. The most preferred of all methods was reasoning (e.g. Barnett, et al., 1996; Paikoff, et al., 1988; Sorbring, Deater-Deckard & Palmérus, 2006). Children modify their evaluations of different child-rearing methods depending on the situation. The disciplinary methods that were used were evaluated positively if children perceived parents' actions as correct in relation to their own behavior (Tisak, 1986). When a child seriously misbehaved, it was correct for its parents to use physical punishment (Wolfe, Katell & Drabman, 1982). Earlier studies showed that children believed that gender was an important influence on the parent's action. Both boys and girls believed that boys were treated more severely and that girls received more lenient treatment (Sorbring, Rödholm-Funnemark & Palmérus, 2003). Furthermore, children believed that the parent's gender contributed to mothers' and fathers' different choices of disciplinary methods. For example, fathers were perceived as using physical punishment more frequently than mothers, while mothers used reasoning more frequently than fathers (e.g. Barnett, et al., 1996).

Children's perceptions of their parents' different child-rearing methods influence their own self-perception (Crase, Foss & Colbert, 1981), as well as their perception of the surrounding social environment (Herzberger, Potts & Dillon, 1981). Furthermore, children's perceptions of parents' child-rearing methods influence the initial development of their own future child-rearing methods (Wolfe, et al.,1982). Ronher et al.'s (Rohner & Bourque, 1996; Rohner, Kean & Cournoyer, 1991) study showed that, when children perceived physical punishment as a form of rejection, this was positively related to the young individual's own maladjustment. The results obtained by Lansford et al. (2005) accord well with those of the Rohner studies and demonstrate that children's perceptions of whether physical punishment is normative moderate the association between experiences of physical punishment, child aggression and anxiety.

As (Kuczynski, et al., 1999) make clear, children have an *intentional interaction* with their parents. Intentional interaction includes children's strategies, intentions and goal-oriented

behavior in situations of parent–child interaction. The child has an opinion about how it should act to get what it wants. The child influences the parent's behavior by regulating its own actions, partly with regard to the "pay-off" effect different parental behavior is expected to produce (Patterson, 1997). Most likely, the fact that children play an active part in resolving parent–child conflicts leads to increases in the child's ability to negotiate. In other worlds, conflict situations are meaningful for the individual's social development (Kuczynski, et al., 1999).

Children are active agents, with various beliefs about the way their own behavior can influence situations in which they find themselves or, put another way, the child has *ideas about the efficacy of its actions* (Kuczynski, et al., 1999). These beliefs vary depending on the child's earlier experiences of the efficacy of its own actions in different situations. Children, in the same way as parents modify their choice of disciplinary method depending on the efficacy of the method in previous situations. This means that, over time, bidirectional influences arise (Goodnow and Collins, 1990).

The traditional power relations that exist in child–parent interaction have made it harder to accept the bidirectional perspective. Kuczynski, et al. (1999) argue that, in social interaction, power is multidimensional and dynamic and it is all too easy to say that parents have a monopoly over power. The variations in power in the parent–child relationship reflect both the parent's and the child's cognitive and physical maturity, as well as their rights. The parent and the child both act in a relationship in which they are simultaneously powerful and vulnerable in relation to each other. Earlier research has focused on the person who had the most power in this relationship, while the bidirectional perspective focuses on the types and forms of power existing both for the child and for the parent.

Research questions

The aim of the study was to examine children's active role in conflict situations. The three criteria for the child as an active agent proposed by Kuczynski, et al. (1999) underpin the following three objectives:
1. How does the child actively create meaning about what is happening?
2. How does the child participate actively in the situation?
3. Which ideas does the child have about the efficacy of its actions?

Furthermore, children's beliefs about the importance of gender in the above processes will be of specific interest in all three objectives.

METHOD

As the current study is influenced by ethnographic methodology, it is based on natural situations. McCracken's (1988) four-step method has been used as a model for conducting the study and analyzing the data. The four steps, based on analytic and cultural data, as well as processes of reviewing and discovery, are as follows. (1) Reviewing analytic categories and interview design. This included a literature review, designed to access deeper knowledge about the subject of interest. Based on this knowledge, the interview guide could be constructed. (2) Review of cultural categories and interview design. From prior experience and beliefs about the subject, the area was reviewed, to address questions such as What is implied by the notion that the child is an active agent? For the researcher, the purpose in addressing these questions was to be aware of his/her own position and make it possible to establish a distance to familiar expectations. Establishing a distance to familiar expectations was helpful in constructing the interview, interacting with the children and analyzing the data. (3) The third step, the interview procedure and identification of cultural categories, includes the construction and performance of the interview. This step will be presented in more detail further on in this section. (4) The last step involved the analysis of interview data and the identification of analytic categories. In the light of the earlier steps "reviewing analytic and cultural categories", the material was analyzed in a multi-step process. This creates higher levels of generalization of the material. By analyzing the data obtained in the interviews, patterns and relationships finally emerge from the analytically constructed themes. The actual process for analyzing the current material is described in detail further on in this section.

Participants

Fourteen eight-year-old children (6 girls, 8 boys) participated in the study. The children were recruited from a youth recreation center in a small town in the west of Sweden. The recreation center was situated in a building close to the children's school. Every day, between seven and half past eight in the morning and from noon to half past four in the afternoon, the center was visited by approximately 20-25 children aged between 8-9 years. In the current study, only the younger, eight-year-old children, participated. Most of the children (8) were from middle socio-economic background families (SES), while two were higher SES and four were lower SES. All the children lived in two-parent families and they all had siblings. Two of the girls and two of the boys only had siblings of the same gender as themselves, while the other children all had at least one sibling of the other

gender in the family. All the children who were approached agreed to participate in the study.

Procedure

After the principal and the staff at the youth recreation center had agreed to take part in the study, both the children and their parents received written information about the study and their rights, as well as the opportunity to talk to the researcher (ES) in person. The children were interviewed once their parents' consent had been obtained.

In order to get to know the children better, to establish a good relationship with them and to establish a degree of confidence in ES as an interviewer, ES spent five weeks at the youth recreation center. During this time, each child was interviewed on three occasions. The children had the opportunity to be interviewed either alone or together with a friend. According to Eckert (2001), interviews conducted with children in pairs create a secure yet relaxed conversational climate. The majority of the children chose to be interviewed together with another child, although there were some who preferred to be interviewed alone. A few wanted to be interviewed together with two friends. Each interview lasted for about 15-35 minutes and was tape recorded. Between the interviews, ES took part in the activities at the center, such as playing and drawing, as well as all the other things associated with everyday life at a youth recreation center.

Interviews

The three interviews were based on relevant literature and pilot interviews with children of the same age as the participants. An open-ended interview formula was constructed, based on the themes that had been identified. Each theme contained a number of relevant questions that could be used. The child's individual approach had a significant effect on the outcome of each interview. The three interviews focused on its special area in the following order: 1) negotiation, power and individual differences in and around conflict situations, 2) gender differences and 3) the use and evaluation of different child-rearing methods. Three separate interviews were chosen to give the child a chance to reflect on the subject and avoid tiring the children. Furthermore, by introducing different areas in different interviews, the purpose was to prevent the children's answers possibly being affected or influenced by the questions that had been posed immediately before (e.g. gender was not introduced before the second interview). All the interviews dealt with upbringing from a general perspective and not the children's own experiences in their own families. However, several children related to their own experiences and families in their answers.

The first interview started out by asking the children to describe what a family was and what families do together. Furthermore, it included questions about who in the family is the one who decides, what parents decide and what children decide and how decisions are made. In the second part of the interview, the children were asked to make up a story about parents and children having different opinions or not wanting the same thing (e.g. a conflict situation) and, in connection with this, to describe what can happen in these

situations and why this happens. The third part was divided into three sub-areas, based on the children's imaginary story. The first area treated the situation as a negotiation, the second looked at the situation from a power perspective and the third area included questions about differences between families. All three sub-areas included discussions about child and parent behavior and thoughts and feelings connected with the conflict situation.

The second interview focused on the same areas as the first interview, but with a specific gender perspective. First, the children were asked to imagine situations for families with both boys and girls, only boys and only girls. After this introduction, the children's imaginary story from the previous interview was discussed from a gender perspective. The third and final part of the interview was, like the first interview, subdivided into three areas, negotiation, power perspectives and parents' relations towards boys and girls, and how this could affect the development of boys and girls.

The third interview differed in structure, with questions focusing on a couple of more specific child-rearing methods, the way parents make use of them and the child's evaluation. To facilitate discussion, six pictures presenting different categories of child-rearing methods were presented. In their original version, the six categories, taken from the Parental Discipline Interview (PDI: Pinkerton, Scarr & Eisenberg, 1991), have previously been used in Swedish studies (Durrant, Broberg & Rose-Krasnor, 1999; Palmérus, 1999; Palmérus & Jutengren, 2004). Furthermore, in a modified version of the PDI, the current pictures have been used with eight-year-old Swedish children (Sorbring, et al, 2003; Sorbring & Palmérus, 2004). The pictures were described carefully for the children and represent the following categories of disciplinary methods: (1) Low use of authority – the parent holding the child on her/his lap in a comforting way, (2) Reasoning/explanations – parent and child are seated opposite one another, (3) Coercive verbal control – the parent stands remonstrating and gesticulating while the child is seated, (4) Isolation/behavior modification – the child stands at the threshold of a doorway while the parent gestures towards the door, (5) Physical restraint – the parent takes a firm hold of the child who is waving her/his arms around and (6) Physical punishment – the parent's hand makes contact with the side of the child's head/face. Each category includes several closely defined methods, all of which were described to the children. In the current set of interviews, the pictures were used as support for the discussion and were consequently not used systematically.

Analysis

The analysis of the interview material is divided into three phases. The first phase is an overview of the material that provides an initial orientation for the researcher. The second phase includes working with each interview separately. The third and final phase involves combining all the interviews and conducting an in-depth analysis. Both the study as a whole and the analysis of the interview data have been influenced by McCracken's (1988) analytical model. The division of the process into separate stages is different, but the content of the process is generally the same.

All the interviews were transcribed, yielding more than 120 two- to three-column pages (the number of columns depended on the number of children in the interview). After that, all the interviews were read through twice. The first set of readings was made without any prior expectations, while the second time the interview transcripts were read in the light of the objectives. Ehrnrooth (cited in Öberg, 1997) argues that well-formulated and theoretically well-supported hypotheses are of great assistance when identifying meaningful information relating to the area of interest. In connection with the second reading of the transcripts, an extensive discussion about the content of the interviews and the continuing process was conducted with a colleague. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) point out that, in this phase, it is important to use the material as a tool for reflection. The researcher should be on the lookout for interesting patterns, group differences, whether there are any obvious connections with previous studies or theories, or if anything else appears to stand out.

The next phase in the analytical process involved a separate review of each interview. Words and sentences that appeared to be central and contained information about the hypothesis were marked in the text. These extracts can be seen as forms of meaning concentrations (Kvale, 1997) in the sense that the children's statements are contained in shorter, concentrated sentences but nevertheless have the same content. Furthermore, the marked words, meanings and concentrations were classified into meaningful groups or categories. The categories were ascribed names that were designed to reflect their content. In highlighting a number of meaningful categories in the material, the aim was to define and elucidate the different phenomena expressed by the children. The next step was to review and question the content and naming of each category, both in the light of the raw material and in the light of the research questions. The difference between the categories and the raw material is the level of generalization. The aim is that the categories, that is to say the empirical generalizations, should reflect the same reality as the raw material.

In the final phase of the process of analysis, all the categories from each interview were combined. In parts of the analysis, boys and girls were considered separately, while, in other parts of the analysis, the material from all the interviews with the children was checked together. After combining the categories for each interview, and with the aim of limiting the number of categories, patterns and similarities among the categories were identified. These patterns and similarities formed the basis for combining main categories into themes. A deeper analysis and interpretation was made possible by putting the raw material aside, using the new themes as a starting-point. In the themes, the underlying message and meaning was looked for. This is analogous to the interpretation of meaning, which involves a more extensive and deeper interpretation of the underlying meaning in the data. Kvale (1998) describes how the researcher in this part of the analysis starts out from a specific perspective and interprets the interviews from this perspective. Furthermore, Kvale suggests that, by reaching behind that which is concretely enunciated in the interviews, the researcher expresses a desire to develop structures and relations that are otherwise latent in the material. In connection with the final analysis, which is presented in the section on the discussion of the results, an interpretation of the material has been made by relating the analysis to existing theory. The goal throughout the analytical process has been to retain the richness and depth of the material.

RESULT and DISCUSSION

The analysis is presented in three sections, all similar to the objectives of the study. Within each section, the results are categorized into several relevant groups and themes (Figure 1). The results are presented and discussed concurrently.
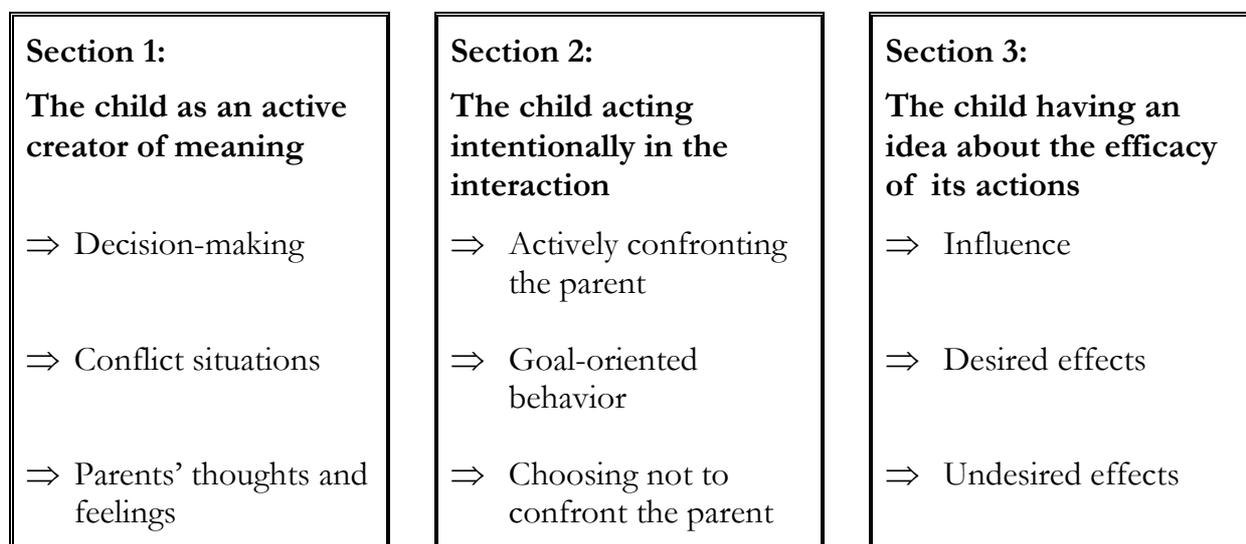
Section 1: **The child as an active creator of meaning** ⇒ Decision-making ⇒ Conflict situations ⇒ Parents' thoughts and feelings	Section 2: **The child acting intentionally in the interaction** ⇒ Actively confronting the parent ⇒ Goal-oriented behavior ⇒ Choosing not to confront the parent	Section 3: **The child having an idea about the efficacy of its actions** ⇒ Influence ⇒ Desired effects ⇒ Undesired effects

Figure 1: The categorizations of the results

The child as the active creator of meaning

In different ways, the children in the interviews described how they imagine and evaluate their parents' action in conflict situations, the effect that parents suspect their action had and background variables that underpin parents' actions. These descriptions were divided into themes under the following headings; Decision-making, Conflict situations and Parents' thoughts and feelings.

As far as the children are concerned, **Decision-making** is associated not only with what is decided but also with the person who makes the decision, the variables that lie behind the decision and the reason why this person has the authority to make the decision. The children mentioned both situations in which they are the ones who decide and situations in which it is mostly the parents who decide. The reported situations are connected with

everyday activities such as the choice of food, bedtime, doing homework, watching TV and who the child should play with. Research shows that parents have both long-term and short-term goals (Dix, McFarland & Thompson, 1999), which can be either child or parent oriented (Dix, 1992) and which underpin the choices parents make in different child-rearing situations. This was revealed in the interviews when the children talked about more specific circumstances that justify the notion that it was the parents who were the appropriate persons to make these decisions. The children felt that the parents' goals were connected to the specific situation, either with regard to the child's best interests; such as, for example, that the child cannot go out because there is a thunderstorm or because of sickness, or because it is too late in the evening to play and that the child should not drink soft drinks after brushing their teeth and so on or, as regards the parents' best interests, such as the parent being too tired to give the child a ride to a friend's house, or the parent not wanting to go out and so on. Long-term goals, so-called socialization goals (Maccoby, 1992; 2000), that children talk about are, for example, that they should learn how to behave, so that in the future they too will be able to raise children themselves and that they should be like their parents when they grow up. The generation aspect was thus revealed as a background variable that could affect parents' goals. Children thought that parents want their children to become like themselves, but also that parents' own upbringing could affect the way they treat their own children. If the parents had been badly treated as children, they were likely to replicate this behavior with their own children. Another variable that affects parents' decision-making is the period of time in which they themselves grew up and the fact that central values at that time could influence approaches to child-rearing. One boy explained that "Things change over time. For example, when Anna (a much older sibling) was born maybe there weren't any computers, but now, in my time, there are computers and that means that there are other things I can do and suchlike. New things come with time – things are different. The reason why their siblings were not treated in the same way as themselves was that they were either younger or older. They appeared to believe that their siblings were probably treated in the same way as themselves when they were the same age – but they say that they know very little about it since they were not actually there.

In many situations, children ascribed parents' legitimacy to decide to the fact that parents were older and children were small, children knew less than their parents and their opportunities to make decisions were consequently more limited. Girls regarded their parents as responsible and said that they should take care of children, using their ability acquired from life experience. Boys felt that their parents sometimes overrated their own legitimacy and capacity to decide in different situations. They felt that parents *believe* they have the right to decide and that parents *believe* they can and know more than the child.

> *Interviewer:* Why do you think that your parents decide so much then?
> *Boy 1:* Yes, well it's just that they are bigger than children and they have more…
> *Boy 2:* They <u>think</u> that they have more …
> *Boy 1:* They <u>think</u> they have the right to decide more than children.
> *Boy 2:* They think they … quite a lot of parents think that they are smarter and better than children and carry on like, deciding things just because they are smarter than children – but they are wrong! We can be just as clever as them.

Parents' over-confidence in their own abilities could sometimes result in poor decisions and, even if parents mean well, their decisions are sometimes entirely wrong. According to boys, parents do not always know better, or manage things better than children. This result is in line with Halldén's (1994) Swedish study in which girls ascribed more power to parents and boys ascribed more power to children, even if there was a large within-group difference.

Conflict situations could arise when children either ignore a decision made by the parent, or do not seek the parent's opinion in those everyday situations in which the child knows that it is invariably the parent who makes the decisions (e.g. not being on time, going out or playing with a friend without permission). In the interviews with both girls and boys, the children were of the opinion that boys more frequently disobeyed their parents or forgot to ask for permission. However, no gender differences were revealed if the reason for the conflict was rooted in the child's mischief or if the child put itself in danger.

When a conflict arose, a whole battery of actions initiated by both parents and children would follow. In the interviews, it emerged that the child often had specific thoughts about how parents would act and how the course of events would develop. Two possible points of departure involving the following actions were described by the children in the interviews (Figure 2).

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                  Conflict situation                  │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
              ▼                          ▼
┌──────────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────────┐
│ Starting point 1:    │   │ Starting point 2:    │
│ Aroused feelings     │   │ Discussion and       │
│                      │   │ arguments            │
│                      │   │                      │
│  ⇒ Reasoning with    │   │  ⇒ Solution          │
│    one another       │   │                      │
│                      │   │                      │
│  ⇒ Punishment        │   │                      │
│                      │   │                      │
│  ⇒ Involvement of    │   │                      │
│    the other parent  │   │                      │
└──────────────────────┘   └──────────────────────┘
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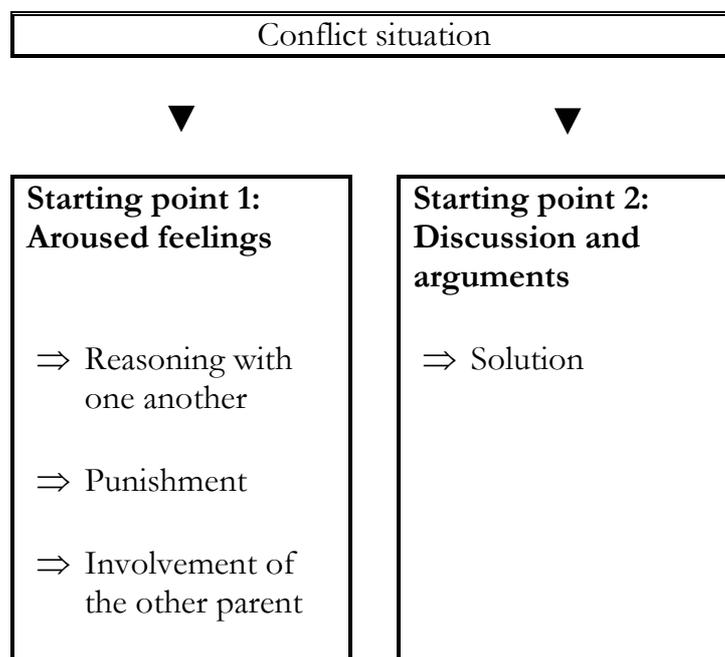
Figure 2: Actions following conflict situations

One common starting-point for a course of events arising from a conflict situation was that a plethora of aroused feelings found an outlet in fights, quarrels and yelling at each other. Children reported that, in this phase, parents acted more firmly with boys than they did with girls, a finding which has been confirmed in previous studies (Sorbring, et al., 2003), and that the reason for this was that boys could cope with more quarrels and did

not become as upset as easily as girls. In one interview one girl says that "When they get angry the boys, it seems to me, take things harder because they don't get upset so quickly, it's usually mostly us girls who do" One of the boys expresses similar feelings when he says "Boys are more used to getting told off than girls, so I think probably that they get told off a little harder, so to say" After the first, emotional arousal phase, children mentioned three different forms the subsequent course of events could take. Children and parents continued to reason with each other on a number of different levels – from milder discussions to harder, firmer commands, or parents decided on some kind of punishment (withdrawal of allowance, time-out, no sweets, forbidden to go out). Although these punishments were experienced as hard, they were perceived, to a greater or lesser extent, as being fair, depending on the situation. A couple of boys mentioned the fact that parents could use physical punishment, something that frightened them. According to children, the third turn a course of events could take was that the other parent got involved in the quarrel and that the quarrel continued between the parents, without the involvement of the child and this could, in certain cases, be perceived by the child as a form of isolation.

The second common starting-point for the course of events in a conflict situation was that, from the outset, children and parents discussed and argued with each other. In this type of case, some children believed that mothers were calmer and more reasonable, whereas others believed that fathers were the best ones to reason with. Even if individual differences between parents existed, it is possible that Swedish fathers in general are perceived as using more reasoning than fathers whose parenting has been the subject of research in other international studies, which have shown that mothers are the ones who make more use of reasoning (e.g. Barnett, et al., 1996; Palmérus, 1999). A solution or compromise very often followed when the starting-point was that both parents and children reason with each other. In these circumstances, the child felt both that the situation was calmer and that the conflict was resolved in a more satisfactory manner.

The children expressed several notions about the best way for parents to handle the situation in order to achieve an optimal outcome. Children expressed a strong preference for reasoning, something that has been demonstrated in several national and international studies (e.g. Barnett, et al., 1996; Paikoff, et al., 1988; Sorbring, et al., 2006). Children described it as positive if a parent, in a calm and controlled way, reprimanded the child, talked to the child about what has happened and then helped the child to behave in a manner the parent expected. In this way, no one became upset and a better solution was obtained for everyone. For the child, unhappiness, something the child experienced when parents yelled and fought, was connected with uncomfortable feelings. One girl described this in a colorful way: Yes, it's like when I hear those angry voices it feels like my heart is going to break and you get a great big lump in your throat. Then it's nicest if you (parents) talk to you. In these circumstances, children expressed the desire that parents should say that they were sorry and then comfort the child, in order to resolve the situation satisfactorily. In previous studies, as in this study, children reported various evaluations of parents' situationally-dependent child-rearing methods (e.g. Tisak, 1986; Wolfe, et al., 1982). In addition to reasoning, children preferred their parents to use time-out when they had broken something and to comfort them when they felt excluded – but parents should preferably not yell at them, except perhaps when they had hit another child. If parents do

yell, children preferred not too great an outburst of anger. There were also indications, in the interview material, that it was best if parents let the child have its own way.

Parents' thoughts and feelings in yelling situations were perceived in relation to the child's previous experiences. All the interviewed children believed that parents did not want to yell and felt sorry when they did so. However, even if it appeared as though parents were very angry, children felt that their true feelings were more those of sadness due to the actual misbehavior of the child. One girl says: "Yes, they can be angry, but they're not angry really – they're only sad. Mostly they're sad. Yelling made the child feel unloved, although it knew that its parents were yelling because they cared for and loved the child. Research has shown that the future development of children is dependent on their perception of their parents' motives for their actions, whether they were signs of care or of rejection (Rohner & Bourque, 1996; Rohner, et al., 1991). From the child's angle, it could be important that the parent is able adequately to show the depth of his/her feelings and affection (Deater-Deckard, Dodge & Sorbring, 2005). After an outburst of yelling, the child believed parents regretted their behavior and wanted to excuse themselves and comfort the child. Both mothers and fathers were described in this way, although children felt that their mothers were better at showing their feelings and saying that they were sorry.

The child acting intentionally in the interaction

In the interviews, children described how they actively chose whether or not to interact with the parent in the conflict situation and, if they did, which strategies they used to influence the situation and lead it in their preferred direction. In this section, as in the previous sections, the results are presented under three different themes: Actively confronting the parent, Goal-oriented behavior and Choosing not to confront the parent.

Actively confronting the parent was mostly done using different forms of reasoning. The child stated its case and added different arguments supporting the preferred outcome. The child chose whether to talk, discuss or even argue with the parent. One girl described how she just very simply expressed her opinion and wishes, without being asked by either of her parents. Occasionally, children presented arguments designed to break down the parent's resistance, or they repeatedly asked questions in an attempt to force the parent to confront the issue. One boy mentioned a more provocative way of confronting his parents. By imitating his parents' behavior (i.e. sounding severe, quarreling like them), he was active in the conflict situation. Sometimes, the children tried to initiate another type of behavior. They could calm the parent, not accept a time-out and instead show that they wanted to talk about what had happened, in an attempt to redirect the course of the conflict situation. Another active strategy designed to change the course of events or patterns of behavior, but without immediately confronting the parent, was to make contact with somebody outside the home (a friend, school nurse, children's organization). One girl mentioned this as a solution in really difficult situations.

Goal-oriented behavior is when behavior is modified in order to achieve some advantage or pay-off (Patterson, 1997) and it was described in several of the interviews. Children could either communicate their feelings verbally or pretend to be upset to calm

their parents or elicit milder forms of discipline. The most frequent type of 'pay-off' behavior was to apologize. In the interviews, it became apparent that children said that they were sorry for their own benefit, in order to continue watching TV, getting something or being friends with the parent again, avoiding the unpleasant feeling of an angry parent. One girl tells about her views in the following way:

> If parents and children fall out, then the child can ask for forgiveness.
> Instead of sulking and being angry with each other, you can say; -
> Sorry then, it wasn't my fault. Then perhaps the other one can be
> kind and say, Okay, it doesn't matter. And perhaps you can hug a
> little afterwards, and so you can be friends again.

All the interviews expressed the importance of friendly relations with the parents. Saying "I'm sorry", but, also as mentioned by some of the boys in the study, demonstrating goodwill by means of a positive gesture, drawing a picture, preparing coffee, or not spending all their pocket money on sweets and so on, were ways of maintaining friendship with their parents.

For many children, **Choosing not to confront the parent,** was a frequently-used strategy in conflict situations. Withdrawing to their room when a parent gets angry is a way for children to be alone and express their feelings, as well as an opportunity to calm down. Several of the children expressed the opinion that, if you are upset, you should try to calm down and this is best achieved on your own. One boy in one of the interviews says:

> On the most part children try to get out of it, but a few won't let the
> argument go. Sometimes they (the children) can be sad and lock
> themselves in somewhere. If you start to cry, then you should run up
> to your room – it's probably best to take it easy for a while.

Some children reported that, if the situation got really bad, they could run away from home. Another solution was to wait and mentally step aside, not saying or doing anything to make the situation worse. This included the child's decision to comply with the parent's wishes. In some cases, the child chose not to continue arguing with the parent who had said 'no', but instead asked the other parent in order to achieve her/his aims. Another way was to encourage the parent to leave the place in order to be able to continue doing what the child wanted to do. Withdrawing or in some other way choosing not to confront the parent should not been seen as the child not being active in the situation. Kuczynski, et al. (1999) point out that even passive behavior should be viewed as goal-related strategies. As we can see in the situations above, both the situation and the child's own well-being were affected by the choices the child actively made.

The child having an idea about the efficacy of its action

Children's perceptions of being able to influence the situation range from reports of relatively little influence, to descriptions about how their behavior and actions really had an impact on the situation. Ideas about the efficacy of the child's own actions are discussed in three themes: Influence, Desired effects and Undesired effects.

Influence was most often reported in situations that had little or no relevance to the rest of the family. These situations included decisions about what to play, which sweets to choose, activities in their own rooms, what to eat and whether the child wants to spend time in her/his own room. All the children reported that these areas of influence are too few and limited and that they would like more influence in a wider range of situations. In fact, they expressed a desire to be able to have more influence in those situations which mostly relate to themselves. Examples included when to clean their rooms (not *if,* but *when*), bedtime during holidays, persons to play with and that their parents should keep promises and so on. In these situations, parents usually decided and children thought that they had little insight into their decision-making process. Most often, when children and parents had different wishes, parents made the decisions. Children said that they should be able to decide as much at home as in school. One boy says:

> They (parents) say: - Now go and do this and this. If you're at home you don't get to decide much, but at school you get to decide more, because there you're on your own. There you can't play computer games and have fun, but you can at least decide about things yourself a little bit more. If you could decide things just as much at home, then it would be great fun at home too.

Based on studies carried out with children, their mothers and unrelated adults, Kuczynski, et al. (1999) argue that children's active interaction increased when the child had a closer relationship with the adult. An explanation for not finding the same results in the current study could be that Sweden has a school curriculum that stresses that children should play an active role in planning their own education (Sheridan & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2001).

Desired effects as a result of their own actions were reported by several children who expressed the opinion that they had some influence. In the interviews, they described how different strategies were effective for different outcomes. The use of different types of reasoning was effective for facts and when the child knew that the parent's action was wrong or inappropriate. A girl talks about situations where she thinks her mother treats her unfairly in comparison to the way that she, the mother, treats the girl's brother:

> And then maybe I say – Why do you do that? Why don't you tell David off that much and tell me off a lot? My mother would have probably said sorry or something and said that she would try to be fairer in the future.

Reasoning was also effective when the child wanted something or, conversely, did not want something to happen. Furthermore, it worked to play parents off against each other in order to obtain a desired result. The two most effective ways to end a conflict and to establish an amicable climate again were either to say "I'm sorry", which usually also gave the parent the opportunity to say that he/she was sorry, or, if the child got angry and upset, this often changed the parent's mind so that he/she started to comfort the child and became friends again.

Undesired effects of actions and behavior are often perceived by children to occur in a range of different situations. Even those strategies that have been mentioned previously as being effective could sometimes produce either no effect or really unexpected effects. Usually, when children displayed emotions, such as getting angry, upset, screaming or showing attachment, the result of these behaviors did not always yield the expected effects. Children believed this was due to the fact that parents found the child's behavior inappropriate for the situation and therefore did not comfort or let the child have its own way. Sometimes, the child believed the decision had already been made (either on its own or together with the parent) and expected this decision to be respected. This was not always the case, since the child and its parent often had different opinions of the prehistory. Trying to hoodwink the parent was not often successful either. Children believed parents knew them too well to be able to pull the wool over their parents' eyes, without getting caught. Despite this, children sometimes tried to do so.

Conflicts were not always resolved and parents and children did not always immediately become friends again. One boy describes the situation in the following way:

> When they (parents) tell you off – because you are not supposed to do that! They wrinkle up their brows – that's what they do. Then perhaps the child wants a hug, but the adult doesn't, and then it doesn't feel nice. It perhaps feels better if they talk, because then the child will know why he shouldn't do this or shouldn't do that.

Parents and children sometimes continue to be on bad terms with each other over a longer period of time, with fighting and sulking. All the children perceived this as uncomfortable and undesirable. Kuczynski, et al. (1999) argue that it could be positive that conflicts were not always resolved, as both parties in the conflict then firmly persist in what they believe is right, instead of compromising in order to achieve a solution. Studies report that about two in five parent-child conflicts resulted in a solution (Eisenberg cited in Kuczynski, et al., 1999). In addition to the fact that the parent learnt from previous parent-child conflicts (Goodknow & Collins, 1990), the child might also do so. If children perceived how parents respond in relation to their actions, feelings of discomfort connected with unresolved conflicts might trigger more effective conflict solutions in the future. To avoid the discomfort, but also to get almost what they want, children develop negotiating skills to become more successful in subsequent conflict situations. The fact that conflicts do not always result in an immediate solution, but are instead followed by discussion, could be positive for the development of the child's future negotiating and argumentation skills (Kuczynski, et al., 1999).

When the desired effects failed to materialize and punishment was a fact, boys, but not girls, described how the only thing left was to make the best of the situation. Even if they were upset and felt that it was boring to have to go to their room, it was now up to them to try to think of something that was fun to do, such as calling a friend, ignoring what had happened, playing a computer game, playing with Lego or finding something else that was fun to do within the confines of their room.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine how children play an active part during different phases in a conflict situation. The first objective focused on how the child actively creates meaning about what happens during conflict situations. According to the children's perceptions, which are comprehensively described in the interviews; parents generally decided and there were several factors, short-term as well as long-term, that underpinned these decisions. Children believed parents had a legitimacy to decide in most situations, due to their greater knowledge and responsibility for their children. A couple of boys felt that their parents were overly confident about their own capacity to decide, thereby leading to inappropriate decisions. In situations in which parents and children had different opinions, different courses of events could occur. From a starting-point dominated by aroused feelings, subsequent reasoning, punishment or a quarrel between the parents without the child being present could follow. Both boys and girls reported that, when parent and child were involved in a conflict, parents were more severe on boys than on girls. When they had different opinions, children and parents very often started a discussion, without any initial heightened emotions. Quarreling and being on bad terms with each other was connected with feelings of discomfort, as far as the children were concerned. They also believed that parents reacted similarly in these situations. Children believed parents were sad, even if they gave the impression of being angry.

The second objective, which related to how the child acts intentionally during interaction with the parent, was defined as actively confronting the parent with argumentation, imitating parents' behavior, or attempting to initiate other types of behavior. Children could also utilize more goal-oriented behavior, with the aim of 'pay-off'. The child then said "I'm sorry", showing goodwill or its feelings. It also happened that the child deliberately chose not to confront the parent but instead withdrew, stepped aside for a while and did as the parent wanted or instead approached the other parent.

Finally, the child's ideas about the efficacy of its actions were investigated. Generally, children believed they had little influence in decision situations. Despite this, children described different strategies, which successfully influence the outcome of a conflict. Children got their own way either through reasoning, or playing the two parents off against one another. The most effective way for the child to end a conflict was either to say "I'm sorry", or to show its feelings. When a strategy did not produce the desired effect, children believed that parents might find their behavior unacceptable in these situations. When children did not succeed in influencing the situation, and the parents

chose some kind of punishment, the boys said there was no other alternative than to make the best of the situation.

In overall terms, boys' and girls' responses described a similar active role in conflict situations. Gender was not important for the children's descriptions of intentional action and having ideas about the efficacy of their actions in the conflict situation. However, in line with previous studies (Sorbring, et al., 2003), both boys and girls believed boys were treated more firmly by parents than girls. They also agreed that boys disobeyed their parents or forgot to ask for permission more frequently than girls. Furthermore, boys, more than girls, ascribed more power to children. This was shown both in their reports of parents' legitimacy to decide and in their reports of not accepting a punishment. There were no gender differences in either children's descriptions of their own and parents' feelings in the conflict situation, or in their evaluation of disciplinary methods.

An important and, for the bidirectional perspective, critical aspect that needs to be addressed is the issue of the relative degree of power for parents and children in conflict situations. In this discussion, power could be seen as a movable which varied significantly, depending on the context. Kuczynski, et al. (1999) identified three dimensions of power; individual factors that include deliberate strategies, the parent-child relationship and cultural variations, all of which underpin the imbalances in power between parent and child in different families. The current study exemplified all three dimensions to some extent. Children's individual capacity to use different deliberate strategies is undisguised. The fact that children thought they could influence the situation by means of an array of emotional, cognitive and behavioral strategies is probably the most distinct evidence in support of the notion that power exists in both directions in the interaction. The emotional dimension of power was reflected several times in the interviews. Children expressed knowledge of both their parents' and their own feelings, as well as thoughts about different child-rearing situations. According to the children, both they and their parents acted on these feelings, but also on a knowledge of and respect for the other person's feelings. The view that the child should be able to decide more could have a cultural explanation. The "aga law" (Durrant, 1999), parents' ways of stressing children's rights in the family (Harkness, et al., 2001) and the requirement in the current national curriculum that demands that children's views are taken into consideration (Sheridan & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2001) all contribute to make Sweden a specific contextual setting. The opinions of both society and family about children's rights to exert an influence could most probably be transmitted to the child and thus become subsumed with their own opinions about how to think and act.

To study how children play an active part in and around the conflict situation, qualitative interviews with the children's own stories as the starting-point were deemed to be suitable. In a qualitative study, validity is of interest; this means that our interviews should describe the phenomena we want to examine. This is combined with getting the child to answer as truthfully as possible, in order to achieve a high level of credibility in the interviews. This was accomplished more easily if the child felt secure in the situation and if the questions that were posed were easy to understand. Like many other authors (e.g. Solberg, 1991: Vestby, 1991), we feel that the general principles that exist for adult interviews are relevant for interviews with children, although they could be more difficult

to manage. In society in general, children are in a dependent and subordinate position in relation to adults. Children could therefore perceive the interviewer as an authority (Falkström & Johansson, 1999). Spending a longer period of time together with the children in the current study resulted in the establishment of good relationships which, in turn, led to a higher level of credibility. To formulate relevant interview questions, pilot interviews were conducted with children of an appropriate age. To control for high reliability in the data analysis, in addition to continuous discussions with appropriate colleagues, McCracken's (1988) analysis model was used as a template.

It has been possible to examine the conflict situation using Kuczynski's three criteria for an active child in the parent-child relation. Many interesting results relating to children's active roles in conflict situations and the aspect of child-parent relationships have been obtained. Several researchers have recently started to examine the relationship between the family's relational climate and phenomena such as children's perceptions of child-rearing and parent-child interaction (Deater-Deckard, et al., 2005; Stattin & Kerr, 2000). In the future, this research should also include the relationship between the relational climate and children's active role in upbringing and, in particular, children's ideas about the efficacy of their action and power in the relationship. From the perspective that power has several dimensions, such as individual factors like deliberate strategies, the parent-child relationship and cultural variations, it is most likely that the relational climate prevailing in the family would play an important role in the discussion of children's and parents' power.

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