

Maternal Beliefs About Children's Friends in Australia and India

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ABSTRACT The research was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, data were collected in Brisbane, Australia. In the second phase, data were collected in Hisar, India. Mothers of 100 preschool-aged children constituted the sample in Australia as well as in India. A questionnaire was used to explore maternal beliefs about children's friends. The results of this study indicated that although Australian and Indian mothers held similar beliefs about children's friends, cultural differences were also found to exist. Mothers in both cultures expected their children to be friends with well mannered children and mentioned that ill mannered and violent children were unsuitable as friends for their children. Cultural differences indicated that Indian mothers valued family background and intellect of children's friends. In line with Western research, a substantial proportion of Australian mothers mentioned not to intervene in exclusive friendship and valued their child's decision to promote self-confidence in their children.

INTRODUCTION

Parents's knowledge, beliefs, and ideas about child development may influence their behaviour toward children and the opportunities they provide for their children (Goodnow, 1988). According to ecological system theory, some important sources of beliefs are present in the individual's microsystem. These include personal experiences, social exchanges with others, observations, and experiences as a child. These beliefs are consistent with the culture because they are embedded and constructed within the macroculture. "Culture consists of the socially communicated practices and beliefs that influence behaviour of people and may vary from one country to another and among groups within a country" (Cloninger, 1996, p. 452).

Mothers' beliefs about the kinds of friends they wish their children to have will influence

the peer opportunities mothers make available to their children. The literature reviewed (Homel et al., 1987; Irving, 1994; Rubin and Sloman, 1984; Sharma, 1990) indicated that many mothers have strong beliefs about the desired characteristics of their children's friends. Some mothers prefer their children to be friends with children from "good" family backgrounds (Homel et al., 1987; Irving, 1994). Families from higher socio-economic backgrounds prefer their children to be friends with children who come from similar socio-economic circumstances (Rubin and Sloman, 1984; Sharma, 1990).

The purpose of this paper is to examine maternal beliefs about suitable and unsuitable friends and about exclusive friendship in Australia and India.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Subjects: The subjects of this study were mothers of 100 four to six year old preschool children (45 girls and 55 boys) in Brisbane, Australia and mothers of 100 four to six year old preschool children (44 girls and 56 boys) in Hisar, India.

The Brisbane Study: In the first phase of the study, in Brisbane (Australia), a number of child care centres, kindergartens and preschools were approached for participation of the families involved with those centres. Families were invited to participate if mothers were born and brought up in Australia or who had been in Australia for more than 10 years. Mothers of 127 children originally agreed to participate and subsequently 100 mothers completed questionnaires. These 100 mothers constituted the Australian sample.

The Hisar Study: The second phase of the data collection was made in Hisar (India). Families

were contacted through seven schools with lower and upper kindergarten classes. The educational levels of Indian mothers was matched with the educational level of Australian mothers. In the Indian sample, 100 mothers constituted the sample.

A higher proportion of mothers (63%), Australian and Indian, were university educated. Diploma holders constituted 7%, +2 level 10%, matric 17% and middle 3% of the sample. Of the Australian mothers, 33% were working full time, 32% were working part-time and 26% were home managers, and in India, 29% were working full time, 10% were working part-time and 61% were home managers.

Measures: A questionnaire was used to gather information on family demographics and mothers' beliefs about children's friends. Mothers were asked two open-ended questions about children's friends. These questions were: *Please describe the sort of children you would like your child to be friends with? And what sort of friends are unsuitable for your child?* Mothers were also asked an open-ended question about exclusive friendship. The question was: *If your child and a friend were to play together all the time at school and rarely play with other children then what would you do?*

In Brisbane, Australia, questionnaires were sent to the 127 mothers who had volunteered to participate in the study. They were provided with reply-paid envelopes to return the completed questionnaires.

In an Indian study, Malhotra and Randhawa (1983) had suggested that a structured interview schedule for mothers was more suitable than a self-administered questionnaire. Participants from Hisar also expressed a preference for interviews over questionnaires, hence interviews were conducted. It is important to note that the interviews actually consisted of writing the mothers' reports by posing the questions from the questionnaire to mothers orally. Oral probes were not used so that interviews were equivalent to the questionnaires given in the Australian study, as far as possible. Interviews took place in the family home.

RESULTS

Within the analyses, percentage are used and

refer to the number of mothers mentioning each category and do not tally to 100% because multiple categories could be identified in the responses to each of the open-ended questions.

Maternal Beliefs About Suitable Friends: Mothers' responses could be categorised into four categories as presented in table 1. The majority of mothers, Indian as well as Australian, wanted their children to be friends with "well-mannered" children. More Indian mothers (95%) mentioned this characteristic compared to Australian mothers. "Well-mannered" children were described as: *polite; good mannered; obedient; respect others; or well behaved*. Compared to the Indian mothers, a higher proportion of Australian mother (56%) indicated that they would like their children to be friends with children who were "kind and caring". In comparison to Australian mothers, more Indian (30%) mothers indicated that they would like their children to be friends with children from "good family backgrounds".

Table 1: Maternal beliefs about children's friends

Sort of Friends	Australia	India
	<i>n</i> = 100 (%)	<i>n</i> = 100 (%)
<i>Suitable Friends</i>		
Well mannered	61	95
Kind and caring	56	15
Good family back ground	14	30
No special group	17	-
<i>Unsuitable Friends</i>		
Ill-mannered	52	76
Violent or bullying	70	50
Poor family back ground	6	28
Dull in studies	1	20

Maternal Beliefs About Unsuitable Friends: Mothers' responses about undesirable characteristics of their children's friends fell into four categories as shown in table 1. Indian mothers (76%) more frequently reported "ill-mannered" children as unsuitable than Australian mothers. Children were categorised as "ill-mannered" when mothers described them as *bad mannered; having bad habits; disobedient; liars; or spoilt*. The majority of Australian mothers (70%) indicated that "violent or bullying" were unsuitable friends for their children. Mothers described "violent and bullying" children in the following terms: *aggressive; naughty; violent; bullies; teases; or*

wilfully damages property. More Indian mothers than Australian mothers also pointed out that children from "poor family backgrounds" (28%) and children who were "dull in studies" (20%) were unsuitable friends for their children.

Maternal Beliefs About Exclusive Friendship: A scenario was presented to the mothers: *If your child and a friend were to play together all the time at school and rarely play with other children, would you intervene and why?* Table 2 shows frequencies and percentages for the categorised responses. The majority of both Australian and Indian mothers indicated that they would intervene. Percentages were higher for Indian mothers (90%) than Australian mothers (60%). In response to how they would intervene, most mothers in Australia and India replied that they would "encourage interaction" with other children. In this category, mothers' responses were: *would talk to their child; encourage to mix with others; would suggest to make more friends; or make sure has social experiences on the weekends with other children*.

As shown in table 2, the highest proportion of Australian (57.9%) and Indian (50%) mothers believed that they would intervene "to broaden social skills". These mothers mentioned that *it is not good to be centred on one person; broader ability to communicate is important; develop socially from interacting with a variety of different people; or learn to get along with a variety of children*. A proportion of Indian mothers indi-

cated that children "learn more from a variety of children" (25.6%). Some of the Australian mothers (22.8%) were more concerned about "problems if relationship breaks down". These mothers indicated that *if that particular child moves to other place; is sick; or if the relationship breaks then their children would be in trouble*.

Compared to Indian mothers (10%), a greater proportion of Australian mothers (40%) indicated that they would not intervene in this exclusive friendship. The majority of them believed that "it would build confidence in the child".

DISCUSSION

In this study, maternal beliefs about suitable and unsuitable friends and exclusive friendship were examined in two cultures, Australia and India. The results of the present study support the view that there are both cultural similarities and differences in values underlying parental beliefs about children's friends. Rubin and Sloman (1984) also report that parents have strong views about *good or bad* friends for their children. The results of this study are in line with previous research indicating that parents prefer their children to be friends with well mannered children (Irving, 1994; Kennedy, 1992; Rubin and Sloman, 1984).

That Australian mothers expected their children to be friends with "kind and caring" is also consistent with the findings that adults play an important role in developing prosocial behaviour (Richman et al., 1988; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1979).

Compared to Australian mothers, Indian mothers expected their children to be friends with children from good family background might be because there are wide range of people from different socio-economic groups, caste groups, and religious groups (Joshi and Tiwari, 1977). Homel et al. (1987) reported that parents from higher-status families may not prefer their children to be friends with lower status children. Indian mothers placed more value on the intellect of their children's friends possibly because preschool-aged children are involved in more formal early education than Australian children and Indian mothers believe that interaction with other children fosters the intellectual abilities of children. Seymour (1988) also pointed out that

Table 2: Maternal beliefs about children's friendship

Would mothers intervene in exclusive friendship?	Australia		India	
	Mothers n = 95	%	Mothers n = 100	%
Yes	57	60.0	90	90.0
No	38	40.0	10	10.0
If yes, a) What would mother do?	n = 57	%	n = 90	%
Encourage interaction	42	73.7	90	100.0
Talk to staff	9	15.8	6	6.7
b) If yes, why?				
To broaden social skills	33	57.9	45	50.0
Learn more from a variety of children	5	8.8	23	25.6
Problems if relationship breaks down	13	22.8	-	-

upper-class Indian mothers place a high value on the education of children.

With regard to exclusive friendship, previous research also indicated that mothers believe it is important to promote the social competence of children by encouraging them to interact with other children (Irving, 1994). A substantial proportion of Australian mothers believed that they would not intervene in exclusive friendship, these results get the support from a Western study. Rubin and Sloman (1984) found that mothers in their study believed that friends should not be separated and emphasised that close friendship has great value for children.

In conclusion, although Australian and Indian mothers held similar beliefs about the friendship characteristics, cultural differences were found to exist. The findings indicate that the cultural context in which families live is an important factor in determining the mothers' beliefs.

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