

# The Interplay Between Observed Maternal Perspective Taking and Clear Expectations: Links with Male Adolescents' Externalizing and Internalizing Problems

Efrat Sher-Censor · Avi Assor · David Oppenheim

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**Abstract** Based on Self-Determination Theory, our study examined the associations of maternal perspective taking (PT), clear expectations (CE), and their interaction during mother–male adolescent conflict with sons' externalizing and internalizing problems. Fifty-one mothers and their 16.5 year old sons were observed while conducting a revealed differences task. Maternal PT and CE during the interaction were assessed using new scales derived from the individuality and connectedness Q-sort. Sons' externalizing and internalizing problems were measured using the Youth Self Report. We found that higher maternal PT was associated with fewer externalizing problems of sons only when mothers also showed high levels of CE. Thus, in situations involving parent–adolescent conflict, parents' sensitivity to adolescent opposing perspective coupled with clear statements regarding the expected adolescent behavior may relate to better socio-emotional functioning of male adolescents.

**Keywords** Perspective taking · Clear expectations · Self-Determination Theory · Mother–adolescent interaction · Externalizing and internalizing problems

## Introduction

According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci and Ryan 2012), parents facilitate their adolescents' psychological growth by supporting their autonomy and providing structure. A key aspect of autonomy support is parents' capacity to take their child's perspective, which presumably enhances autonomous regulation of emotions and behavior, and minimizes feelings of anger, resentment, and anxiety, and related socio-emotional problems (e.g., Roth et al. 2009). A major feature of structure is the expression of clear expectations (CE) regarding adolescent behavior (Grolnick and Pomerantz 2009; Vansteenkiste et al. 2012). SDT suggests that parents' CE supports adolescents' competence. Adolescents who are exposed to CE know how their parents will respond to their actions and can plan their behavior accordingly, which presumably enhances their sense of perceived control (Farkas and Grolnick 2010).

Numerous studies guided by SDT and other theoretical views have demonstrated the positive effects of perspective taking (PT; e.g., Skinner et al. 2005; Soenens et al. 2007). There is also growing evidence of the benefits of parental CE (Barnes and Farrell 1992; Farkas and Grolnick 2010; Skinner et al. 2005). However, we know little about PT, CE, and their interplay particularly in the context of parent–adolescent conflicts. Parent–child conflicts regarding child behavior are frequent during adolescence (Laursen and Collins 2009). In this context, parents are confronted with the challenging task of fostering adolescents' internalization of parentally valued expectations, with which the adolescents disagree, in ways that would be experienced by the adolescents as autonomy-promoting rather than controlling (Smits et al. 2010; Soenens and Vansteenkiste 2011).

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E. Sher-Censor (✉) · D. Oppenheim  
The Center for the Study of Child Development, University of Haifa, #6035 Rabin Building, 31905 Mount Carmel, Haifa, Israel  
e-mail: esher@psy.haifa.ac.il

A. Assor  
Education Department, Ben Gurion University of the Negev,  
Beersheba, Israel

Taking the perspective of the adolescents during a conflict may not be enough to foster youth socio-emotional development and adaptation. Adolescents might interpret parental PT accompanied by vague or inconsistent expectations or lack of expectations as a sign of parents' value-confusion or lack of confidence, which might impede the internalization of parental values and norms (Assor 2011; Baumrind 1991, 2005). In parallel, imposing expectations with which adolescents disagree with little sensitivity to the adolescents' perspective and feelings (i.e., high CE with little PT) might evoke resentment and defiance and might also fail to promote adequate internalization of pro-social norms in the adolescents. As a result, adolescents might experience a particularly high level of externalizing problems such as angry and hostile outbursts and anti-social behaviors. In contrast, high CE communicated with high PT may predict a particularly low level of externalizing problems.

Only a handful of studies examined these notions. In the study of Koestner et al. (1984) experimenters set fairly demanding limits pertaining to the way first and second grade students conducted a drawing task (i.e., CE that often arouse resistance and conflict). When the experimenters expressed their understanding that children may not like the drawing instructions (i.e., PT) and provided a rationale, the children enjoyed the task more and showed increased intrinsic motivation to engage in drawing later on. Three additional studies were conducted by Roth (2008), Roth and Assor (2012), and Roth et al. (2009). They found that adolescents who reported that in times of conflict their mothers communicated their expectations in ways that were sensitive to their child perspective showed volitional internalization and enactment of mothers' expectations, as well as effective and integrated emotion regulation. Adolescents who reported that their mothers communicated their expectations in controlling ways showed more resistance, less cooperation, and poorer emotion regulation. However, in these studies there was no separate assessment of the extent to which experimenters' and mothers' expectations were conveyed in a clear versus unclear way, and hence it was not possible to rigorously assess the interactive effects of PT and CE. In addition, the study of Koestner et al. (1984) did not involve adolescents, and the studies by Roth and his colleagues involved self-reports of adolescents in response to potential conflict scenarios rather than observations of parental behavior in actual conflict situations.

To address these gaps in the literature, we observed maternal PT and CE in a conflict situation between mothers and their 16.5 year old sons, and examined the associations of maternal PT, CE, and their interaction with the sons' self-reported externalizing (i.e., aggression and rule breaking behaviors) and internalizing problems (i.e.,

depression, anxiety, withdrawal, social problems, and thought problems). We examined mothers because conflicts are more prominent in the interactions of adolescents with their mothers than with their father (Laursen and Collins 2009). We focused on sons because prior works suggested that by mid-adolescence sons gain dominance at the expense of their mothers during conflicts, while daughters and mothers retain equal power (see Hill 1987 for review). Thus, expressing CE with respect to adolescents' behavior may be particularly challenging for mothers of sons.

We hypothesized that increased maternal PT that is coupled with high (but not low) CE would be associated with fewer externalizing problems of sons, and in parallel, the combination of maternal low PT and high CE would be associated with more externalizing problems of sons. To allow a more complete exploration of the links between maternal behaviors and sons' problems we also explored the association of maternal PT and CE with sons' internalizing problems. However, no specific predictions were made because, unlike psychologically controlling parental behaviors such as conditional regard or guilt induction (e.g., Assor et al. 2004; Assor and Tal 2012; Soenens and vansteenkiste 2010), little PT and/or unclear expectations may not be sufficiently emotionally threatening to induce anxious or depressive symptoms.

## Method

### Participants

Fifty-two mothers and their sons participated in the study. One dyad did not conduct the revealed differences task and was excluded from the analyses. Thus, the current study included 51 mothers and their 16.5 year old sons ( $SD = 6.57$  months). The participants were recruited from middle-class neighborhoods in large urban areas in Israel. All families were intact, Jewish, and spoke Hebrew fluently. The mean number of children in the family was 2.86 ( $SD = .63$ ). Eighteen sons (35.3 %) were first born. Mothers' average age was 46.46 years ( $SD = 5.31$ ). The mean number of years of maternal education was 15.55 ( $SD = 2.98$ ). These demographic variables were not associated with any of the study variables (all  $p$ 's  $\geq .13$ ).

### Procedure

Families were recruited via flyers sent to students' homes. Their home addresses were available through publicly available high-school phone books. Dyads completed a 2 h home assessment as part of a larger study on mother–male adolescent relationships. Informed consent was obtained in

writing and was followed by a revealed differences task (Allen et al. 1994). Sons rated the extent to which they disagreed with their mothers on 12 issues such as grades and school work, smoking, alcohol and drugs, household rules, and spending money, using the Issues Checklist (Robin and Foster 1989). Sons and mothers were then asked to discuss an issue which the son identified as a major conflict and which both mother and son felt comfortable to discuss in the presence of the interviewer. Dyads were asked to discuss their conflict for 7 min and to try and reach some agreement. The conversations were videotaped. Dyads were then observed in other family interaction tasks (not included in the current study) and sons were administered the Youth Self Report (YSR; Achenbach 1991). Dyads received a copy of their videotaped interactions as a souvenir from the study.

## Measures

### *Perspective Taking and Clear Expectations*

To the best of our knowledge there is no observational measure for assessing PT and CE in parent–child interactions. We therefore assessed PT and CE via items of the individuality and connectedness Q-Sort (ICQ; Bengtson and Grotevant 1999), which four leading SDT experts independently rated as highly representative of these dimensions. The procedure used to support the content validity of the PT and CE items is described below.

The ICQ includes 35 items such as “Uses derogatory or criticizing remarks or tone”. A coder who was blind to the study hypotheses and to other information about the families watched the videotaped interactions and coded the behavior of the mothers by sorting the ICQ items into seven piles, in each of which five items were placed. The piles ranged from one (“most undescriptive or unsalient of the individual”) to seven (“most descriptive or salient of the individual”), yielding a score of 1–7 for each item. To establish reliability in the present study, the behaviors of 16 mothers (31.37 %) were also coded by the first author. The correlations between the two coders’ arrays of scores ranged from .80 to .92 ( $M = .86$ ,  $SD = .01$ , all  $p$ 's < .001). Coders’ disagreements were resolved through discussion, until a consensus was reached.

Q-sort methods allow constructing scales that consist of sets of theoretically related items without necessarily using all or even most of the q-sort items (Block 1961; Waters and Deane 1985). For the purpose of the present study, we created PT and CE scales by asking four SDT senior researchers to identify ICQ items which reflect high versus low parental PT and parents’ clear versus vague or contradictory statements regarding expected adolescent behaviors (i.e., parental CE). The researchers uniformly

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among study variables

Variable	n	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Maternal PT	51	5.63	.45	–	–.47*	–.43**	–.19
2. Maternal CE	51	6.18	.56	–	–	.26†	.26†
3. Son’s externalizing problems	50	13.22	7.77	–	–	–	.74**
4. Son’s internalizing problems	50	17.62	11.1	–	–	–	–

†  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

classified 11 of the ICQ items as reflecting high or low PT (e.g., “Seems to understand partner’s feelings”; “Minimally acknowledges other without showing interest in their ideas”), and seven items as reflecting high versus low CE (e.g., “Demonstrates a clear point of view”; “Contradicts own point of view”). To evaluate mothers’ PT and CE, we inverted the scores mothers received in items that reflected low manifestation of the constructs. For example, the item “Contradicts own point of view” was inverted so that a score of seven became one etc. (Waters and Deane 1985). We then averaged the 11 PT items ( $\alpha = .74$ ) to form mothers’ PT scores, and the 7 CE items ( $\alpha = .78$ ) to form their CE scores. Higher scores reflected more maternal PT and clearer expectations respectively.

### *The Youth Self Report (YSR; Achenbach 1991)*

Sons responded to the YSR to assess their externalizing and internalizing problems. The YSR is a widely used measure that was validated across varied societies including in Israel (Ivanova et al. 2007). Sons rated the frequency of 113 behaviors (e.g., “I am mean to others”) during the preceding 6 months, from 0 (*not true*) to 2 (*very true or often true*). For the current study, we used the total externalizing and internalizing problems scores.

## Results

Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations of the study variables are presented in Table 1. As shown in Table 1, higher maternal PT was associated with mothers’ less CE and with fewer sons’ externalizing problems. Mothers’ clearer expectations were marginally related to more externalizing and internalizing problems.

To examine the unique and interactive effects of maternal PT and CE on sons’ adaptation, we conducted two hierarchical regression analyses, one for sons’ externalizing problems and one for their internalizing problems. To assess the unique contributions of PT, CE, and their interaction, in both regression equations PT and CE were entered in the first block, followed in the second block by

**Table 2** Regression results of son’s adaptation on maternal PT and CE (N = 50)

Variables in regression	Son’s externalizing problems			Son’s internalizing problems		
	$\beta$ (entry)	$\beta$ (final)	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$ (entry)	$\beta$ (final)	$\Delta R^2$
Block 1			.18**			.07
Maternal PT	-.39*	-.18		-.08	.03	
Maternal CE	.07	.55*		.23	.46	
Block 2			.08*			.02
Maternal PT $\times$ CE		-.51*			-.24	
Total $R^2$	.27			.09		
Final model	$F(3, 46) = 5.64^{**}$			$F(3, 46) = 1.57$		

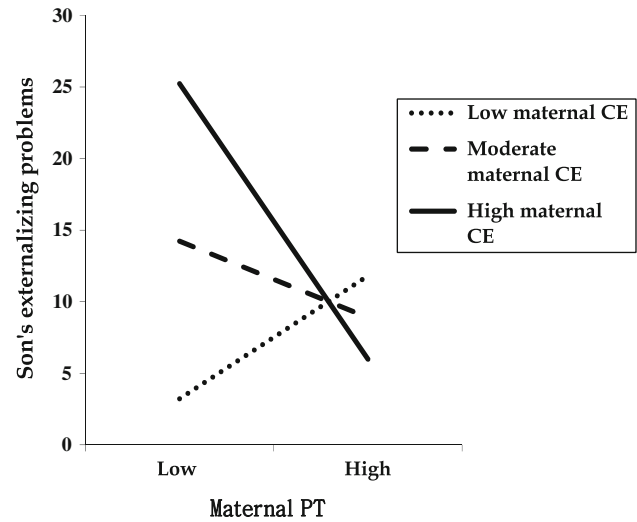
\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

their interaction term. The predictors were centered and interaction term used centered scores to facilitate the interpretation of interaction effects and reduce problems of collinearity (Holmbeck 2002).

As can be seen in Table 2, maternal PT was associated with fewer externalizing behavior problems. The interaction between maternal PT and CE was also associated with sons’ externalizing problems. The interaction was probed using O’Connor’s (1998) simple slopes technique. As shown in Fig. 1, higher maternal PT was associated with fewer sons’ externalizing problems (and in parallel lower PT was associated with more sons’ externalizing problems) only when maternal CE was high ( $\beta = -.62, p = .001$ ). When maternal CE was moderate or low, maternal PT was not associated with sons’ externalizing problems ( $\beta = -.18, p = .315$ , and  $\beta = .27, p = .407$  respectively). Finally, the unique and interactive effects of maternal PT and CE on sons’ internalizing problems were not significant.

**Discussion**

To our knowledge, this study is the first to observe maternal PT and CE during mother–adolescent conflict and examine their interplay. As expected, higher maternal PT was associated with fewer self-reported externalizing behavior problems of sons only when mothers also expressed high CE, but not when mothers showed moderate or low levels of CE. In parallel, lower maternal PT at the background of high CE was associated with more externalizing problems. These results support SDT notion that parents’ PT, which make adolescents feel that their personal opinions and goals are respected, combined with parents’ CE, which helps adolescents understand their



**Fig. 1** Associations between maternal PT and son’s externalizing problems at low, medium, and high levels of maternal CE

parents’ values, are most beneficial for adolescents (e.g., Assor 2011). At the same time, parental CE that is not accompanied by PT may have the most undesirable psychological effects. Such parental behaviors might evoke adolescents’ anger and defiance and impede the internalization of parents’ expectations (e.g., Assor et al. 2004; Ryan et al. 2006). Our results also echo Baumrind’s work (1991, 2005) on parenting styles, which suggest that parents’ responsiveness facilitate adolescent wellbeing only when it is combined with parents’ clear demands.

The lack of a significant association between maternal PT and sons’ externalizing problems in the absence of high level of maternal CE may suggest that when mothers disagree with their sons’ views, taking the sons’ perspective alone may not suffice to foster adequate socio-emotional functioning. Two possible processes which may account for this phenomenon are sons’ perceptions of maternal behavior as indicating inability to firmly set limits or as reflecting value-confusion; namely, uncertainty about desirable and undesirable behaviors. To the extent that our pattern of results will be replicated in future studies, further research may explore directly these interpretive adolescent processes.

We found a marginally significant correlation between maternal CE and more externalizing problems as experienced by sons. Previous works suggest that parental CE is beneficial for adolescents’ adaptation (e.g., Barnes and Farrell 1992; Farkas and Grolnick 2010; Skinner et al. 2005). However, these studies did not assess maternal behavior in a conflict situation. Parents’ CE may have beneficial effects when set proactively, in situations that do not involve a conflict (e.g., Padilla-Walker et al. 2011; Bugental and Goodnow 1998). In such contexts, the clarity and consistency of parents’ expectations may help

adolescents to internalize parents' values. However, when parental expectations are expressed during a conflict, conflict-related antagonistic feelings might interfere with adolescents' capacity to understand their parents' perspective and internalize their expectations. Adolescents might also experience their parents' communication of clear and firm expectations as coercive demands, leading to defiance and rejection of norm-abiding behaviors. Future research may benefit from assessing the difference between CE set proactively and reactively during a conflict.

The associations between maternal behaviors and sons' internalizing problems were not significant, although CE had a marginally significant correlation with more internalizing problems. The lack of significant associations may be specific to male adolescents. Previous work indicated that the qualities of the relationship with parents were more closely linked to male adolescents' externalizing problems than to their internalizing problems, while the opposite pattern emerged for female adolescents (Gore et al. 1993; Leadbeater et al. 1999). Similarly Assor and Shavit-Miller (2012) found that parental conditional regard was a much stronger predictor of female adolescents' poor wellbeing than of male adolescents' wellbeing. There is a need, therefore, to replicate our findings with a larger sample of adolescents from both sexes.

We found that higher maternal PT was related to lower maternal CE. This result is inconsistent with previous studies which indicated that the two parental dimensions are either not related (e.g., Farkas and Grolnick 2010) or are positively related (e.g., Skinner et al. 2005). The different methods used for assessing parents' behaviors (i.e., self-report and interviews in previous studies versus an observation in our research) may underlie these discrepant results. Also, the association between the two parental behaviors could be context-specific. During a conflict, when mothers' and sons' views and expectations regarding desirable sons' behaviors stand in contrast and might be a cause of concern to mothers, it might be difficult for mothers to express their expectations clearly but also in ways that are sensitive to the differing perspective of their sons. As this is the first study to assess maternal PT and CE in a conflict situation using an observational method, more studies that observe both parenting behaviors in varied situations are needed.

Several limitations of our work point to additional directions for future research. First, we focused on mothers and sons. To examine the generalizability of our findings, it is important to extend the present research to conflicts between mother and daughters and between fathers and adolescents from both sexes. Second, sons' behavior problems were assessed based on self-reports. Some youth may have under-reported these socially undesirable behaviors, while others may have over-reported their problems. Therefore, future

studies may benefit from including the reports of other respondents, such as teachers and observers. Third, the sample consisted of relatively highly educated mothers. Although there is little evidence of links between parents' education level and their PT and CE (e.g., Farkas and Grolnick 2010), the results cannot be generalized to less educated mothers. Finally, our study was based on concurrent assessments. Thus, a possible interpretation of our results is that when sons show fewer externalizing problems, it may be easier for their mothers to take their perspective while maintaining clear and consistent expectations regarding sons' behavior. However, when mothers are faced with intense externalizing problems of their sons, they might become less empathic, while still, at least initially, respond with high expectations and demands (e.g., Kerr et al. 2008). Longitudinal assessments of mothers' behaviors and adolescent adaptation may clarify transactional relations that could not be examined here.

In summary, our study provides preliminary evidence that taking adolescents' perspective while expressing CE during mother–son conflict might be a challenging task for mothers. Yet, it appears important to exhibit both behaviors, so that maternal sensitivity to opposing sons' views does not come at the expense of communicating CE even when sons find these expectations displeasing. Finally, we documented the reliability and initial validity of new observational scales of parental PT and CE as a useful way to assess both aspects of parenting and study potential mechanisms underlying male adolescent socio-emotional functioning.

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