

Observed Social Competence in At-Risk Children: Associations with Informant Reports and Maternal Childhood Characteristics

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INTRODUCTION

- Approximately 566,000 Canadian children live in poverty (Statistics Canada, 2020).
- Poverty is associated with higher levels of internalizing and externalizing problems in children (Hosokawa & Katsura, 2017).
- Children may be better equipped to cope with it if they are socially competent (Hosokawa & Katsura, 2017).
- Social competence is the ability to successfully interact with individuals through the use of a set of desirable social skills (Rose-Krasnor, 1997).
- The context in which these social behaviours take place influences the desirability of the behaviour (Warnes, Sheridan, Geske, & Warnes, 2005).

GAP IN THE LITERATURE

Assessment of children's social competence

- Most studies on children's social competence rely on informant reports (Merrell, 2001; Clopet, & Bulotsky-Shearer, 2016; Gresham et al., 2018)
- Problematic as the choice of informant influences the information provided (Hughes, Soares-Boucaud, Hochmann, & Frith, 1997; Stanger & Lewis, 2010)
- Weak to moderate associations between reports of mothers and teachers (Achenbach, 2011; Renk & Phares, 2004; Gresham, Elliott, Cook, Vance, & Kettler, 2010)
- Direct behavioural observations offer the possibility to capture social competence within a naturalistic context (Roberts, Tsai, & Coan, 2007)
- For an accurate representation of children's social competence, we need to use multiple methods and multiple informants (Merrell, 2001; Roberts, Tsai, & Coan, 2007; Clopet, & Bulotsky-Shearer, 2016)

Advantages of using direct observations

- Could bridge the information provided by informant reports and direct observations
- Few studies have directly compared children's scores on both measures (Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Hammond, 2001; Brotman et al., 2005; Kasari, Rotheram-Fuller, Locke, & Gulsrud, 2012; Herndon, Bailey, Shewark, Denham, & Bassett, 2013)
- Could examine how different variables influence children's display of social competence
- In the present study, maternal characteristics influencing children's observed social competence were further examined.

Maternal influence on children's social competence

- Children's social competence is influenced by mothers' level of dominance, attachment style, amount and type of support, and maternal wellbeing (Rubin, Hastings, Chen, Stewart, & McNichol, 1998; Kerns, Abraham, Schlegelmilch, & Morgan, 2007; Diener, Isabella, Behumin, & Wong, 2008; Brumariu, Kerns, & Seibert, 2012; Chang, 2013)
- The influence of maternal characteristics in childhood on children's display of social competence has yet to be explored
- However, we know that maternal childhood histories of social withdrawal or aggression predict:
 - Lower home environment quality (Serbin, Peters, McAffer, & Schwartzman, 1991)
 - Unresponsive style of parenting (Serbin et al., 1991)
 - Aggressive and unresponsive behaviours in children (Serbin et al., 1998)
 - Children's noncompliance through maladaptive parenting practices (Grunzweig et al., 2009)

OBJECTIVES

In a community-based sample drawn from lower socio-economic status neighborhoods originally the present study was designed to:

- Investigate how ratings of children's social competence, as assessed by their mothers, their teachers, and themselves, are related to the child's observed social competence.
- Investigate how maternal childhood characteristics such as maternal childhood histories of aggression, withdrawal, and likeability impact children's observed social competence.

METHODS

- Sub-sample of the Concordia Longitudinal Research Project, a prospective, longitudinal, inter-generational study that began in Montreal in 1976 (Schwartzman, Ledingham, & Serbin, 1985).
 - Original sample is a community-based sample drawn from lower socio-economic status neighborhoods.
- Students were screened on a peer-nominated measure (Pupil Evaluation Inventory) assessing their levels of aggression, social withdrawal, and likeability (Pekarik, Prinz, Liebert, Weintraub, & Neale, 1976).
 - 34-item peer-nomination measure; subscales of **Aggression** (e.g., "Those who try to get other people into trouble"), **Social Withdrawal** (e.g., "Those who are too shy to make friends easily"), and **Likeability** (e.g., "Those who are liked by everyone") used
- Oversampling of children at the upper extremes of aggression and social withdrawal in order to arrive to a sample of 1774 children (909 girls, 861 boys).
 - Approximately half of these children were considered to be at high psychosocial risk, i.e., compared to their peers they showed elevated levels of aggression and/or withdrawal, and the other half represented low levels of aggression and/or withdrawal.

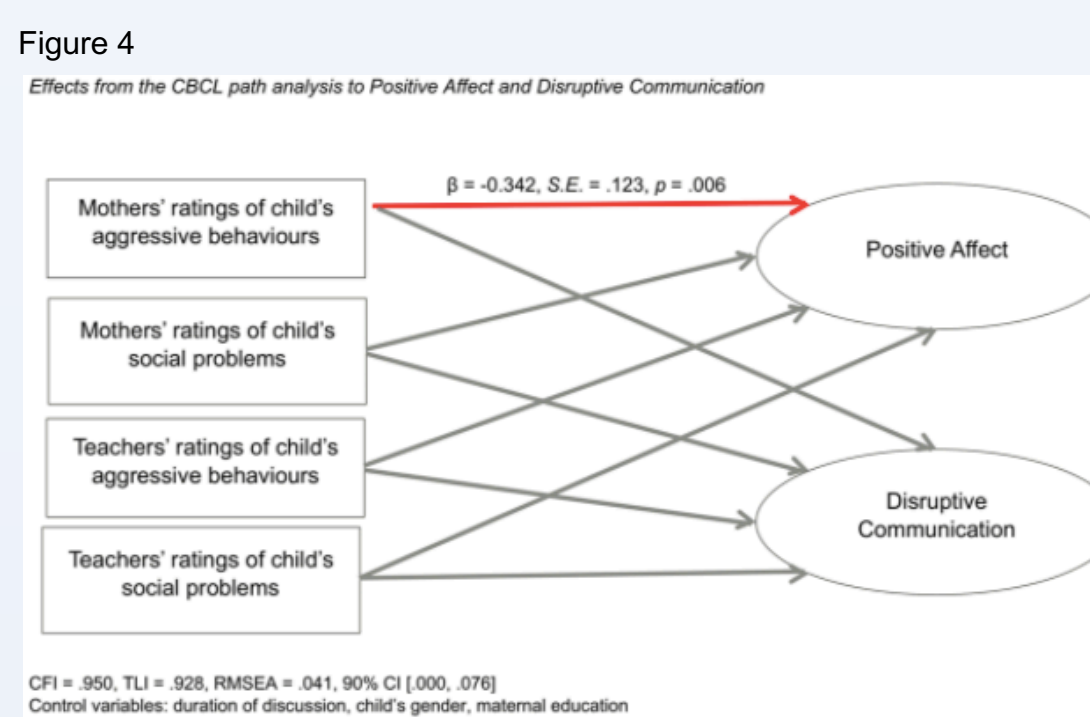
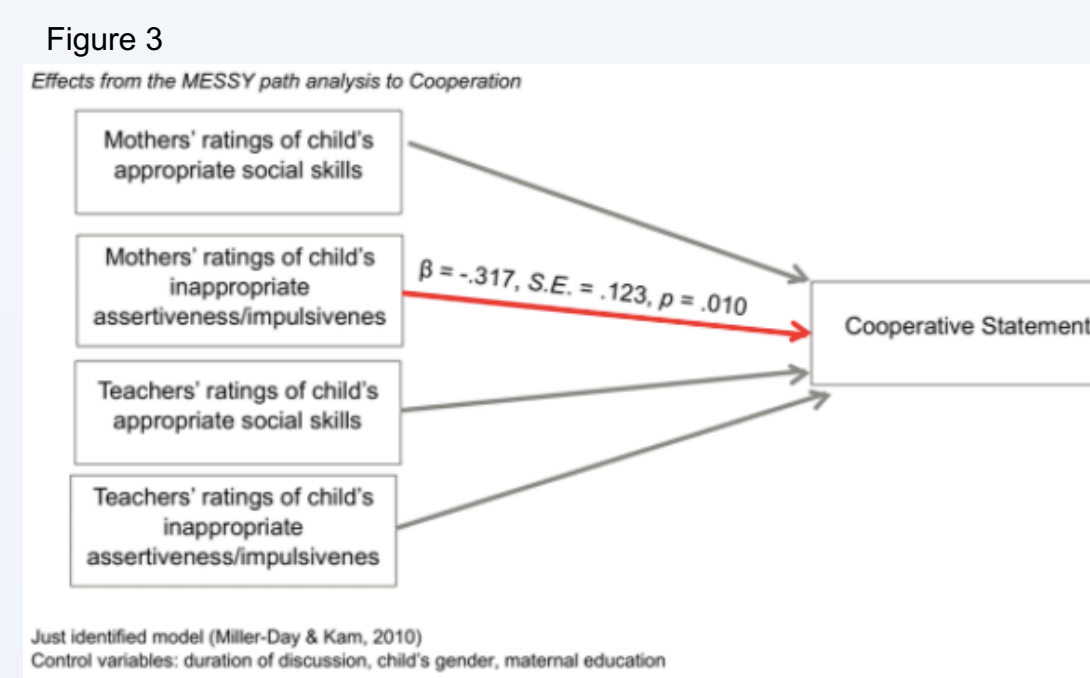
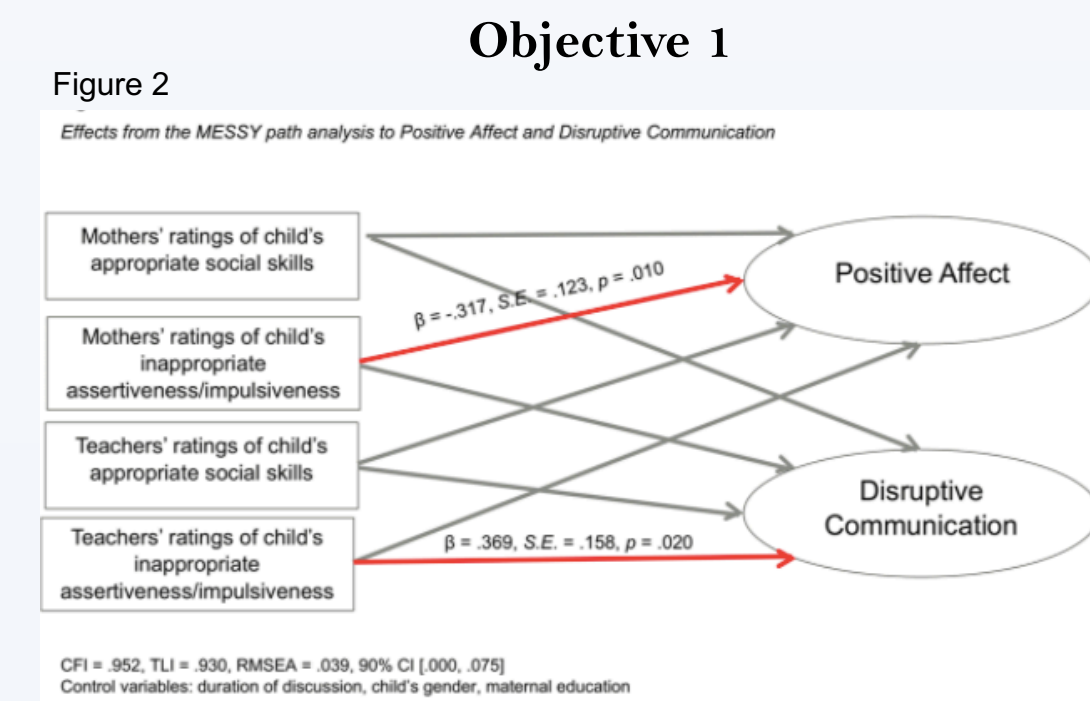
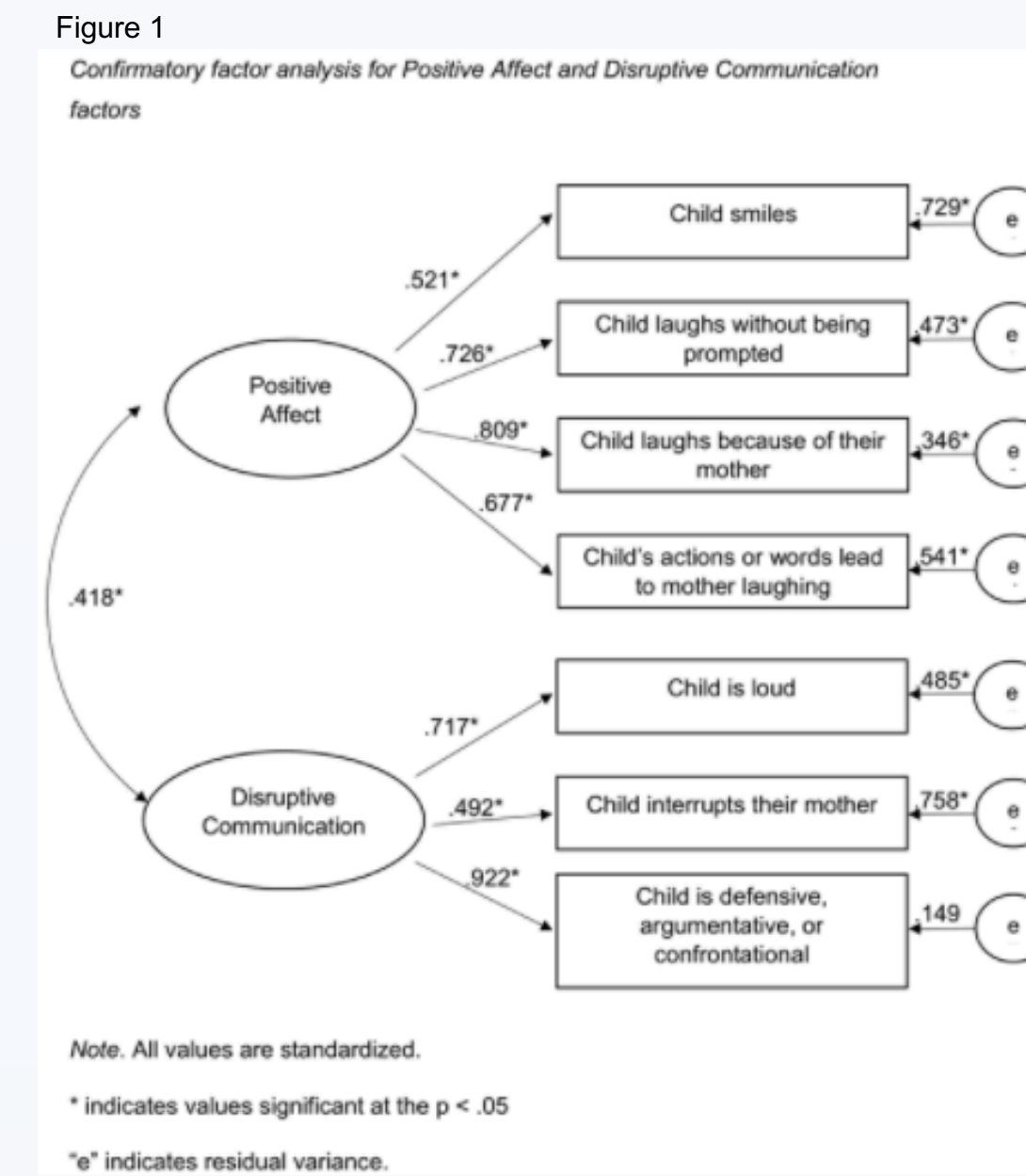
- Assessed over time, and as they became parents were invited to participate with their children.
- In the current research project, a sub-sample of children (offspring of the children in the original sample) between 9- and 12- years-old (n=119, 66 girls, M age=10.75, SD=.87) participated along with their mothers.

- Mothers were between 32- and 42- years old (M age = 37.32, SD = 2.49) and had between 5 to 18 years of education (M = 12.38, SD = 2.44)
- During a home visit, the dyads were videotaped as they discussed a conflict in the dyad.
 - Mothers and children were each asked to rate a series of typical topics that could cause some conflict within the dyad, (e.g. cleaning up their room, doing homework, bedtime, and getting along with their siblings) on a scale of 1 (always agree) to 5 (never agree).
 - They then discussed the topic that they had both rated as the highest source of conflict in their relationship for five to six minutes.

- The mother, teacher, and the child also completed multiple questionnaires including the:
 - Matson Evaluation of Social Skills with Youngsters (MESSY)
 - 64 items, 5-point Likert scale; subscales of **Appropriate Social Skills** (e.g., "Makes other people laugh"), and **Inappropriate Assertiveness/Impulsiveness** (e.g., "Speaks too loudly") used
 - ASEBA Child Behavior Checklist for Ages 6-18 (CBCL), Teacher Report Form (TRF)
 - 114 items, 3-point Likert scale; subscales of **Social Problems** (e.g., "Doesn't get along with other kids"), and **Aggressive Behaviour** (e.g., "Argues a lot") used
 - Social Skills Rating System (SSRS)
 - 34 items, 3-point Likert scale; subscales of **Cooperation** (e.g., "I use a nice tone of voice in classroom discussions"), and **Empathy** (e.g., "I smile, wave, or nod at others") used

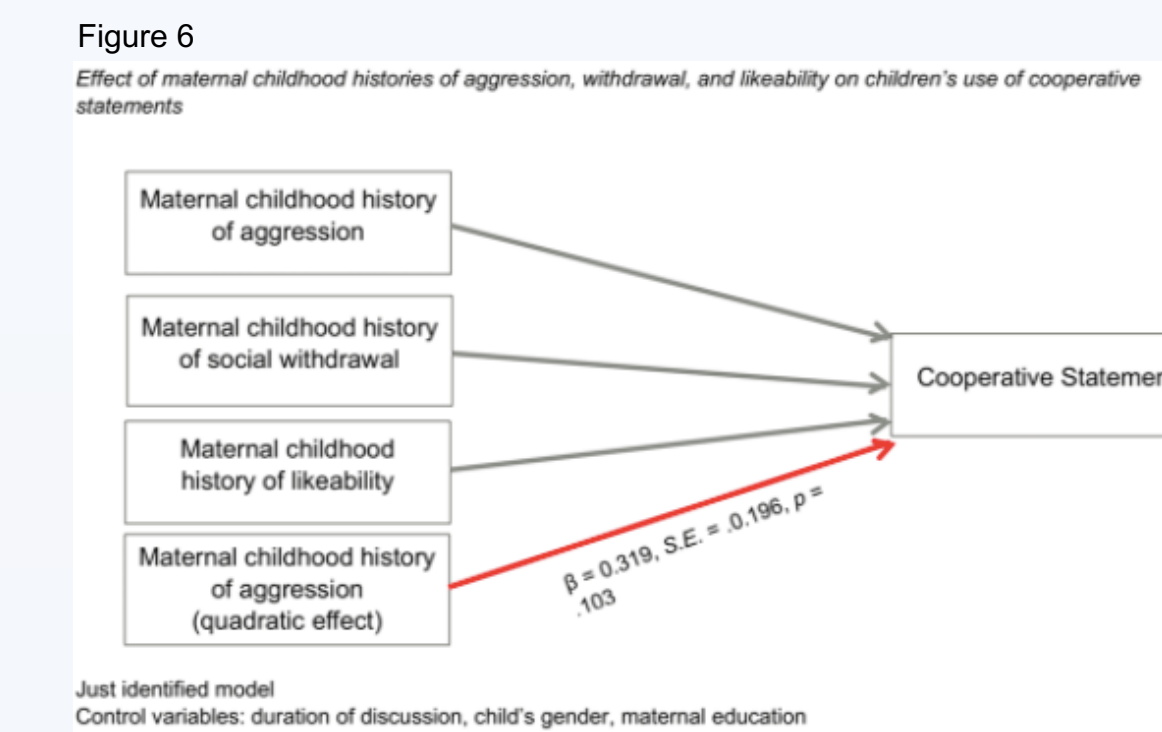
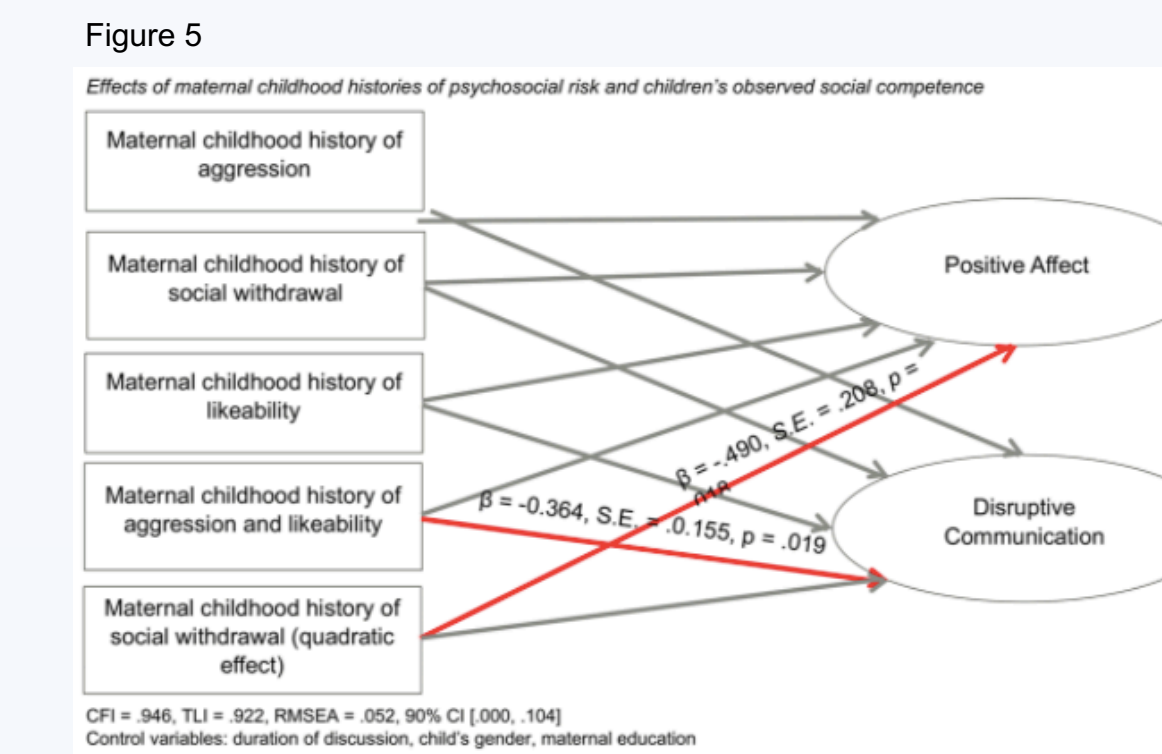
- Observed Social Competence Coding System
 - Based on the social skills observed in the interactions and those found in the CBCL/4-18; TRF, MESSY, and the SSRS.
 - Videotaped discussions were surveyed in order to assess overlap between the questionnaires' items and the types of behaviours the children displayed or engaged in. Using the observational software Mangold Interact, the behaviours were coded in terms of frequency, and a code was placed at the beginning of the observed behaviour.
 - Socially competent behaviours**
 - Child smiles; Child's actions or words lead to mother laughing; Child laughs because of their mother; Child laughs unprompted; Child is cooperative
 - Socially incompetent behaviours**
 - Child is defensive, argumentative, or confrontational; Child is loud; Child interrupts their mother; Child makes an off-topic statement; Child pre-emptively attempts to terminate the task

RESULTS



RESULTS (cont'd)

Objective 2



DISCUSSION

Objective 1

- Children who were rated highly on measures of social incompetence engaged in less socially competent behaviours and in more socially incompetent behaviours.
 - Mothers' ratings of social incompetence were associated with the absence or decreased use of socially competent behaviours in their children.
 - Whereas teachers' ratings of social incompetence were associated with the presence or increased use of socially incompetent behaviours.
- Different child behaviours might be salient to parents and teachers.
 - Parents and teachers attend to different behaviours when rating children's antisocial and delinquent behaviours
 - Leads to different predictive values of ratings (Bank, Duncan, Patterson, & Reid, 1993)
- As such, teachers might attend more to disruptive behaviours and mothers to socially competent behaviours.

Objective 2

- Maternal childhood histories of aggression or social withdrawal had a negative impact on children's displays of social competence.
 - Maternal histories of social withdrawal → Less frequent children positive affect
 - Maternal histories of aggression → Fewer cooperative statements
- For mothers who were not well liked by their peers (low in likeability), aggression represents a risk factor for their children's use of socially competent behaviours.
 - Aligns with literature of maternal childhood aggression and withdrawal (Serbin et al., 1998; Grunzweig et al., 2009; van der Molen, Hipwell, Vermeiren, & Loeber, 2011; Raudino, Woodward, Fergusson, & Horwood, 2012; Duncombe, Havighurst, Holland, & Frankling, 2012; Raudino et al., 2012)

DISCUSSION (cont'd)

- In mothers who were high in likeability in their childhood, greater childhood aggression predicted less disruptive communication expressed by their children during the conflict task.
 - Maternal childhood aggression is then both a protective and a risk factor when mothers were rated high on childhood likeability.
- Does not align with the literature on sociometric popularity (i.e., being liked by peers; Sandstrom & Cillessen, 2006; Andreou, 2006)
- Potential explanation: third variable which interacts with mothers' high likeability levels to produce negative outcomes
 - Higher likeability is associated with subsequent greater behavioural and emotional engagement in school (Engels et al., 2017)
 - However, when teacher-student relationships are negative, higher likeability is associated with subsequent lower behavioural engagement in school (Engels et al., 2016)

CONCLUSION

Contribution to the literature

- Operationalizes social competence
- Provides greater understanding of how to interpret ratings on these informant reports in term of expected observations of child behaviours
 - Can influence the choice of informants in social competence interventions depending on the desired outcome (e.g., reducing socially incompetent behaviours or increasing socially competent behaviours)
- Better understanding of intergenerational transfer of risk for observed social competence
 - Prevention should thus target children's aggression to prevent the transfer of risk to their children's social competence

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

- The Concordia Longitudinal Research Project was originated by Drs. Jane Ledingham and Alex Schwartzman in 1976. Drs. Serbin and Stack are currently the co-directors of the intergenerational Project. We are grateful to all the participants who have continuously participated in this ongoing longitudinal study.
- The funding contributions for this particular study presented from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), Fonds Québécois de la Recherche sur la Société et la Culture (FRQSC; grant and scholarship funding), Health Canada, Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), and Concordia's Horizon Post-Doctoral Fellowship program are truly appreciated.