Compliance in Homeschooled Children
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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to measure homeschooled children’s compliance while they worked on an academic task with their mothers. Participants were 24 homeschooled children (mean age 12.2 years) and their mothers. Maternal directives and children’s reactions to them were recorded as mothers and children worked together on an academic task for 30 minutes. Randomly selected mothers were instructed to give their children both positive (“do this”) and negative (“don’t do that”) directives during the task. Mothers also completed a measure of their perception of their children’s everyday compliance. Both boys’ and girls’ compliance during the task was very high and was not affected by instructing their mothers to give directives. However, the more directives mothers gave their children, the more likely it was that negative behavior such as questioning or complaining accompanied children’s compliance. Mothers who believed their children to be noncompliant in general gave them more negative directives. The results suggest that homeschooling parents are successfully teaching their children this important social skill.

*Keywords:* home schooling, compliance, socialization
Compliance in Homeschooled Children

A child is usually expected to comply with an adult’s directive if the directive is reasonable, the child is capable of obeying it, and the adult has legitimate authority to make it. This expectation is so prevalent that a child who “often actively defies or refuses to comply with adults’ requests or rules” (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 94) may be diagnosed with a behavior disorder such as Oppositional Defiant Disorder. But as parents will readily attest, children must be taught to comply, and judging by the abundance of books and “expert” advice on the subject, it is not a quick and easy task.

Young children, in fact, do not comply much of the time (Owen, Slep, & Heyman, 2009; Clark, 1997). For example, an observational study found that toddlers and preschoolers willingly complied with only 30% of the requests their mothers made (Lollis, Kuczynksi, Navara, & Koguchi, 2003, as cited in Kuczynski & Parkin, 2007). Mothers were sometimes able to force their children to obey, but more than half the time, children either did not comply at all or did so only when the request was changed to something they found a little more endurable. Children show a wide array of uncooperative behaviors, including (but unfortunately not limited to) “unwilling compliance, passive noncompliance, simple refusal, and defiance” (Kuczynski & Parkin, 2007, p. 277). Parents, for their part, use a similarly wide array of tactics to persuade reluctant children to comply, ranging from reasoning and compromise to bribery and coercion (Crockenberg & Litman, 1990; Kuczynski & Parkin, 2007; Maccoby, 2007). Getting young children to obey, therefore, is often a “quite extended” affair (Crockenberg & Litman, 1990, p. 970).

As children grow older, however, willing compliance to parental directives improves (Blandon & Volling, 2008; Vigilant & Wahler, 2005; Volling, Blandon, & Gorvine, 2006).
Although children’s need for self-determination increases with age, so does self-regulation and internalization of their parents’ standards (Grusec & Davidov, 2007; Kochanska & Aksan, 2006; Kuczynski & Parkin, 2007; Siegel & Cowan, 1984; Smetana, 1988). Children’s maturing cognitive, linguistic, and physical skills also enable them to comply more readily and to inhibit competing behaviors (Owen et al., 2009). And though they may not always choose to do so, older children are better able to respond to unwanted parental directives without open conflict, an ability that parents are eager to cultivate (Kuczynski & Parkin, 2007).

**Compliance and Socialization**

The importance of the parents’ role in the socialization of children is (almost) universally acknowledged (Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000; Grusec & Davidov, 2007; but see also Harris, 1995, 2009). As Grusec and Davidov (2010) point out, “although socialization also occurs in other contexts, there is a compelling argument that its primary context is the family” (p. 688). This argument is based on five premises:

First, parents and children are part of a biosocial system that functions to protect offspring and to ensure that they are able to deal with the demands of social life….Second, the strong human need for interrelatedness plays a substantial role in the socialization process, and opportunities for such interrelatedness abound in the parent-child relationship….Next, in most societies, parents are formally assigned the role of primary agents of socialization. Fourth, practical reasons facilitate parents' motivation to socialize their children, given that they must live in close proximity to these children and that the lives of all are more comfortable when there is some agreement about the nature of appropriate behavior. Finally, parents are in a position in which they can control resources available to their
children as well as manage their environments to ensure that they are either protected from or forewarned about undesirable influences. (Grusec & Davidov, 2007, p. 285)

Parents who homeschool and those who don’t both agree that teaching children to comply is an important goal of socialization (Hastings & Grusec, 1998; Johnson, 1991; Miller, 2000). But children’s compliance is not only important to their parents—it is a central social skill. In an effort to develop a taxonomy of positive social behaviors in children and adolescents, Caldarella and Merrell (1997) analyzed 21 studies that altogether included more than 22,000 participants. All of the studies used “factor analysis, cluster analysis, or related multivariate techniques to derive common dimensions or constructs of social skills” (Caldarella & Merrell, 1997, Method section, para. 2). They found that the four most frequently identified dimensions of positive social behavior were peer relations, self-management, academic skills, and compliance. The specific behaviors most often associated with compliance included following instructions and directions, obeying rules, and responding appropriately when corrected. Similar behaviors, such as “follows rules and accepts imposed limits” and “listens to and carries out teacher directions” (Caldarella & Merrell, 1997, Table 3), were associated with the self-management and academic skills dimensions. Conversely, noncompliance is “associated with greater maladaptive behavior” (Owen et al., 2009, p. 640), and has been called “the most frequent reason children are referred for psychological services” (Clark, 1997, Abstract).

**Research on Compliance**

Not surprisingly, research confirms that children are more obedient when parents reinforce compliance and punish noncompliance (Chapman & Zahn-Waxler, 1982; Owen et al., 2009; Strand, Wahler, & Herring, 2001). Also not surprisingly, the methods parents use to
manage their children’s behavior change as their children grow older, and certain methods work better than others (Blandon & Volling, 2008; Clarke, 1997; Hakman & Sullivan, 2009). Mothers and fathers typically try to control their children’s behavior in different ways, and although children respond differently to mothers and fathers, there is little evidence that one way is more effective overall than the other (Blandon & Volling, 2008; Emmons, 2002). Girls tend to be more obedient than boys (Rothbaum & Weisz, 1994; Smith, Calkins, Keane, Anastopoulos, & Shelton, 2004). Children comply more willingly to positive directives (“do this”) than to negative directives (“don’t do that”), but parents often make a bad situation worse by giving more negative directives to children who are habitually noncompliant, even when they are being compliant at the moment (Blandon & Volling, 2008; Gauvain & Perez, 2008).

Much of the research on compliance has focused on the nature of the parent-child relationship in general, rather than on specific methods of control or types of directives. For example, children who are securely attached to their parents and who have received sensitive, protective caregiving are more compliant than other children (Dix, Stewart, Gershoff, & Day, 2007; Kochanska et al., 2010; Londerville & Main, 1981). Children are more willing to comply if their parents are characteristically responsive and attentive and treat them with courtesy and respect (Kochanska & Thompson, 1997; Maccoby, 2007; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Martinez & Forgatch, 2001; Strand, 2002; Wahler, Herring, & Edwards, 2001). Parents who themselves comply with reasonable requests model cooperation and reciprocity, which their children tend to imitate (Kochanska & Murray, 2000; Parpal & Maccoby, 1985). And children are more compliant if their parents are able to understand their perspective when conflicts do occur (Davidov & Grusec, 2006). This research suggests that “children whose parents are typically
available and supportive in times of need” are better able to receive their parents’ directives as “manifestations of caring and goodwill” (Grusec & Davidov, 2007, p. 290).

Research has examined many aspects of homeschooled children’s social behavior (Medlin, 2000), but has not yet measured compliance directly. It is safe to say that problems in compliance have not been reported in the literature, and that there are hints that homeschooled students may be appropriately compliant in their families, in college, and in the wider community as adults (Kingston & Medlin, 2006; McEntire, 2005; Ray, 2004; Sutton & Galloway, 2000; White et al., 2007). For example, parents do not describe handling discipline problems as a difficult aspect of homeschooling (Medlin, 1995). They tend to rate their children’s maturity, cooperation, and self-control at or above the average of children attending conventional schools (Francis & Keith, 2006; Lee, 1994; Kingston & Medlin, 2006; McKinley, Asaro, Bergin, D’Auria, & Gagnon, 2007; Meighan, 1995; Smedley, 1992). Self-report and observational studies, though rare, also suggest that homeschooled children’s social skills are advanced (Kingston & Medlin, 2006; Medlin, 2007; Shyers, 1992a, 1992b; but see also McKinley et al., 2007). And some research suggests that homeschooling families may be likely to have the kind of responsive, supportive parent-child relationships that are associated with the development of compliance (Allie-Carson, 1990; McDowell, 1999, 2000; Miller, 2000; Resetar, 1990). But there are hints only, because the studies that offer them did not focus on compliance directly or involve actual observations of homeschooled children with their parents.

The Present Research

The purpose of this study was to measure homeschooled children’s compliance while they worked on an academic task with their mothers. To ensure that opportunities for compliance occurred, some of the mothers were instructed to give their children directives as
they worked together. It was hypothesized that children would comply most of the time, but that children whose mothers were told to give them directives would be less compliant than children whose mothers were allowed to act naturally. It was also hypothesized that boys would be less compliant than girls. It was expected that mothers’ perceptions of their children’s compliance in everyday situations would be related to their children’s behavior during the academic task, and that mothers who believed their children to be noncompliant in general would give their children more negative directives.

**Method**

**Participants**

Twenty-four homeschooled children—10 boys and 14 girls—and their mothers participated in this study. The children’s ages ranged from 11 to 13 years, with an average age of 12.2 years. Most (20) of the children were identified by their mothers as White, three as Hispanic, and one as Asian. Mother-child pairs were randomly assigned to either the control group or the experimental group such that there were 12 pairs in each. Participants were contacted through the researchers’ personal connections with a local homeschool support group. Whether this sample was representative of the homeschooling population in the area was uncertain.

**Materials**

An observational coding system was created by the researchers to record maternal directives and children’s reactions to them. Directives were classified as either positive (“do this”) or negative (“don’t do that”). Reactions to directives were categorized as either compliant or noncompliant. Compliance was defined as appropriately obeying the directive within 30 seconds, and noncompliance as not doing so. If children complied but also argued, complained,
questioned the directive, or made nonverbal expressions of displeasure such as sighing loudly or rolling their eyes, this accompanying behavior was noted as well.

A parent questionnaire measured how compliant each mother believed her child to be in everyday situations (see Appendix). This questionnaire included eight items indicating compliance, such as, “When I tell my child to do something, he or she does it immediately,” and ten indicating noncompliance, such as, “My child argues with me when I tell him or her to do something.” Mothers rated each item on a 6-point scale ranging from very seldom to very often. Questionnaires were scored by assigning a point value ranging from 1 for very seldom to 6 for very often for items representing compliance and the reverse for items representing noncompliance. Thus total scores could range from 18 to 108 with higher scores meaning mothers perceived their children to be more compliant.

Mothers in the experimental group received written instructions asking them to give their children both positive and negative directives during the observation period. Included with these instructions was a list of 11 suggested directives, such as, “Read this out loud” (positive) and “Stop fidgeting” (negative).

**Procedure**

Participants were observed in their own homes. Mothers were asked to work with their children on a school subject just as they normally would when homeschooling. Immediately before the observation began, mothers in the experimental group only were given the written instructions with suggested directives. All participants were then observed for 30 minutes, and mothers’ directives and children’s reactions were recorded using the observational coding system described above. Afterwards, mothers completed the questionnaire and the purpose of the study
was disclosed to them. Eight (one-third) of the observations were videotaped and coded later by a second observer in order to determine the reliability of the coding system.

**Results**

Inter-observer agreement was .76 across all of the categories included in the observational coding system. Agreement for the individual categories was: .79 for positive directives, .73 for negative directives, .76 for compliance, .57 for noncompliance, and .72 for negative behavior accompanying compliance. Agreement for noncompliance may have been lower simply because there were so few instances of it—each disagreement between the observers had a larger effect mathematically for noncompliance than for the other categories.

Table 1 presents the mean number of positive and negative directives given during the academic task for boys and girls in each group. Mothers in the experimental group gave their children more directives, just as they were instructed to do. Negative directives, however, were rare in both groups. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was computed with the number of positive directives as the dependent variable and group and the child’s gender as the factors. The only statistically significant effect was the group effect, $F(1,20) = 8.30, p = .009$, with $\eta^2 = .292$, indicating a “large” effect size. A similar ANOVA was calculated for negative directives; there were no statistically significant effects.

Mean compliance and noncompliance scores for boys and girls in each group are presented in Table 2. These scores were computed as percentages—the number of times children complied (or did not comply) divided by the number of directives given to them. Although compliance was very high in both groups, children in the experimental group and boys in both groups complied slightly less, as expected. However, an ANOVA with compliance
scores as the dependent variable and group and the child’s gender as the factors produced no statistically significant effects.

Negative behavior such as arguing, complaining, questioning the directive, or making nonverbal expressions of displeasure did not often accompany children’s compliance. In the control group such behavior occurred 5.8% of the time that children complied, and in the experimental group it occurred 7.9% of the time. An ANOVA was computed with percent of the time negative behavior accompanied compliance as the dependent variable and group and the child’s gender as the factors; there were no statistically significant effects.

Pearson correlations were calculated among all the variables measured by the observational coding system across the entire sample. The percent of the time negative behavior accompanied compliance was significantly related to both the number of positive directives, $r(24) = .540, p = .006$, and the number of negative directives, $r(24) = .549, p = .005$.

The reliability of the parent questionnaire was found to be .86 using Cronbach’s alpha. Mean questionnaire scores for the parents of boys and girls in each group are presented in Table 3. Note that all the means are well above the middle of the range of possible scores (63). An ANOVA was computed with questionnaire scores as the dependent variable and group and the child’s gender as the factors; there were no significant effects.

Pearson correlations were computed between parent questionnaire scores and each of the observation scores across the entire sample. The correlation between questionnaire scores and the number of positive directives mothers gave their children during the academic task was not statistically significant. A negative correlation between questionnaire scores and the number of mothers’ negative directives approached statistical significance, $r(24) = -.400, p = .053$. Correlations between questionnaire scores and compliance and noncompliance scores were not
statistically significant. However, there was a statistically significant negative correlation between questionnaire scores and the percent of the time negative behavior accompanied children’s compliance, \( r(24) = -0.413, p = .045 \).

**Discussion**

Homeschooled children’s compliance to their mothers’ directives was quite high, as expected. The hypotheses that boys would comply less than girls, and that children would comply less when the number of directives they were given was artificially increased, were not supported. The more directives mothers gave their children, however, the more likely it was that negative behavior such as questioning or complaining accompanied children’s compliance. As expected, mothers who thought their children were less compliant in everyday situations tended to give them more negative directives. These children were more likely to exhibit negative behavior, but the hypothesis that they would comply less during the academic task was not supported.

**Comparison to Previous Research**

The result that children obeyed their mothers most of the time is consistent with previous research on homeschooled children, which suggests that their social behavior is “certainly no worse than” that of other children, and is “probably better” (Medlin, 2000, p. 116). That boys were no less compliant than girls, however, does not agree with earlier research on children attending conventional schools (Rothbaum & Weisz, 1994; Smith et al., 2004). Negative results are often due to methodological limitations—in this case, perhaps too few participants—but it is also possible that the homeschool environment is less likely than the conventional school environment to bring about or support gender differences in compliance, and perhaps other social
behaviors as well (cf. Montgomery, 1989; Sheffer, 1997). This issue would seem to be well worth further investigation.

Mothers who perceived their children to be less compliant in everyday situations gave their children more negative directives during the academic task, and although their children complied, they did so with more negative accompanying behavior. These results are consistent with previous research and reflect the complex, reciprocal nature of parent-child relations—parents’ expectations influence how they treat their children, which in turn can elicit from their children the very behavior they expect, thus reinforcing their expectations for the next round (Gauvain & Perez, 2008; Larsson, Viding, Rijsdijk, & Plomin, 2008).

The Issues

A reasonable question to consider is whether the children’s compliance was high simply because they knew they were being observed. Although previous research has suggested that participant reactivity to in-home observations is minimal (Jacob, Tennenbaum, Seilhamer, Bargiel, & Sharon, 1994), it is possible that being watched put the children—and their mothers—on their best behavior. It should be noted, however, that none of the children knew the purpose of the study until after the observation was completed. None of the mothers did, either, unless some guessed it from the instructions to give their children directives during the academic task. Even so, these instructions were given immediately before the observation began, so that mothers could not coach their children to obey. And since children of mothers who received the instructions were no more compliant than children of mothers who did not, such influence seems unlikely.

Another question to consider is whether a high level of compliance is such a good thing after all. For example, some (e.g., Apple, 2005; Reich, 2002, 2005; West, 2009) have argued
that homeschooling permits a kind of “parental despotism” (Reich, 2005, p. 8) so complete that children may “fail to develop the capacity to think for themselves” (Reich, 2005, p. 9). These authors tend to depict homeschooling parents as rigidly authoritarian, compelling children to think and act a certain way, and hindering the development of their children’s individuality (which is, by the way, almost exactly how homeschooling parents describe the social environment of public schools) (Medlin, 2000). This argument is made primarily from a philosophical standpoint, and more thorough discussions of the issues involved can be found elsewhere (e.g., Burkard & O’Keeffe, 2005; Cox, 2003; Hardenbergh, 2005; Ray, 2009, 2010).

It is perhaps relevant to note here, however, that this study and many others suggest that the more directives parents give and the more authoritarian their parenting style, the less compliant their children are likely to be and the less likely they are to internalize their parents’ values (Blandon & Volling, 2008; Braungart-Reiker, Garwood, & Stifter, 1997; Crockenberg & Litman, 1990; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Kochanska, Aksan, & Koenig, 1995; Kucsynksi, Kochanska, Radke-Yarrow, & Girnius-Brown, 1987; Smith et al., 2004). An alarmist view of homeschooling, in fact, has received very little support from empirical research.

Limitations and Conclusion

The strength of this study was that parents and children were observed while engaged in an activity that closely resembled what they actually do when they are homeschooling. A principal weakness was that homeschooled children were not compared to children attending conventional schools. Also, children were observed in only one situation, and only with their mothers, which yielded a limited view of their behavior. Although a simple dichotomy was used to classify children’s responses to maternal directives, it would have been more realistic to make a distinction between different kinds of compliance and noncompliance—to distinguish willing
cooperation from sullen submission, for example, and stubborn defiance from healthy independence. Despite these limitations, however, the level of compliance was found to be so high that it seems safe to conclude that homeschooling parents are successfully teaching their children this important social skill.
References


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Table 1

*Means and Standard Deviations of the Number of Positive and Negative Directives Given by Mothers to Boys and Girls in Each Group*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control Group</th>
<th>Positive Directives ( M (SD) )</th>
<th>Negative Directives ( M (SD) )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>8.67 (1.16)</td>
<td>0.00 (0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>9.11 (5.47)</td>
<td>0.56 (1.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9.00 (4.69)</td>
<td>0.42 (1.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental Group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>15.43 (4.96)</td>
<td>1.57 (1.40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>14.40 (3.72)</td>
<td>0.80 (0.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15.00 (1.25)</td>
<td>1.25 (1.22)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of the Percentage of Compliant and Noncompliant Responses to Maternal Directives for Boys and Girls in Each Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control Group</th>
<th>Percent Compliance $M$ (SD)</th>
<th>Percent Noncompliance $M$ (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>95.83 (7.22)</td>
<td>4.17 (7.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Girls</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>97.08 (6.73)</td>
<td>2.92 (6.73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>96.77 (6.54)</td>
<td>3.23 (6.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental Group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>91.18 (7.76)</td>
<td>8.82 (7.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>97.29 (3.77)</td>
<td>2.71 (3.77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>93.73 (6.92)</td>
<td>6.27 (6.92)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3

*Means and Standard Deviations of Parent Questionnaire Scores for the Mothers of Boys and Girls in Each Group*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Parent Questionnaire Scores $M (SD)$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Control Group</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>82.33 (11.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>86.22 (6.72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>85.25 (7.77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experimental Group</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>81.00 (18.89)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>82.40 (2.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>81.58 (14.06)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix

Parent Questionnaire

Please answer these demographic questions:

Age of Child: _______ Grade of Child: _______ Gender of child: M F

Ethnic group or race of child: ____________ I am the: Mother Father

Your ethnic group or race: ____________

Please carefully fill out this survey, using a scale from 1 to 6.

1=Very Seldom  _2_ _3_ _4_ _5_  6=Very Often.

1. When I tell my child to do something, he or she does it immediately. ______

2. When another adult (not a parent) tells my child to do something, he or she does it immediately. ______

3. My child does his or her chores when they are supposed to be done. ______

4. My child does his or her chores without complaining. ______

5. My child argues with me when I tell him or her to do something. ______

6. When I tell my child to stop doing something, he or she stops immediately. ______

7. My child refuses to do schoolwork. ______

8. My child puts off doing schoolwork as long as possible. ______

9. My child tries to negotiate with me when I tell him or her to do something. ______

10. My child displays a bad attitude when I ask him or her to do something he or she considers unpleasant (such as rolling eyes, sighing, or crossing arms). ______

11. Other adults compliment my child’s behavior. ______

12. My child is well-behaved. ______

13. My child argues with me. ______
14. My child questions my reasoning when I ask him or her to do something.

15. My child tries to please me.

16. My child gets into trouble.

17. I have to tell my child to do something more than once before he or she will obey.

18. It is difficult to get my child to wear appropriate clothing.

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REFERENCE: