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## A sense of containment: Potential moderator of the relation between parenting practices and children's externalizing behaviors

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### Abstract

We introduce the construct of *perceived containment*, defined as children's beliefs about adults' capacity to impose firm limits and to prevail if there is a conflict in goals. We propose that children's containment beliefs represent an important but understudied factor in the development and maintenance of childhood aggression. Children's ratings on the Perceived Containment Questionnaire (PCQ) were inversely related to parent and teacher ratings of externalizing problems. Moreover, this relation was found to be independent of the quality of parental discipline. We also found evidence that perceived containment moderated the relation between overly harsh, inept discipline and children's externalizing behaviors: ineffective discipline was directly related to externalizing problems in children with relatively high PCQ scores but was unrelated to externalizing problems in children with relatively low PCQ scores. For the latter group of children, the affective quality of the mother-child relationship was a better predictor of problem behavior. These findings provide additional support for Kochanska's (1993) model of differential socialization and for Frick's (1998) assertions concerning meaningful subgroups of aggressive children.

The relation between ineffective parenting and children's externalizing problems is well documented and typically viewed as evidence that poor parenting leads to the development of children's conduct problems (Chamberlain & Patterson, 1995; Hinshaw & Anderson,

1996; Patterson, 1997; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992). Researchers also recognize that difficult, hard to manage children are co-participants in the emergence of coercive parent-child exchanges and the development of antisocial behavior (Loeber, 1990; Lytton, 1990; Patterson, 1976; Patterson et al., 1992). Recent theoretical discussions of the processes by which conduct problem children affect their own socialization have called attention to the potential benefit of studying their internal representations of disciplinary conflicts (Cavell, 2000; Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Kuczynski & Hildebrandt, 1997). Greater knowledge of how children interpret adults' socialization efforts could advance our understanding of individual differences in children's overt response to discipline (e.g., Paikoff, Collins, & Laursen, 1988; Rodrigo, Janssens, & Ceballos, 1999). Our particular focus is on ag-

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gressive children's beliefs about significant adults' capacity to restrict their behavior in reliable and specific ways.

### **Individual Differences in Children's Response to Socialization**

Theoretical and empirical work by Kochanska (1993, 1995, 1997) illustrates the contributions that are possible when parent and child effects are studied simultaneously. According to Kochanska, parents promote the internalization of prosocial values via two primary mechanisms. The first mechanism involves anxious arousal elicited when children are confronted with their wrongdoing (Hoffman, 1983). Anxious arousal is thought to facilitate the semantic processing of parents' prosocial messages, although emotionally charged, power assertive discipline could lead to over-arousal and a sense of resentment that interferes with internalization (Kochanska, 1993). A second mechanism posited by Kochanska (1997) was derived from Maccoby's (1992) belief that children are intrinsically motivated to maintain a mutually positive orientation toward their caregivers. Once established, a mutually responsive relationship is thought to reduce the need for power-assertive discipline in promoting children's cooperation. Kochanska (1993) posits that both mechanisms of internalization are operating in most children. However, the anxious arousal mechanism is thought to be less effective with children who are temperamentally fearless because they tend to respond with insufficient anxiety when confronted with their wrongdoing. Power assertive discipline (harsh words, corporal punishment, and withdrawal of affection) can produce greater levels of anxious arousal but simultaneously fosters resentment toward the parent, which can interfere with internalization. Kochanska (1997) found that gentle discipline was sufficient to promote the development of conscience in relatively fearful toddlers, but this was not the case for relatively fearless toddlers. For the latter group, only the quality of the mother-child attachment (a proxy for a mutually positive relationship) was predictive of conscience development.

Frick and his colleagues (1998; Wootton,

Shelton, & Silverthorn, 1997) regard temperamental fearlessness in toddlers as a harbinger for the later expression of callous and unemotional (C/U) traits in children. C/U traits involve an absence of guilt, shallow emotions, and a lack of anxiety. These traits are considered characteristic of fledgling psychopathy (Frick, 1998; Lynam, 1996). Wootton et al. (1997) found that ineffective discipline (e.g., corporal punishment, inconsistency, poor monitoring, and low involvement) predicted externalizing behavior for children who were low in C/U traits. However, high C/U children exhibited greater levels of externalizing behaviors that were unrelated to ineffective discipline. These findings were generally replicated by Oxford, Cavell, and Hughes (2001) and suggest that the pathway to externalizing behavior for fearless and callous children is distinct from that of more fearful, less callous children. Frick (1998) has argued that the externalizing behaviors of high C/U children are strongly linked to genetic or other biological factors. Low physiological arousal and decreased autonomic reactivity have been found to be associated with higher levels of externalizing behaviors, independent of parenting quality (McBurnett, Pfiffner, Capasso, Lahey, & Loeber, 1997). These biologically based factors are thought to diminish the power of avoidance conditioning and reduce the effectiveness of punishment (Hinshaw & Anderson, 1996). Children who demonstrate these physiological deficits tend to have an earlier onset of conduct problems and are likely to exhibit extreme and more stable patterns of externalizing behaviors (Hinshaw & Anderson, 1996).

### **Children's Internal Representations of Discipline**

Individual differences in children's response to discipline may not be limited to the affective, behavioral, and biological variables implicated by Kochanska (1993, 1995) and Frick (1998). The manner in which children perceive and interpret disciplinary encounters may also be important. The presence of social cognitive deficits or biases among aggressive

children has been well documented in studies that examine situations involving conflicts with peers (Crick & Dodge, 1994). However, aggressive children also have conflicts with parents, teachers, and other adult caregivers. Despite the importance that goal conflicts and accompanying emotional reactions have for parents (Dix, 1991) and teachers (Greene, Abidin, & Kmetz, 1997), little is known about the way in which children, especially aggressive children, interpret and evaluate these situations. This gap in knowledge may be due to the lack of reliable and valid means for assessing social cognitive variables in situations that involve conflict between children and their adult caregivers.

A potentially important variable to assess in this regard is aggressive children's view of the power that adults wield during a disciplinary conflict. Children tend to imitate the behavior of powerful adults (e.g., Bussey & Bandura, 1984; Grusec, 1971) and tune out or treat with coercion adults who are powerless (Bugental, Lyon, Lin, McGrath, & Bimbela, 1999; Kees, 1999). Also, adults who feel powerless are prone to experience greater stress, heightened autonomic arousal, a tendency to regard children as hostile and threatening, and a propensity to use overly harsh punishment (Bugental, Brown, & Reiss, 1996; Bugental, Lewis, Lin, Lyon, Kopeikin, 1999; Lewis, 1999). For families with aggressive children, perceived power or social dominance relations could hold even greater significance (Lykken, 1995; Omark, Strayer, & Freedman, 1980; Scott, 1992). In many of these families, power is expressed coercively and distributed less hierarchically, and in some cases it is skewed in the opposite direction, with aggressive children as the most dominant members (Patterson, 1982; Patterson et al., 1992). Few child and family researchers have studied the role of power or social dominance within families (c.f. Clutton-Brock, 1991; McDonald, 1980; Phelps & Slater, 1985; Rollins & Bahr, 1976; Vuchnich, 1987), despite reports that conflict and aggression tend to diminish among group members once a dominance hierarchy is established (e.g., Pettit, Bakshi, Dodge, & Coie, 1990). The implication for families with ag-

gressive children is that unsettled questions about who is in charge could lead to continued conflict. Patterson et al. (1992) found that "coercive exchanges are most likely to occur in families in which either the rules for child behavior or the roles of family members are not clearly defined" (p. 42).

The paucity of studies in this area may be due to the fact that power is an elusive construct, which is often difficult to measure. A more common approach to assessing dominance relations in families is to observe how parents respond to their children's use of coercive behavior (Patterson et al., 1992). Aggressive children tend to use coercive tactics to the degree that parents give in to such tactics (Snyder & Patterson, 1995). However, what aggressive children believe their parents will do in those situations has not been examined. The study of these beliefs could add to our knowledge about child effects that directly or indirectly influence the socialization process. Cavell (2000) described children's beliefs about the likelihood of being disciplined as their sense of containment. We define "a sense of containment," or *perceived containment*, as a child's belief that adults have the capacity to impose firm limits and to prevail if there is a conflict in goals. Cavell (2000) hypothesized that effective discipline promotes, but does not guarantee, that children will have a sense of being contained. Just as some parents fail to appreciate how their aversive responses function to maintain child misbehavior (Patterson et al., 1992; Wahler & Dumas, 1989), so, too, might children fail to appreciate the contingent relations between their misbehavior and parents' punitive responses. It may also be the case that children who are physiologically underresponsive to punishment contingencies, such as the high C/U children identified by Frick and his colleagues (Frick, 1998; Wootton et al., 1997), may hold beliefs about parental consequences that are discrepant with what their parents actually do. Cavell (2000) also draws on relationship-based models of socialization to suggest that children who have a sense of containment are restricted behaviorally, but are not threatened personally or relationally, by their parents' disciplinary actions (Cavell,

2001; Dumas, 1996; Kochanska, 1995; Kuczynski & Hildebrandt, 1997; Richters & Waters, 1991; Wahler, 1994). Therefore, strict discipline in the context of an emotionally negative parent–child relationship is unlikely to foster a sense of containment. Regardless of its origins, a sense of containment has yet to be investigated as a potential contributor to the development and maintenance of childhood aggression.

In this article we describe efforts to examine the construct of perceived containment in a sample that includes aggressive, high-risk children. We report two studies here: the first investigated the psychometric properties of a newly developed measure of perceived containment and the second tested a series of hypotheses regarding potential correlates of perceived containment.

### Study 1

In this, the first study, we describe the development of the Perceived Containment Questionnaire (PCQ), a new instrument for assessing perceived containment in elementary-age children who are at risk for antisocial behavior. We also report preliminary findings on the psychometric properties of the instrument.

#### *Development of the PCQ*

A primary goal in developing the PCQ was to assess containment or power-related beliefs that aggressive children invoke when responding to conflict-laden, dyadic interactions with their adult caregivers. Specifically, we wanted to assess the degree to which aggressive children believe they are relatively unfettered by the disciplinary practices of the adults who are typically charged with the task of socialization. We avoided a singular focus on the mother–child relationship because mothers are too often the victims of aversive actions by antisocial children (Patterson, 1982; Patterson et al., 1992). Instead, items on the PCQ assessed containment beliefs across three significant adult–child relationships: mother–child, father–child, and teacher–child. We also tried to balance the number of PCQ items in which a deferential response by the child

represented the performance of a prescribed behavior or inhibition of a proscribed behavior. Recent studies suggest that children develop separate internal systems for managing these two tasks and that internal controls for proscribed behaviors (i.e., adherence to “don’t” rules) are more easily attained than internal controls for prescribed behaviors (i.e., adherence to “do” rules; Braungart–Rieker, Garwood, & Stifter, 1997; Kochanska, Aksan, & Koenig, 1995).

Another goal in developing the PCQ was to devise an instrument that was specific to the containment beliefs of aggressive children. We reasoned that aggression-prone children are not alone in recognizing the weak spots in a parent or a teacher’s disciplinary strategy; however, we expected these children to more frequently challenge adults’ authority and to do so in situations where the base rate for children prevailing is rather low. Therefore, we included two types of items in the PCQ. The first type involves general statements about adults’ capacity to exert their authority (e.g., “My mom can make me obey her even if I really don’t want to”), which children rate on a 4-point, Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all like me*; 4 = *very much like me*). Each subscale (i.e., mother, father, teacher) contains five such items. A second type of item describes situations in which it would be unlikely that a child’s wishes would prevail (e.g., “You really don’t want to go to school today. Your mom says that you have to go anyway. Can your mom make you go to school?”). Children answer these items with a dichotomous, yes/no response, which we coded as either 1 or 4, respectively, to parallel the scoring of Likert scale items. Each subscale contains four dichotomous response items, bringing the total number of PCQ items to 27. Pilot testing indicated that children in grades 1 to 4 ( $N = 8$ ) understood all but one item. This item was revised to make it easier to understand.

#### *Preliminary investigation of the psychometric properties of the PCQ*

We conducted a preliminary investigation of the psychometric properties of the PCQ using

data collected in conjunction with a larger, school-based prevention project targeting aggressive children who are at risk for delinquency and substance abuse. We expected to find that the PCQ evinced adequate internal consistency and test-retest reliability. We also examined the range and distribution of PCQ scores in this sample.

We also explored interrelations among the mother, father, and teacher subscales of the PCQ. Theoretically, we see perceived containment as an individual difference variable that is expressed conditionally within interpersonal contexts (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). As such, we expected more overlap than independence in children's containment beliefs across the three adult-child relationships. Whether this new construct is more accurately construed as a relationship variable with containment beliefs specific to each adult caregiver is an empirical question. To begin to address this question, we examined the intercorrelations among the three PCQ subscales, hypothesizing that subscale scores would show moderate overlap.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were drawn from a sample of 169 aggressive children in Grades 2 and 3 (Mean age = 8.24 years,  $SD = .65$ ) whose parents consented to their involvement in school-based programs designed to prevent later delinquency and substance abuse. Participating children had met one or more of the following criteria: (a) a score at or above 70T on the Aggressive Behavior subscale of the Teacher Report Form (TRF; Achenbach, 1991b); (b) a score at or above 2 standard deviations above the classroom mean on peer nominations of aggression; or (c) a score at or above 60T on the Aggressive Behavior subscale of the TRF and a score above the classroom mean on peer-nominated aggression. The percentage of high-risk children who met each criterion (with overlap) was 48, 45, and 31%, respectively. Aggression ratings from teachers ( $M = 69.66$ ,  $SD = 7.68$ ) and peers ( $M = 1.14$ ,  $SD = .82$ ) confirmed the high-risk status of these

children. Of the 169 children whose parents consented to participation, 160 completed the PCQ and were included in the present analyses. Thirty-three percent were girls; their ethnic/racial group membership was distributed as follows: European American, 39 (24.4%), African American, 83 (51.9%), Hispanic, 37 (23.1%), and Asian American, 1 (0.6%). Mean years in school for mothers and fathers of high-risk children were 11.64 ( $SD = 2.72$ ,  $N = 113$ ) and 11.69 ( $SD = 3.49$ ,  $N = 83$ ), respectively. The modal occupational level for parents was "unskilled worker" (36%) for mothers and "skilled worker" (46%) for fathers. Only 11% of mothers and 15% of fathers reported an occupational level at or above "manager/lesser professional."

Also participating in this study was a convenience sample of 103 students recruited as coparticipants in school-based, problem solving skills training groups. These children were invited to participate in these groups in order to counter potential iatrogenic effects associated with treatment groups composed solely of antisocial youth (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999). They were recruited from the same classrooms as target children and had been identified by teachers as prosocial, "good citizens." All those whose parents gave permission were considered eligible. Data from this sample of children were used to expand the range of scores obtained from our sample of high-risk, aggressive children. Teachers rated the externalizing behavior of these low-risk children (TRF Aggressive Behavior Scale,  $M = 52.26$ ,  $SD = 7.77$ ), but these ratings were not used as screening criteria.<sup>1</sup> Teachers were asked to nominate children whose gender and ethnic/racial group membership matched that of target children in the classroom, but there was a tendency for teachers to nominate more girls (52%) than boys and more European American children (38.8%) than African American (16.5%) or Hispanic (22.3%) chil-

1. Mean externalizing *T* scores on the Teacher Report Form (Achenbach, 1991b) were significantly different for the high- and low-risk groups,  $t(261) = 16.95$ ,  $p < .01$ .

dren (ethnicity data were unavailable for 22.3% of the children in this low-risk group). Chi-square analyses revealed significant differences between high- and low-risk children for both gender ( $\chi^2 = 10.32$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and ethnicity ( $\chi^2 = 22.68$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Information about parents' educational or occupational level was not available for this group of children, but participating schools drew from adjacent neighborhoods, suggesting that high- and low-risk children from the same classrooms would be comparable in terms of their socioeconomic status.

We also asked 22 children from a previous cohort to complete the PCQ on two occasions over a 2-week interval. Their scores were used solely to estimate the temporal stability of the PCQ. Of these 22 children, 11 were aggressive, high-risk children and 11 were low-risk, coparticipants in the problem solving skills training groups.

### Measure

**PCQ.** The PCQ is a newly developed, 27-item self-report instrument designed to measure children's containment-related beliefs across three significant adult-child relationships: mother, father, and teacher. Items on the PCQ-mother and PCQ-father subscales are identical, whereas items on the PCQ-teacher subscale are slightly different to reflect the school context of the teacher-child relationship. Higher PCQ scores are indicative of greater perceived containment, after reverse coding selected items (mother/father subscales: items 2, 3, 7, and 8; teacher subscale: 1, 3, 7, and 8). Because the PCQ contains both dichotomous and Likert-scale items, children's responses were averaged across item type and standardized and these mean scores were then averaged and restandardized. Mother and teacher subscales of the PCQ can be found in the Appendix.

### Procedure

The PCQ was administered at school as part of a more extensive, individual interview ad-

ministered by trained undergraduate or graduate student research assistants.

### Results

Item-total correlations for the PCQ ranged from .19 to .50 ( $M = .34$ ,  $SD = .10$ ). Not surprisingly, item-total correlations were generally lower for yes/no items than for Likert-scale items. Internal consistency was not improved by deleting any items; therefore, all 27 items were used to form a summary PCQ score. Coefficient alpha for the PCQ was .80 ( $N = 203$ ), suggesting adequate internal consistency. The 2-week retest reliability was also adequate ( $r = .88$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the PCQ scale and its three subscales based on the present sample. Mean PCQ item scores ranged from 1.41 to 4.00. As shown in Figure 1, scores were negatively skewed (skewness = -1.43) and characterized by a low ceiling, which fell about 1  $SD$  above the mean. We also found that PCQ scores were distributed in a leptokurtic fashion (kurtosis = 3.00), with a relatively large number of subjects scoring at the higher end of the range.

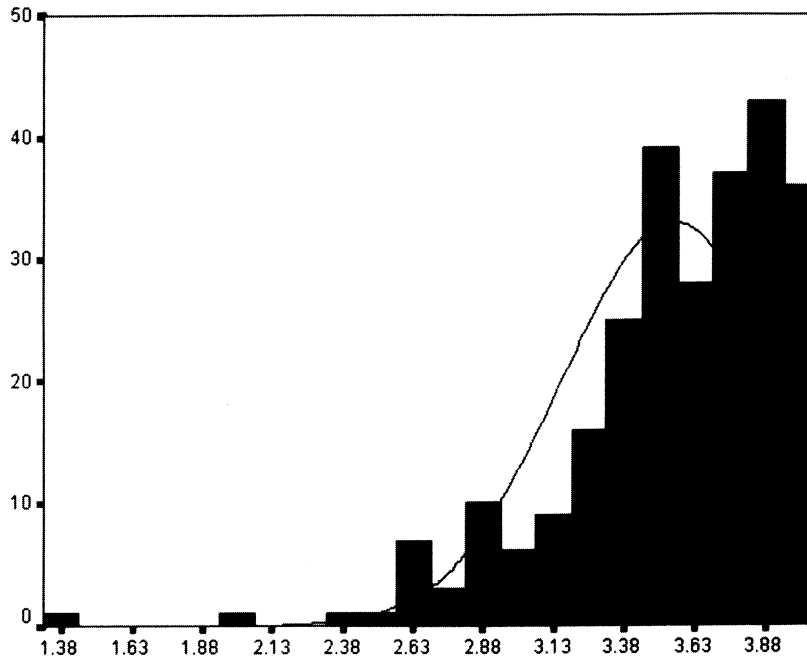
We next considered demographic differences in PCQ scores. Because high- and low-risk groups differed on both gender and ethnic/racial group membership, we ran separate analyses of covariance to control for risk status in each of these analyses. As a group, boys ( $M = -.02$ ,  $SD = .96$ ) and girls ( $M = .03$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ) did not differ significantly in their response to the PCQ,  $F(1, 260) = .04$ ,  $ns$ . Also, mean PCQ scores for European American ( $M = .21$ ,  $SD = .95$ ), African American ( $M = -.14$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ), and Hispanic ( $M = -.10$ ,  $SD = .87$ ) children were not significantly different,  $F(2, 226) = .92$ ,  $ns$ .

We found partial support for the hypothesis that subscales of the PCQ would show moderate overlap. Intercorrelations among the subscale scores were significant ( $p < .05$ ) and indicated moderate associations between the PCQ-mother subscale and both the PCQ-father ( $r = .62$ ) and PCQ-teacher ( $r = .47$ ) subscales. The correlation between PCQ-father and PCQ-teacher scores was smaller ( $r = .35$ ) but still significant. The size of these

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics for the Perceived Containment Questionnaire (PCQ) and hypothesized correlates

Scale	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
PCQ	3.55	.40	263
Mother subscale	3.51	.45	260
Father subscale	3.51	.54	228
Teacher subscale	3.57	.48	259
TRF–Externalizing ( <i>T</i> scores)	62.70	11.50	235
CBCL–Externalizing ( <i>T</i> scores)	53.80	12.76	157
Callous–unemotional traits	1.57	.40	213
Ineffective parenting	2.47	.62	157
Relationship quality	4.28	.61	107

*Note:* All scores are mean item scores, except where indicated. TRF, Teacher Report Form; CBCL, Child Behavior Checklist.



**Figure 1.** A frequency histogram of the mean raw scores from the PCQ.

correlations also suggests a fair degree of independence, particularly between children’s view of parent-related versus teacher-related containment. Therefore, we examined the internal consistency and 2-week stability for each of the subscales. Coefficient alphas were as follows: PCQ–mother, .51; PCQ–father, .68, and PCQ–teacher, .61. Temporal stability estimates were as follows: PCQ–mother,  $r =$

.73; PCQ–father,  $r = .85$ ; and PCQ–teacher,  $r = .85$ .

**Discussion**

The PCQ was constructed to offer a standardized way to assess the containment beliefs of aggressive, school-age children. The PCQ appears to be a reliable instrument: Summary

scores were internally consistent and temporally stable in this mixed sample of high- and low-risk children. PCQ scores were also unrelated to children's gender or ethnicity: we found no significant differences between boys and girls or among children of different ethnic or racial groups. Of course, future studies with larger and more representative samples may yield significant differences in the PCQ scores of children from different ethnic or racial backgrounds.

We found that the distribution of PCQ scores was skewed and leptokurtic, revealing a tendency for children in this sample to report a rather strong sense of containment. This finding is intriguing, given that over 60% of the children were considered high risk. The mean PCQ score for this high-risk group was 3.47 ( $SD = .44$ ), further indicating that strong containment beliefs were not restricted to well-behaving children. Because our primary objective was to assess perceived containment among highly aggressive children, departures from a normal distribution are not particularly problematic. We had hoped for variability among children scoring at the lower ends of the containment continuum and we were relatively unconcerned about limited variability at the upper end. Of course, these strengths are also limitations when the research question requires a distinction between average and higher levels of perceived containment. For example, investigators who study maltreated or anxious children may want to use a measure that allows for the identification of children whose containment beliefs are inordinately high (Crittenden, & DiLalla, 1988; Dumas, LaFreniere, & Serketich, 1995). One possibility is the Picture Attribution Test, used by Bugental and Martorell (1999) to identify children who felt relatively powerless vis-à-vis their parents. One could also add items to the PCQ that describe situations in which the likelihood of children prevailing over the wishes of adult caregivers is relatively high. In this way, children who are extremely reluctant to challenge adults' authority can be identified.

We conceptualized a child's sense of containment as an individual difference variable that would fluctuate minimally across adult-

child relationships, but we considered the possibility that subscales of the PCQ would reveal relationship-specific patterns. To address this question, we computed intercorrelations among the mother, father, and teacher subscales of the PCQ. We found significant correlations among all three subscales, with the greatest overlap involving the PCQ-mother subscale. Confounding these analyses is the problem of shared method variance, on the one hand, and limited reliability, on the other. The former would generally inflate these correlations, and the latter would attenuate them. Both concerns are present in this study, and yet the subscale with the lowest estimate of internal consistency (i.e., PCQ-mother subscale) showed the greatest overlap with the other two subscales. Nevertheless, it would appear from these analyses that children do not hold to a uniform set of beliefs about containment across all adult caregiver relationships, and investigators who wish to examine the correlates of perceived containment are justified in conducting analyses that disaggregate PCQ subscale scores (see Study 2). We should note, however, that internal consistency estimates for all three subscales were marginally adequate (not uncommon for scales containing only nine items and for samples of young children), suggesting that the PCQ subscale scores be used with some caution.

## Study 2

In Study 2, we tested a series of hypotheses about the correlates of perceived containment. These hypotheses were drawn from the extant literature on individual differences in children's response to discipline. The first set of hypotheses concerns variables that might predict a child's sense of containment. Based on evidence suggesting that high C/U children are relatively unresponsive to parental discipline (Wootton et al., 1997), we suspected a corresponding tendency for these children to devalue adults' capacity for containment. Therefore, we predicted that PCQ scores would be inversely related to parents' and teachers' ratings of C/U traits. We also reasoned that children's sense of containment would vary as a



function of how well they were parented (Cavell, 2000) and that PCQ scores would be significantly related to measures of ineffective discipline and mother-child relationship quality. Thus, we hypothesized that children who experienced ineffective parental discipline and an emotionally negative mother-child relationship would report lower perceived containment.

We also investigated the degree to which children's sense of containment predicted their use of coercion and other forms of anti-social behavior. To the degree that children who lack a sense of containment are likely to challenge an adult's efforts to limit their misbehavior, we would expect to find an inverse relation between PCQ scores and children's externalizing problems. Moreover, to the degree that a child's sense of containment is not simply a marker for parents' use of ineffective discipline, PCQ scores should predict externalizing problems independent of parental discipline. This is a key hypothesis in light of recent speculations about the role of children's internal representations in the process of socialization generally (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Kuczynski & Hildebrandt, 1997) and the development of aggressive behavior specifically (Cavell, 2000; Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997).

A related hypothesis was based on the possibility that perceived containment would alter children's responsiveness to parent discipline in a manner similar to that suggested by studies of children's C/U traits (Wootton et al., 1997). If children truly doubt adults' capacity for containment, then the type or quality of the discipline used should not matter. Therefore, we predicted that PCQ scores would moderate the commonly found relation between ineffective parental discipline and children's externalizing problems. More specifically, poor discipline was expected to be associated with greater externalizing problems, but only for those children who had a relatively strong sense of containment.

Our final hypothesis was based on the work of Kochanska (1995), who found support for an alternative pathway to socialization for young children who are temperamentally fearless. For these children, conscience

development was better predicted by the affective quality of the mother-child relationship than the quality of maternal discipline. If being confronted with their wrongdoing matters little to children who lack a sense of containment, then a similar pattern of results might emerge. Specifically, we expected the quality of the mother-child relationship to be a better (negative) predictor of externalizing problems for children with relatively low PCQ scores.

## Method

### *Participants*

Study 2 data were obtained from the same two groups of children (high- and low-risk) who participated in Study 1.

### *Measures*

In addition to the PCQ, the following measures were used in Study 2.

*Externalizing problems.* Teachers and parents rated children's level of externalizing problems via the Teacher Report Form (TRF; Achenbach, 1991b) and the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991a), respectively. These questionnaires are well-validated instruments used to assess a variety of problematic behaviors in children. The broadband externalizing scale was used for this study. Because CBCL and TRF Externalizing scores were significantly correlated ( $r = .37$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $n = 150$ ), we formed a composite by first standardizing parents' and teachers' raw scores and then computing a mean externalizing score.

*Ineffective discipline.* Parents completed the Weinberger Parenting Inventory (Feldman & Weinberger, 1994), a self-report measure that assesses parenting along five dimensions: harsh, inconsistent, psychologically intrusive, permissive, and child centered. Scores from the harsh, inconsistent, and psychologically intrusive subscales were used to form an index of ineffective discipline that approximated the overly arousing pattern of parenting

thought to interfere with the internalization of parental values (Hoffman, 1983; Kochanska, 1995). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating more ineffective discipline. Cronbach's alpha for this 27-item composite was .87, based on data from the present sample.

*Callous/unemotional traits.* Parent and teacher ratings from the Callous–Unemotional scale of the Psychopathy Screening Device (Frick & Hare, 2002) were used to index C/U traits. Individual item scores range from 0 (*not true at all*) to 2 (*definitely true*), with higher scores indicative of stronger C/U traits. Parents' and teachers' ratings of individual items are summed before an overall score is computed (Wootton et al., 1997). Support for combining parents' and teachers' ratings was found in the significant correlation between the two sets of scores ( $r = .35, p < .01, n = 150$ ). Cronbach's alpha for the C/U composite was .78, suggesting adequate internal consistency for this sample of subjects.

*Mother–child relationship quality.* An adapted version of the Network of Relationships Inventory (NRI; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985) was used to measure of the quality of the mother–child relationship. The NRI is typically used to assess the quality of children's relationships with members of their social network (e.g., mother, teacher, best friend). Items are rated on a 5-point scale, with higher scores associated with more positive relationships. We modified the NRI to obtain mothers' views of the quality of the parent–child relationship. Scores from the affection, intimacy, nurturance, reliable alliance, and satisfaction subscales of the NRI were summed to form a composite index that approximated Kochanska's (1993) construct of a mutually responsive, positive, and binding relationship. Items within this composite were internally consistent, based on data from the present sample (Cronbach's alpha = .81).

#### *Procedure*

As in Study 1, all child measures were administered at school as part of a more extensive, individual interview administered by trained

undergraduate or graduate research assistants. Parents and teachers completed questionnaires at home and at school, respectively. In nearly all cases, mothers completed the measures given to the parents. Because mothers of high-risk children were often difficult to access and because some refused to complete all measures given, parent-report data were missing for some of these children. We were also limited in the time demands we could place on parents of low-risk children in our convenience sample; approximately half the parents were given the CBCL and Weinberger Parenting Inventory and none were given the NRI-Mother.

## **Results**

### *Descriptive statistics*

Included in Table 1 are mean scores and standard deviations for the variables of interest in this study. Also listed are the numbers of cases available for each measure. Cases were dropped from an analysis if they were missing data. We also considered whether there was a selective loss of parent report data from our high-risk sample (e.g., whether parents of the most aggressive children were less likely to complete measures). A comparison of high-risk children whose parents did and did not complete the CBCL revealed no significant differences in TRF Externalizing T scores,  $t(140) = 0.18$ .

### *Primary hypotheses*

*The relation between perceived containment and C/U traits.* Table 2 presents intercorrelations among the variables of interest. As hypothesized, PCQ scores were inversely related to C/U traits<sup>2</sup> ( $r = -.23$ ). The children who

2. In a post hoc analysis, a regression equation in which PCQ scores were used to predict C/U traits revealed a significant curvilinear relation between C/U traits and perceived containment ( $R^2 = .07, \Delta R^2 = .02, \Delta F = 4.64, p < .05$ ). This effect appears to be an artifact of the low ceiling of the PCQ. Analysis of simple slopes revealed that perceived containment was significantly related to C/U traits at lower levels ( $\beta = -.35, t = -4.04, p < .01$ , for children whose PCQ scores were 1 *SD* below the mean) but not at higher levels ( $\beta = .12, t = .66, ns$ , for children whose PCQ scores were 1 *SD*

**Table 2.** Intercorrelations among the primary variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Perceived containment	—				
2. Externalizing behaviors	-0.21** (237)	—			
3. Callous/unemotional traits	-0.23** (213)	0.70** (211)	—		
4. Ineffective discipline	-0.05 (157)	0.23** (157)	0.37** (156)	—	
5. Relationship quality	0.09 (107)	-0.46** (107)	-0.37** (107)	0.04 (103)	—

Note: Numbers in parentheses are not significant.

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

were rated as relatively callous and unemotional tended to believe that adult caregivers could not contain them. We also examined whether scores from specific subscales of the PCQ were differentially related to C/U traits, as rated by parents and teachers. Parent-rated C/U traits were significantly correlated with both PCQ–mother ( $-.21$ ) and PCQ–father ( $-.19$ ) scores, whereas the correlation between parent-rated C/U traits and PCQ–teacher scores ( $-.11$ ) was not significant. Conversely, teacher-rated C/U traits were not related to PCQ–mother ( $-.10$ ) or PCQ–father ( $-.03$ ) scores, but they were significantly associated with PCQ–teacher scores ( $-.16$ ).

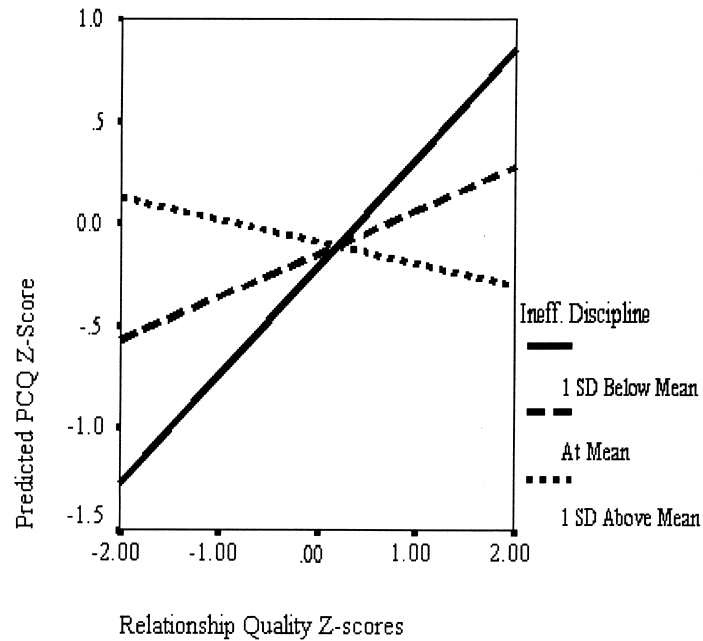
*The relation between perceived containment and parenting.* Table 2 also presents correlations between PCQ scores and measures of parenting. The correlations indicate that children's containment beliefs were unrelated to parental discipline ( $r = -.05$ ) or to the quality of the mother–child relationship ( $r = .09$ ). Controlling for child gender and ethnicity, we next regressed PCQ scores onto both measures of parenting as well as the interaction between ineffective discipline and mother–child relationship quality. Because relationship quality was not measured in our low-risk group, only high-risk children were included in this analysis. In this multivariate analysis, parenting main effects were not significant, but

the interaction term was,  $\beta = -.24$ ,  $t(96) = -2.53$ ,  $p < .05$ . Analyses of simple slopes (Aiken & West, 1991, pp. 20–21) suggested that a positive mother–child relationship was associated with a stronger sense of containment (see Figure 2), but only for children whose parents did not rely on harsh, ineffective discipline (i.e., scores  $\leq 1$  SD),  $\beta = .50$ ,  $t(95) = 2.85$ ,  $p < .01$ . When parents were ineffective in their discipline (i.e., scores  $\geq 1$  SD), the quality of the mother–child relationship was unrelated to perceived containment,  $\beta = -.10$ ,  $t(95) = -.69$ , *ns*.

Based on studies that found a moderating effect for gender (e.g., McFayden–Ketchum, Bates, Dodge, & Pettit, 1996) or ethnic group differences (e.g., Deater–Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1996) on the relation between parental discipline and children's conduct problems, we reran the previous analysis to test for possible interactions between measures of parenting and children's gender or ethnic/racial group membership in our high-risk group. We found no evidence that gender interacted significantly with ineffective discipline, mother–child relationship quality, or the interaction of the two factors. We did find, however, that the interaction between ineffective discipline and mother–child relationship quality was significant only for African American children,  $\beta = -.41$ ,  $t(90) = -2.61$ ,  $p < .01$ .

above the mean). The PCQ quadratic term incremented the total variance explained in C/U traits from 5.2 to 7.2%.

*The relation between perceived containment and children's externalizing problems.* As shown in Table 2, PCQ scores were inversely



**Figure 2.** The moderating influence of ineffective discipline on the relation between mother-child relationship quality and predicted PCQ scores.

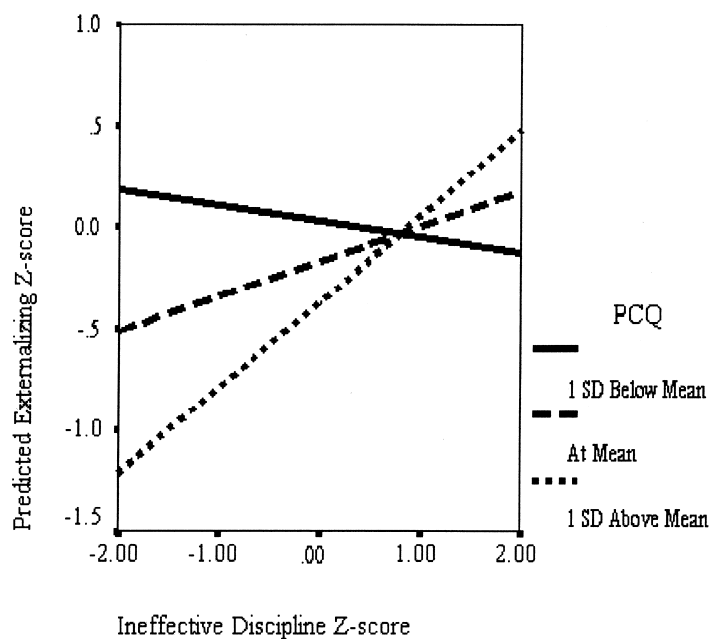
**Table 3.** Hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting externalizing behaviors from perceived containment and ineffective discipline (N = 157)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
$R^2$	.14**	.17**	.22**
$R^2\Delta$ (over previous model)	—	.03**	.05**
Steps			
1. Gender (male = 1, female = 0)	.16*	.14*	.15*
African American	.23**	.21*	.20*
Hispanic	-.02	-.03	-.02
2. Ineffective discipline	.20**	.20**	.18*
3. Perceived containment		-.19**	-.20**
4. Perceived containment $\times$ ineffective discipline			.23**

Note: Regression coefficients are standardized beta weights.  
\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

related to ratings of child externalizing problems ( $r = -.21$ ). Children who lacked a strong sense of containment were generally viewed as engaging in more problem behavior. We next examined relations among perceived containment, parental discipline, and children's externalizing problems, using a series of hierarchical regression models (see Table 3). Although PCQ scores were nonnormally dis-

tributed for this sample (see Study 1), multiple regression analyses are generally robust with respect to nonextreme violations of the normality assumption. We controlled for child gender and ethnicity in these analyses, and in each successive model we included an additional predictor of children's externalizing problems: in Model 1, ineffective discipline was our only predictor (after child demo-



**Figure 3.** The moderating influence of perceived containment on the relation between ineffective discipline and predicted externalizing behaviors.

graphics); in Model 2, the main effects of ineffective discipline and perceived containment were examined simultaneously; and in Model 3, the interaction between these two variables was added.

Models 1 and 2 revealed that ineffective parental discipline was associated with greater child externalizing problems but that low containment scores predicted greater problem behavior after controlling for parental discipline. PCQ scores accounted for 3% additional variance in children's externalizing scores. Model 3 revealed a significant interaction between parental discipline and child containment that explained an additional 5% of the variance in children's problem behavior. Follow-up analyses (Aiken & West, 1991) indicated that ineffective discipline predicted greater externalizing problems, but only for children with relatively high PCQ scores,  $\beta = .41$ ,  $t(150) = 4.05$ ,  $p < .01$ ; for children with relatively low PCQ scores, the relation between ineffective discipline and perceived containment was not significant,  $\beta = -.12$ ,  $t(150) = -1.03$ , *ns*. The nature of this interaction is depicted in Figure 3.

We next examined the possibility that the

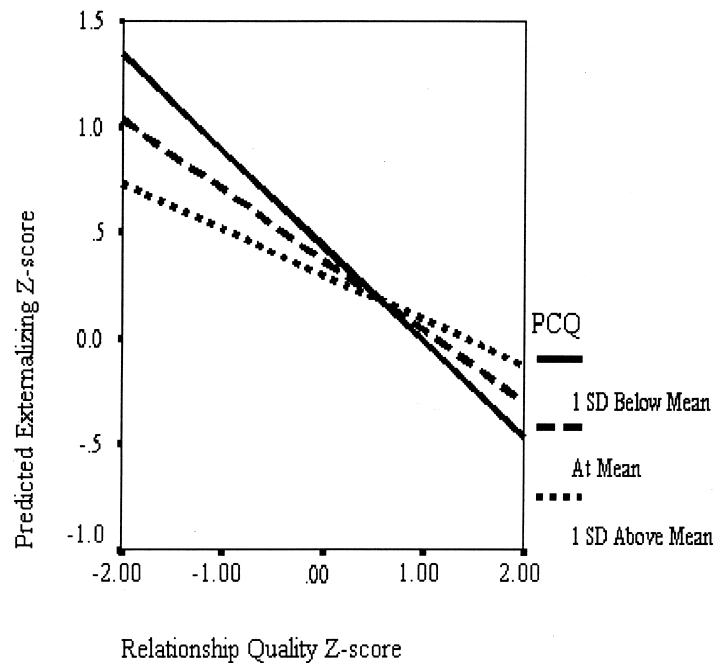
ffective quality of the mother-child relationship was a better predictor of externalizing problems in the children who lacked a sense of containment. We conducted similar hierarchical regression analyses (also controlling for child gender and ethnicity) but used NRI-Mother ratings in lieu of ineffective discipline scores (see Table 4). As hypothesized, mothers' ratings of relationship quality interacted significantly with perceived containment, such that the quality of the mother-child relationship was a stronger predictor of externalizing behaviors for the children who lacked a strong sense of containment (see Figure 4). Analyses of simple slopes revealed that mother-child relationship quality was inversely related to children's externalizing problems, but this relation was significantly stronger for children with low PCQ scores,  $\beta = -.45$ ,  $t(100) = -5.57$ ,  $p < .01$ , than for children with high PCQ scores,  $\beta = -.21$ ,  $t(100) = -2.05$ ,  $p < .05$ .<sup>3</sup>

3. We reran both sets of regression analyses after dropping one child who had an unusually low PCQ score ( $z = -5.25$ ). Both interaction effects were robust to the removal of this child's data.

**Table 4.** Multiple regression analyses externalizing behaviors from perceived containment and mother–child relationship quality (N = 106)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
$R^2$	.25**	.26**	.29**
$R^2\Delta$ (over previous model)	—	.01	.03*
Steps			
1. Gender (male = 1, female = 0)	.05	.04	.03
African American	.18	.16	.17
Hispanic	.03	.03	.07
2. Relationship quality	-.50**	-.48**	-.44**
3. Perceived containment		-.13	-.10
4. Perceived containment $\times$ relationship quality			.19*

Note: Regression coefficients are standardized beta weights.  
\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .



**Figure 4.** The moderating influence of perceived containment on the relation between mother–child relationship quality and predicted externalizing behaviors.

#### Supplemental analyses

In the previous analyses, summary PCQ scores were used to predict combined CBCL and TRF scores. Based on findings from Study 1 suggesting some independence among PCQ subscales, we conducted supplemental analyses to examine whether children's relationship-specific containment beliefs predicted externalizing problems, as rated by the

adult in that relationship (or in that setting, in the case of fathers). The previous regression analyses were modified such that PCQ–mother (or PCQ–father) scores were used to predict CBCL externalizing scores. A similar analysis included PCQ–teacher scores as a predictor of TRF externalizing scores. As was the case with our composite measures, two sets of analyses were conducted (i.e., ineffec-

tive discipline and its interaction with perceived containment and mother-child relationship quality and its interaction with perceived containment). The first set yielded significant interactions between ineffective discipline and each of the PCQ subscales. Both PCQ-mother and PCQ-father scores interacted with ineffective discipline to explain an additional 5% of the variance in CBCL externalizing scores. The interaction between PCQ-teacher scores and ineffective discipline accounted for 3% additional variance in TRF externalizing scores. The nature of these three interactions paralleled those found using our composite variables: the commonly found association between ineffective discipline and children's externalizing problems was found only for children with relatively high containment scores. The second set of analyses, involving relationship quality, yielded a similar pattern of findings, with one exception: the interaction between PCQ-father scores and mother-child relationship quality was not significant. PCQ-mother scores interacted with relationship quality to explain an additional 2% of the variance in CBCL externalizing scores, and the interaction between PCQ-teacher scores and relationship quality accounted for 3% additional variance in TRF externalizing scores. Again, the nature of these interactions paralleled those found with our composite variables: The inverse relation between mother-child relationship quality and children's externalizing problems was significantly greater for children with relatively low containment scores.

## Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore hypothesized correlates of children's containment beliefs. We reasoned that children's sense of containment—their beliefs about adults' capacity to impose firm limits and to prevail if there is a conflict in goals—would relate in specific ways to measures of parenting, child behavior problems, and C/U traits. The findings provided strong support for our hypotheses and argue for the continued study of children's containment beliefs.

## Predicting perceived containment

We hypothesized that C/U traits and measures of parenting would predict children's containment beliefs. As expected, children's C/U traits were inversely related to perceived containment, suggesting the possibility that these two constructs are linked in ways that warrant further exploration. We also found that measures of parenting interacted in a catalytic fashion to predict the PCQ scores of children in our high-risk group. High-risk children whose parents combined relatively effective discipline with an emotionally positive relationship reported a stronger sense of containment. An additional, three-way interaction suggested that this pattern was significant for African American children only. The limited size of our high-risk sample compels us to treat this particular finding cautiously, but other researchers have also found evidence that parenting practices may not generalize across racial or ethnic subgroups (e.g., Deater-Deckard et al., 1996; Heffer & Kelley, 1987). We did not find a direct relation between children's containment beliefs and measures of parenting: The bivariate correlations were near zero and nonsignificant for both ineffective discipline and mother-child relationship quality. The lack of a direct association may be due to the self-report nature of our parenting measures or to the inclusion of teacher-related items on the PCQ. Contradicting the latter explanation is the fact that similar, near-zero correlations were found between scores from all three subscales of the PCQ and both ineffective discipline ( $r_s = .01, .02, \text{ and } -.11$  for the mother, father, and teacher subscales, respectively) and mother-child relationship quality ( $r_s = .11, .12, \text{ and } -.04$  for the mother, father, and teacher subscales, respectively).

## Predicting externalizing problems from perceived containment

As expected, children who scored lower on the PCQ were rated as having more externalizing problems. An even more important finding is that children's beliefs about containment predicted problem behavior indepen-

dently of parental discipline, suggesting that containment-related beliefs are not simply a marker for the quality of parental discipline. We interpret this finding as evidence that PCQ scores reflect children's internal schemas about their own power relative to adults' capacity to be insistent in the face of opposition. An alternative explanation is that mothers' self-reported disciplinary practices are fraught with error, thereby allowing related measures to explain significant amounts of variance in children's externalizing problems. Arguing against this explanation is that we found a significant relation between discipline ratings and externalizing scores but no relation between discipline ratings and perceived containment. The failure to find a significant relation between ineffective discipline and perceived containment also rules out the possibility that containment beliefs mediated the relation between ineffective discipline and children's externalizing problems (Baron & Kinney, 1986). The absence of a mediating effect stands in contrast to previous studies in which children's social cognitions partially mediated the relation between harsh parental discipline and children's aggressive behavior (e.g., Dodge, Pettit, Bates, & Valente, 1995). In those studies social cognitive variables were assessed in situations involving conflict with peers, not adults. Sample and measurement differences could also explain the lack of a mediational role for perceived containment (e.g., Neiderhiser, Pike, Hetherington, & Reiss, 1988). It seems more likely, however, that containment beliefs simply do not function as a causal link between parental discipline and children's externalizing problems (Patterson, 1997; Snyder & Patterson, 1995).

We did find evidence suggesting that containment beliefs are an indicator of whether children will be responsive to parents' socialization efforts. As has been found with temperamental fearlessness (Kochanska, 1995) and C/U traits (Wootton et al., 1997), PCQ scores moderated the relation between parental discipline and child behavior. Parental discipline that was harsh, intrusive, and inconsistent predicted externalizing problems, but only for children with a greater sense of containment. Children with relatively low PCQ

scores tended to have higher levels of externalizing behaviors, regardless of the effectiveness of parental discipline. Our data do not speak to causal relations among these variables, but we suspect that a child's sense of containment facilitates parents' use of discipline and enhances the socialization process. We also suspect that children who lack a sense of containment are relatively unaffected by parents' disciplinary practices. We hypothesized that for these children the quality of the mother-child relationship would be a better predictor of externalizing behavior (Kochanska, 1997). Supporting this hypothesis is the finding that children's beliefs about containment moderated the relation between mother-child relationship quality and children's externalizing problems. Mothers' ratings of relationship quality predicted externalizing scores, but this relation was significantly stronger for children with relatively low PCQ scores.

Collectively, these findings provide additional, empirical support for Kochanska's (1993) model of differential socialization and Frick's (1998) assertions about the existence of theoretically meaningful subgroups of aggressive children. Our findings also resonate with recent counterarguments concerning the diminished role of parenting in light of evidence gathered by behavior-genetics researchers (Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000). In making a case for both nature *and* nurture, Collins et al. (2000) suggest that main effects for either heredity or environment are often qualified by moderator effects, which "are the rule, not the exception" (p. 228) in studies of children's behavior and personality.

#### *Are containment beliefs relationship specific?*

Additional support for the hypothesized relations among parenting variables, children's externalizing behavior, and perceived containment was found in our supplemental analyses. Initial results based on a summary PCQ score and an externalizing composite were generally replicated when the PCQ mother, father, and teacher subscale scores were used sepa-



rately to predict corresponding parent- or teacher-rated externalizing problems. These analyses had the added benefit of reducing or eliminating shared method variance between the predictor and criterion variables. However, findings from our supplemental analyses also lend credence to the argument that children's containment beliefs are, to some degree, relationship specific. Further evidence of this was seen in the correlations between PCQ subscale scores and parent- or teacher-rated C/U traits. Parent-rated C/U traits were significantly associated with PCQ-mother and PCQ-father scores only, whereas teacher-rated C/U traits were significantly related to PCQ-teacher scores only.

### General Discussion

We introduced the construct of perceived containment and found evidence that children's beliefs about containment relate in meaningful ways to measures of parenting and children's externalizing behavior. What explains these findings, and what does it mean that a child lacks a "sense of containment"? Socialization researchers generally acknowledge that children play active roles in their own development, but the mechanisms by which they wield power and act with agency are seldom studied (Kuczynski, 2002). It is more common to view children's antisocial behavior as a product of parents' external contingencies (Patterson, 1997; Patterson et al., 1992). This perspective was updated recently to reflect Herrnstein's (1970) *matching law* (Snyder & Patterson, 1995). According to the matching law, rates of behavior tend to match the level of reinforcement accruing to that behavior, *relative* to the reinforcement accruing to alternative behaviors (McDowell, 1982). Thus, the simple law of effect has now been replaced by the more complex notion that responses are selected rather than strengthened: "Reinforcement does not mechanically increase the 'strength' of a particular response independent of other responses, but it does provide information about the functional or adaptive value of each of the multiple responses that could be made in a particular situation" (Snyder, Edwards, McGraw, Kilgore, & Holton,

1994, p. 319). The idea that children select from multiple responses dovetails with research suggesting that social information processing is often a precursor to children's response to peer conflict (Crick & Dodge, 1994). But memory stores and acquired interpersonal schemas are thought to interact with on-line processing to codetermine their response selection. If true, then beliefs about containment could also affect how children interpret and respond to disciplinary encounters: For children who lack a sense of containment, objective information about impending disciplinary sanctions is likely to be excluded or overshadowed by beliefs in their own power (Cavell, 2000). Unlike conflicts with peers, conflicts involving parents or teachers have the potential to distort what is typically viewed as a vertical relationship (Hartup, 1989; Minuchin, 1974). If children see little need to capitulate to adults, then parental discipline, even "effective" parental discipline, may not deter their misbehavior (Cavell, 2000). However, these same children may be drawn to and influenced by what they cannot obtain on their own: an emotionally positive relationship with a caring adult (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cavell & Strand, 2002; Kochanska, 1997). Absent such a relationship, children who lack a sense of containment may be particularly vulnerable to contextual factors that promote antisocial behavior. Future researchers can explore this hypothesis by examining the degree to which containment beliefs interact with known risk variables (e.g., association with deviant peers, poor supervision, exposure to neighborhood crime and violence) to predict later delinquency.

The present findings raise other important questions, including questions about the origin of children's containment beliefs. We found that C/U traits were inversely related to children's level of containment, perhaps owing to a history of engaging in problem behavior without the subjective experience of significant emotional costs. However C/U children are not the only ones who learn that they can use coercion to escape adult sanctions (Patterson, 1982; Patterson et al., 1992). Future studies may reveal that aggressive children's basic training in antisocial behavior

(Patterson, 1982; Patterson et al., 1992) is accelerated or broadened by growing doubts about adults' capacity for containment. We also found evidence that measures of ineffective discipline and mother-child relationship quality interacted to predict children's containment beliefs. Linkages between parenting practices and children's internal representations are not uncommon (Grusec & Kuczynski, 1997), but it is unclear how perceived containment fits within this broad array of findings. Research on the development of children's reasoning about hierarchical power may be relevant. Containment beliefs appear to be an example of what Bugental (2000) referred to as social algorithms that guide children's interactions within the domain of hierarchical power. According to Bugental (2000), social algorithms in the power domain are organized in service of negotiating interactions between those who have (or seek) unequal control or resources. When these strategies are used to manage hierarchical interactions in other social domains (e.g., reciprocity, attachment), the consequences can be negative for both parents and children (Bugental & Happaney, 2000). Nonetheless, some children may come to overrely on these algorithms if parents are unable to sustain their sources of power while simultaneously trying to promote secure attachment relationships or teach benign lessons about reciprocity. In fact, Kuczynski and his colleagues (Dawber & Kuczynski, 1999; Harach & Kuczynski, 1998; Hildebrandt & Kuczynski, 1998) conducted a series of studies that suggested that mothers' emotional investment in the parent-child relationship is one avenue by which children acquire power vis-à-vis their parents. Children's intimate knowledge of how far they can push a mother emotionally, behaviorally, and relationally can sometimes undermine her position of authority. Moreover, the process of monitoring a parent's degree of power may begin quite early: Bugental (2000) cited research suggesting that infants less than 1 year old can use nonlinguistic signals to detect cues about social dominance.

Also awaiting exploration is how child factors and parenting behaviors interact to pro-

mote the developmental course of children's containment beliefs. When parents feel powerless and convey ambiguous messages about their power, their children tend to respond with a pattern of attentional avoidance (Bugental, Lyon, et al., 1999). But what if the children of powerless parents were also temperamentally fearless or impulsive? We suspect that a more serious pattern of antisocial behavior may ensue, perhaps fueled by a weak sense of containment. Indeed, our findings raise important questions about the manner in which researchers study children's dispositional vulnerabilities. Discussions about child effects generally focus on characteristics (e.g., temperament, personality traits) thought to be biogenetic in origin (Lytton, 1990). Hyperactivity, inattentiveness, and impulsivity, as well as the tendency to be physiologically and emotionally underaroused, are known risk factors for later conduct problems (Frick, 1998; Hinshaw & Anderson, 1996). However, the precise origin of these variables and the specific mechanisms by which they affect children's development are not fully understood (Shaw, Bell, & Gilliom, 2000). Recent reports challenge the commonly held view that child effects are strictly biogenetic in nature and necessarily predate the occurrence of critical familial and psychosocial processes (e.g., Hastings, Zahn-Waxler, Robinson, Usher, & Bridges, 2000; Shaw et al., 2000). Child effects contributing to later externalizing problems are not always static entities, the impact of which are exerted uniformly over the course of development. Instead, child effects are often dynamic processes that change and evolve over time, partly as a function of recurring environmental transactions. We suspect that longitudinal and transactional relations among perceived containment, C/U traits, conduct problems, and parental discipline will be similarly complex. We would predict, for example, that a child's beliefs about containment could at times undergo significant reorganization. When this occurs, the influence that such beliefs have on parents' socialization efforts and on children's use of antisocial behavior could shift dramatically. Viewed from this broader perspective, the task of investigating so-called child effects

takes on the more demanding requirement of assessing changes in these variables over time and across varying socialization contexts.

#### *Implications for prevention and intervention*

The present findings resonate with conceptual models suggesting that a number of behavioral, cognitive, and affective variables conspire to maintain, if not overdetermine, antisocial behavior and its maladaptive outcomes (Hinshaw & Anderson, 1996; Loeber, 1990; Patterson et al., 1992). However, there are also practical implications that arise from our findings, assuming future studies support the conclusions we drew. For example, we found that mothers who are able to provide effective discipline in the context of an emotionally positive relationship had children who reported a stronger sense of containment. The idea that good parenting entails a combination of effective discipline and emotionally positive interactions is, of course, not new (Baumrind, 1967). However, researchers rarely consider the challenge of performing both parenting tasks, day in and day out, for a period that can easily span 20 years (Cavell, 2000; Cavell & Strand, 2002). Instead, setting limits on misbehavior and fostering a positive parent-child relationship are usually dealt with in a short-term, piecemeal fashion. The temporal and practical separation of these two tasks is particularly problematic for parents of aggressive children, who face the challenge of restricting children's use of coercion while not resorting to coercion themselves (Patterson et al., 1992). In families with hard-to-manage children and overly stressed parents, this challenge can lead to disciplinary failure and a worsening of behavior unless the parents can offset negatively charged disciplinary encounters with a preponderance of emotionally satisfying parent-child interactions (Dumas et al., 1995; Wahler, 1994). Accomplishing this goal will require an approach to parenting that places greater emphasis on managing parent-child relationships than on managing children's behavior (Cavell, 2000; Cavell & Strand, 2002; Kuczynski & Hildebrandt, 1997; Wahler, 1994).

Our findings also suggest that practitioners

who provide assistance to parents of aggressive children should consider the extent to which those children regard adults as having the capacity to set limits effectively and reliably. For children who lack a sense of containment, disciplinary techniques designed to counter misbehavior may be less effective than sustained, positive parent-child relationships that pull the children toward prosocial values. But what about high-risk children who still believe that adults are capable of setting firm limits? In line with previous recommendations (McMahon & Wells, 1998; Webster-Stratton & Herbert, 1994), our findings suggest that such children are likely to benefit from consistently applied, nonharsh parental discipline. However, if the goal is preventing the erosion of children's sense of containment, then parents may have to use a disciplinary approach that also preserves the affective quality of the parent-child relationship (Cavell, 2001; Cavell & Strand, 2002; Ducharme, Atkinson, & Poulton, 2000).

#### *Limitations and recommendations*

This study has several limitations. The findings are preliminary, and the modest effect sizes may not replicate in future studies with different samples. Moreover, the small size and scope of our sample limit the generalizations that can be made. Confidence in our results is strengthened by the use of multiple measures and multiple agents, but direct observation of child or parent behavior was not used. Because the study's design was cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, the dynamic relations between perceived containment and its correlates measured over time are currently unknown. Finally, none of the variables was experimentally manipulated, thereby limiting our ability to make causal inferences about the relation between perceived containment and other factors. Despite these limitations, the present findings justify continued efforts to investigate the extent to which children's internal representations of disciplinary encounters play a contributing role in the development and maintenance of antisocial behavior.

Future studies should examine further the

construct validity of the PCQ, including its factor structure, its potential correlates, and the developmental course of children's containment beliefs. Also needed are studies that shed greater light on the precise nature of PCQ scores. Certainly, the degree to which children's beliefs about containment vary significantly from one adult-child relationship to the next is a question that requires additional study. Also useful would be studies comparing children's self-reported beliefs about containment with the reports of their parents and

teachers and with direct observations of parents' disciplinary strategies and children's response to those strategies. Studies that examine the relation between children's containment beliefs and beliefs about the power they wield among same-age peers would also be interesting and potentially informative. Finally, studies that investigate the potential for, and benefit of, treatment-induced changes in containment beliefs could make significant contributions to this nascent area.

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**Appendix A***The Perceived Containment Questionnaire*


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 Mother or Mother Figure (Actual relationship: \_\_\_\_\_)
 

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|--|-----|----|
| 1. You really don't want to go to school today. Your mom says that you have to go any-<br>way. Can your mom make you go to school?   | Yes | No |
| 2. You are having fun bouncing a ball in the house. Your mom says to stop. Will you be<br>able to keep bouncing a ball in the house even though your mom says that you can't?  | Yes | No |
| 3. Your mom needs to leave the house and wants you to come with her because no one<br>else will be home with you. You want to stay home alone. Will you be able to stay at<br>home alone even though your mom says that you can't? | Yes | No |
| 4. You want to play with some friends outside. Your mom says you can't go. Can she<br>make you stay inside?  | Yes | No |
| 5. My mom can make me obey her even if I really don't want to.<br>Never like me    Sometimes like me    Usually like me    Always like me  |     |    |
| 6. I always do everything that my mom wants me to do.<br>Never like me    Sometimes like me    Usually like me    Always like me   |     |    |
| 7. I can do whatever I want even if my mom does not like it.<br>Never like me    Sometimes like me    Usually like me    Always like me  |     |    |
| 8. My mom tries to punish me but it does not work.<br>Never like me    Sometimes like me    Usually like me    Always like me  |     |    |
| 9. When my mom tells me to stop doing something, I usually stop.<br>Never like me    Sometimes like me    Usually like me    Always like me  |     |    |
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Teacher

- |   |     |    |
|---|-----|----|
| 1. You are playing at recess. The recess bell isn't working so your teacher tells the class<br>to come back in from recess. You want a little more time. Will you be able to play a<br>little longer even though your teacher says that you must come back in to the classroom?   | Yes | No |
| 2. You are out of your seat. Your teacher tells you to sit down. You don't want to sit<br>down. Can your teacher make you sit down?   | Yes | No |
| 3. Your teacher assigns some classwork that you hate. You start doing something else.<br>Your teacher sees that you are not working on the assignment and tells you to stop what<br>you are doing and to get out the assignment. Will you be able to keep doing what you<br>were doing instead of getting out the assignment? | Yes | No |
| 4. You are having fun talking with the kid next to you in class. Your teacher tells you to<br>stop talking. Can your teacher make you stop talking?   | Yes | No |
| 5. My teacher can make me obey her even if I really don't want to.<br>Never like me    Sometimes like me    Usually like me    Always like me   |     |    |
| 6. I always do everything my teacher wants me to do.<br>Never like me    Sometimes like me    Usually like me    Always like me   |     |    |
| 7. I can do whatever I want even if my teacher does not like it.<br>Never like me    Sometimes like me    Usually like me    Always like me   |     |    |
| 8. My teacher tries to punish me but it does not work.<br>Never like me    Sometimes like me    Usually like me    Always like me   |     |    |
| 9. When my teacher tells me to stop doing something, I usually stop.<br>Never like me    Sometimes like me    Usually like me    Always like me   |     |    |
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