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Understanding the Developmental Significance of Aggressive Television Shows on Preschoolers' Aggressive Behavior

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Introduction

- Preschool age is a time when the influence of television is salient and children are most affected by the content and duration of the TV they consume (Kostyrka-Allchome et al., 2017).
- Current children's television shows are filled with a mix of prosocial, aggressive, fantastical, and educational content (Taggart et al., 2019), and it is important to understand how different types of content affect children's behavior, especially during the influential preschool years.
- Aggression and prosocial behavior are age-salient socioemotional behaviors for preschoolers, and it is important to explore what factors influence these behaviors.
- Previous studies have found support for the relation between aggressive television and aggressive behavior (Coyne et al., 2016), but there is a dearth of literature that positions the relation in the context of the current landscape of children's television. There is also a lack of literature exploring connections between prosocial behavior and aggressive television.
- The study asked the following questions:
 - What is the relation, if any, between preschoolers watching aggressive television shows and aggressive behavior?
 - H1: Aggressive TV will be positively related to aggressive behavior, such that watching more aggressive television will correlate with higher aggressive behavior.
 - What is the relation, if any, between preschoolers watching aggressive television shows and prosocial behavior?
 - H2: Aggressive TV will be negatively related to prosocial behavior, such that watching less aggressive television will correlate with greater prosocial behavior.

Participants & Procedures

- 146 caregivers (53.4% male; 59% White, 26% Black, 13% Asian, 11% Latinx, 5.5% Native American or Alaskan Native, 1.4% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, .7% Middle Eastern) of children ages 3–7 ($M = 5.51$, $SD = 1.01$) completed an anonymous Qualtrics survey
- Caregivers listed their child's top three favorite TV shows and rated how much aggressive content they observed in each show.
- Caregivers rated their child's aggressive behavior using Dodge and Coie's (1987) measure of reactive and proactive aggression.
- Caregivers rated their child's prosocial behavior using the five-item Prosocial Scale from the Strengths and Difficulties questionnaire (Goodman, 1997, 2001).

Results

- There was a significant, positive correlation between caregivers' cumulative TV aggression ratings and overall aggressive behavior ($r = .32$, $p < .001$)
 - There was a significant, positive correlation between caregivers' cumulative TV aggression ratings and reactive aggressive behavior ($r = .28$, $p < .001$)
 - There was also a significant positive correlation between caregivers' cumulative TV aggression ratings and reactive aggressive behavior ($r = .31$, $p < .001$)
- There was a significant, negative correlation between caregivers' cumulative TV aggression ratings and prosocial behavior ($r = -.17$, $p < .05$)

Table 1. Most frequent responses of child's favorite TV shows

TV Show	N	% of participants
Paw Patrol	33	22.6%
Spongebob Squarepants	27	18.5%
Bluey	22	15.1%
PJ Masks	19	13.0%
Sesame Street	18	12.3%
Peppa Pig	15	10.3%
Mickey Mouse Clubhouse	14	9.6%
Dora the Explorer	12	8.2%
CocoMelon	9	6.2%
Gabby's Dollhouse	9	6.2%

Figure 1. Relation between caregivers' cumulative TV aggression ratings and aggressive behavior

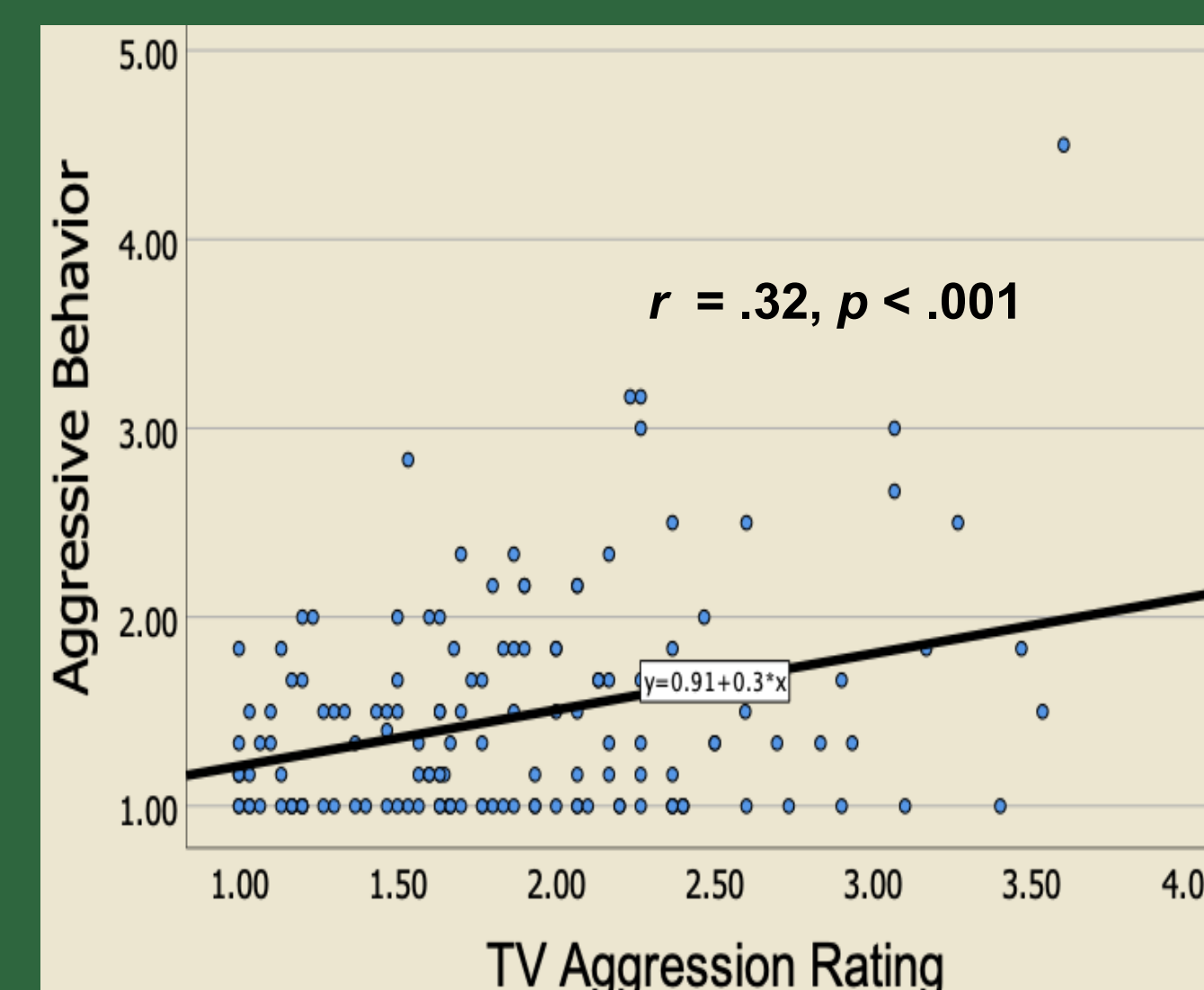
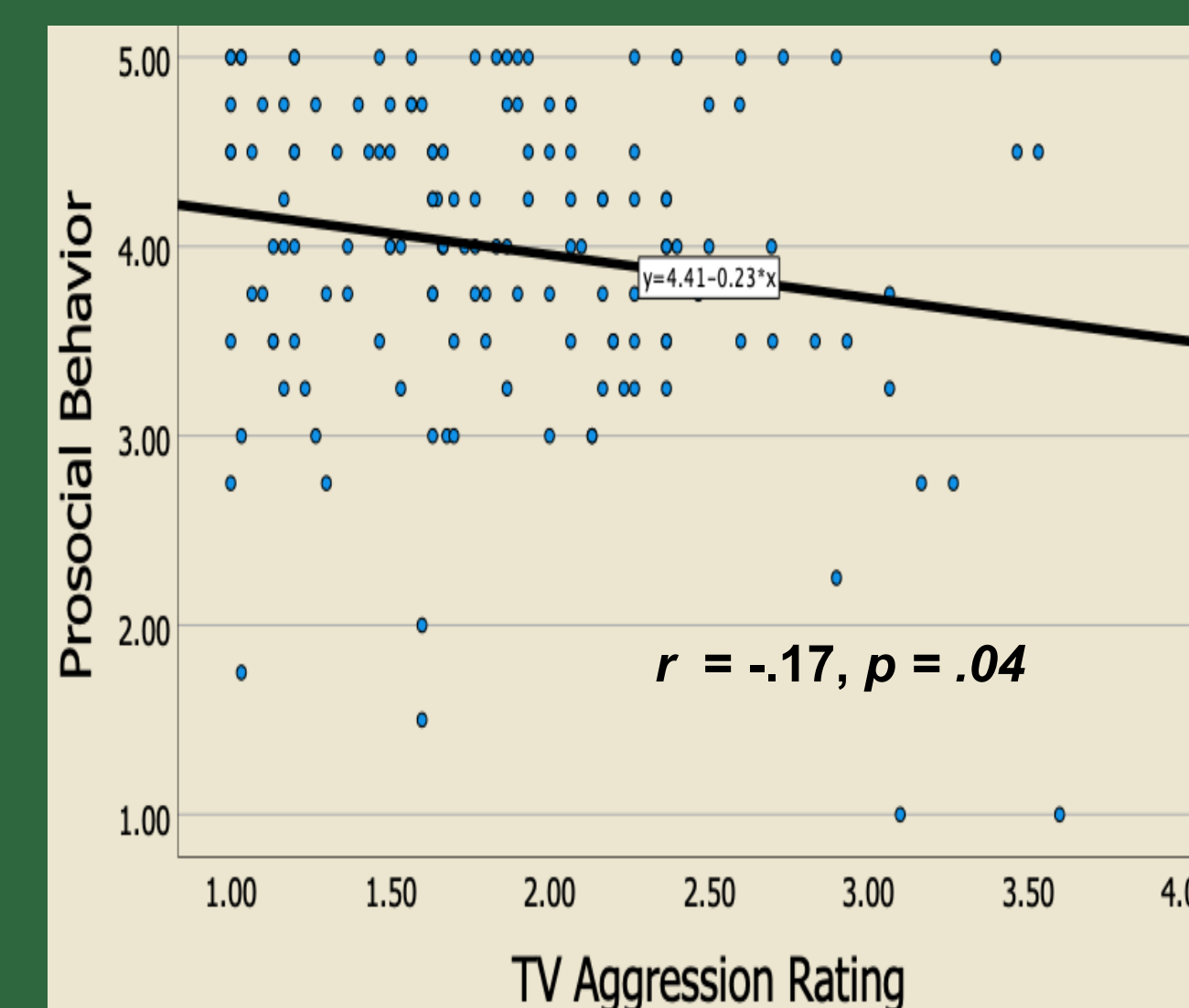


Figure 2. Relation between caregivers' cumulative TV aggression ratings and prosocial behavior



Discussion

- These findings show that higher aggressive television content predicts greater aggressive behavior, indicating that children may be learning aggression from TV and replicating it in their own behavior.
- These findings also show that higher aggressive content predicts lower prosocial behavior, and lower aggressive content predicts greater prosocial behavior. This signifies that aggressive television may be having a damaging effect on children's ability to act prosocial.
- These findings have implications for how caregivers approach television watching since aggression is a maladaptive behavior in most contexts.
- By using TV shows generated by caregivers, the study positions its findings in the context of current children's television, making them relevant for today's preschoolers.
- Limitations of the study include its correlational design and caregivers as the only source of information on their child's behavior.
- Future research should explore other factors related to television watching and aggression that could moderate the relation, such as caregiver television mediation.

Future Directions

- A follow-up study will be conducted wherein children will watch one of four TV shows, each with a different level of aggressive content, and then complete a laboratory measure of aggressive behavior.
- This will elucidate whether there is a direct causal effect between degree of aggressive TV content and children's aggressive behavior.
- This study will also introduce pretend play as a variable and compare the effects of television on aggressive behaviors and on aggressive play affect.

Key References

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Acknowledgments

This work was supported by a grant from the Steinbrecher fellowship.