

Children's Behavioral Regulation and Caregiver Co-Regulation in a Public Library: A Naturalistic Observation Study

Xi Tang

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada

Abstract

This study examines how young children and caregivers navigate behavioral expectations in a structured public setting. Using naturalistic field observation in a public library in Toronto, the study explores the interaction among children's developing behavioral regulation, caregiver co-regulation, and institutional norms. Observations suggested that older children and adolescents were generally able to remain seated, quiet, and focused with little visible adult support, whereas younger children more often displayed vocalization, movement, and attention-seeking behaviors that required caregiver guidance. Caregiver responses varied according to children's immediate needs: more active strategies, such as calm verbal guidance and behavioral redirection, were used when children's behavior became disruptive, while minimal responses occurred when children were already aligned with the setting's expectations. The findings further suggest that the library's norms of quietness and limited disruption shaped both how children's behavior became noticeable and how caregivers chose to respond. Overall, the study identifies behavioral regulation as a socially situated process shaped by developmental capacity, caregiver support, and the normative structure of public environments.

Keywords

Behavioral regulation, co-regulation, institutional norms, naturalistic observation, early childhood.