



Maternal Emotional Empathy and Emotional Awareness: Relation with Aggression in Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

The present study has been designed to investigate the relationship of maternal attributes such as emotional empathy and emotional awareness with adolescents' aggressive behavior towards others. Specifically, the study addresses three issues: 1) Does mothers' emotional empathy and emotional awareness separately predict aggression in their children? 2) Do the mothers' attributes of emotional empathy and emotional awareness together better predict aggression? 3) Does mothers' emotional empathy interact with gender of children to predict aggression? and, 4) Does mothers' emotional awareness interact with gender of children to predict aggression? The study was conducted on a sample of 115 adolescent boys and girls with an average age of 16.4, S.D. = 1.17. In addition, the study included 115 mothers of the same adolescents. Mean age for mothers was 41.6 years (S.D. = 7.1). Mothers reported on their personality characteristics of emotional empathy and emotional awareness, utilizing the Emotional Empathy Scale (EES) and Trait Emotional Awareness Scale (TEAS) respectively, whereas the adolescents were administered the Aggression Questionnaire (AQ) to assess their level of aggression. Results indicated predictive value of mothers' emotional awareness for inhibiting aggression in their children ($\beta = -.26, p < .01$). However, mother's emotional empathy neither separately nor in interaction with emotional awareness significantly predicted aggression. Moreover, mothers' emotional awareness was found to interact with adolescents' gender to inhibit aggression in children ($\beta = .27, p < .02$). Results showed that mothers' emotional awareness contributed to decreased risk for developing aggression in girl child. However, the interactive effect of mothers' emotional empathy and adolescents' gender did not predict aggression in children. The obtained pattern of findings will hold important implications for parent training and growthful relationships.

KEYWORDS: emotional empathy, emotional awareness, aggression, gender, mother

1. INTRODUCTION

Empathy is believed to motivate other-oriented behavior (Batson, 1991) [1]. The idea that empathy is a major determinant of prosocial orientation, and plays a critical role in forging human bonds of trust and reciprocity has been widely empirically accepted among psychologists (e.g., Eisenberg, Guthrie, Cumberland et al., 2002 [2]; Eisenberg, Zhou, & Koller, 2001 [3]; Sober & Wilson, 1998 [4]; Underwood & Moore, 1982 [5]). On the other hand, deficits in empathic capacity have been found to be linked with aggression and antisocial actions (Ashraf, 2004 [6]; Chandler, 1973 [7]; Feshbach, 1978 [8]; Gibbs, 1987 [9]; Ohbushi, Ohno, & Mukai, 1992 [10]; Mehrabian, 1997 [11]). Owing to the predictive value of empathy, psychologists have tried to understand the role of parent's empathic disposition in the development of their children's personality characteristics. It is reasonable to think that more empathic parents are better able to read their children's emotional cues and are motivated to be responsive and warm. Therefore, these conditions should facilitate positive development in children, and possibly inhibit aggressive tendencies. It is also argued that mother's capacity for accurate appraisal of her own emotions would be related with vicariously experiencing the feelings of another's emotional states (Ashraf, 2004). Therefore, the present study proposed that adolescent's tendency to engage in aggressive acts would vary as a function of dispositional differences in the level of mother's emotional empathy and emotional awareness. Furthermore, the relation of gender differences in adolescent's aggression and their relation with mother's emotional empathy and emotional awareness were also explored.

Empathy is generally defined as sharing another person's emotional state (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987 [12]). Some psychologists, however, focus mainly on the cognitive processes, analogous to cognitive role taking or perspective taking (e.g., Deutch & Madle, 1975 [13]; Hogan, 1969 [14]); others take it to mean a primarily affective process (e.g., Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998 [15]; Feshbach, 1978 [16]; Hoffman, 1984 [17]; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972 [18]). In the present study, empathy has been conceptualized as affective, because the cognitive role taking

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definition is the recognition of another's feelings, emotional responsiveness also includes vicariously experiencing of those feelings. Besides being characterized by its emotional component, it involves some cognition as well, which to most theorists, is a prerequisite for experiencing empathy (Batson, 1987; Feshbach, 1978).

2. The Relation of Parental Emotional Empathy with Child's Aggression. Parental empathy is theorized to have positive effects on the child. Conversely, lack of empathy, especially in the mother, is considered to be responsible for the disintegrated self and other forms of psychopathology in the child (Goldberg, 1978 [19]; Kohut, 1971 [20]). It is argued that a parent who is empathically aroused by their children's emotional states and needs are better able to understand their feelings. Thereby, giving a child the reassuring feeling of being emotionally connected. According to Feshbach (1987) when emotional experiences of the child are shared by the parent, it contributes to the formation of lasting bonds with the child. Such an emotional relationship between parent and child is expected to shape the emotional behavior and expectations of the child in his/her interaction with others. In a study of twin boys, Stern (1987) [21] found that the child whose emotions were not met with empathy, accepted, and reciprocated by the mother was more fearful and dependent in his interaction with others. Moreover, criminals whose life histories reflected emotional neglect and little opportunity for empathy, as they were moved from one foster home to another or raised in orphanage, were found to have committed the cruelest and most violent crimes. (Prentky, 1994) [22]. Thus, parental empathy might be regarded as crucial to the psychological development of the child. It is anticipated that parental empathy should foster positive psychological development in the child, and lack of empathy in a parent should be associated with development of maladaptive behavior patterns.

Social and Developmental psychologists who used empathy to refer to the tendency to be vicariously aroused by another person's affective state, believe that this affective arousal stimulates sympathetic concern for the other. According to some theorists (e.g., Feshbach, 1978; Hoffman, 1984), when an individual watches another's pain or distress, vicarious emotional responding enables him to experience similar distress. An observation of pain cues may induce negative emotional arousal in perpetrator of aggression. It is suggested that immediate proximal feedback provided by empathy, should discourage aggressive acts by making the aggressor aware of, and possibly sympathetic toward, the pain suffered by the victim. (Feshbach & Feshbach, 1982 [23]; Tremblay, et al., 1992 [24]). Thus, parents' sensitivity to their children's emotional cues might be internalized by the children and lead to children's empathic disposition and appropriate behavior in interaction with others.

Parental personality characteristics can be considered theoretically influential determinants of parenting because it affects parental behavior directly or indirectly. Mothers who are empathic are more likely to be sensitive to the feelings of their children, respond appropriately, better able to understand them and be less aggressive. Mothers' empathic caregiving have been positively related to their use of reasoning and expression of emotion in child-caused distress situations (Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, & King, 1979) [26]. Inversely related to empathy-related parental behavior is the use of strong physical punishment, particularly as manifested in child abuse. Abusive parents (who lack empathy) tend to engage in more negative, coercive interactions with their children (Burgess & Conger, 1978) [27]; respond less appropriately to their children (Fontana & Robinson, 1984) [28]; express more negative affect; and use more punitive strategies (Howes & Feshbach, 1986) [29]. Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that abusive parents, in comparison with empathic parents may be less sympathetically or vicariously aroused by their children's pain cues and negative emotional reactions.

Therefore, non empathic and abusive parent provide their children with little experience or opportunity to learn to identify and feel emotional cues and states of others, because their own feelings and needs are not responded to aptly. Thus, children who endure abuse may become hyperalert to the emotions of others and to cues that have signaled threat. In such cases, the abused child of a non empathic parent may show awareness of others' negative affect but express inappropriate social responses to them, for example, defensiveness, rejection or aggression as opposed to nurturant, positive social responses. Physically abused toddlers and preschoolers react to others' distress by threatening or attacking them (Main & George, 1985) [30]. This maybe because abusing parents do not provide models of appropriate behavioral and emotional responding (empathy) to others in need and are likely to use child rearing practices that do not promote empathic or prosocial responsiveness (Feshbach, 1987; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1979).

3. The Relation of Parental Emotional Awareness and Emotional Empathy with Child's Aggression. Since emotional empathy, by definition involves emotions, researchers have recently begun to examine its emotional dispositional variables. Among many variables—how one experiences one's emotions has been found to be theoretically and empirically linked with emotional empathy (Ashraf, 2004; Eisenberg, Fabes, Shepard, Murphy, Jones, & Guthrie, 1998; Mayer & Stevens, 1994 [31]; Salovey, Mayer, Goldman, Turvey, & Palfai, 1995 [32]). Salovey and Mayer (1990) [33] maintained that from an evolutionary point of view, it was important that people be able to perceive emotions in themselves, which in turn enabled them to experience the emotions of those around

them. Thus, empathy depends not only on one's ability to feel toward others, but general access to one's own feelings.

In the present study, emotional awareness has been referred to as people's tendency to attend to their moods and emotions, discriminate among them, and regulate emotion and emotion-related behaviors (Ashraf, 2004). It has been suggested that the way individuals experience and deal with their feelings has important behavioral outcomes. Eisenberg, Fabes, Murphy et al. (1994) believed that people who can maintain their emotional reactions within a moderate tolerable range are likely to experience sympathy, evoked by empathy inducing situations. On the other hand, people who become anxious or distressed in reaction to others negative emotions often avoid dealing with the distressing situations (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990) or may even respond aggressively (Radke-Yarrow & Zahn-Waxler, 1984) [34]. One might expect that individuals who are well practiced at attending to and regulating their emotions are more empathic, whereas those without ready access to their feelings maybe unaware of them and expected to be lacking in their capacity to empathize with others. As such emotional awareness can be expected to foster an individual's ability to emotionally empathize with others and be kind as opposed to be aggressive in his interpersonal relationships. Ashraf (2004) found individual differences in empathic responding to be linked with emotional awareness, particularly high attention to one's own feelings, clarity of feelings, and high regulation. Moreover, the study also found emotional awareness to be lacking in people who engage in hurtful and aggressive behaviors towards others. In this context, a parent's personal psychological disposition characterized by emotional awareness and emotional empathy is viewed as the most important determinant of promotion of growthful relationships in his/her offspring.

It is suggested that parents who are characterized by the ability to attend to their feelings and are able to regulate them would be better able to attend to their children's emotional needs. If the parent is unable to experience his/her feelings and consequently is insensitive to the child's feelings and desires, one can expect that children will experience considerable degree of frustration and feelings of not being understood. According to Feshbach (1987), non empathic parents are likely to have non empathic children. In the absence of empathic models, children themselves are less likely to learn to be sensitive to the feelings of others, less able to understand another perspective in conflict situations and behave more aggressively.

Starting from Freud (1925) [35], there have been many efforts to relate parental practices to child's behavior. The role of mother, in particular, is thought to be having crucial and possibly irreversible effects on the psychological development of her offspring. Keeping in view the significance of the mother's role, the present study focused on the mother's personality characteristics as major determinants of maladaptive behavior in the child. Deficits in emotional empathy and emotional awareness in a mother are thought to be linked with development of aggression in their children.

4. Research Aims. On the basis of theoretical considerations above it was proposed that mother's personality characteristics such as emotional awareness and emotional empathy combined may act as protective factors against the development of aggressive behavior in adolescent girls and boys. The study aimed to explore the following questions: 1) Does mothers' emotional empathy and emotional awareness separately predict aggression in their children? 2) Do the mothers' attributes of emotional empathy and emotional awareness together better predict aggression? 3) Does mothers' emotional empathy interact with gender of children to predict aggression? and, 4) Does mothers' emotional awareness interact with gender of children to predict aggression?

5. METHOD

5.1 Participants. Fifty one boy and sixty four girl (N = 115) students with an average age of 16.4, S.D. = 1.17 (ages ranging from 14 to 18 years) participated in the present study. They belonged to various educational institutes of Kahuta, such as Punjab College of Commerce and Kahuta Institute of Professional Studies. The participants from the natural sciences and social sciences were 75% and 28%, respectively. In addition, the study included 115 mothers of the same students. Mean age for mothers was 41.6 years (S.D. = 7.1). All mothers were educated. Families came from predominantly middle-class backgrounds.

5.2 Instruments. The details of the instruments employed in the present study are as follows.

5.2.1 Emotional Empathy Scale (EES). The EES, developed by Ashraf (2004), was used for the assessment of the trait of emotional empathy in adolescents. It is a 26-item self-report measure of the tendency to experience vicariously the (positive and negative emotional experiences of others. It measures individual differences in the trait of emotional empathy. The theoretical model of emotional empathy proposed by Mehrabian (1996) [36] was used as a basis for the development of the EES. Respondents use a 7-point scale, on which "1" represents "strong disagreement" and "7" represents "strong agreement" to indicate the extent to which each item described them. To

reduce response bias, 17 items were worded positively, and 9 items were worded negatively. The EES is intended for use with adolescents and general adult population. The norms for EES are as follows: Mean = 143; Standard Deviation = 20.

EES is a multidimensional measure of the trait of emotional empathy. The three subscales are (a) Tendency to be moved by others' positive and negative emotional experiences, (b) Emotional responsiveness, and (c) Susceptibility to emotional contagion. The alpha coefficient for EES is .85.

Evidence for the convergent validity of the EES has been demonstrated through its significant positive correlation of $r = .65$, $p < .000$ with the Balanced Emotional Empathy Scale (BEES) (Mehrabian, 1996). Discriminant-related validity studies showed that emotional empathy was positively related ($r = .48$, $p < .000$) with affiliative tendency, and trait emotional awareness ($r = .41$, $p < .000$), and negatively related with delinquency ($r = -.28$, $p < .001$).

5.22 Trait Emotional Awareness Scale (TEAS). The TEAS was developed by Ashraf (2004). It is a multifactor 25-item self-report scale, which indexes the degree of attention that individuals devote to their feelings, the clarity of their experience of these feelings, and their capacity to regulate feelings and emotion-related behavior. The development of the scale was guided by the theoretical model of trait meta-mood proposed by Salovey et al. (1995). It is a five-point Likert type scale, anchored by 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree.

The factor structure of the TEAS mapped onto three primary domains of attending to feelings, discriminating among feelings, and regulating them. The 25-item scale exhibited adequate alpha reliability of .76 and split half reliability coefficient of .72.

5.23 The Aggression Questionnaire (AQ). The AQ was developed by Buss and Perry (1992) [37]. The scale is the revised version of the original "Hostility Inventory" (Buss & Durkee, 1975) [38]. The scale contains 29 items divided by factor analyses into four correlated subscales: (a) Physical aggression, (b) Verbal aggression, (c) Anger, and (d) Hostility. The two aggression scales represent the behavioral component, and anger and hostility subscales represent the affective and the cognitive components, respectively. The alpha coefficient for the AQ has been reported as .89. For the present study, the Urdu translated version of the scale (Ashraf, 2004) was used.

5.3 Procedure. The adolescent boys and girls ($N = 115$) were administered the Urdu version of the Aggression Questionnaire (AQ). The students were approached in the form of a group in their classes. They were given clear instructions to go through each item very carefully and to give their responses by selecting that response category which most closely described them. The participants were also requested not to skip any item on the scale. In order to ensure honest and candid responses to the items of the questionnaire, the respondents were assured that their responses were important only for a psychological research, and would not be revealed to any of their teachers/authority figures. All participation was anonymous. Afterwards, they were given the set of questionnaires, consisting of the Emotional Empathy Scale (EES) and the Trait Emotional Awareness Scale (TEAS), to be filled out by their mothers. They were briefed about how to fill out the questionnaires. The questionnaires filled out by their mothers were collected from them on the next day.

In order to achieve the goals of the present study a series of analyses were conducted. As a preliminary step, descriptive statistics, means and standard deviations, and estimates of the internal consistency reliability of the instruments were obtained for the two samples. Zero order correlational analyses were performed to assess the relation among variables of the study. Following the correlation analyses, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were used to identify the relative contribution of the independent variables and their interactive effects on the effect variable.

6. RESULTS

6.1 Descriptive Analyses and Reliability Estimates of the Scales

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and reliability estimates for scores on the Emotional Empathy Scale (EES), Trait Emotional Awareness Scale (TEAS), and the Aggression Questionnaire (AQ). The alphas were adequate and support the instruments' use in the present study.

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Alpha Coefficients of the EES, TEAS, and AQ (N=115)

Scales	No. of Items	M	SD	Alpha Coefficients
Emotional Empathy Scale (EES)	26	134.6	14.9	.84
Trait Emotional Awareness Scale (TEAS)	25	92.2	10.1	.75
Aggression Questionnaire (AQ)	29	80.9	17.3	.80

6.2 Zero-Order Correlations Between Mother's Emotional Empathy and Trait Emotional Awareness with Adolescent's Aggression

As a preliminary step the relationship between mother's emotional empathy and trait emotional awareness with adolescent's aggression were examined with correlational analyses. As can be seen in Table 2, a fairly clear pattern of results emerged. Mother's emotional empathy and emotional awareness were negatively associated in the expected direction with their children's aggression. However, an examination of relation of male and female scores on aggression showed that boy's level of aggression was negatively but not significantly related with either of their mother's emotional empathy or emotional awareness. However, mother's emotional empathy and emotional awareness were strongly and positively correlated with aggression in girls. The magnitude of negative correlation between mother's trait emotional awareness and girl's aggression was the strongest, implying that trait emotional awareness plays a significant role in inhibiting aggressive behavior in girls.

Table 2: Zero-Order Correlations among Mother's Emotional Empathy and Emotional Awareness and Adolescent's Aggression (N=115)

Mother Attributes	Adolescent's Aggression		
	Female	Male	Total
Mother's Emotional Empathy	-.32***	-.03	-.25***
Mother's Trait Emotional Awareness	-.51***	-.04	-.32***

***p<.000

6.3 Hierarchical Multiple Regression

In the next set of analyses, hierarchical multiple regression analyses (Elwan, A. A., Elwan, S. M. A., & Ghomed, 2013) [39] were computed in order to achieve the aims of the study. Results are presented in Table 3. In the first step, predictability of adolescents' aggression from their mothers' traits of emotional awareness and emotional empathy were assessed. According to the results, mothers' emotional awareness separately significantly predicted aggression in adolescents ($\beta = -.26$, $p < .01$). Contrary to expectations, mothers' emotional empathy did not achieve significance for adolescents' aggression. The interactive effect of mothers' trait emotional awareness and emotional empathy on adolescents' aggression was also found to be not significant. Based on the results of correlational analyses, the prediction of adolescents' aggression from interaction between mothers' emotional awareness and children's gender was assessed. Results showed that mothers' emotional awareness in combination with gender of the child significantly predicted aggression in the child ($\beta = .26$, $p < .01$). As can also be seen from the results, the predictive power was added to the model by the addition of interaction between mother's emotional awareness and gender in step 3. The percent of variability accounted for went up from 13% to 20%--quite a lot of increase. Thus, suggesting that the effect of mother's emotional awareness depends on adolescents' gender in inhibiting adolescents' aggression. Lastly, the interactive effect of mothers' level of emotional empathy and children gender was assessed, which was found to not significantly predict aggression in adolescents.

Table 3: Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Adolescents' Aggression from Mothers' Emotional Awareness and Emotional Empathy (Standardized Beta Coefficients) (N= 115)

Model	Aggression		
	β	R ²	F-Value
Step 1			
Trait Emotional Awareness	-.26**	.11	7.4
Emotional Empathy	-.12		p<.001
Step 2			
Trait Emotional Awareness X Emotional Empathy	-1.6	.13	5.7
			p<.001
Step 3			
Trait Emotional Awareness X Gender	.27*	.20	7.16
			p<.000
Step 4			
Emotional Empathy X Gender	-.99	.21	6.0
			p<.000

*p<.02, **p<.01

The interactive effect of mothers' emotional awareness and emotional empathy on adolescents aggressive behavior is also evidenced from the Figure 1 given below.

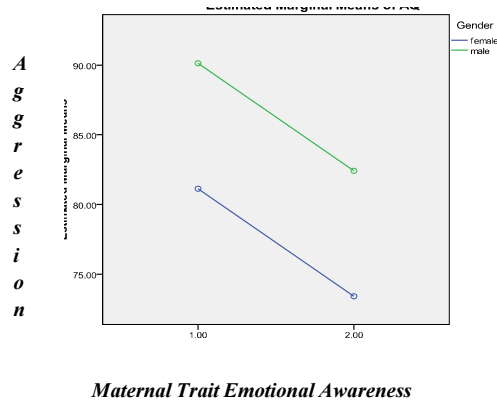


Figure 1: Interaction between Maternal Trait Emotional Awareness and Gender of Adolescents

7. Discussion. The focus of the present study was to determine the role of mothers' personality characteristics such as emotional empathy and emotional awareness as predictors implicated in the inhibition of aggression in their adolescent children. Parents who are not only aware of their own feelings but are also sensitive to the emotional experiences and needs of their children are expected to foster positive social development in their children—one that precludes hurtful behavior towards others. Therefore, the present study proposed that individual differences in children's tendency to engage in aggressive behaviors would vary as a function of dispositional differences in the typical level of mothers' emotional empathy and emotional awareness.

Lessons in emotional skills begin with good parent-child interaction. However, children who receive little empathic care and responsiveness miss out the chapter from their life, of learning to identify, label, respect or even "feel" their own feelings (Asadullah, 2014 [40]; Muhammad, & Rasool, 2014 [41]). Consequently, they tend to respond to others feelings with insensitivity and indifference. It has also been found that abused children, of parents who display excessive negative emotions in their interactions with their children, tend to be hyper vigilant to other people's emotional cues. Due to severe psychological limitation of their parents, these children learn incorrect lessons about emotions. They might have the gift to recognize feelings in others, but tend to respond inappropriately, that is, with rejection, defensiveness, and even aggression, instead of offering empathic responsiveness. In the present study, consistent with expectations, mothers' emotional empathy was found to be negatively and significantly related with their children's aggression ($r = -.25, p < .000$). Moreover, emotional awareness in mothers was also found to be significantly and negatively related with their children's tendency towards aggression ($r = -.32, p < .000$), suggesting that mothers who attend to their feelings, experience them clearly and try to regulate them tend to have children who refrain from engaging in aggressive acts. However, an examination of gender differences in aggression revealed that mothers' emotional empathy and emotional awareness were significantly and negatively related with girl's level of aggression. In contrast, correlations for boys were not significant. Thus, implying that emotional empathy and emotional awareness in a mother would inhibit aggression in her girl child.

Next, the main effects of mothers' emotional empathy and emotional awareness on the aggressive level of their children was assessed, using the hierarchical regression analyses. Results revealed that only the mothers' tendency to clearly appraise her own feelings and regulate them was found to significantly predict aggression in her children ($\beta = -.26, p < .01$). It is argued that mother who are emotionally aware, respond to their children's feelings, especially negative expressions of pain, sadness, and distress, in a balanced way by not letting themselves become overly anxious or sink into self-focused rumination. Whereas, attention and clarity serve one to feel one's own feelings, regulation operates to keep that emotional arousal under one's control. Therefore, it might be suggested that a predisposition toward emotional awareness enhances the possibility of people attending to others' needs with compassion and resist the urge to strike out or be aggressive. Emotional awareness, therefore, enables a mother to respond with appropriate emotional arousal to her children's' emotional experiences. Too little arousal could create indifference and distance, whereas, out of control emotions could lead to anxiety, depression, and extreme impulsive behaviors such as aggression. Thus, emotionally aware mothers' serve as calmer and compassionate models for their children to learn appropriate forms of responding from, and thereby inhibit aggression in them. Surprisingly, the main effect of mothers' emotional empathy on their children's' aggression was not significant. Perhaps, mothers' emotional empathy needs to be translated into parenting practices/behavior, which could then play a role in inhibiting aggression in their children.

In order to explore if mothers' traits of emotional empathy and emotional awareness together better predict aggression in children, their interactive effect was examined. The interactive effect of mothers' emotional awareness and emotional empathy could not gain significance for adolescent children's level of aggression. Thus, implying that the causal effect of mothers' emotional awareness and emotional empathy are not interdependent in inhibiting aggression in children. However, it was found that mothers' emotional awareness significantly interacted with the gender of the child to inhibit aggression ($\beta = .27, p < .02$). It was also found that mothers' emotional awareness tend to protect girls as compared to boys in the development of aggression (Figure 1). Because mothers are usually closer to the girl child, their personality characteristics are more important in influencing the behavior of the girls. Results also indicated that the interaction between mothers' emotional empathy and gender of the child did not significantly predict aggression in children.

We believe that our results contribute to our understanding of possible protective factor in the development of aggression in adolescent children. It is suggested that an enhanced capacity of emotional awareness in mothers is likely to inhibit aggression in children.

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