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Title	The relationship between different parenting techniques and the social adjustment of adolescents
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Source	<i>MERA-ERA Joint Conference, Malacca, Malaysia, 1-3 December 1999</i>

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# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DIFFERENT PARENTING TECHNIQUES AND THE SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT OF ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract: This paper presents findings of a study that was undertaken to examine the relationship between different parenting techniques and the social adjustment of adolescents who are between the ages of 14 and 16. Using a General Information Questionnaire and an adapted version of John Buri's Parental Authority Questionnaire, the study yielded results obtained from 2 different groups of adolescents. One group comprised of 224 students from two secondary schools in Singapore, while the other was made up of 135 adolescents from three residential homes for juvenile delinquents. Findings of the study revealed significant differences between the types of parenting techniques employed by the parents of the two different adolescent groups. The non-delinquents yielded scores which showed that their parents were more authoritative in their discipline techniques whereas the delinquents' data indicated that their parents were more permissive and neglectful in their parenting. Gender differences were found in the authoritarian parenting sub-scale between the male and female adolescents. The two groups also differed significantly in terms of their home background, parents' educational levels, occupational type and the types of offences they commit. In addition, the amount of interaction between parent and child, monitoring and supervision, also differed significantly between the two sample groups.

## **Introduction**

In recent years there has been increased coverage by the mass media with regards to the number of offences committed by young persons in Singapore and the majority of these young offenders are adolescent students from schools. For example, in the year 1984, police statistics showed that only 983 juveniles were arrested for criminal activities. However, more recent statistics showed that the number of juvenile offenders arrested in 1998 increased to 2 242 cases (Chua, 1999). Such a trend has captured the attention of the judicial authorities as well as the public. The various relevant government bodies have become rather concerned over such a rising trend in delinquency and greater efforts have been put into research on juvenile delinquency.

Two such studies were conducted by a committee which formed part of the Inter-Ministry Committee on Dysfunctional Families, Juvenile Delinquency and Drug Abuse. The findings of these 2 studies revealed that majority of the parents of these misbehaving children were either divorced or separate, leaving a single parent to look after the basic needs of the family as well as the psychological needs of a growing child. The growing child was often neglected, resulting in the single parent being unaware of the whereabouts of the child or the kind of company he/she kept. The committee also reported that in general, the parents of these young persons were rather lax in their supervision of their offspring, allowing the child to do whatever he/she pleased, with no specific set of rules to guide him/her (MCD, 1995).

## **Social Control Theory**

The Social Control theory of Travis Hirschi is a theory that has evolved from the traditional Control Theory. The latter states that an adolescent will tend to engage in delinquent behaviour if there are no restrictive measures present to discourage him from doing so. This is because control theorists

believe that juveniles commit delinquent acts because some controlling force is absent or defective in the juveniles' lives (Shoemaker, 1984). The theory further states that as a result of the absence or defectiveness in the restraints, delinquency occurs. Earlier versions of the control theory include Albert J. Reiss's theory of personal and social control and F. Ivan Nye's family-focused theory of social control (Reiss, 1951).

However, in recent years, with additional research studies in this area, a theory which links delinquency with the quality of the bond that an adolescent has with his parents in the earlier years of his life, was developed out of the traditional Control Theory (Bartollas, 1997). This is known as the Social Control Theory which states that basically, there are four types of social bonds that bring about socialisation and conformity among adolescents. The first bond, which is attachment, refers to the type of bonding between the adolescent and his parents or school. The theory explains that an adolescent is less likely to get involved in acts of deviance if he has built up strong social bonds with his family and school. In the absence of these social bonds, the adolescent has a greater tendency towards delinquency (Hirschi, 1969). Optimal bonding between parent and child takes place when the parents show great concern and care for the welfare of the child and at the same time, employ non-punitive discipline measures to check his behaviour. Research has shown that bonding between parent and child plays an important role for the healthy development of a child (Canetti *et al*, 1997). This is because the attachment between parent and child has been found to be negatively correlated with aggressive or non-aggressive type of antisocial behaviour within a child (Marcus & Betzer, 1996). A secure attachment to the parents is important, as the theory views it, for the child to identify and thus acquire parental and societal values necessary for later adjustment to work and with the people around him (Elliot, Huizinga & Ageton, 1985).

In addition, because of the social bonds that the adolescent has developed with his parents, he would have internalised the appropriate moral values from his parents which will serve as sifting devices for him in times of temptation and in the face of adversity. Research has shown that they are more likely to conform to societal norms and are therefore better adjusted socially. In general, these adolescents have a positive feeling of well-being and they feel strongly supported by their families (Canetti *et al*, 1997). The parents also serve as role models in their lives, being held in high regard. Thus knowing that their parents disapprove of delinquent behaviours, the potential loss of parental approval and affection is sufficient to deter these adolescents from getting involved in delinquents acts. Therefore the stronger the bond is between the parent and the child, the stronger the influence of the parent will be (Buysse, 1997). Unconsciously, these adolescents thus tend to seek out non-delinquent activities or friends who shun deviant acts. Also because of the close bonding, their parents are often aware of the kind of company they are in touch with, and indirectly exert an influence on their behaviour (Warr, 1993).

Commitment is the second type of social bond that motivates the adolescent to conform to social norms. One of the needs that every average adolescent has, is the need to be accepted or even well-liked by others around him, including his parents, teachers and peers. Hirschi postulated that if an adolescent has expended a great deal of effort and time in building up a positive image among these groups of people, he is less likely to be enticed into committing criminal or deviant acts. This is because he fears that he might jeopardise the affirmative impression that others have, of him (Bartollas, 1997).

The third bond, which is quite closely linked to the idea of commitment, is the notion of involvement. Hirschi states that if an adolescent participates actively in home, school or community-related activities, he is less likely to engage in delinquency. The theory claims that by getting adolescents involved in pro-social activities, it helps to prevent them from engaging in deviant acts (Hirschi, 1969).

The fourth and final social bond put forward by the Social Control Theory is that of belief, which represents the adolescent's acceptance and respect for the society's laws and norms. This also includes the adolescent's respect for the rules of the social institution he comes from, and the people in authority who enforce those rules. According to Hirschi, the adolescent's respect for the laws of society is derived from the adolescent's intimate relations with people around him, especially his parents. As mentioned earlier, an adolescent who has strong attachment bonds with his parents conforms to societal norms better, and he also believes that "the rules of society are binding on one's conduct" (Hirschi, 1969).

### **Parenting Techniques**

For this study, 4 types of parenting styles according to Baumrind, namely the authoritative, authoritarian, indifferent and permissive parent will be used to examine the type of parenting styles employed by the parents of the adolescents.

The *authoritative* parent is one who communicates a consistent set of familial rules to the child right from the time when he is able to comprehend and appreciate what behaviours are acceptable and what are not. The child is also given a certain level of autonomy in adjusting these rules as he matures. Opportunities are also provided for the child to exercise his capacity to reason and his opinions about matters pertaining to the family are encouraged. By his words and actions, the authoritative parent also makes apparent to his child that he lives in a *shared world and that there are preferred solutions* and ways to solve certain types of problems faced in this world (Coopersmith, 1967). Independence with mature behaviour and unimpeded communication between parent and child are also some of the characteristics that are present in a family which practises authoritative parenting.

On the other hand, the *permissive* parent is one who does not attempt to impose any form of rule system or standards upon his offspring. He allows the child to develop the "do as I please" attitude and behaviour, but avails himself if his opinions are sought. The permissive parent is usually very accepting of the child's behaviour whatever it may be, and does not endeavour to instil into him the norms of the society. No accountability of the child's behaviour is expected. Research has shown that these children were often found to engage themselves in certain types of deviant behaviours which include substance abuse and behavioural misconduct in school (Lamborn et al, 1991).

Contrary to the permissive parenting technique mentioned above, the *authoritarian* parent disciplines his offspring in a highly punitive way. He imposes a very firm set of rules that are to be observed with absolute reverence and obedience by the child. In addition, the child is also discouraged from questioning the truthfulness and rationale of decisions that have been made by the parents who are seen as persons with authority and power. The child is also made aware that any attempt to depart from the existing set of established norms or rules will warrant a corresponding punishment from the parents (Bartol & Bartol, 1989).

The fourth type of parenting technique mentioned in this study is the *neglectful* parenting technique. As the name suggests, these parents are totally and possibly oblivious to the well-being and activities of their own offspring. These parents are considered neglectful as they often fail to render the necessary supervisory directions and attention to their children. There is also no set of rules or standards being established by the parents. They are usually unaware of their adolescent's activities or whereabouts. In other words, it is up to the adolescent to experiment on his own, trying to establish some form of standards or rules for himself (Santrock, 1993).

## Method

The sample for this study comprised of two different groups: one making up of 14 year-old adolescents who were from two different local secondary schools and the other made up of 14 to 16 year-old adolescents from the three local detention homes for juveniles. Due to the already existing age-range distribution of adolescents at these centres, the researcher was unable to obtain an adequate number of 14 year-old juveniles to match the corresponding number of 14 year-olds from the schools.

The data for the study was collected in terms of the responses made by the adolescents from the two groups to a questionnaire. The questionnaire was made up of two parts: a general information questionnaire which was used to collect data on the adolescent's family background, parents' occupations and the type of offences/deviant behaviours that they had committed for the past 12 months prior to answering the questionnaire. The second part of the questionnaire is an adapted version of the Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ) by John Buri, which was used to determine the type of parental authority or discipline practices, from the adolescent's point of view. Specific questions which characterise the parents' monitoring patterns and the amount of supervision or interaction with their parents, were also scored.

Descriptive statistics, ANOVA and graphs were some of the statistical techniques were used to analyse the data collected. A pilot study was also conducted with a group of pupils from a third school to assess the difficulty level of the language used and to ensure that the statements to the questionnaire were linguistically comprehensible.

## Findings and Discussion

### *Home Background:*

Majority of the subjects from the non-delinquent group (> 90%) come from homes where both natural parents live in the same dwelling as them. This stands in sharp contrast with the delinquent group where almost half of the subjects (40%) come from homes where there is only one parent or none of the parents live in the same dwelling. Further analysis of the data showed that one third of the delinquent girls come from homes where there are no natural parents living with them. In the delinquent boys' homes where both parents live in the same dwelling, half of these are step parents.

### *Parents' Educational Levels:*

All the parents of the non-delinquent group have attained at least secondary education as compared with the delinquent group, where more than half of their parents have only achieved primary education. However, there were no significant gender differences found within either sample group.

### *Parents' Occupational Types:*

For the non-delinquent group, the data obtained showed that more than 75% of their fathers held white-collared or skilled jobs, as compared with the adolescents from the delinquent group, where about 60% of their fathers held semi-skilled or unskilled jobs. Although most of the mothers of the non-delinquent group have attained rather high levels of education, most of them had chosen to be full-time housewives, as compared with more than half the mothers of the delinquent group in the workforce doing semi-skilled or unskilled jobs.

*Types of Offences Committed:*

The delinquent group has generally scored higher percentages for every kind of offence stated in the General Information Questionnaire as compared with the frequency and type of offences committed by the non-delinquents. Two types of deviant acts that were found to be present only in the delinquent sample were the offences of rioting (21.3%) and drug-taking (20.9%). In terms of gender differences, the boys in both samples scored higher percentages in the commitment of offences, than the girls within their own sample group.

*Discipline/Monitoring/Supervision Patterns*

The results obtained from the responses to the questions pertaining to their parents' discipline/monitoring/supervision patterns showed that there is a significant difference in the type of monitoring patterns and the amount of interaction and supervision received, between the non-delinquent and the delinquent groups. The results showed that for either gender parent, the adolescents from the non-delinquent group had received significantly greater amount of monitoring, interaction and supervision from their parents than their fellow adolescents from the juvenile homes. This finding is evident of the strong social bonds that Hirschi mentioned in his social control theory, where interaction between the authoritative parent and the non-delinquent child is high. With good monitoring and supervisory measures, these authoritative parents are also aware of the kind of friends their child has. Conversely, the parents of the delinquent group have not built up strong social bonds with their child due to poor or absent monitoring measures. In the absence of parental interaction and good supervisory measures, the parents are therefore unable to build any strong attachments nor exert influence on the child in a positively effective way.

*Parenting Techniques:*

A significant difference was found among the parenting sub-scale scores of the two samples in this study. The non-delinquent group obtained a significantly higher score in the authoritative parenting sub-scale (17.308 vs 15.20;  $F$ -ratio = 22.971 at the significant level of 0.05) than the delinquent group. This finding reinforced the fact that children of authoritative parents are better adjusted to the environment around him and less likely to get involved in deviant activities. This is because, according to the social control theory, non-punitive discipline measures together with great support and affection from parents would have helped in the establishment of strong social bonds between the adolescents and their parents. This, in turn, help prevent the adolescents from getting involved in activities of deviance. In addition, these adolescents are also more competent in achieving the goals that they have set out to meet. With the independence accorded by their authoritative parents since their early years, these adolescents usually have a good level of self-esteem, displaying great confidence in whatever task they embark on.

On the other hand, the delinquent group has scored significantly higher scores for the other 3 parenting sub-scales, especially in the Neglectful Parenting sub-scale (18.474 vs 15.531;  $F$ -ratio=50.711 at the significant level of 0.05). These adolescents of neglectful parents are often not as well adjusted to the environment around them as their peers in the other group. Due to the absence of consistent rules since their early years, these adolescents often faced problems in adhering to norms or rules laid down by the school or the respective authority, like their teachers. They also demonstrate problematic behaviours in school such as being disruptive in class. At times, they might face problems interacting with their peers as well. They also tend to be involved in more serious acts of delinquency such as gang fights, robberies and homicides (Santrock, 1993). The social bonding between parent and child is probably weak or in some cases, absent. This is because

in such families, according to research, care and concern for the welfare of the child which form the basis of bonding in the social control theory, are missing from the parents (Canetti et al, 1997).

Looking specifically at the two different genders, the data showed that in terms of the authoritative parenting sub-scale, the girls from the non-delinquent group had scored significantly higher mean scores (17.096 vs 14.833, F-ratio=15.362 at the significant level of 0.05) while the girls from the delinquent group obtained higher mean scores in the permissive and neglectful parenting sub-scales (17.611 vs 15.916, F-ratio=5.939) The girls from the two groups also differed significantly in their mean scores for the authoritarian parenting sub-scale of their fathers. However no similar significant difference was found in terms of their perceptions of their mothers' parenting style.

Similarly, the boys from the non-delinquent group had also obtained a significantly higher mean score in the authoritative parenting sub-scale as compared with their counterparts from the delinquent group who scored significantly higher means in the permissive and neglectful parenting sub-scales. However, unlike the girls, the mean scores of the authoritarian sub-scale between the two groups of boys were not significantly different for either gender parent. Such a finding could be attributed to cultural practices. In the Asian context, parents are more likely to be harsher in their dealings with their sons. Unlike the girls who are being regarded as the gentler gender, the boys are ascribed with higher expectations from the parents who are also likely to be stricter in applying disciplinary measures on their sons.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study have provided important implications with regards to the relationship between the different types of parenting techniques used by the parents and the behavioural outcome of an adolescent. It is quite apparent that parents and their nurturing practices, do play a major role in affecting the social adjustment of an adolescent. Parental supervision and interaction, and regular monitoring have been shown to help reduce the risk of adolescents getting into acts of mischief and deviance. In view of this major role that parents play, it is imperative that some kind of education pertaining to parenting of adolescents is made available to parents, especially to those with problematic teenage children. These parents need to be educated with the necessary knowledge of adolescent development and its respective characteristics, to help them cope with the differing needs of a growing adolescent child. This points to the need of forging a strong parent-teacher partnership and that the school should play a role in parent education.

One such measure to help these parents was initiated by the Pastoral Care and Career Guidance (PCCG) Branch of the Ministry of Education recently. The PCCG came up with some guidelines for schools on how to encourage parents to get more actively involved in the educational process of their children. These guidelines, also known as the Home-School Links Approach, are made up of specified graded steps in which the school could help foster closer links with parents with the objective of enhancing the students' learning and developmental process. By urging the parents to take on a more active role in school, it is hoped that they will not only encourage their children in excelling academically, but to help the latter acquire positive attitudes and pro-social behaviours as well (MOE, 1999).

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