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Parenting Behaviours and Adolescents' Psychosocial Adjustment

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Abstract

The paper presents the results of an extensive study with 748 Singapore adolescents on their perceptions of their parents' child-rearing behaviours and the relationship to the adolescents' psychosocial adjustment. The study looked at three key dimensions of fathers' and mothers' parenting behaviours: warmth, control and communication, as well as important areas of adolescent psychosocial well being: personal self-concept, emotional well being, autonomy development, and social efficacy. The findings revealed that adolescents perceived mothers to be the more nurturant and supportive parent. Correlational analysis indicated that fathers' and mothers' parenting behaviours were significantly linked to all measures of psychosocial adjustment, with stronger associations with mother's parenting behaviours. The differential outcomes reflect the different types of relationship that adolescents have with their fathers and mothers.

INTRODUCTION

Two dimensions of parenting behaviours - support/responsiveness (warmth, reciprocity, and attachment) and control (coerciveness, confrontation, monitoring, supervision, consistent discipline and corporal punishment) have been repeatedly identified in parent-child research as important in accounting for parents' influences on children (references). Parental warmth is found to be highly facilitative in the development of many desirable characteristics of

adolescents, including high self-esteem, cognitive development, and general psychological adjustment (Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Rollins & Thomas, 1979), whereas a lack of parental social support and affection is found to impede the development of feelings of security, trust, and positive orientation toward others (Bowlby, 1969). Parental control is also linked to adolescent functioning though much more weakly than parental warmth (Thomas, Gecas, Weigert, & Rooney, 1974). Baumrind (1971) noted that the degree and kind of control exercised by parents are related to many and subtle differences among children. Inadequate supervision and a low level of parent-involvement are important contributions to poor adjustment in elementary school-aged and young adolescent boys (Capaldi & Patterson, 1991). Equally, too, controlling families may also put children at risk from peer pressures (Fuligni & Eccles, 1993). In contrast, autonomy support is positively associated with outcomes such as self-regulation, school motivation and social development (Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989; Yee & Flanagan, 1985).

Crouter and colleagues (1990) however, argued that at any point in the life span of a child there are likely to be optimal levels of parental monitoring, depending on the child's circumstance. This suggests that even positive forms of control such as parental monitoring may not be equally effective at different periods in a child's life. Yet another factor that has been identified as critical in the adolescent's development is the quality of intrafamilial communication. Adequate parental communication is positively correlated with the individual and social adjustment of the adolescent and negatively correlated with deviant or delinquent attitudes, and drug abuse (e.g. Barnes & Farrell, 1992; Farrell & Barnes, 1993, Sorosiak, Thomas & Balet, 1976).

Findings on parent-adolescent relationships have been drawn predominantly from Western sample. Only recently have variations in ideologies and goals regarding childbearing in different ethnic groups, as well as resultant socialization strategies and family interaction patterns been the subject of considerable discussion (Coll, 1990, Ogbu, 1981). There are some recent studies on Asian cultures, but these tend to focus on Chinese mothers' parenting practices in American contexts (Chao, 1994; Gorman, 1998) and their impact on school achievement (e.g. Chen & Utal, 1988). There has been no study comparing fathers' and mothers' parenting behaviours and how these are related to the psychological well being of the adolescents. This study focused on parenting behaviours on three dimension: warmth, control and communication -and how adolescents' perception of fathers' and mothers' specific parenting behaviours are linked to key psychosocial outcomes.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 748 post-secondary students drawn from the initial sample of 1008 adolescents. Ages of the sample participants ranged from 16 to 19 years, with a mean age of 17.8.

Measures

Subjects completed a questionnaire in which they describe their relationship with their fathers and mothers separately. Parenting behaviours were measured by: (1) parental warmth, (2) parental control, (3) parental communication with adolescents. Parental warmth scale measured adolescents' perception of the extent to which they experience their father/mother as loving, intimate and expressive of affection in words and actions, as well as the extent adolescents' perception of father/mother as providing emotional and resource support, and their involvement in their everyday life.

The parental control scales measure the specific means through which parents influence adolescent outcomes. Negative parenting was measured by three subscales: parental strictness, parental inconsistency, coercive control and psychological control. Positive parenting was assessed by autonomy support and induction method.

Parent-adolescent communication was measured by openness in communication with father/mother and the quality of affect in the parent-child communication.

Psychological well being was indexed by personal self-concept, emotional well being, and personal autonomy, while social efficacy measures adolescents' perceptions of their ability to relate to peers and the ability to relate to adults.

To examine the extent of differences in adolescents' perception of their relationship with father and mother, t-tests

were performed. Pearson Correlation coefficients were calculated to investigate the relationship between parenting behaviour and adolescent adjustment variables. Mother- and father-adolescent relationships were studied separately because research has shown that relationships with mothers and fathers may be differentially associated with adolescent adjustment (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & Connor, 1994; Bell & Bell, 1983).

RESULTS

Perceptions of Parenting Behaviours

T-test results revealed that adolescents perceived mothers as more affectionate and supportive than fathers. Mothers were more autonomy granting and more likely to use induction method of control involving explanation and reasoning. They were also more consistent in rule enforcement. At the same time, mothers were seen as the stricter parent in that they were more restrictive and vigilant in their monitoring. They rated significantly higher on psychological control. However, there was no significant difference between fathers and mothers on coercive discipline although the mean score for fathers was higher than for mothers. On communication, mothers enjoyed greater openness in interaction with their adolescent children.

Table 1 Mothers' and Fathers' Parenting Behaviors (N=748)

	Mother		Father		T Value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Warmth/involvement	39.96	(4.88)	36.31	(7.74)	-13.35**
Strictness	11.64	(2.78)	10.74	(2.96)	-8.14**
Autonomy Support	13.94	(2.48)	13.38	(2.60)	-5.92**
Inconsistency	3.27	(1.89)	3.38	(1.24)	2.34*
Coerciveness	3.45	(1.22)	3.52	(1.45)	1.33
Psychological Control	8.45	(2.33)	7.96	(2.35)	-5.42**
Induction	5.48	(1.45)	5.16	(1.65)	-5.13**
Communication	16.05	(3.39)	14.81	(3.53)	-8.22**

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Relationships between Parenting Behaviors and Adolescents' Well-being

Correlational analysis of fathers' and mother's parenting behaviours with adolescents' psychological adjustment are

summarised in Table 2. The results showed similarities in direction of correlations in both dyads.

Table 2 Correlations with Adolescent's Psychological Adjustments

	Personal Self-concept		Emotional Well-being		Autonomy Development		Social Efficacy	
	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father
Parenting Behaviours								
Warmth	.58**	.26**	.66*	.22**	.25**	-.07	.46**	.25**
Strict monitoring	-.02	.03	-.02	-.02	-.05	-.04	-.04	-.05
Autonomy-Support	.30**	.23**	.22**	.20**	.20**	.09*	.36**	.27**
Rule Inconsistency	-.08	-.06	-.14**	-.14**	-.14**	-.15**	-.15**	-.15**
Coercive control	-.11**	-.12**	-.17**	-.20**	-.18**	-.14**	-.17**	-.19**
Psychological Control	-.07	-.06	-.11**	-.14**	-.11**	-.09*	-.07	-.14**
Induction	.15**	.15**	.18**	.13**	.13**	.06	.23**	.21**
Communication	.25**	.20**	.25**	.24**	.12**	.07	.30**	.25**

* Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)

Mother warmth was the strongest parental correlate of psychological adjustment. Adolescents who experienced their mothers as supportive and involved in their lives reported a high level of emotional well being and personal self-concept. Father warmth was also significantly though more moderately correlated with well being of the adolescent.

The findings revealed modest correlations with parental control variables. Harsh and inconsistent discipline was associated with lower self-esteem and greater emotional distress, whereas induction control and autonomy support were related to higher self-esteem, emotional well being, and social competence.

Similarly, parental communication was also a significant and moderate correlate of psychosocial competence. Maternal communication was not as central as maternal support and involvement

Overall, the results revealed similarities in pattern and direction of correlations. Nonetheless, analyses of the data revealed differences in the strength of correlations between the two parent-adolescent dyads. First, mother warmth was more strongly correlated than was father warmth with psychological functioning and social competence. Second, father-adolescent communication was less strongly linked to psychosocial competence as compared to mother communication. Third, coercive and psychological control by father was more highly correlated with psychosocial maladjustment than was maternal control.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study confirmed the results of a large body of research that while fathers and mothers display remarkable congruence in their parenting behaviors, mothers use more of all the main parenting constructs than do fathers, reflecting their greater involvement in their adolescents' lives. The study converges with previous literature in recognizing that fathers and mothers vary in the degree to which they manifest warmth and support, in the extent and manner in which they control their adolescent's behavior, and in the frequency and content of their interactions with their adolescents. The expression of greater warmth and intimacy by mothers and the exercise of negative control by fathers reflect a universal pattern of parental role differentiation in which mothers assume the traditional role as the nurturant parent (Forehand & Nousiasen, 1993; Noller & Callan, 1990; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). These findings suggest that despite modernisation and the increase in dual-income households, mothers are still the primary caretaker and are more involved in the everyday lives of their adolescents.

The results further underscore the importance of family experiences in the successful adjustment of adolescents. The findings substantiate numerous studies (Barnes, 1984; Jessor & Jessor, 1977, Steinberg, 1990, Steinberg et al., 1989) about the buffering role of parental relationships in adolescence. Parental warmth and support remains an important resource for adolescence even though adolescents have more sources of support outside the family than primary school children do.

As expected, parental control is linked to difficulties in psychosocial adjustment, suggesting that adolescents could interpret negatively any parental attempt to limit their autonomy, a very important aspect of psychosocial development in adolescents. It is therefore not surprising that parental support of autonomy is associated with enhanced personal esteem and social efficacy and with autonomy development of the adolescents.

Comparing the two dyads, the results showed stronger associations in the mother-adolescent relationships. For example, mother warmth/support involvement was strongly and significantly correlated with adolescents' emotional well being, personal self-concept, and social efficacy, whereas corresponding correlations in the father-adolescent dyads were more moderate. There were more significant associations in the mother-adolescent relationship; for example, maternal warmth and nurturance was linked to adolescents' autonomy development but there were no corresponding significant correlations for fathers. These findings clearly demonstrate that maternal support is the most important correlate of adolescents' psychosocial development. This is expected as mothers engage in more parenting and spend more time in day-to-day interactions with their adolescents than do fathers. However, the phenomenon of the dual income family is putting stresses on family relationships (Quah, 1999). This is evidenced in the rise in teenage delinquency as teenagers are under more peer pressure and influence of media. Recent study showed that they do not turn to fathers and mothers for advice. As more mothers join workforce, there is a need to safeguard their nurturing role in the family - to balance work demands and family needs.

On the whole, parental control is more weakly linked to adolescents' psychosocial competence. However, father's punitive control is more negatively associated with adolescents' well being. This is expected as Asian fathers are accepted in their authority role and are perceived as more powerful than mothers. Thus it is likely that paternal discipline may evoke higher levels of anxiety and distress than maternal attempts at discipline. Moreover, fathers are culturally less involved in child rearing and intervene less frequently, but when they do so, they are more effective than mothers in having their wishes carried out.

CONCLUSION

The study adds to a large body of research that parenting is a critical factor in adolescent development and adjustment (e.g. Grotevant & Cooper, 1986; Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989) and provides strong support for parental warmth and communication to the well being of adolescents. It contributes to cross-cultural research in demonstrating that despite modernisation and the change in family structure, the traditional roles of Asian fathers and mothers have not changed significantly. Mother is

still perceived as the warmer caregiver and father as the more detached breadwinner. The present research however

dispels the prevailing notion that Asian father is the authoritarian parent who wields strict and harsh control over their children. Instead, the findings reveal that mother is the stricter and more controlling parent, indicating a slight shift in the traditional roles of fathers and mothers.

As the nature of parent-child relationships in adolescence has largely been inferred from correlations between parenting practices and adolescent outcomes, it does not make it possible to ascertain the direction of causality. The study hence raises more questions than answers. For example, could strict monitoring be associated with more significant and positive outcomes with a younger adolescent sample? Future studies may provide more answers to these questions.

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