



Original article

Day-to-Day Inconsistency in Parent Knowledge: Links With Youth Health and Parents' Stress

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: Considerable evidence documents the linkages between higher levels of parental knowledge about youth activities and positive youth outcomes. This study investigated how day-to-day inconsistency in parental knowledge of youth activities was linked to youth behavioral, psychological, and physical health and parents' stress.

Methods: Participants were employees in the Information Technology Division of a Fortune 500 company and their children ($N = 129$, mean age of youth = 13.39 years, 55% female). Data were collected from parents and youth via separate workplace and in-home surveys as well as telephone diary surveys on eight consecutive evenings. We assessed day-to-day inconsistency in parental knowledge across these eight calls.

Results: Parents differed in their knowledge from day to day almost as much as their average knowledge scores differed from those of other parents. Controlling for mean levels of knowledge, youth whose parents exhibited more knowledge inconsistency reported more physical health symptoms (e.g., colds and flu). Knowledge inconsistency was also associated with more risky behavior for girls but greater psychological well-being for older adolescents. Parents who reported more stressors also had higher knowledge inconsistency.

Conclusions: Assessing only average levels of parental knowledge does not fully capture how this parenting dimension is associated with youth health. Consistent knowledge may promote youth physical health and less risky behavior for girls. Yet knowledge inconsistency also may reflect normative increases in autonomy as it was positively associated with psychological well-being for older adolescents. Given the linkages between parental stress and knowledge inconsistency, parent interventions should include stress management components.

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IMPLICATIONS AND
CONTRIBUTION

Inconsistent parenting is linked to youth health. We found that day-to-day inconsistency in parental knowledge about youth activities was associated with more physical health symptoms in youth and risky behavior in girls but better psychological well-being for older adolescents. Parents who reported more stress were more inconsistent in their knowledge.

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High levels of parental knowledge of their children's activities have been associated with lower levels of youth risky behavior, substance use, and depression [1,2]. Parental knowledge may emerge from parents' family management techniques, including parental solicitation of information, behavioral control, and supervision [3,4] as well as youths' decisions about which

information to disclose [5]. Indeed, parents' knowledge is an important mediator that links parents' management strategies and child disclosure with youth well-being [4]. In this study, we examined day-to-day fluctuations [6] in parental knowledge, drawing from theory and research on the role of consistent parenting for youth well-being [7]. We also moved beyond the field's current focus on youth psychological and behavioral health to study youth physical health correlates of parental knowledge. Our first goal was to test whether, beyond parents' average level of knowledge, inconsistency in knowledge, as calculated from youth's daily reports of parental knowledge across multiple days, accounted for unique variance in youths' behavioral, psychological, and physical health and whether these linkages were moderated by youth age or gender. Given that little is known about the conditions that give rise to parental knowledge, we also tested the links between parents' stress and the inconsistency in their knowledge.

Inconsistency in parental knowledge and youth behavioral, psychological, and physical health

To date, investigators have examined parents' average levels of knowledge and the extent to which differences between parents' average knowledge explain variations in youth well-being [1,2]. Theories also emphasize that *consistency* in parenting also has implications for youth adjustment because it provides youth with clear and predictable standards, thereby promoting their autonomy to behave and make choices within established limits [7,8]. Under conditions of high inconsistency, parents' level of knowledge increases and decreases from one day to the next, creating unpredictability. In this study, we operationalized inconsistency as the within-person standard deviation (SD) of knowledge across 8 days, with higher scores indicating greater inconsistency in knowledge from day to day [9]. Our method for capturing parenting inconsistency was relatively novel in that it was assessed directly rather than through global reports of parenting which may be biased by memory demands and the need for mental arithmetic to evaluate parenting across several days [6]. By asking youth to report parental knowledge each day and using statistical methods to capture within-person variability, the index of inconsistency is free of these sources of bias [6,9].

When parents are inconsistent, such as in their availability to listen to youth disclose information about their experiences or in their solicitation of information, youth may perceive fewer consequences for misbehavior given that parents are uninformed about their conduct. Furthermore, youth may perceive parents who are inconsistent as uninterested or less caring, which may increase youths' risk for poor psychological health [10–13]. If parents inconsistently keep abreast of how their children are feeling, they may less readily detect when their children are coming down with a cold or flu and therefore take early preventive or remedial action. As a result, in consistent parental knowledge may hinder youth physical health. In addition, youth who engage in risky behavior and those who are less psychologically and physically healthy may also be less likely to consistently disclose information to their parents [5,14]. For these reasons, youth with parents who experience greater knowledge inconsistency may exhibit poorer behavioral, psychological, and physical health. In this study, we built on prior research on parents' levels of knowledge to examine whether knowledge inconsistency explained unique variance in youth health outcomes, and we also investigated the role of parental knowledge in

youths' physical health. Although research documents links between levels of parental knowledge and youth risky behavior and depression [14], there are as yet no studies of knowledge inconsistency, and we know virtually nothing about the role of parental knowledge in promoting youth physical health.

We also examined the roles of youth gender and age as potential moderators of the links between knowledge inconsistency and youth health outcomes, testing the hypotheses that inconsistency would be more strongly linked to outcomes for girls and older adolescents. First, gender differences in the implications of knowledge inconsistency may arise because of differences in girls' versus boys' parent–child relationships. For example, parents monitor girls more than boys, girls disclose more information to their parents than boys [15], and some studies found stronger associations between knowledge and problem behavior for girls than boys [16,17]. Inconsistency in parents' knowledge may therefore be more strongly linked to health outcomes for girls than boys. With respect to age, adolescents spend increasingly less time with their parents but more time with peers and unsupervised time with age, making it more difficult for parents to consistently keep track of their children's experiences [18]. Beyond mean level of knowledge, inconsistency in knowledge may reflect youths' increasing autonomy. Furthermore, adolescence is marked by increases in psychological and behavioral health problems, such as depression and risky behavior [19]. Thus, knowledge inconsistency may have stronger implications for youth health in later adolescence than earlier on.

The role of parents' stress in knowledge inconsistency

The second goal of this study was to explore factors that may underlie knowledge inconsistency. Prior research suggests that parents who experience more stress are less warm and more withdrawn in their interactions with their children and less likely to use effective discipline strategies [20–24]. Thus, parents' stress may have negative implications for the parent–child communication patterns that underlie parental knowledge and may also interfere with family management practices, such as parental solicitation and supervision [22], leading to greater knowledge inconsistency. Parents' stress also has implications for the emotional tone of parent–child relationships, including greater conflict and less warmth [20–23], which may inhibit youths' self-disclosure [25]. Stress may also impact cognitive functioning, thus influencing a parent's ability to consistently collect and retain information [26]. Most research on parents' stress has examined its implications for parents' average levels of parenting practices. However, parents who are stressed may also be more inconsistent in their knowledge [27]. Stress may affect whether parents consistently supervise their children and whether youth consistently disclose information, which may lead to knowledge inconsistency. We explored this idea in the present study, testing the hypothesis that parents who reported higher levels of stress would exhibit greater inconsistency in their parental knowledge.

The current study

We used data from face-to-face surveys with employee parents and their adolescent-age offspring in combination with eight consecutive nightly telephone diary calls to study intra-individual fluctuation or inconsistency in parental knowledge, its implications for youth psychological, behavioral, and physical health, and its links with parents' stress. A daily diary design

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