Mothers' and fathers' parenting styles and associations with toddlers' externalizing, internalizing, and adaptive behaviors

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ABSTRACT

The two primary objectives of the present study were to (a) investigate mothers' and fathers' reports of their own as well as their partner's parenting styles, and (b) assess how mothers' and fathers' parenting styles uniquely and jointly predicted toddlers' externalizing, internalizing, and adaptive behaviors. Fifty-nine mothers and fathers independently completed the *Parenting Styles and Dimension Questionnaire* (PDSQ; Robinson, Mandleco, Olsen, & Hart, 2001) and the *Behavior Assessment Scale for Children-2* (BASC-2; Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004). Parents' self-reports of their parenting styles were positively correlated with each other for all three parenting styles (authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive). Comparisons between parents' reports of their partner's styles with that of the partner's self-reports were positively and moderately correlated for all three parenting styles. Findings revealed mothers' and fathers' self-reported parenting styles explained 44% of the variance in youngsters' externalizing behaviors. In particular, permissive parenting by mothers and authoritarian parenting by fathers uniquely and significantly predicted toddlers' externalizing behaviors, while authoritative paternal parenting was predictive of adaptive behaviors.

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Children's exposure to socialization begins within the family, mainly through direct parent–child interaction (Fabes, Gaertner, & Popp, 2005). While the majority of early childhood parenting studies have focused on just one parent's contribution to socialization (i.e., mothers), most researchers acknowledge that this is a limited approach (Isley, O'Neil, & Parke, 1996; McHale et al., 2002). The importance of early child–parent relationships has been emphasized in many prominent theories such as attachment (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991), social interaction (Fisher, Ellis, & Chamberlain, 1999), and family systems theories (Hinde, 1989; Parke, 2002; Parke & Buriel, 2006). In studying relationships, perceptions of behavior offer both practical and theoretical insights (Furman, 1984). Family researchers advocate for the examination of self and other perceptions, and while they may present a biased perspective, it is argued that these perceptions are valid because they shape the quality of social interactions (Engfer, 1988; Erel & Burman, 1995; Minuchin, 1988).

Parent–child research has overwhelmingly focused on maternal patterns of parenting and has not adequately considered paternal contributions (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000). Moreover, our main assumptions about the associations of parenting styles with young children's behavioral outcomes are largely derived from mother–child relationships. Yet, according to theories of socialization and empirical evidence, fathers play an important role in children's development (Parke & Buriel, 2006). Criticisms are raised about using mothers as both a proxy for how fathers individually, and as part of the parenting subsystem, approach issues related to child-rearing (Simons & Conger, 2007); this one-sided representation of mothering as equaling parenting is a serious limitation (Bornstein & Sawyer, 2005). However, even studies that have included both parents often combine their parenting styles to create a single or composite measure (e.g., Gray & Steinberg, 1999). Thus, researchers have missed an opportunity to detail the unique and combined contributions that both parents make to their young children's development. In the present study, we were interested in examining (1) cohabitating mothers' and fathers' perceptions of their own parenting styles and behaviors, and (2) the relationship between parenting behaviors (mothers and fathers) and toddlers' externalizing, internalizing, and adaptive behaviors, which provide an early assessment of their behaviors in these domains. Once established in early childhood, emotional/behavioral patterns remain stable over time and are resistant to change (Eron, 1990; Walker et al., 1999). Further, there is evidence suggesting a long-term predictive link between early childhood behaviors and problems in middle childhood and

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adolescence (Bornstein, Hahn, & Haynes, 2010; Howes & Phillipsen, 1998).

1. Parent and child relationships

1.1. Parenting styles and child behaviors

In the child development literature, Baumrind's (1967, 1971) early conceptualization of the dimensions of parenting style (authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive) continues to be widely employed in explaining individual differences in parenting practices (Parke, 2002; Parke & Buriel, 2006; Winsler, Madigan, & Aquilino, 2005). Following from Baumrind's original perspective of parenting styles, it is generally accepted that there are two main parenting dimensions – parental acceptance/responsiveness and demandingness/control (Grolnick, 2003; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). When these two orthogonal dimensions are jointly considered, four main parenting styles emerge: (a) authoritative (warm, responsive/restrictive, demanding), (b) permissive (warm, responsive/permissive, undemanding), (c) authoritarian (rejecting, unresponsive/restrictive, demanding), and (d) uninvolved (rejecting, unresponsive/permissive, undemanding). The fourth style (uninvolved) has been observed relatively infrequently in young populations compared to the three other styles, but has mainly been reported in studies of adolescents (Baumrind, 1991; Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991). Thus, most measures of parenting styles (for young children) have typically included an assessment of the first three styles. These three parenting styles have been confirmed with both mother and father data (Baumrind, 1971; Baumrind, Larzelere, & Owens, 2010). As such, in the current study, we focus on mothers' and fathers' authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parenting styles.

Based on Baumrind's (1967, 1971) seminal research, the different parenting styles have been associated with a variety of child outcomes. For example, strong support for associations between an authoritative parenting style (flexible, democratic style with clear boundaries) and a range of later positive child outcomes has been documented, such as more effective social skills and school success (Baumrind, 1991; Baumrind et al., 2010; Davidov & Grusec, 2006; Weiss & Schwarz, 1996). In addition, permissive and authoritarian styles are associated with less positive child outcomes such as internalizing, externalizing, and attention problems (e.g., Aunola & Nurmi, 2005; Baldry & Farrington, 1998; Booth-LaForce & Oxford, 2008; Gadeyne, Ghesquiere, & Onghena, 2004; Kaufmann et al., 2000; Lagacé-Séguin & d'Entremont, 2006; Milevsky, Schlechter, Netter, & Keehn, 2007).

1.2. Including both mothers and fathers

Conceptually as well as practically, one reason for taking a broader approach to studying parenting is that multiple, significant adults may be involved in socializing children. Based on North American statistics, father involvement in primary care activities has increased in recent decades (Marshall, 2006; Pleck, 1997; Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean, & Hofferth, 2001). Furthermore, fathers' roles in the form of more active involvement have changed as a result of social and historical context shifts (Cabrera et al., 2000). In the present study, the inclusion of fathers is not about determining whose role is more important, but rather to investigate how both parents contribute to children's development.

A review of the few studies that have compared mothers' and fathers' parenting reveals inconsistent findings. Differences across parenting studies may exist for several reasons, most probably disparities are due to methodological variations of age, gender, and measures of social behaviors examined. Typically these studies

can be categorized as documenting similarities (Davidov & Grusec, 2006), reporting greater maternal influence (Aunola & Nurmi, 2005; Brook, Zheng, Whiteman, & Brook, 2001) or indicating that fathers' parenting behavior was differentially related to children's behaviors in comparison to mothers (Casas et al., 2006; Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb, 2004; Verhoeven, Junger, van Aken, Dekovic, & van Aken, 2010). Taking this idea one step further, Roopnarine, Krishnakumar, Metindogan, and Evans (2006) studied the parenting styles of Caribbean immigrants and links to the academic and social behaviors of their kindergarten-aged children. In this sample, fathers' authoritarian parenting style was negatively correlated with children's academic skills (receptive and vocabulary skills) above that of mothers' contributions. As well, fathers' authoritative parenting was positively correlated with children's social behaviors. In contrast, mothers' authoritarian style negatively predicted their children's social behaviors (e.g., social skills, self-confidence, persistence). Roopnarine et al. argued that fathers' parenting styles had relative predictive ability above mothers' contributions, thus emphasizing the importance of considering the influence of both parents on children's development. It is important to note that there may also be differential role expectations of mothers and fathers from varying cultural backgrounds (Roopnarine et al., 2006).

2. Compatibility of parenting styles

Recent research challenges the implicit assumption that fathers' parenting styles are similar to mothers' styles. Winsler et al. (2005) investigated mothers' and fathers' perceived similarities and differences in parenting styles in a predominantly Caucasian sample and revealed some interesting results vis-à-vis mothers' and fathers' self and partner ratings. Mothers reported being more authoritative in comparison to their partners, but did not perceive differences between themselves and their husbands on the dimensions of permissiveness or authoritarianism. In contrast, fathers reported their partners to be more authoritative and permissive than themselves, but also less authoritarian. Furthermore, Winsler et al. assessed the accuracy of the perceptions of spouses' styles and found that parents were accurate in reporting on their spouses' level of authoritarianism and permissiveness, but not their level of authoritativeness. In another study that examined the parenting styles of both parents, Gamble, Ramakumar, and Diaz (2007) investigated the congruency across parenting dimensions in Mexican-American mothers and fathers. Gamble et al. (2007) found a positive correlation between mothers' and fathers' self-reported parenting styles on the authoritative parenting dimension. However, the mothers' and fathers' reports for permissive and authoritarian style were not significantly correlated. In sum, these patterns indicate the importance of determining both mothers' and fathers' self-reported parenting styles and their assessment of their spouse's style.

Obtaining self-reports from both mothers and fathers allows us to assess both insider relationship information (target parent's perceptions of parenting) and participant observer relationship information (perceptions of their partner's parenting) (Furman, Jones, Buhrmester, & Adler, 1989; Olson, 1977). Collecting both self and partner parenting data permits us to test for congruency between mothers' and fathers' parenting styles. Congruency of perceptions within families has been explained by the notion of spillover, namely since mother–child relations occur alongside father–child relations, they are bound to be influenced by the other (Engfer, 1988). Furthermore, collecting information from both parents has been argued to be a methodological strength by allowing multiple relationship perspectives to be considered (Olson, 1977).

In sum, a significant portion of parenting research has relied on the use of parent-self reports, and the majority of these studies