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Parental practices of Italian mothers and fathers during early infancy: The role of knowledge about parenting and child development



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ABSTRACT

Our contribution aims to verify whether parental knowledge about child development and parenting constitutes a protective factor in the application of dysfunctional educational practices. Numerous studies have found that parental knowledge has a great influence on parenting, however it remains unclear whether both are casually linked in a direct and linear way. Data currently available on parental knowledge almost exclusively refers to mothers and subjects at risk. Furthermore, there are almost no studies which take into consideration subjects who are Italian citizens.

In contrast our work takes into consideration a normative sample of 157 Italian couples who are the parents of children aged between 16 and 36 months and who completed the Knowledge of Infant Development Inventory (KIDI; MacPhee, 1981) and the Parenting Scale (Arnold, O'Leary, Wolff, & Acker, 1993). The results highlight differences between mothers and fathers, both in terms of knowledge levels (higher for mothers) and educational practices (maternal practices are more frequently dysfunctional); knowledge influences educational practices above all in the case of fathers, although said effect is slight, which supports the idea that interaction between knowledge and parental practices is not linear but rather mediated by other factors.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary studies on parenting are increasingly focused on “parental cognitions”, which include parental values, beliefs, socialisation objectives as well knowledge about child development and educational practices (Bornstein, Cote, Haynes, Hahn, & Park, 2010), which are considered to be a fundamental framework for the understanding of parental behaviours and child development processes (Goodnow, 1996; Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, & Spellmann, 2002).

One of the most central of all these aspects is the field of knowledge, referred to as “the parent’s understanding of developmental norms and milestones, processes of child development, and familiarity with caregiving skills” (Benasich & Brooks-Gunn, 1996, p. 1187).

Indeed international literature demonstrates that knowledge about child development has a profound influence on parenting: a good level of knowledge increases the perception of competence, satisfaction and investment in the parental

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role (Bornstein et al., 2003), is associated with better parenting skills (Booth, Mitchell, Barnard, & Spieker, 1989; Reis, Barbera-Stein, & Bennett, 1986; Stevens, 1984) and more positive interaction with one's own children (Chamberlin, Szumowski, & Zastowny, 1979; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994), favours the correct interpretation of child behaviour (Bugental & Happaney, 2002) and the offering of age-appropriate stimuli and experiences (Frankel & Roer-Bornstein, 1982; Ninio, 1979; Parks & Smeriglio, 1986), and consequently has a positive influence on child development (Bornstein et al., 2010; Goodnow, 1988; Miller, Manhal, & Mee, 1991; Sigel & McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 2002), limiting the arising of behavioural problems (Benasich & Brooks-Gunn, 1996; McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 1982).

Conversely, mothers with scarce knowledge demonstrate lesser parenting abilities (Dukewich, Barkowski, & Whitman, 1996) and tend to experience stress and enter into conflict with their children due to discrepancies between their own unrealistic expectations and child behaviour (Crnic & Low, 2002; Teti & Gelfand, 1991), perceiving them to be less competent and providing less support for their development (Linde & Engelhardt, 1979; Jarrett, 1982; Ragozin, Basham, Crnic, Greenberg, & Robinson, 1982).

However some research questions the linearity of links between knowledge and parenting quality (Conrad, Gross, Fogg, & Ruchala, 1992; Hess, Teti, & Hussey-Gardner, 2004; Huang, Caughy, Genevro, & Miller, 2005; Myers, 1982), as no significant direct links have been found between such aspects, or due to the fact that they have only partially been observed in certain contexts, therefore there is a need for further investigation.

Furthermore there is almost no research which takes into consideration the field of parental knowledge in Italian samples and despite copious amounts of studies in different cultural fields these tend to focus mainly on mothers insofar as they are primarily responsible for the care of young children and thus acquire greater skills and knowledge on the matter (Barnard & Solchany, 2002; Bornstein et al., 2010; Geary, 2000; Leiderman, Tulkin, & Rosenfeld, 1977; Parke, 2002; Weisner & Gallimore, 1977). Currently this setting appears deficient insofar as there have been rapid transformations in the differentiation of mother and father roles, at least this is the case in western industrialised cultures, which are increasingly characterised by an increase in the sharing of care and a higher level of paternal involvement (Hall, 2005; Lamb, 2010). Therefore it is important for research to involve fathers too, and to consider them as subjects of equal importance. Scarce available research investigating differences between maternal and paternal knowledge is also often characterised by contrasting data (Nobre-Lima, Vale-Dias, Mendes, Mónico, & MacPhee, 2014; Schreiber, 2001; Winter, Morawska, & Sanders, 2012).

Another shortcoming of current literature regards the fact that most research is based on subjects at risk (for example: adolescent, poor, depressed mothers or those with premature babies), thus yielding results which eschew generalisation.

1.1. Objectives of the study

The aim of our contribution is to address some of the weaknesses of current studies regarding the link between knowledge and parenting through taking into consideration a normative group of Italian parent couples and exploring the differences between mothers and fathers. The aim is to verify whether parental knowledge concerning diversified fields (development norms and milestones, general principles about development, health and parenting strategies) may constitute a protective factor against dysfunctional parenting practices (tendency towards laxness, overreactivity and verbosity).

The specific research aims are as follows:

- To investigate whether mothers and fathers have different level of knowledge on development, both at a general level and in reference to specific fields.
- To investigate the sources which mothers and fathers most commonly refer to for the acquisition of information on development and parenting.
- To investigate whether knowledge about development and parenting in mothers and fathers varies in relation to socio-demographic characteristics and the use of information sources.
- To identify eventual differences between mothers and fathers in the use of dysfunctional parenting practices.
- To analyse if and how maternal and paternal knowledge is associated with and influences the implementation of said practices.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants are 157 couples (N: 314) of Italian citizens who are the parents of children aged between 16 and 36 months (average: 25.9; d.s. 5.55), attending 6 nursery schools in a large northern Italian city, selected in diversified zones as a social and economic basin. After obtaining nursery management authorisation, parents were contacted and addressed in a preliminary meeting in which their voluntary collaboration was requested. Willing families received an envelope containing two questionnaires, one for the mother and one for the father, to be filled in at home and deposited anonymously in a special box which was left in the entrance hall of nurseries.¹

¹ The research project was granted preliminary authorization by the University of Turin Bioethics Committee.

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