

**Perceived Social Support and Cognitive Readiness to Parent
as Predictors of Attachment, Parenting Style, and Parenting Stress:
A Comparative Study of Adult and Adolescent Mothers**

by

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**A Doctoral Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements of the Degree of Doctor of Psychology
in the Department of Psychology.**

Pace University, New York

2014

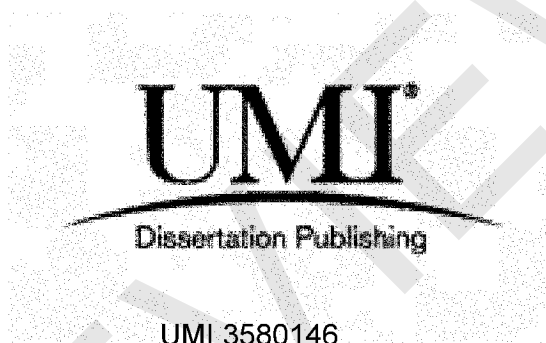
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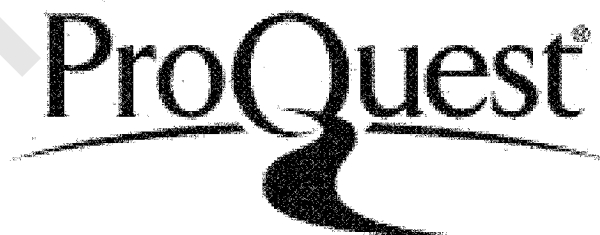
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PREVIEW

2014
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my doctoral project committee for all their help, support, advice, and guidance throughout this process. Meg, I have to thank you for encouraging me to follow my interests. Without you, I would have been fearful about finding a sample of adolescent mothers and probably would have stuck with more accessible data that would have inspired me a great deal less. You showed me that anything is possible with research and that there are always willing participants out there. That's a lesson I will take with me well beyond this doctoral project.

I also need to thank Dr. Yasik for your attention to detail and thorough editing of this project. Your comments helped me to think about the data differently and to write more thoughtfully. I always appreciated your input and am very grateful for your guidance and dedicated work throughout this process.

Of course I have to thank Mr. Steve Salbod. Without you, I might still be scratching my head over how to run the data and then make sense of the numbers. I will be forever grateful for your endless patience for my endless questions. I felt as if you cared just as much as I did about this project, which provided me with a sense of calm I never knew I could have when dealing with stats and formatting. Thank you for dedicating yourself to this project, I feel very lucky to have gotten to work with you.

I would also like to thank my family. Firstly, to all of you, collectively, for putting up with me in my perpetual stressed-out state as I trudged through the various stages of this project! To my parents for always encouraging me and knowing, even when I didn't, that this was something that could indeed be done. And to you Mom, specifically, for attempting to read through boring drafts of this project and humoring me that it was interesting! To my in-laws for never minding that I'd hole myself away to work on this while on visits home. And to Sean for your endless support, weathering my stress storms, and the countless things you did for us to keep the house running and us fed while I wrote and wrote...

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PREVIEW

ABSTRACT

This study explores the differences between adult and adolescent mothers on attachment, parenting style, and parenting stress. It also explores whether cognitive readiness to parent and perceived social support are able to predict attachment, parenting style, and parenting stress. Participants included 100 mothers, 67 of whom were adult mothers and 33 were adolescent mothers. Findings indicated that in comparison to adult mothers, adolescent mothers report more security within their attachment to their children, tend to utilize more permissive parenting, and report more parenting stress. Significant differences were found between adult and adolescent mothers on cognitive readiness to parent and perceived social support, but these constructs did not predict the outcome variables. Clinical implications of these findings are discussed.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a time of great change and growth in an individuals' life. During this phase of development, many struggle with issues of identity and autonomy and begin to experiment with intimacy in their relationships (Carothers, Borkowski, Lefever, & Whitman, 2005; Emery, Paquette, & Bigras, 2008). Adolescents who become pregnant during this time in their life are faced with even more challenges as they struggle not only with issues related to their age but also with the choices they must make about their pregnancy. Adolescents who ultimately decide to become mothers face the challenges of adolescence, while simultaneously grappling with motherhood. Because they have become mothers as they are in the process of growing from children to adults themselves, adolescent mothers represent a unique population of individuals.

Over the years, research has studied various aspects of adolescent motherhood but as these studies are limited in number, it has been difficult for researchers to arrive at reliable conclusions (Emery et al., 2008). Adolescent motherhood has been studied in many different ways with studies focusing on factors such as the developmental outcomes of the child born to an adolescent mother (Farris, Borkowski, Lefever, & Whitman, 2006; Leadbeater, Bishop & Raver, 1996), the mother-infant relationship (Emery et al., 2008; Madigan, Moran & Pederson, 2006), the emotional and psychological functioning of the adolescent mother (Leadbeater et al., 1996), and the amount and affects of support given to a mother raising her child as she progresses

through adolescence (Contreras et al., 1999; Edwards et al., 2012; Gee & Rhodes, 2003).

This study seeks to add new information and findings to the adolescent motherhood literature base by exploring differences between adult and adolescent mothers on attachment, parenting style, parenting stress, cognitive readiness to parent, and perceived social support.

PREVIEW

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Attachment

Researchers have studied the relationship that develops between the adolescent mother and her child, placing particular focus on the attachment style present. Typically, the quality of the mother-child relationship has been viewed through Bowlby's (1958) theory of attachment and classified using Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall's (1978) categories: secure, resistant, and avoidant. That is, the attachment between mother and child that forms through early interactions and which informs the child of the level of responsiveness and safeguarding that their caregiver will provide (Bowlby, 1988). Ainsworth and colleagues found that it was possible to categorize the child's attachment to their caregiver by observing specific behaviors such as the child's exploratory behaviors, both when their caregiver is near and when their caregiver is absent; the child's reaction to their caregiver's absence and their behaviors upon the caregiver's return; and the child's reaction to strangers when their caregiver is not present (Meins, 1997).

A secure attachment is said to form when the caregiver is attuned to her child and is consequently able to provide appropriate and consistent care in response to the child's needs. As a result of the caregiver's apt reactions, the child feels safe in their ability to explore novel environments and stimuli, knowing that their caregiver will be there to provide them with comfort should they need it. Further, though the child will become

upset by separation from the caregiver, a secure attachment allows the child to tolerate this separation and thus the child is able to be soothed upon the caregiver's return. Additionally, the child will not be overly distressed by strangers but will still show preference for their caregiver over the stranger, a healthy response (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

A secure attachment is important as it has many implications for the child's development and functioning. Children with secure attachments were found to be better at problem-solving and task completion (Frankel & Bates, 1990; Gove, 1983), demonstrated more autonomy and independence (Sroufe, Fox, & Pancake, 1983; Turner, 1993), possessed better social skills (Main & Weston, 1981), and demonstrated a higher capacity for resilience (Arend, Gove, & Sroufe, 1979) than children with insecure attachments. Further, insecure attachments have been linked to negative outcomes from infancy into adulthood (Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 1999; Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986; Waters, Posada, Crowell, & Lay, 1993).

The risk factors for developing insecure attachments are many. What makes attachment an important construct to consider when exploring the differences between adolescent and adult mothers is that adolescent mothers experience higher incidences of these risk factors, including increased levels of parenting stress (Passino et al., 1993), marital instability (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn & Morgan, 1987), depression (Colletta, 1983), and lack of self-efficacy (McLaughlin & Micklin, 1983). Additionally, Madigan, Moran, and Pederson (2006) found that mothers with an unresolved state of mind – that is, mothers who were disorganized and disoriented when giving a narrative regarding the loss of a loved one – were more likely to develop disorganized attachments to their