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PREVIEW

Parenting Perceptions and Behaviors of Preschool Parents

by

Shoshana Sperling

A Doctoral Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
The Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Psychology  
In the Department of Psychology at Pace University

New York

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## Abstract

Perceptions and behaviors of parents of young preschoolers is a subject that has not been extensively researched. Many studies have explored global parenting styles and child developmental outcomes, rather than the way parents conceptualize their roles. Further, most research considers parenting typical children. However, parenting special needs children is challenging. When children with special needs are young, parents are faced with increased challenges along with the common struggle associated with parenting.

The Parent Role Development Theory (PRDT) (Mowder, 1991a, 1991b) is a theory proposed to explain how individuals' perceptions of parenting are modified over time. As children progress from childhood to adulthood, their parents' perceptions regarding the parent role change and develop. In this study, questionnaire data was utilized with parents of young children with typical and special needs. The Parent Role Brief Questionnaire (PRBQ) and Parent Behavior Questionnaire (PBQ) were completed by 72 parents of

children at four preschools, to sample their perspectives on parenting.

Based on the PRDT, the PRBQ and PBQ were created by Mowder to better understand parents' perceptions and parenting activities. Statistical analysis was used to determine how parents of young children with either typical or special needs, conceptualize their roles. The results suggest developmental trends exist regarding how parents rate the importance of parenting characteristics.

Parents of special needs children rate parenting behaviors associated with general welfare and protection and sensitivity as most important, whereas parents of typical children deem education the most important characteristic. Parents of special needs children find that responsivity and sensitivity are more important than parents of typical children. Respondents' ratings of their perceptions, on the PRQ, are highly correlated to their parenting activities, as evident in their responses on the PBQ.

Assessment, consultation, and interventions with families of children with young children are discussed.

Implications for the field of psychology are addressed. By understanding parenting perspectives, psychologists are better able to help parents utilize their parenting role most effectively. Further, effective communication between psychologists and parents can be facilitated with a discussion about useful parent-child assessments and interventions.

PREVIEW

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Those who assume the parenting role typically take the job without any prior training, education, or experience. Nevertheless, parents are expected to impart love, patience, morals, and a variety of other traits to their children (Ambert, 1997). The task of parenthood is no doubt a difficult one, and no one is capable of perfection in performing all the duties that parenthood requires.

The relationship between a child and parent begins to take form well before the birth of a child. The quality of the parent-child relationship can be influenced by the resources and type of care provided to the parent and the child. Personality, age, socioeconomic status, employment, educational and marital status of the parent are some of the key factors that impact the parent-child relationship (Baumrind, 1971, 1972; Keller, 2000).

Parent-child interactions influence parent relationships with their children as well as later child development outcomes. Most research focuses on the child's

experience with the parent rather than the experience of parenthood. Past studies have shown that parental behaviors impact child outcomes, and therefore, parental support, time spent with the child, and other acceptable behaviors are associated with a high level of child well-being (Demo, 2000).

According to Darling and Steinberg (1993), parenting practices are the behaviors characterized by the content and goals pertaining to socialization. The goals parents have for integrating their children into the family and society, their applied parenting practices, and beliefs expressed to their children establish the processes through which parenting styles affect child development (Bandura, 1997). Other investigators note the importance of addressing perceptions of parenting stress and early parent-child interaction. Specifically, a child's language development may be improved when these issues are addressed (Magill-Evans, 2001).

Parenting "self-efficacy" refers to parents' perceptions of their competence in their parental role and their ability to positively affect the behavior and development of children. Parents with high self-efficacy with respect to their parenting roles are likely to provide

their children with a stimulating and nurturing environment. In turn, this self-efficacy fosters their children's growth and development (Coleman & Hildebrandt-Karraker, 2000). Punitive parenting behaviors, however, are associated with low parenting self-efficacy and negatively influence children's development into mature individuals (Bugental & Cortez, 1988).

"Parenthood, like other phenomena of nature, is the product of growth and evolution" (Gross & Shuman, 1987, p.8). There are many factors that shape individuals' views about the parent role. Children's first view of parenting is that of their own parents. As children mature and develop, they acquire an increasingly complex outlook regarding parenting (Lessuck-Namer, 1997). That outlook is based on growth and life experiences, with the original conceptual template formed from children's parents. This enhanced perception of parenting is further developed according to a number of variables.

Parents may teach their children based, in part, on gender role stereotypes. Males may or may not view their paternal role in a traditional way. For instance, boys may believe that a father's role is to teach his children to achieve, compete, and attain certain goals. Females may or

may not view their role as a parent in accordance with a traditional approach, such as offering emotional sustenance, understanding, and an overall sensitivity (Maurer, 2001; Parke, 1995; Yeung, 2001).

A father and mother could, therefore, have starkly different paradigms, based upon gender and/or other differences, for how they believe their children should be raised. For instance, Mowder (1995) notes that mothers are more demonstrative while fathers are more moderate in their understanding of their role as a parent. These beliefs could have profound implications in the growth and development of children under parents' guidance and influence.

The gender of the child is another factor in the parent-child relationship that may contribute to conflicting parent role expectations. For instance, Johnson and Lewman (1990) found significant differences in parental perceptions of children's leisure time, favorite books, and early indications of intellectual ability based on young children's gender. Professionals aware of gender differences can help parents differentiate roles as they relate to children's academic performance (Lawrence, 1995).



It may be difficult to attain harmony between two parents' potentially diametrically opposed views of parenting. Indeed, each individual parent has ideas about challenges that inevitably arise when parenting children and responses to those challenges. The influence of parents' and children's gender on parenting is but one example of variables which may affect parenting conceptions and subsequent parenting behaviors (Mowder, Harvey, Moy, & Pedro, 1995).

Parenting children with special needs differs greatly from raising children with typical needs (Stiller, 1992). Parents of special needs children may or may not be prepared for the tasks required of them. Parent guidance and even mentoring may be necessary when children face limitations. Are parents prepared to meet the challenges they may face? This is an important question to ask since psychologists consult with parents about their parenting activities and appreciate that modifying certain aspects of parenting tasks may affect other aspects of the parent role (Turiano, 2001).

Traditional and non-traditional couples' parenting beliefs may be challenged when it comes to raising children with special needs. Special needs children may present

parenting issues which at times seem inordinate and insurmountable (Jones, 1991). Indeed, as the early intervention literature suggests, when young children have special needs identified at an early age, parents grapple with these issues as well as other parenting factors. For psychologists, identifying potentially dysfunctional parenting when the child is young is important because parenting affects children's growth and development (O'Leary, Smith, & Reid, 1999). This is crucial because children may develop difficulties (e.g., academic difficulties, social-emotional problems) due to problematic parenting.

It is essential for child and parent service providers to have a thorough understanding of factors that may shape individuals' behaviors, including perceptions of how they should behave (Christmon, 1990). This is necessary in order to effectively create an organized and proficient intervention for children with typical and special needs and their parents. An intervention is only as effective as the practitioner and parents who cooperate to carry it out (Zeanah, 2000). The literature strongly suggests that the child's age at the time of intervention is a crucial variable; the beginning years of life are fundamental in

influencing the relationship between brain and behavioral development (Nelson, 2000).

Little is known about the perceptions of parents with younger children and, therefore, there is a growing need to learn about the cognitive schemata and behavior of parents with children aged three to five. The subjects in previous studies using the Parenting Behaviors Questionnaire (PBQ) (Mowder, 1995) and the Parent Role Brief Questionnaire (PRBQ) (Mowder, 1989) were all parents of children aged six and older.

It is important to identify potentially dysfunctional parenting early on, when the children are still young, before children develop externalizing or other problems that eventually may become diagnosable as they grow older. This is the case because child outcomes are strongly affected by parents. For example, according to Abelman and Pettey (1989), "parental attributes, such as child rearing practices, are used as a mediator variable for the correlation between children's antisocial behavior and the viewing of violence"(p.20). Therefore, parents of young children who exercise control over what television programs will be viewed may reduce the exposure of violence. These children may be less likely to act out aggressively at

school than children with parents who do not curtail television viewing.

Mothers of very young children are strongly influenced by their children's troublesome behaviors and are more likely to change their parenting beliefs and behaviors compared to parents of older children (O'Leary & et al., 1999). The comparison between relationships of parents of younger and older children can be explained by understanding the differences between the long and short-term effects of having difficult children. After parenting challenging children for a long time period, mothers may not be inclined to seek help or change their patterns. However, mothers of younger children may be more open to changing their perceptions and parenting behaviors than mothers of older children since the problematic behaviors have existed for less time.

The goal of the present study is to identify and compare the perceptions of parental roles held by parents of special-needs children and of typical preschool children. With further research and increased understanding of parenting complexities, psychologists may help parents become effective and competent parents. Research reveals that parents' perceptions of and behaviors

associated with their parenting role fluctuate across child age and gender of both parent and child (Donnelly, 1992; Lessuck-Namer, 1997; Mowder, 1993).

This study utilized questionnaires to assess preschool parents' perceptions of the six parental characteristics of interest: (a) bonding (feeling love for and demonstrating affection to one's child), (b) discipline (setting limits on children and assuring that limits are responded and adhered to), (c) education (educating, guiding, and teaching), (d) general welfare and protection (keeping one's child from harm and providing them with basic needs), (e) responsivity (caring for and being responsive to one's child and his or her child's needs), and (f) sensitivity (being able to tell what one's child is communicating and matching one's response to the child's needs) (see appendix E).

The PRBQ and PBQ have been utilized in a variety of research studies, including Mowder's (1991, 1993) studies based on her theoretical model. In addition, parenting views held by parents and their preadolescent children (Donnelly, 1992), adoptive parents of special needs children (Stillier, 1992), parents of school age children (Mowder & Harvey, 1992), Chinese American parent perceptions (Shum, 1996), children ages six through 12

(Lessuck-Namer, 1997), and parent characteristics (Turiano, 2001) were explored using the questionnaires.

The primary focus of this study is to examine some of the complexities of the parenting role related to parents of preschool special-needs and typically-developing children. The research questions are as follows:

1. Do parents of preschool-aged children vary their perceptions of parent role characteristics according to different child development stages? That is, are the characteristics equally important at each developmental stage or do the characteristics vary with child developmental level? It is hypothesized that parental perceptions of the six parental role characteristics decrease linearly across developmental stages.

2. Do preschool parents rate the importance of parent role expectations differentially based on whether or not their children have special needs? Further, are there commonalities and differences of parent role characteristic importance between the two groups?

Based on prior findings, it is predicted that parents with special-needs children consider responsibility and sensitivity to be more important than parents of children in regular educational settings.

3. Are there commonalties and differences of parent role perceptions, regardless of children's special needs status, considering gender as a variable? More specifically, do parenting perceptions and behaviors differ according to parent gender? Consistent with the professional literature, it is predicted that fathers will rank all parenting characteristics excluding discipline lower in importance than mothers. Fathers will consider discipline to be more important than mothers.

4. Further, do parents with children of their same gender have higher parent role importance ratings than with parents with children of the opposite gender? That is, do parent role perceptions differ according to child gender? An analysis will be conducted to determine if children's gender is relevant at the preschool level.

5. What is the relationship between parent role importance ratings and parenting behaviors? Based on prior research showing the relationship between behaviors and perceptions, parent responses to the PRBQ will be related to parent ratings on the PBQ. It is hypothesized that parenting activities and parent-

role perceptions will be significantly associated with one another.

PREVIEW