Raising Young Children: Parental Perceptions

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RAISING YOUNG CHILDREN: PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS

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Summary.—Parents' perceptions of raising young children were examined using the Parent Behavior Checklist. The sample included 44 married couples with children between one and four years of age. Parents completed the checklist twice, first based on how each parent was raising one own child and second based on how each perceived the spouse was raising the same child. The results indicated that fathers and mothers had similar developmental expectations for their young children. Fathers tended to be more disciplinarian and mothers more nurturing. Mothers perceived fathers as having higher expectations than did fathers, and fathers perceived mothers as more disciplinarian than did mothers. Correlation coefficients computed to assess agreement between mothers' and fathers' perceptions of their parenting averaged .68, which is comparable to those found for other rating scales completed by parents. Implications are discussed.

Early parent-child interactions have not been extensively studied (McBride, 1984). One area of interest is how mothers and fathers each contribute to childrearing. Bentley and Fox (1991) found that mothers and fathers had similar developmental expectations and used similar discipline strategies with young children. In contrast, mothers were significantly more nurturing than fathers. The purpose of the present study was to assess how mothers and fathers of young children perceive their own parenting and that of their spouses using the Parent Behavior Checklist (Fox, 1994), formerly entitled the Parenting Inventory (Fox, 1992).

This checklist has three factors, Expectations—50 items that measure parents' developmental expectations, Discipline—30 items that assess parental responses to a child's problem behaviors, and Nurturing—20 items that measure parents' behaviors that promote a child's psychological growth. The 100 items, developed specifically for parents of 1- to 4-yr.-old children, are internally consistent and have good test-retest reliability (Fox, 1992). Supportive validity and social desirability data have been reported (Fox & Bentley, 1992; Peters & Fox, 1993).

Subjects were 44 married couples; mothers' average age was 33.9 yr. (SD = 4.1) and fathers' was 36.2 yr. (SD = 6.2). Family socioeconomic status was middle to upper-middle class based on Stevens and Cho's Occupational Classification Scheme (1985). Each couple had at least one child between 1 and 4 years of age. Couples with more than one child were instructed to se-

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lec the same focus child for this study. The focal sample included 29 boys and 15 girls (\( M \) age = 3.6 yr., \( SD = 1.5 \)). Parents were asked to complete the Parent Behavior Checklist twice. For the first administration, mothers and fathers each rated their own parenting (self-report). On the second administration, they rated their spouses' parenting (spouses' report). The self-report and spouses' report scores for parents are shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Expectations</th>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Nurturing</th>
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<td>( M )</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-report</td>
<td>135.0</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>37.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouses' Report</td>
<td>134.3</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>41.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fathers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-report</td>
<td>132.5</td>
<td>34.0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouses' Report</td>
<td>138.4</td>
<td>38.0</td>
<td>39.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To compare parenting styles between parents, mothers' and fathers' self-report scores were examined. Discipline scores were higher for fathers than mothers (\( t_{49} = 2.9, p < .01 \)), Nurturing scores were higher for mothers than fathers (\( t_{49} = 8.9, p < .001 \)), and Expectations scores did not differ between groups. Pearson correlations computed between mothers' and fathers' self-report scores were .93 on Expectations, .59 on Discipline, and .40 on Nurturing (all \( ps < .05 \)).

To assess parents' perceptions of their own and their spouses' parenting styles, parents' self-ratings and spouses' ratings were used. For mothers, Discipline scores based on their spouses' ratings were higher than mothers' self-ratings on Discipline (\( t_{43} = 3.79, p < .01 \)); Expectations and Nurturing scores did not differ. Pearson correlations computed between mothers' self-ratings and spouses' ratings for mothers were .93 on Expectations, .61 on Discipline, and .64 on Nurturing (all \( ps < .01 \)). For fathers, Expectations scores based on their spouses' reports were higher than fathers' self-ratings on Expectations (\( t_{43} = 2.56, p < .01 \)); Discipline and Nurturing scores did not differ. Pearson correlations computed between fathers' self-ratings and spouses' ratings for fathers were .92 on Expectations, .47 on Discipline, and .53 on Nurturing (all \( ps < .01 \)).

The present results indicated that based on self-reports mothers and fathers have similar developmental expectations for their young children. Fathers tended to perceive themselves as more disciplinarian than mothers. Mothers rated themselves as more nurturing than fathers. These results are similar to those reported by Bentley and Fox (1991). The second series of
analyses studied the agreement between parents regarding their respective parenting styles. Fathers and mothers agreed about the mothers’ expectations and nurturing but not their discipline. Fathers rated mothers higher on discipline than did mothers themselves. At least two interpretations of this latter finding are possible. First, mothers may not be as objective regarding their discipline of young children’s problem behaviors as an outside observer (father) due to a variety of factors such as fatigue, emotionality, or a tendency to respond to discipline items on the checklist in a socially desirable manner. Second, fathers may be overgeneralizing or overestimating their ratings of mothers’ use of discipline based on limited observations. Regarding fathers’ parenting styles, mothers and fathers agreed about the fathers’ discipline and nurturing but not their expectations. Mothers rated fathers higher on expectations than did fathers themselves. One explanation for this latter discrepancy is that fathers cognitively responded to the expectation items on the checklist whereas mothers responded to the items based on observations of the fathers’ interactions with their children. That is, fathers completed the checklist from a “This is what I think” perspective whereas mothers rated fathers’ expectations from a “This is what you do” perspective.

The correlation coefficients computed separately for mothers’ and fathers’ self-report and spouses’ report scores, respectively, ranged between .47 and .93 ($M = .68$). While these coefficients do not represent true interrater reliability estimates where external judges independently and objectively rate a particular phenomenon, the correlations between parents’ self-reports and spouses’ reports on the checklist are in the same range as the interrater reliabilities reported between parents’ ratings of their children on the Conners’ Rating Scales (Mean $r = .51$, Range = .36—.68; Conners, 1990), the Personality Inventory for Children (Mean $r = .57$, Range = .36—.68; Wirt, Lachar, Klinedinst, & Seat, 1977), and the Child Behavior Checklist (Median $r = .66$; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983). To ascertain better the accuracy of parents’ ratings of their own or their spouses’ parenting, a more direct measure of parenting would be required, e.g., direct observation of a parent’s behavior by an objective, expert observer. These direct measures, which also have inherent limitations, e.g., expensive to obtain, influence of observers’ presence on parental behaviors, could then be compared with parents’ ratings to assess the accuracy of parental perceptions regarding their own behavior.

Agreement on parenting is an important issue for professionals who work with parents. Clinical interventions for parent-child difficulties often are predicated on parents’ self-reports. Inaccurate parental perceptions could lead to faulty and ineffective treatment programs. Agreement on parenting also is important for young children. Children thrive best in homes where some consistency between parents is present. Significant differences between parents in their expectations, discipline, and nurturing styles could signal
potential problems for the family. Checklists similar to the one used in this study could help identify these differences early and provide guidance before significant difficulties in the family occur.

REFERENCES


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