



Potential roles of parental self-efficacy in parent and child adjustment: A review

Tracy L. Jones, Ronald J. Prinz*

Department of Psychology, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 20208, United States

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Abstract

This review examines the potential roles of parental self-efficacy (PSE) in parent and child adjustment and the role of parental cognitions in understanding behaviors and emotions within families. The areas in this review include parental competence and psychological functioning, as well as child behaviors, socio-emotional adjustment, school achievement, and maltreatment. There is strong evidence linking PSE to parental competence, and more modest linkage to parental psychological functioning. Some findings suggest that PSE impacts child adjustment directly but also indirectly via parenting practices and behaviors. Although the role of PSE likely varies across parents, children, and cultural–contextual factors, its influence cannot be overlooked as a possible predictor of parental competence and child functioning, or perhaps an indicator of risk. PSE may also be an appropriate target for prevention and intervention efforts. Limitations in the literature include measurement problems, variability in conceptualizations and definitions of the construct, and the lack of research exploring causality. Future research should focus on clarifying the measurement of PSE, studying potential bias in self-report of PSE, and utilizing experimental and longitudinal designs to untangle the issues of causal direction and potential transactional processes.

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: prinz@sc.edu (R.J. Prinz).

This review examines the potential roles of parental self-efficacy (PSE) in parent and child adjustment and the role of parental cognitions in understanding behaviors and emotions within families. PSE is a potentially important cognitive construct, related to child and family functioning, that can be broadly defined as the expectation caregivers hold about their ability to parent successfully. PSE is presumed to be a specific case of the more general class of constructs associated with personal efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1982; Cervone, 2000; Pajares, 1997).

Bandura (1997) links personal efficacy to human agency, which he defines as acts done intentionally that reflect an individual's perception that they are exercising influence over what they do. Cognitions of personal efficacy, considered the main facets of human agency, are the beliefs that what the person does will produce the intended outcomes. Extrapolating from these general definitions, PSE involves a parent's beliefs in their ability to influence their child and the environment in ways that would foster the child's development and success (Ardelt & Eccles, 2001).

Building on Bandura's conceptualizations, Coleman and Karraker (1998) explicated the PSE construct with respect to importance of studying PSE, levels of specificity, and discrimination from related constructs, and they characterized the role that PSE appears to play in parenting. The Coleman and Karraker review was based on 18 studies related to PSE. The present review, which focuses predominantly on studies from 1995 onward, examines a substantially larger and stronger body of empirical work (47 studies) and examines evidence regarding the extent to which PSE relates to facets of parent and child adjustment. Evidence is considered that relates PSE to parenting competencies, parental psychological functioning, and child adjustment. Within each section evidence is generally presented from stronger to weaker to conflicted. Mediator and moderator roles, and cultural, contextual, and developmental considerations are discussed where salient.

1. Conceptual frameworks

Depending on the particular conceptualization and application, PSE has been posited as an antecedent, a consequence, a mediator, and a transactional variable. PSE as an antecedent has primarily involved PSE as an influence over parenting competence. Presumably, parents with high PSE exude confidence in acquiring and exercising effective parenting skills, and conversely, parents with low PSE may find it more difficult to parent effectively in the face of challenging child situations.

PSE as a consequence has taken on multiple forms. The most common is that the ecological context influences PSE. Variables linked to socioeconomic disadvantage and neighborhood characteristics may undermine or limit the development of PSE, or may interfere with parenting competence which in turn limits PSE. Another consideration is that child problems of a particularly challenging nature (e.g., severe oppositional-defiant disorder or ADHD, autism, delinquent behavior) may affect PSE.

PSE as a mediator mainly concerns a link between ecological variables and parenting competence. Environmental conditions may undermine a parent's confidence and account for less effective parenting.

PSE may operate as a transactional variable. For example, parents with higher levels of PSE may reflect greater success in parenting, resulting in better child outcomes which in turn increases PSE further in a feedback loop. Similarly, parents who have lower levels of PSE may struggle with parenting, experience frustration and non-optimal child outcomes, and have PSE further undermined.

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