



Personality and parenting style in parents of adolescents

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A B S T R A C T

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Since parental personality traits are assumed to play a role in parenting behaviors, the current study examined the relation between parental personality and parenting style among 688 Dutch parents of adolescents in the SMILE study. The study assessed Big Five personality traits and derived parenting styles (authoritative, authoritarian, indulgent, and uninvolved) from scores on the underlying dimensions of support and strict control. Regression analyses were used to determine which personality traits were associated with parenting dimensions and styles. As regards dimensions, the two aspects of personality reflecting interpersonal interactions (extraversion and agreeableness) were related to supportiveness. Emotional stability was associated with lower strict control. As regards parenting styles, extraverted, agreeable, and less emotionally stable individuals were most likely to be authoritative parents. Conscientiousness and openness did not relate to general parenting, but might be associated with more content-specific acts of parenting.

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Introduction

Parenting style has been defined as a global climate in which a family functions and in which childrearing takes place (Darling & Steinberg, 1993). Four distinct parenting styles have been distinguished, namely the authoritative, authoritarian, indulgent, and uninvolved styles, based on the two underlying dimensions of parental support (often referred to as parental responsiveness) and strict control (often referred to as parental demandingness) (e.g., Baumrind, 1966, 1971; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Parental support refers to parental affectionate qualities and is associated with characteristics like warmth, acceptance, and involvement. Strict control reflects parental control over their children's behaviors and as such includes parental knowledge of these activities as well as active monitoring attempts (Stattin & Kerr, 2000). Authoritative parents offer their children a democratic climate of both high support and strict control. Authoritarian parents provide strict control without being supportive, and are therefore perceived as demanding and power-assertive. Children experiencing support in the absence of strict control are being reared by indulgent parents, who are allowing and permissive. These parents apply few rules to constrain their children. Finally, parents with an uninvolved parenting style are neither supportive nor controlling, and are relatively more indifferent and uninvolved (or even neglectful) with respect to their children.

General parenting styles have been found to relate to children's development (Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000), and authoritative parenting in particular has been found to have beneficial effects on adolescent lifestyles. Adolescents being raised in an authoritative parenting climate eat more fruit, smoke less, drink less alcohol, and are less likely to use marijuana (e.g., Jackson, Henriksen, & Foshee, 1998; Kremers, Brug, De Vries, & Engels, 2003; Radziszewska, Richardson, Dent, & Flay, 1996). In addition, adolescents with authoritative parents show better psychosocial development,

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greater academic competence, less delinquent behavior, and fewer somatic symptoms (e.g., Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, Mounts, & Dornbusch, 1994).

If parenting influences adolescent development, then individual characteristics affecting parenting may be of indirect relevance to issues related to adolescent development (Belsky & Barends, 2002; Prinzie et al., 2004). One general theoretical model that aims to explain the determinants of parenting was offered by Belsky (1984). Belsky argued that parenting is multiply determined by three general sources of influence: child's individual characteristics, contextual sources of stress and support, and parent personality. Moreover, he argued that of those three personality is the most important source of influence. Whereas factors such as occupational status and well-being have been studied more intensively, studies that concentrate on parental personality are scarce (e.g., Fox, Platz, & Bentley, 1995). This, however, is surprising since personality aspects are most likely to contribute, as these aspects are also likely to influence other determinants of parenting, such as marital quality, occupational aspects, and social support (Belsky & Barends, 2002; Caspi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005). The present study therefore concentrated on the relation between personality and parenting style.

There is relative consensus on a five-factor structure of personality, based on a bipolar taxonomy of underlying traits (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1992; Digman, 1990; Saucier & Goldberg, 1998), which is supported by factor analyses of extensive lists of trait adjectives (Goldberg, 1990). The five broad personality dimensions are commonly labeled extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, emotional stability, and openness. It should be noted that these dimensions are not types, meaning that personality is made up of scores on the five dimensions. Extraversion reflects the frequency and quality of interpersonal contact, capacity for joy, activity level, and stimulation-seeking behavior. Conscientious persons are best described as dutiful, scrupulous, perseverant, punctual, and organized. Agreeable individuals are compassionate, good-natured, complying, and trusting. Emotional stability is the opposite of neuroticism. As such, emotionally stable individuals are calm, unemotional, and self-satisfied, whereas neurotic persons are nervous, touchy, anxious, depressed, and insecure. Finally, openness comprises characteristics such as curiousness, versatility, creativity, and originality (Costa & McCrae, 1992).

Previous research into the relations between parents' personalities and their parenting styles has revealed certain patterns, and there is empirical evidence for these relations for each of the five dimensions. First, extraversion appears to be associated with a parenting style characterized by high levels of support and control, or authoritative parenting (Belsky & Barends, 2002). Although another study among parents of adult twins failed to find such an association (Kendler, Sham, & MacLean, 1997), a study among parents of children under the age of 8 reported positive correlations between extraversion and positive support (Losoya, Callor, Rowe, & Goldsmith, 1997). Second, Losoya et al. (1997) found that conscientiousness was related to higher levels of supportive parenting and less negative control. Similarly, conscientious mothers of infants have prospectively been found to be more responsive (Clark, Kochanska, & Ready, 2000). Third, although agreeableness has less often been subject of study, one would intuitively expect agreeable persons to be more responsive and supportive parents (Belsky & Barends, 2002). Previous research tentatively supports this idea. Losoya et al. (1997) found agreeableness to be positively associated with positive support and inversely with negative, controlling parenting. Moreover, disagreeableness interfered with adaptive parenting, one aspect of authoritative parenting (Kochanska, Clark, & Goldman, 1997). By contrast, another study (Prinzie et al., 2004) found higher levels of parental agreeableness to be associated with increased coercion, a part of parenting that is known to be ineffective for eliciting lasting positive behavior from children (Strassberg, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994). Fourth, neuroticism, the opposite of emotional stability, has received most attention, possibly because neuroticism is thought to be most predictive (Belsky, Crnic, & Woodworth, 1995) and neurotic parents are believed to be less competent or capable of exerting authoritative parenting (Downey & Coyne, 1990; Kochanska et al., 1997). Kendler et al. (1997) found neuroticism to be related to less parental warmth. According to Prinzie et al. (2004), reduced emotional stability is associated with more overreacting (e.g., more strict control). Finally, whereas rarely studied, openness and parental support have been reported to coincide (Clark et al., 2000; Losoya et al., 1997).

Whereas a great deal of research has concentrated on the influence of personality on friendships and intimate relationships, fewer studies have focused on how personality might shape the style of parenting (Caspi et al., 2005). Most existing studies on the linkage between personality and parenting focused on mothers of toddlers and young children rather than on adolescents (e.g., Smith et al., 2007). However, it is important to concentrate on adolescence, since this is the period of time that antisocial and health-compromising behaviors develop. In addition, it has been shown that parents are still influential socializing agents, for instance through parenting style. Moreover, most knowledge in this field is based on research into relations between parental psychopathology, such as depression, and parenting (Downey & Coyne, 1990). The main aim of the present study was therefore to examine the relations between personalities and parenting styles, for mothers and fathers of adolescents, with the help of widely used and validated instruments that assess personality and parenting style. Hence, the research question in this study was: Are different aspects of personality differently related to parenting styles? We hypothesized that authoritative parents – parents that score high on support and strict control – would be more extraverted, agreeable, conscientious, emotionally stable, and open as compared to parents who employed an authoritarian, indulgent or uninvolved parenting style.

Methods

Participants and procedures

In the spring of 2003, 688 inhabitants of the Dutch city of Eindhoven participated in the Study of Medical Information and Lifestyles in Eindhoven (SMILE). The SMILE study is a joint project of Maastricht University and 23 family physicians from

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