



Parenting styles, coping strategies, and the expression of homesickness

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Abstract

The present study examined the role of parenting styles in the experience and expression of homesickness, and the way of coping with the feelings involved. Using a sample of 670 first year college and university students, aged 16 to 25, we tested three hypotheses: (1) authoritarian, permissive as well as uninvolved parenting are associated with the experience of homesickness, contrary to students with authoritative parents who are less likely to have feelings of homesickness; (2) students with authoritarian, permissive or uninvolved parents show their homesickness by internalizing and externalizing problems; and (3) students raised by authoritative or permissive parents use more effective coping strategies to deal with homesickness. Results indicated that students raised by authoritative and permissive parents experienced more homesickness with stronger feelings of homesickness than students raised by authoritarian or uninvolved parents. However, they hardly express homesickness by internalizing or externalizing problems when they use effective ways of coping, namely support-seeking and/or problem-solving. Students with parents endorsing an authoritarian or uninvolved parenting style, on the other hand, showed more internalizing and externalizing problems in reaction to feelings of homesickness. They also use less effective coping strategies. The results revealed the importance of a loving and accepting home environment for the development and expression of homesickness, as well as the importance of the way in which students learn to cope with their problems.

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	Controlling	Uncontrolling
Responsive	Authoritative parenting	Permissive parenting
Unresponsive	Authoritarian parenting	Uninvolved parenting

Fig. 1. The four parenting styles from Baumrinds model (Shaffer, 2000).

Going to college is characterized by many changes, such as moving out to live on your own, a new city, making new friends, finding your way at the university, adjusting to new situations with new routines, but also extrication from parents and missing old friends and their familiar environment (van Vliet, Stroebe, & Schut, 1998). Although many students do not confess this easily, about 60–70% of those who move to take up residency at a university develop feelings of homesickness (van Tilburg, Vingerhoets, & van Heck, 1999), of whom 7–10% develops a serious form of homesickness (Eurelings-Bontekoe, Brouwers, Verschuur, & Duijsens, 1998). Therefore, homesickness is a prevalent phenomenon among students.

What is homesickness? Several definitions are given in the literature about homesickness. There is no unambiguous definition. In this study, homesickness is defined as a negative emotional state characterized by recurrent thoughts of home, missing friends, the desire to go back to the familiar environment and often co-occurring physical complaints.

Parenting behaviour plays an important role in the emotional and social adjustment of the student and therefore in the development of homesickness (Mason, Cauce, Gonzales, Hiraga, & Grove, 1994). Two dimensions of parenting are important: the degree in which the child experiences warmth, acceptance and nurturance from parents, and the degree in which parents use restrictive control but at the same time encourage autonomy (Baumrind, 1991). These two dimensions result in four parenting styles, namely authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and uninvolved parenting (Fig. 1).

Homesickness and parenting style

Going to college is often associated with distress (van Tilburg, Vingerhoets & van Heck, 1996) and the family environment can play an important role in coping with these feelings of distress. Children with authoritative parents show high self-reliance and high self-esteem. They are more likely to become more independent individuals, who are able of making their own decisions. Three aspects of authoritative parenting are important to form a buffer against homesickness. First, the acceptance and involvement of parents have a positive influence on the socialization process of the child. Second, the support and limits parents place on their child contribute to the development of a responsible, competent individual. Third, the give-and-take features of authoritative parenting make the child more cognitively and socially competent. These aspects enhance adequate functioning outside the family (Steinberg, 2001). Children with authoritarian parents however are less likely to get the chance to become autonomous. Their parents are highly controlling, highly demanding, and do not give the child the possibility to make his or her own decisions (Leung & Kwan, 1998). The result is that the child is more likely to stay dependent on his or her parents.

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