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Correspondence between maternal and paternal parenting styles in early childhood

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Abstract

The goal of the present study was to investigate perceived similarities and differences in parenting styles between mothers and fathers in the same family. The 56 parents of 28 preschool children independently completed the parenting styles and dimensions questionnaire (PSDQ) [Robinson, C. C., Mandleco, B., Frost Olsen, S., & Hart, C. H. (2001). The parenting styles and dimensions questionnaire (PSDQ). In B. F. Perlmutter, J. Touliatos, & G. W. Holden (Eds.), *Handbook of family measurement techniques. Vol. 2: Instruments and index* (p. 190). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage]. Results reveal only modest similarity in parenting styles used by two parents within the same home. Permissive (and to a lesser extent, authoritarian) parenting was somewhat positively associated across parents but no cross-informant association was found for authoritative parenting. Fathers perceive their spouses to be more authoritative, more permissive, and less authoritarian than themselves, whereas mothers only perceive themselves to be more authoritative than fathers. Parents who share similar parenting styles are more accurate at reporting on their spouses' parenting styles than are parents with differing styles. Correspondence in parenting style across both parents in the home is important as are parental perceptions of similarity and differences in styles. Independent assessment of both mother's and father's parenting styles, and each parent's perception of their spouse's parenting appears needed in research and practical settings.

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Baumrind's (1971) dimensions of parenting style (authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive) continue to be powerful constructs in the socialization literature and are used frequently as descriptions of

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individual differences in parenting within child development research (Chao, 2001; Cohen & Rice, 1997; Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Holmbeck, Paikoff, & Brooks-Gunn, 1995). Research based on Baumrind's model has yielded fairly consistent findings on the parenting behaviors that promote positive adjustment in children, particularly among middle-class, Caucasian families (Baumrind, 1989; Chao, 2001; Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Park & Bauer, 2002; Querido, Warner, & Eyberg, 2002). Authoritative parenting (characterized by emotional supportiveness, limit setting, and firm yet responsive disciplinary strategies) is consistently associated with positive educational, social, emotional, and cognitive developmental outcomes in children. Conversely, authoritarian parenting (characterized by strong control and limited emotional support and responsiveness) and permissive parenting (characterized by high levels of emotional support/responsiveness and little discipline/control) are typically linked with poorer child outcomes (Baumrind, 1989; Chao, 2001; Park & Bauer, 2002; Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1991).

One of the major limitations of work in this area to date has been an almost exclusive focus on maternal parenting style. Indeed, there have been frequent calls in the parenting style literature for the systematic inclusion of fathers (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000; Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 2002). The role of fathers is of particular concern considering the trend of increased father involvement in children's lives among two-parent families, and decreased involvement of fathers living outside the child's home (Cabrera et al., 2000). In light of changes to the structure of American families and the changing role of fathers in child development, the relationship between dual parent child-rearing practices and children's development is seemingly more complex than previously believed. Although currently little information exists about fathers' parenting styles and possible gender differences in parenting style, there is some indication that mothers tend to demonstrate parenting practices more consistent with an authoritative style, while fathers exhibit practices more consistent with an authoritarian style, particularly with regard to disciplinary strategies (Holmbeck et al., 1995; Russell et al., 1998; Russell, Hart, Robinson, & Olsen, 2003; Tein, Roosa, & Michaels, 1994). Less is known, however, about how mothers' and fathers' parenting styles may interact to affect family functioning. An exciting trend in this area of research has been the push toward understanding the family system and, more specifically, the contributions made by both mothers and fathers combined (Cabrera et al., 2000; Deal, Halverson, & Wampler, 1989; Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001; McHale et al., 2002).

Based on a family systems perspective, mothers' and fathers' parenting styles are conceptualized as being interdependent, and the relationship between mothers' and fathers' parenting makes an important contribution to children's functioning, perhaps more important than the individual contributions of mothers' or fathers' parenting style (Block, Block, & Morrison, 1981; Gable, Crnic, & Belsky, 1994; Lindsey & Mize, 2001). As such, understanding inter-parental agreement on parenting practices for parents in the same family has become increasingly important to developmental researchers and family practitioners. Although research on the degree of correspondence between maternal and paternal self-reported parenting styles is somewhat limited, there is evidence suggesting that parents using effective authoritative parenting strategies tend to have spouses with a similar parenting style, while parents using less effective parenting strategies tend to disagree often with their spouses (Block et al., 1981; Deal et al., 1989).

The family systems perspective further suggests that the marital relationship between mothers and fathers plays an important role in children's developmental outcomes, particularly with regard to how it may affect parents' child-rearing practices (Belsky, 1981; Schoppe, Mangelsdorf, & Frosch, 2001). In fact, positive relationships have been found between marital quality, agreement on parenting style, and children's adjustment (Gable et al., 1994; Harvey, 2000; Margolin et al., 2001). Furthermore, perceived (dis)agreement between parents has been shown to be an important predictor of marital quality over

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