



## Proactive parenting practices during early adolescence: A cluster approach

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### A B S T R A C T

#### Keywords:

Proactive parenting  
Parenting practices  
Early adolescence  
Cluster analysis

The purpose of the current study was to explore clusters of proactive parenting practices, and how they might vary as a function of parental demographics, the quality of the parent–child relationship, and the traits and behaviors of the adolescent child. Data were taken from the *Flourishing Families Project*, which includes 500 families with an early adolescent child ( $M$  age = 11.49). Findings suggested that there were four clusters of parents, and patterns were similar for mothers and fathers. Findings also suggested that proactive clusters varied primarily as a function of demographics of the parent (e.g., religiosity, ethnicity, education) and the traits and behaviors of the adolescent child (e.g., empathy, internalizing and externalizing behaviors). Discussion highlights the importance of using a typological approach to study parenting, and places particular emphasis on parents' use of pre-arming (alone, or in conjunction with other practices) in an attempt to avoid misbehavior before it occurs.

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Most scholars agree that parents play a significant role in the socialization of adolescents, but parenting is often conceptualized in a variety of different ways, with a variety of different outcomes. In an attempt to better organize the broad concept of parenting, Darling and Steinberg (1993) suggested an important distinction between parenting styles and parenting practices. More specifically, parenting styles are indicative of the overarching emotional climate that the parent creates for socialization, while parenting practices are intentional parental behaviors in response to specific socialization goals. While parenting styles (also referred to as indirect parental influences; Ladd & Pettit, 2002) impact the adolescent's willingness to comply; parenting practices (also referred to as direct parental influences) generally have a direct impact on adolescents' behavior. This distinction between parenting styles and practices (or between indirect and direct parenting) has been an important framework for the last decade of research that has greatly expanded our understanding of the parent–child relationship. For example, a great deal is known about various parenting practices such as induction and power assertion, and how indirect parental influences moderate the relation between practices and child outcomes (e.g., Kochanska, Aksan, Knaack, & Rhines, 2004; Mounts, 2002). However, the largest body of research on direct parenting practices has focused on reactive parenting practices, or parental responses after the child transgresses (for reviews, see Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998; Grusec, 2002; Maccoby, 2007). In contrast, proactive parenting practices, or parenting that involves anticipatory rather than reactive techniques, is less prominent and lacks a unified definition of what constitutes “proactive” parenting. Thus, the purpose of the current study was to examine typologies or clusters of different parental approaches to proactive parenting, and to explore correlates of these typologies.

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## Proactive parenting practices

It should be noted that much of the socialization literature contains parenting practices that could be considered proactive, such as parental support, praise, monitoring, and involvement. Indeed, reactive parenting is also somewhat proactive in nature, as parents often discipline in an attempt to avoid future misbehavior. However, few studies have purposively separated proactive and reactive parenting practices, and even fewer have examined proactive parenting practices during adolescence. Developmentally, proactive practices during childhood look much different than during adolescence, and are likely motivated by different parental goals. Indeed, proactive attempts during childhood may be motivated by parents' desires to avoid specific instances of misbehavior (e.g., tantrum in the grocery store), while proactive practices during late childhood and early adolescence are more likely motivated by parents' attempts to pre-empt potentially conflicting values messages or influences that become more prominent during adolescence (Padilla-Walker, 2006; Padilla-Walker & Thompson, 2005). This approach to parenting takes place prior to misbehavior, which is unique in that it is not accompanied by the heightened emotional response that often coincides with a child's transgression.

Holden (1983) explained proactive parenting as using preventative control techniques, such as those highlighted in his study on mothers who anticipated and directed the development of their children by preventing misbehavior in the supermarket. Since Holden's introduction to proactive parenting, research on this topic has been characterized by three main uses of the term "proactive". The first is among studies of minority parents who teach positive racial socialization messages and important life skills in anticipation of discrimination (Barr & Neville, 2008; Letiecq, 2007). The second conceptualizes parental monitoring as a proactive parenting practice because parents are actively seeking knowledge about their child in an effort to prevent misbehavior (Kosterman, Hawkins, Guo, Catalano, & Abbott, 2000; Lansford et al., 2006). The third most closely resembles Holden's definition and captures the active and anticipatory process of parents to head off problems before they occur. These studies describe, as a part of this preventative process, teaching, involvement, prohibition, and redirecting of attention (Gardner, Ward, Burton, & Wilson, 2003; Mounts, 2002; Nikken & Jansz, 2006; Pettit, Laird, Dodge, Bates, & Criss, 2001; Putnam, Spritz, & Stifter, 2002).

Regardless of the definitions used for proactive parenting, results have linked proactive parenting practices with improved outcomes for children. Proactive parenting is associated with fewer conduct and behavior problems (Gardner, Shaw, Dishion, Burton, & Supplee, 2007; Pettit, Keiley, Laird, Bates, & Dodge, 2007), delay of alcohol and drug use (Hawkins et al., 1997; Kosterman et al., 2000), and improved delay of gratification in children (Putnam et al., 2002). However, these results are largely found in studies examining young children (Gardner et al., 2007; Holden & West, 1989), with far fewer studies looking at the influence of proactive parenting practices during adolescence (with the exception of parents' mediation of media and management of peers). In addition, few scholars have distinguished between different proactive parenting practices and their associated benefits for children and adolescents. Thus, the purpose of the current study was to examine parents' patterns of proactive parenting practices (using a cluster analysis approach), and how these combinations of proactive parenting were related to demographics of the parent, the quality of the parent-child relationship, and traits and behaviors of the adolescent child.

## Specific proactive parenting practices

Goodnow (1997, 2002) suggested two specific proactive approaches parents might use to combat potentially conflicting values messages in order to prevent misbehavior. The first is *cocooning*, in which parents seek to shelter their child from outside influences. Cocooning, as described by Padilla-Walker and Thompson (2005), is the most controlling proactive parenting practice, as parents actively seek to align exterior influences on children with their personal values or wishes. Other researchers have found support for this parenting practice, although it may not have been labeled as such. For example, Letiecq (2007) described African American parents' attempts to reduce outside influence in the home by restricting violent media, and Mounts (2002) assessed parents' prohibition of undesired friendships in her work on parental management of peer relationships.

Another proactive parenting practice is *pre-arming* (Bugental & Goodnow, 1998), where parents provide the child with some plan, or "advance arming" to face the outside world (p. 434), thus anticipating potential problems for the child and preparing them to meet this opposition with success. This socialization tactic has been effective for minority parents in preparing their children to successfully manage racial stereotypes and hostility faced outside the home (Barr & Neville, 2008; Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan, & Buriel, 1990), and has been linked to lower levels of association with deviant peers (Mounts, 2002).

In addition to cocooning and pre-arming, studies have identified another proactive parenting practice termed *deference* (Padilla-Walker, 2006; Padilla-Walker & Thompson, 2005). Deference is a proactive strategy with high levels of autonomy, in which parents purposefully allow their child to be exposed to outside influences with little advanced teaching or ammunition. Parental deference is often discussed by parents as an active attempt to show trust and to avoid overreacting and alienating their child, or to prevent conflict (Padilla-Walker, 2006). Denham et al. (2000) explained that parents sometimes choose not to intervene in child decision making with the explanation, "I trust my child to behave as he should, even when I am not with him" (p. 30). The parental justification in this instance often centers on having already taught the child the relevant values, and now represents the parents' attempt to provide autonomy. Taken together, different names and labels have been used to

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