



## Impact of parental emotional support and coercive control on adolescents' self-esteem and psychological distress: Results of a four-year longitudinal study



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### A B S T R A C T

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This study aims at investigating the impact of parental practices on youths' adjustment. In all, 605 adolescents completed questionnaires at ages 14, 16 and 18. Self-esteem, psychological distress as well as parental emotional support and coercive control were measured. Analyses based on individual growth models revealed that self-esteem increased with age, but psychological distress remained stable over time. Boys reported higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of psychological distress than girls. Maternal and paternal emotional support reinforced self-esteem over time. Maternal coercive control undermined self-esteem, but only at ages 16 and 18. Psychological distress decreased with parental emotional support but increased with parental coercive control at ages 14, 16 and 18. Overall, these results indicate that positive parental practices are related to youths' well-being. These findings support the importance of establishing intervention strategies designed to promote best practices among parents of teenagers to help them develop into well-adjusted adults.

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Youths face various changes in their body and their cognitive development during adolescence. They navigate between self-identity development and graduated autonomy, but are still influenced by their relationship with their parents. This important relationship in turn has an effect on their psychological adjustment. Despite extensive research and theoretical work in this area, few longitudinal studies have been conducted on the impact of parenting during adolescence. The objective of this study is to investigate the impact of parental emotional support and coercive control on adolescents' self-esteem and psychological distress between the ages of 14 and 18.

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## Parenting: parental emotional support and coercive control

Despite the multiple ways in which parenting practices have been operationalized (Bellerose, Cadieux, & Noël, 2001; Picard, Claes, Melançon, & Miranda, 2007) and classified (e.g., Baumrind, 1996; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979), parenting has historically been associated with emotional support and control (Bellerose et al., 2001; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Parental emotional support refers to parents' emotional characteristics, such as warmth, acceptance, attention, responsiveness, involvement and support (Deschesnes, Shaefer, & Couture, 1997; Huver, Otten, de Vries, & Engels, 2010). The definition of parental control may differ depending on which behavior it refers to. Adequate parental control refers to an adequate level of boundaries, demandingness, protection and supervision (Baumrind, 1966; Maccoby & Martin, 1983), while parental coercive control involves overprotection, overcontrol, intrusion, rejection or even hostility (Bellerose et al., 2001; Deschesnes et al., 1997; Parker et al., 1979; Rohner, Khaleque, & Cournoyer, 2005).

## Factors influencing parental emotional support and control

Levels of parental emotional support have been found to vary depending on various characteristics, such as the age and gender of the adolescent. Previous studies have found that younger adolescent boys and girls perceive more support from both their mother and their father than older adolescents do (Bellerose et al., 2001; DeGoede, Branje, & Meeus, 2009; Meeus, Iedema, Maassen, & Engels, 2005; Rey, Bird, Kopec-Schrader, & Richards, 1993). Nonetheless, from middle adolescence to late adolescence, perceived emotional support may stabilize, although DeGoede et al. (2009) report that it appears to increase slightly among girls in their study.

Adolescents' age and gender may also influence their perception of parental coercive control. In Bellerose et al.'s (2001) study, there is no difference in perceived coercive control from the father, but 16-year-old adolescents perceive more control from their mother. Rey et al. (1993) highlighted a slight but significant difference between boys' and girls' perceptions of parenting, girls perceiving their fathers as being more controlling than boys do. Subsequent studies have also proposed that boys may perceive a higher level of permissiveness (or less control) from their parents than girls do, suggesting that parents may be more restrictive with girls than with boys (Bellerose et al., 2001; Claes & Lacourse, 2001; McKinney & Renk, 2008; Radziszewska, Richardson, Dent, & Flay, 1996). Mothers and fathers may adopt different parenting behaviors based on their child's gender.

Levels of parental control and emotional support may also vary according to the parents' gender (Conrade & Ho, 2001; Deschesnes et al., 1997; McKinney & Renk, 2008; Parker et al., 1979; Rey et al., 1993). Research suggests that mothers are generally more caring (Deschesnes et al., 1997; Parker et al., 1979) and slightly more overprotective than fathers (Parker et al., 1979). Mothers are more likely to be perceived as authoritative (adequate level of control, and high level of warmth, democracy and responsiveness) or permissive (high level of warmth and responsiveness, and low level of control and demandingness) than fathers (Conrade & Ho, 2001; McKinney & Renk, 2008). Meanwhile, fathers are sometimes perceived as more authoritarian (high level of control and low level of warmth and responsiveness) than mothers, although results reportedly vary across studies (Conrade & Ho, 2001; McKinney & Renk, 2008).

Because adolescents' needs vary according to their age and the developmental challenges they face, parents' levels of control should vary according to these needs and therefore decrease as the child matures, while parental emotional support seems to remain essential in every developmental stage of adolescence (Hamburg, 1974; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). However, the separation process may reduce the level of support needed from the parents as adolescents grow up (Meeus et al., 2005). Overall, results of previous studies suggest that adolescents' perceptions of their parents' coercive control and emotional support change over time. More studies are thus needed to better understand these changes in various relationship characteristics (DeGoede et al., 2009).

## *Self-esteem and parenting*

A high level of self-esteem is commonly associated with psychological well-being (Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, & Rosenberg, 1995) and happiness (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). Adolescence is a critical period of change in the development of self-esteem (Seidah, Bouffard, & Vezeau, 2004). In their meta-analysis, Robins, Tryesniewski, Tracy, Gosling, and Potter (2002) examine the trajectory of self-esteem across the lifespan. They conclude that self-esteem levels, which are generally high during childhood, drop significantly during adolescence and rise gradually throughout adulthood (Robins et al., 2002). Nevertheless, according to other authors, these variations would be relatively small (Huang, 2010; Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999). During childhood, self-esteem levels would not differ by gender (Breton, Légaré, Laverdure, & D'Amours, 1999; Robins et al., 2002) but in the adolescence period, self-esteem levels would decrease more for girls than for boys (Birndorf, Ryan, Auinger, & Aten, 2005; Breton et al., 1999; Robins et al., 2002; Seidah et al., 2004) and would remain lower for women throughout adulthood (Robins et al., 2002).

In most studies, adolescents' self-esteem has been positively associated with perceived parental emotional support (Breton et al., 1999; DeHart, Pelham, & Tennen, 2006; Herz & Gullone, 1999) and negatively associated with perceived parental coercive control (Aquilino & Supple, 2001; DeHart et al., 2006; Herz & Gullone, 1999; Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Luyten, Duriez, & Goossens, 2005). Moreover, McKinney, Milone, and Renk (2011) and Milevsky, Schlechter, Netter, and Keehn (2007) report that an authoritative parenting style, generally characterized by a high level of emotional support and adequate control

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