

Contributions of Parental Empathy to Parenting Processes During Adolescence

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Parenting Tasks During Adolescence

- Parent-child relationships undergo a developmental shift during the adolescent period.
 - Specifically, parents are charged with maintaining an appropriate amount of control while encouraging adolescents to become more autonomous (Soenens et al., 2007).
 - Parents of adolescents who are successful in granting appropriate levels of autonomy while maintaining connection have children who report more empathy and self-regulation (e.g., Padilla-Walker & Christensen, 2011).
 - Whereas parent-child relationships marked by intrusive behaviors are associated with internalizing and externalizing difficulties (e.g., Gruhn et al., 2016).

Thus, better understanding the factors that affect parenting during the adolescent years is prudent as it may illuminate how to foster positive developmental outcomes during the teen years and beyond.

Determinants of Parenting

Per Belsky's (1984) model of the determinants of parenting (see Figure 1), parenting characteristics (e.g., personality) directly impact parenting practices, beliefs, and behaviors (Belsky, 1984).

Indeed, the literature has demonstrated that factors such as personality (e.g., Bornstein, Hahn, & Haynes, 2011) and psychopathology (e.g., Murray et al., 2012) are related to parenting behavior, practices, and beliefs.

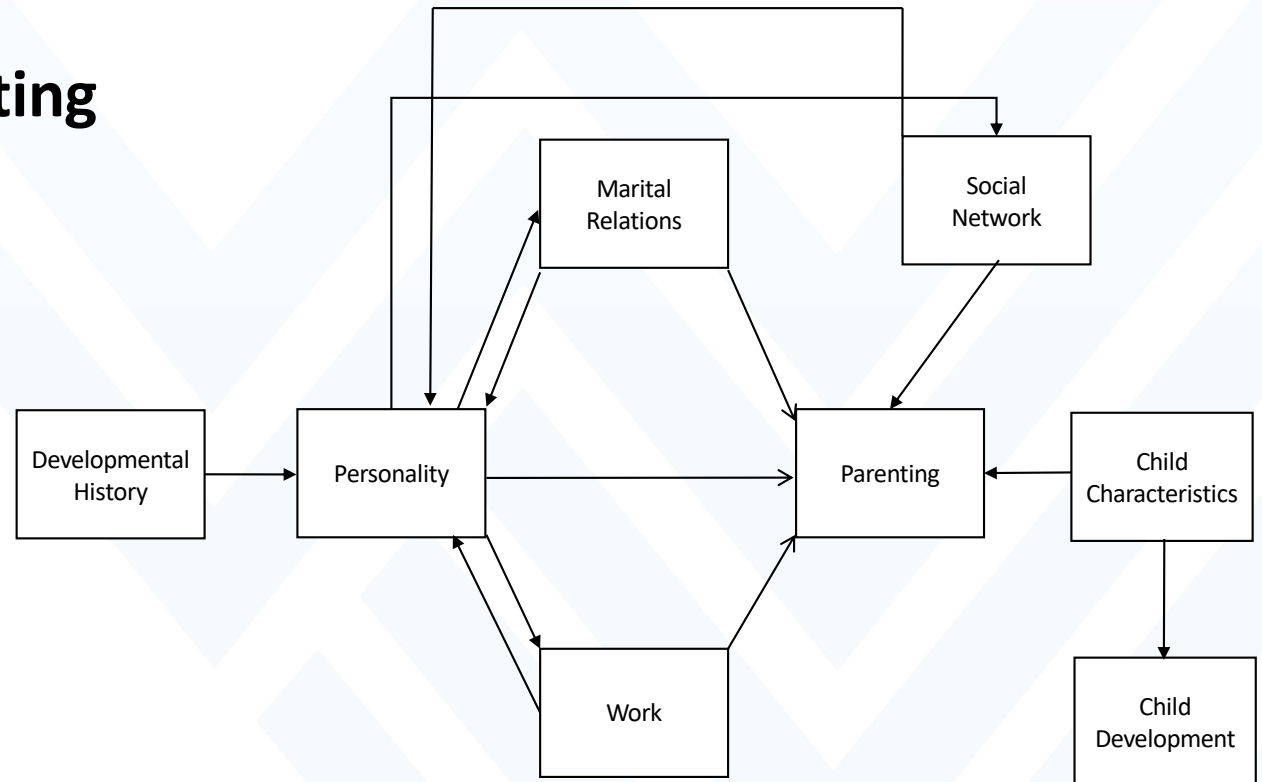


Figure 1. Belsky's (1984) process model of the determinants of parenting.

Empathy and Parenting

- The goal of parenting is to be child-centered (e.g., goodness-of-fit). There are certain traits that are known to promote better ability to relate with others, including perspective-taking and empathy (e.g., Portt et al., 2020).
- Parental empathy has been linked to parenting processes.
 - Parental empathetic understanding is linked to secure attachment relationships during infancy (e.g., Oppenheim, Koren-Karie, & Sagi, 2001).
 - Parent-infant relationships improve after adolescent mothers are taught how to be infant-centered, or make parenting decisions based on the best interest of the infant (Deustcher, Fewell, & Gross, 2006).
 - However, it is virtually unknown how parental empathy relates to the parenting process beyond the early childhood period.

Method: Participants

- Data were drawn from a larger, longitudinal study on adolescents
 - 295 teens; $M_{age}=15.12$, $SD=.49$; 51.7% female
 - 286 mothers (84.2% biological mothers); $M_{age}=43.97$, $SD= 6.53$
 - 94 fathers (76.8% biological fathers); $M_{age}=47.21$, $SD= 7.96$
- Data included herein were from two waves of data collection, and from both parent- and adolescent-reported measures.

Method: Instrumentation

- Adolescents rated their mothers and fathers on:
 - Psychological control
 - Barber (1996)
 - Cronbach's alpha = .90_{Mother} .92_{Father}
 - "Brings up past mistakes when s/he criticizes me." "Will avoid looking at me when I have disappointed her/him."
- Parents rated their own:
 - Empathy
 - Davis (1983)
 - Cronbach's alpha = .82_{Mother} .76_{Father}
 - "I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective."
 - Emotion socialization practices
 - Karnilowicz & Mauss (unpublished)
 - Cronbach's alpha = .73_{Supportive Mother} ; .79_{Unsupportive Mother} ; .73_{Supportive Father} ; .84_{Unsupportive Father}
 - "Imagine your child has a big test coming up and is feeling nervous."
 - Supportive: I would help my child my child think of things they could do to get ready for the test.
 - Unsupportive: I would tell my child that they are being dramatic.

Results

- Regression analyses were conducted separately for mothers and fathers.
- Maternal empathy was:
 - Concurrently associated with less maternal unsupportive responses to negative emotions and more maternal supportive responses to negative emotions.
 - Longitudinally associated with less maternal psychological control, as rated by teens.
- Paternal empathy was:
 - Concurrently associated with more paternal supportive responses to negative emotions.

Table 1. Regression Analyses Predicting Maternal Parenting

Predictors	Maternal Supportive Responses			Maternal Unsupportive Responses			Maternal Psychological Control		
	Wave 2			Wave 2			Wave 3		
	R	ΔR^2	β	R	ΔR^2	β	R	ΔR^2	β
Gender	0.11	0.01	0.09	0.09	.008	0.09	0.22	0.05**	0.22
Maternal Empathy	0.28	0.07**	0.26	0.26	0.06**	-0.24	0.31	0.05**	-0.21

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$

Table 2. Regression Analyses Predicting Paternal Parenting

Predictors	Paternal Supportive Responses			Paternal Unsupportive Responses			Paternal Psychological Control		
	Wave 2			Wave 2			Wave 3		
	R	ΔR^2	β	R	ΔR^2	β	R	ΔR^2	β
Gender	0.16	0.02	.16	0.21	0.04	0.21	0.05	.003	0.05
Paternal Empathy	0.32	0.08*	.28	0.22	.008	-0.09	0.15	0.02	-.14

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$

Conclusions & Future Directions

Maternal empathy was related concurrently and longitudinally with indices of more adaptive parenting, including their own report of responses to teens emotions and teens' report of mothers' intrusive/controlling behaviors.

- Provides initial evidence for the importance of maternal empathetic understanding beyond the early years of life to parenting processes.
- Child-centered, or adolescent-centered approaches, likely continue to be the most adaptive ways to parent through the teen years (e.g., Talwar, Nitz, & Lerner, 1990).

Paternal empathy was related concurrently to their own report of supportive responses to emotions.

- Paternal responses to emotions may be influenced by other factors, including mothers' parenting practices and involvement (e.g., Day & Padilla-Walker, 2009).
- The influence of paternal characteristics on parenting may interact with teen personality (e.g., Prinzie et al., 2012).

Future research should focus on:

- Examining the contribution of parental empathy to adolescent outcomes.
- Better understanding how parental empathy is linked to parents' satisfaction with their relationship with their teen.
 - Investigating empathetic responding to child, rather than general empathy/perspective-taking ability as examined herein.