

## Parental Control and Maturity Demands in Australia

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**ABSTRACT** This research was conducted in Brisbane, Australia. One hundred mothers and 55 fathers of preschool-aged children constituted the sample. A questionnaire was used to gather information on family demographics and parental beliefs about parental control and maturity demands from preschool-aged children. It was found that there were no parent gender differences in parental control and maturity demands from preschool-aged children. Child gender differences were also not observed for parental control and maturity demands. A higher percentage of mothers and fathers belonged to permissive category of parenting style. With increase in children's age, firm control and expectations for mature behaviour increased. More educated parents were less likely to use harsh and lax control. With higher parental education demands for self-control increased.

### INTRODUCTION

Parenting style is displayed in a wider range of parent-child interactions. Parenting style is parents' attitudes toward their children. Baumarind (1973, 1977) classified parenting style into three categories: authoritarian, authoritative and permissive. Parents belonging to authoritarian category are highly controlling. These parents are less likely to use reasoning and more likely to use harsh methods to control their children. They value obedience. Authoritative parents although high in control but their demands are developmentally appropriate. They are firm in control and use reasoning with their children. They are also warm and affectionate. Permissive parents are nondemanding and lax in control, but are generally warm and affectionate.

Kochanska (1990) reports that attitudes mothers held about child-rearing practices are related to their parenting practices in real life. Mothers who believe in an authoritarian child-rearing pattern are controlling and directive during naturalistic interactions with their children. Whereas mothers who believe in an authoritative pattern are likely to use positive ways of controlling their children. These mothers are

more responsive to their children's demands and requests. In another study, Holden, Coleman and Schmidt (1995) also report that mothers who believe spanking to be useful disciplinary technique in parenting are likely to use this technique with their own children.

So it is evident that parental beliefs about discipline and parental control practices are related to their own behaviour in real-life.

In the present study an attempt has been made to investigate parents' beliefs about parental control practices and maturity demands from their preschool-aged children.

### MATERIAL AND METHODS

#### Subjects

The subjects of this study were parents of 100 four to six year old preschool children (100 mothers and 55 fathers) from Brisbane, Australia. Mothers of 45 girls and 55 boys; and fathers of 29 girls and 26 boys participated. The feasibility of the research necessitated nonprobability sampling.

#### Data Collection

A number of child care centres, kindergartens and preschools were approached for participation of the families involved with those centres. Consent forms and information sheets regarding the research project were sent to families whose children were 4 to 6 years old. As Australia is a multicultural country having families from different origin places, parents were invited to participate if both parents were Australians of long-term residence. Parents of 127 children originally agreed to participate. One or two parents from 100 families completed parental questionnaires. These 100 families constituted the sample. One hundred mothers and 55 fathers returned questionnaires.

With regard to education of parents, 63% mothers and 58% fathers were university educated; 17% mothers and 25% fathers were + 2 level or diploma holders; and 20% mothers and 17% fathers were high school educated. Of the mothers, 33% were working full time, 32% were working part-time and 26% were home managers. The majority of fathers (78%) were working full time.

The mean age of target children was 59 months ( $SD = 5.41$  months). The mean age of mothers was 35 years ( $SD = 4.97$  years) and fathers was 37 years ( $SD = 6.31$  years).

### Measures and Procedure

Two scales, Parental Control and Maturity Demands developed by Greenberger (1988) were used. Parents were requested to rate the frequency of their control practices on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*always*). Parental control scale has three subscales: Firm Control, Harsh Control and Lax Control. Component scores were calculated for parental control. Parents were also requested to rate their expectations on a 7-point Maturity Demands Scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*always*). This scale also contains three subscales: Self-Control, Independent Behaviour and Prosocial Behaviour.

Parenting style was categorised from the component scores on the Parental Control Scale and the total score on the Maturity Demands Scale. Scores were cross-classified on the two parenting scales and median scores were used to identify parenting style.

Questionnaires were sent to the parents who had volunteered to participate in the study. They were provided with reply-paid envelopes to return the completed questionnaires. Mothers and fathers were requested to complete the questionnaires separately.

### RESULTS

A two-way MANOVA was performed using parent gender (mothers, fathers) and sex of child (male, female) as independent variables and parental control (firm, harsh, lax) as the dependent variables. This was followed by univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) (alpha

set at .05).  $F$  statistics for Wilk's Lambda are reported. The main effects for parent gender and sex of child were not significant,  $F_s(3, 149) = 2.22$  and  $.29$  respectively,  $p > .05$ . There was no significant interaction between parent gender by sex of child,  $F(3, 149) = .86$ ,  $p > .05$ . Means and standard deviations are presented in table 1.

**Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations for Parental Control Measure**

| Parental control measures | Mothers<br><i>n</i> = 100 |      | Fathers<br><i>n</i> = 55 |      |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|------|--------------------------|------|
|                           | Mean                      | SD   | Mean                     | SD   |
| Firm control              | 48.29                     | 5.38 | 46.87                    | 5.65 |
| Harsh control             | 32.41                     | 8.97 | 34.55                    | 9.27 |
| Lax control               | 35.33                     | 7.90 | 35.91                    | 8.41 |

A two-way MANOVA was also performed using parent gender (mothers, fathers) and sex of child (male, female) as independent variables and parental expectations for mature behaviour (self-control behaviour, independent behaviour, prosocial behaviour) as dependent variables. The main effects for parent gender and sex of child were not significant,  $F_s(3, 149) = 1.38$  and  $.40$  respectively,  $p > .05$ . Interaction between parent gender by sex of child was also not significant,  $F(3, 149) = 1.59$ ,  $p > .05$ . Means and standard deviations are presented in table 2.

**Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations for Maturity Demand Measure**

| Maturity demand measures | Mothers<br><i>n</i> = 100 |      | Fathers<br><i>n</i> = 55 |      |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|------|--------------------------|------|
|                          | Mean                      | SD   | Mean                     | SD   |
| Self-control behaviour   | 55.38                     | 7.85 | 56.35                    | 7.65 |
| Independent behaviour    | 43.82                     | 4.54 | 42.98                    | 5.06 |
| Prosocial behaviour      | 26.42                     | 3.29 | 25.82                    | 3.39 |

Correlations were run to examine associations between firm, harsh, lax control and age of children; and firm, harsh, lax control and education of parents. As presented in Table 3, there existed a significant moderate positive correlation between firm control and age of children,  $r = .30$ ,  $p < .005$ . There were negative correlations between harsh and lax control and education of parents,  $r_s = -.28$  and  $-.17$  respectively,  $p_s < .005$  and  $.05$  respectively. These results suggest that

with increase in children's age firm control increases. Also with higher parental education harsh and lax control decrease.

Correlations were also run to examine associations between maturity demand sub-scales (demand for independent, prosocial and self-control behaviours) and age of children; and between maturity demand sub-scales and education of parents. As shown in table 3, positive correlations existed between age of children and expectations for independent, prosocial and self-control behaviours,  $r_s = .36, .27$  and  $.19$  respectively,  $p_s < .005$  and  $.05$  respectively. Marginal positive correlation was also found between demands for self-control and education of parents,  $r = .17, p < .05$ . These results indicate that with increase in children's age demands for mature behaviour increase. Also with higher parental education demand for self-control increases.

**Table 3: Correlations Between Children's Age, Parents' Education and Parental Control and Maturity Demand Sub-scales**

|                    | Parental Control |       |        | Maturity Demands |        |         |
|--------------------|------------------|-------|--------|------------------|--------|---------|
|                    | Firm             | Harsh | Lax    | Inde-            | Proso- | Self-   |
|                    |                  |       |        | pendent          | social | control |
| Children's Age     | .30*             | .10   | .06    | .36*             | .27*   | .19**   |
| Parent's Education | .12              | -.28* | -.17** | .05              | .09    | .17**   |

Note. Significant at \* $p < .005$ , \*\* $p < .05$

With regard to parenting style categories, 80% of the total sample of mothers and 75% of the fathers could be classified as belonging to one of the four categories identified by Greenberger (1988). The frequencies and percentage distributions of parenting style categories are presented in table 4. A high proportion of parents fell into the permissive category.

$\chi^2$  was computed to examine the parent gender differences in parental style categories. There were no significant differences in two groups,  $\chi^2 (3, n = 121) = 2.67, p > .05$ .

**Table 4: Frequency Distribution of Parenting Style Categories**

| Parenting Style Categories | Mothers |      | Fathers |      |
|----------------------------|---------|------|---------|------|
|                            | n=80    | %    | n=41    | %    |
| Permissive                 | 29      | 36.3 | 17      | 41.5 |
| Mixed                      | 16      | 20.0 | 12      | 29.3 |
| Authoritarian              | 17      | 21.3 | 6       | 14.6 |
| Authoritative              | 18      | 22.5 | 6       | 14.6 |

## DISCUSSION

In the present research it was found that mothers' and fathers' held similar beliefs about parental control practices. Also mothers' and fathers' had similar expectations of mature behaviour from their preschool-aged children. With regard to parenting style, a higher percentage of mothers and fathers were permissive in their parenting style. Greenberger and Goldberg (1989) also found that in their sample a higher percentage of mothers and fathers belonged to permissive category. Bachtold (1982) also reported that parents are more likely to have permissive attitudes toward children.

Parents used similar parental control practices with their sons and daughters. These findings get support from Balda and Irving (1998) that mothers and fathers used similar disciplinary techniques for their preschool-aged sons and daughters. The present study does not support the findings by Bronstein (1994) that parents tend to use different control techniques for sons and daughters. One of the reason might be that in the present study the participants were parents of preschool-aged children (4 to 6 years).

Parents also had similar expectations of mature behaviour from their preschool-aged sons and daughters. These results get support from the findings of Verma and Ghandially (1985) that the mothers did not differentiate between boys and girls in the number of demands they placed on their children.

With increase in children's age firm control increased. In an Australian study, Ross (1984) found that parents of older children preferred to use authoritative disciplinary style. Education of the parents seems to have a great impact on parental control practices. Compared to less educated parents, more educated parents were less likely to use harsh and lax control and were more likely to use firm control. These results are in line with previous research (Balda and Irving, 1998; Najman et al., 1994).

With regard to demands for mature behaviour, parental expectations for mature behaviour increased with increase in children's age. The reason might be that parents believed as children grow older they acquire more knowledge about their own behaviour (Dix et al., 1989).

Also more educated parents had higher expectations for mature behaviour. Similar results were found by Balda et al. (1999) in an Indian study.

Few limitations in the present research are apparent. First, self-report measures of parental beliefs and practices were used. Questionnaires have been considered as valuable for obtaining parental beliefs and practices (Tauliatos et al., 1990). Holden and Edwards (1989) reported that parent questionnaires may be unreliable and inaccurate. Parents may not provide accurate information about their actual parenting practices. Second, the sample was homogenous, the majority of parents were highly educated. This limits the generalisability of results to other groups within Australian society.

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