

Parental Support and Development of Peer Social Status among Children in India

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Abstract

This article examines differential expressions of parental support offered to 150 children in the South Orissa region of India. The authors compare and contrast uses of parental power, love and permissiveness as they impact children's developing self-concept and social adjustment. Using questionnaires, 7th and 8th grade students between the ages of 12 and 15 were asked for details regarding parents' disciplinary practices and parental support. Children's responses were rated according to the primary mode of disciplinary practice used by their parents. The authors found significant differences in parental support by gender, with boys experiencing more permissive forms of discipline. Most parents of boys used parent-child discussion to correct them, whereas parents of girls used love withdrawal techniques, such as anger and silence. The authors suggest that these differences in support play a key role in the development of children's social competence and self-esteem. To address gender differences in parental support, the authors suggest a counseling program for parents that would teach more egalitarian childrearing practices and strengthen relationships between parents and their daughters.

Introduction

The family is both the earliest and the most sustained source of social contact for children. Parents filter cultural beliefs, values, and attitudes and present them to children in highly personalized, selective ways (Hetherington & Parke, 1986). Family and peer systems are linked, in that families directly and indirectly influence children's peer competency via the parent-child relationship (Parke, MacDonald, Burks, Bhaungri, Barth, & Beitel, 1989). Family income, family size, parental occupation, neighborhood quality, and parental control

also influence the peer relationships of adolescents (Muni & Chaudhury, 1997).

Parental support has been defined by different researchers in different ways. Often it refers to assistance given to children to ease mental stress and unhappiness. This is one of the fundamental ways in which parents provide support to children. However, the manner in which they do this varies depending on the child's physical and psychological capacities and on the parent's caregiving abilities. Parental support is a way of maintaining physical and psychological closeness between parent and child, but it may also involve a degree of parental control when children need help regulating their behavior or developing social and intellectual competence. For example, in situations in which adolescent children may be prone to engage in conflict, parents are likely to deescalate the conflict by creating a family atmosphere of warm approval, praise, and acceptance, and by offering reasons for a requested change in behavior. It can be said that parents are ultimately responsible for helping children become independent and for creating a family environment that helps them develop the ability to be flexible in different surroundings. For these reasons, among others, parental support is vital not only to individual children but also to society at large. When parents use positive means to motivate and guide, children become better family members, better social partners, and better citizens.

Three types of disciplinary techniques are adopted by parents to control children's negative behavior: power-oriented/power-assertion, love-oriented/love-withdrawal, and induction/permissiveness. Power-assertion and love-withdrawal types of discipline affect young adolescents both

physically and emotionally. Induction forms of disciplinary practice are some of the most important forms of parenting because children obtain higher levels of parental support through induction, which in turn enhances positive self-concept and future adjustment (Rath & Patnaik, 1998).

Love-oriented techniques are not unilaterally positive, and power-oriented techniques are not invariably harsh. Boys who have developed conflictual styles of relating may interact better with peers, whereas discipline that relies heavily on power-oriented methods may incite more anger and rebellion than it quells. As for love-oriented positive methods, there is no evidence that threats to withdraw love jeopardizes independence (Rogers, 1977). Love-oriented discipline may or may not be permissive. Permissive discipline suggests relatively flexible and relaxed controls, but it should not be confused with ultra permissive discipline, which means simply the absence of controls. Extreme permissiveness sometimes leads to a lack of concern for others and a decline in gratitude, guilt, and other emotions of personal involvement (Rogers, 1977).

The harmonious parent neither studiously exercises control nor avoids such exercise. She simply achieves a quality of harmony in the home and develops principles that resolve difficulties with her children and result in proper behavior. Although she recognizes her greater power, she does not put her child at a disadvantage. Overall, she displays high esteem for such values as honesty, harmony, justice, and rationality in human relations (Rogers, 1977).

Parents have both direct and indirect influences on their children's interactions with peers (Ladd & Lesieur, 1995). Parents' involvement, warmth, and moderate control appear to be important in the development of children's social competence. Within the social nest of the family, children learn certain social skills and behaviors that transfer to their interactions with peers (Putallaz & Heflin, 1990).

The objectives of the study were:

- To differentiate types of parenting received by boys and girls in Indian society and to identify levels of parental support.
- To compare family demographic profiles among boys and girls.
- To determine differences, if any, in the development of peer social status between boys and girls.

Methodology

The sample of 150 children was drawn from the town of Berhampur in the South Orissa region (India). The sample was evenly divided by gender, with 75 boys and 75 girls between the ages of 12 and 15 years. All were students of the Anglo Vedic School of Berhampur Town for Comparative Study. Access to the setting was made via personal contact with the school principal, who gave permission to collect the data. Questionnaires were distributed among the seventh- and eighth-grade students. The following instruments were used in the present study for collecting the data: 1) assessment of maternal disciplinary practices, 2) family demographic profile scale, and 3) sociometric analysis of peer status, all of which are described further below.

Assessment of maternal disciplinary practices

In the state of Orissa, fathers are customarily regarded as embodying the key executive function, as well as assuming responsibility for the family's financial burden. Household activities and childrearing are performed by the mother. For these reasons, we chose an instrument to measure disciplinary practices and parental support received by both boys and girls. The interview schedule consisted of 15 hypothetical situations that occur commonly in everyday family routines. For each situation there were 12 possible responses, 4 from each category of disciplinary technique. The four responses are related either to the power-assertion, the love-withdrawal, or

the induction type of disciplinary technique. Children's responses were rated as falling into one of the three categories of disciplinary practices.

1. Power assertion: Responses indicating use of direct commands, threats, and physical force.
2. Love withdrawal: Responses indicating use of anger, disapproval of the child's behavior, and refusal to speak to the child.
3. Induction: Responses indicating that mothers pointed out painful consequences of the child's act for parents and others. Parents using this type of discipline are generally regarded as supportive, cooperative, and warm.

Scoring: Responses were first categorized and then scored. Each response was given a score. All responses scored under each category of disciplinary practices were totaled. The highest score was considered as characterizing the predominant maternal disciplinary technique.

Family demographic profile scale

A profile scale was one of the primary means of gathering information regarding parental education, family income, number of family members, child's age, and parental occupation. The schedules were distributed to the participating children, who filled them out on their own. The items and scoring follow:

- I. Parental education was rated on a 3-point scale:
Score 1: Class 10th—under graduation.
Score 2: Graduation.
Score 3: Post graduation and above

- II. Parental income was rated on a 3-point scale:

Score 1: Rupees (Rs.) 0/— to Rs. 3,000/—

Score 2: Rs. 3,000/— to Rs. 6,000/—

Score 3: Rs. 6,001/— and above

- III. Total number of family members.

- IV. Age of the children.

- V. Parental occupation was rated on a 3-point scale:

Score 1: Small grocery shop owners, fourth-class employees, whose income level was Rs. 0 to Rs. 3,000/—

Score 2: School teacher, junior assistant, whose income level was Rs. 3001/— to Rs. 6,000/—

Score 3: Doctor, engineer, lecturer, and lawyer whose income level was Rs. 6001/— and above.

Sociometric analysis

Peer social status was evaluated by the degree to which the child identified himself or herself as accepted or rejected by peers and friends.

Score 1: Rejected children

Score 2: Isolated children (neither accepted nor rejected)

Score 3: Preadolescents whose acceptance and rejection numbers were equal

Score 4: Children accepted by their peers

Discussion

Table 1 presents the numbers and percentages of respondents receiving different types of parental discipline. This was the easiest way to compare parental support between boys and girls. As we know, induction is one of the best ways to provide children with adequate structure, guidance, and parental support through every stage of development. We found that in the power-assertion group, approximately 10% of

boys and girls experienced their parents as supportive. In the love-withdrawal group there was a sharp distinction between the boys who experienced parents as supportive (only 10%) and the girls, 32% of whom experienced parents as supportive. There were also marked gender distinctions in the induction group, with 30% of boys experiencing parents as supportive, but only 8% of girls from this group reporting similar parental experiences.

Table 1: Number and percentage of boys and girls receiving different types of parental discipline

| Types of parental discipline | Power assertion (parents use commands/threats) | | Love withdrawal (parents use anger and silence) | | Induction (parents use discussion) | |
|-----------------------------------|--|-------|---|-------|------------------------------------|-------|
| | Boys | Girls | Boys | Girls | Boys | Girls |
| Number of respondents | 15 | 15 | 15 | 48 | 45 | 12 |
| % of the respondents (total 100%) | 10 | 10 | 10 | 32 | 30 | 8 |

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation of the family demographic profile variables scores of boys and girls (N = 75 each)

| Sl. No. | Family demographic profile | | | | |
|---------|--------------------------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| | | <i>Boys</i> | <i>Girls</i> | <i>Boys</i> | <i>Girls</i> |
| 1. | Father's education | 2.14 | 0.748 | 2.20 | 0.697 |
| 2. | Mother's education | 1.50 | 0.665 | 1.66 | 0.741 |
| 3. | Father's income | 6737.33 | 4484.98 | 5209.40 | 2766.47 |
| 4. | Mother's income | 189.33 | 769.79 | 550.66 | 1364.32 |
| 5. | Total number of family members | 7.68 | 4.697 | 7.33 | 4.01 |
| 6. | Age | 12.94 | 1.02 | 12.54 | 0.576 |
| 7. | Father's occupation | 2.20 | 0.717 | 2.12 | 1.294 |
| 8. | Mother's occupation | 0.12 | 0.401 | 0.29 | 0.653 |

Based on children's responses, we believe that boys categorized in the induction group experience their parents as more supportive than boys in either of the other two groups. As noted earlier, parental support is essential for children's physical and psychological growth and development. We believe it plays a key role in the development of social competence and children's self-esteem.

Table 2 presents the mean and standard deviation of the family demographic profile scores of both boys and girls. The data showed that in each category (e.g., level of parent education, parental income, parental occupation), when girls focused on their mothers' scores, girls had better mean scores than boys. In contrast, boys, when focused on their fathers' income, education, and occupation, reported higher mean scores than girls. Parents of girls were found to be highly qualified, and to hold higher positions in society; most mothers were employed. Also, girls were younger than their male counterparts. Fathers of boys were found to be financially stronger because their jobs were permanent and secure, giving them the capacity to represent themselves and their families well both from an economic standpoint and from a position of social status.

Table 3 presents the mean and standard deviation of peer social status among the boys and girls. We first compared self-respect scores of peer acceptance/rejection to categories of parental discipline. Then, to compare peer social status between boys and girls, we totaled the source of three categories (power assertion, love withdrawal, and induction) of boys. In the same way, we obtained the peer social status among girls.

From the results, we can say that boys reported higher scores in peer social status

than girls because most of the boys belong to the induction group (and, again, induction is one of the best ways of providing structure and support to children). This parental support contributes to a family atmosphere that is warm and peaceful. Parents endorsing this way of relating generally encourage children to express their own opinions or views without fear of reprisal. These parents encourage children to develop their inner qualities and support the development of strong peer relationships. This is one of the essential characteristics for healthy personality development. The boys in our sample came from families where their fathers occupied higher positions in society, and they were more mature than the sample of girls.

In Indian society, boys are generally given preferences in every sphere of life. When mothers are employed, their employment status often creates busy schedules, which reduces the time available to maintain close relationships with children. Lack of parental support, less-than-optimal parental discipline choices, and subordinate social standing all contribute to girls' feelings of inadequacy. These feelings negatively influence girls' social competence.

Conclusion

Proper interactions between parents and children, and availability of positive parental support, are fundamental to the development of positive peer social status among children. Parental support may facilitate children's social development; conversely, its absence may inhibit that development. Our findings show that boys in this sample obtained better parental support as compared to girls, even when girls' parents were highly qualified and mothers were found to be employed. We believe the gender differences in levels of

Table 3: Mean and standard deviation of the peer social status scores of boys and girls (N = 75 each)

| Sl. No. | Variables | Boys | | Girls | |
|---------|--------------------|------|------|-------|------|
| | | Mean | S.D. | Mean | S.D. |
| 1. | Peer social status | 2.32 | 1.18 | 2.10 | 1.21 |

support are derived from culturally distinct ways of viewing boys' and girls' family and social roles. According to the Hindu religion, the male child will manage the family as karta after the death of the parents. Because of this important role, parents encourage sons to develop their inner qualities. Male children spend more time with their peers and are encouraged to develop their peer social status.

To address these gender disparities, we recommend a program of parental counseling to teach more egalitarian childrearing practices, and to help strengthen parent-child relationships, particularly between parents and their daughters. This counseling program could be developed using resources from both governmental and nongovernmental sponsors. Ideally, such a program would help parents to resolve family relationship problems and provide children a measure of protection from poor social outcomes.

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