

Child-rearing Behaviours and Adolescent Self-Esteem:

An Examination of Reciprocal Effects

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Abstract

Previous research has reported a relation between parenting behaviour and adolescent self-esteem. The influence of perceived parental support and control on adolescents' self-esteem is examined in this study. The sample included 42 adolescent participants, 19 females and 23 males, and both of their parents. The data were obtained in the family's home through individual assessment of the mother, father, and adolescent participant. Data were collected annually, over a two year period. The participants were assessed using questionnaire scales which examined family functioning, adolescent self-esteem, and parenting behaviour. To assess family functioning and parenting behaviour, modified scales from Heilbrun (1964) and Schaefer (1965) questionnaires were used. Several sub-scales of the Offer Self-Image Questionnaire were used to measure the self-esteem of the adolescent participants. Consistent with past research, results displayed a positive association between parental support and adolescent self esteem, a negative relation between parental control and adolescent self esteem, and a reciprocal relationship between parenting behaviour and adolescent self-esteem.

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Throughout the lifespan, self-esteem is influenced by interpersonal relationships in a variety of contexts. Self-esteem is influenced by both formal and intimate interactions with one's partner, family, and peers. Of particular interest is the importance of the parent-child relationship and its contribution to adolescent self-esteem. Research on North American subjects indicates that parenting style has far-reaching contributions to adolescent self-esteem (Amato, 1989; Barber, Chadwick, & Oerter, 1992; Barber & Thomas, 1987; Dekovic, & Meeus, 1997; Gecas & Schwalbe, 1987; Hoelter & Harper, 1987; Joubert, 1991; Nielsen & Metha, 1994). The focus of this investigation is to further explore the specific relationship that exists between child-rearing behaviour and the development of self-esteem in adolescents.

Two theories are often used to explain the processes involved in the development of self-esteem in adolescence. The first, symbolic interaction theory, states that an adolescent's self-esteem is shaped by parental appraisals of the adolescent's inherent worth (Margolin, Blyth, & Carbone, 1988). The second, social learning theory, emphasizes self-esteem as being acquired through parental self-esteem. Adolescents observe parental behaviour and parental self-esteem and internalize these patterns and perceptions as their own (Openshaw, Thomas, & Rollins, 1984). The majority of the research completed to date reflect the ideology of one theory over the other. However in a novel study by Openshaw et al. (1984), variables representing both theories were combined to demonstrate that both processes are independently associated with

adolescent self-esteem. Therefore, the relationship of parenting and adolescent self-esteem can be seen in terms of the feedback that they receive from parental interactions as well as through the vicarious internalizing of parental patterns of behaviour. It is clear that more than one theory can be used to explain the influences on development of self-esteem. It is for this reason that our study extrapolates from this evidence and focuses on child-rearing behaviours and their relationship to the development of adolescent self-esteem.

Several child-rearing behaviours have been associated with the development of self-esteem. Research has linked many parental behaviours and familial relationships with self-esteem in adolescence. Of the aforementioned, extensive analysis has consistently supported the influence of the following interactions as positively associated with self-esteem: level of parental support (Amato, 1989; Barber et al., 1992; Barber & Thomas, 1987; Bogenschneider, Small, & Tsay, 1997; Dekovic & Meeus, 1997; Hoelter & Harper, 1987; Joubert, 1991), low level of parental control (Amato, 1989; Barber et al., 1992; Bogenschneider et al., 1997; Demo, Small, & Savin-Williams, 1987; Feldman & Wentel, 1990), a low level of harsh parental discipline (Amato, 1989; Openshaw, et al., 1984; Joubert, 1991), and a high level of family cohesion (Amato, 1989; Dekovic & Meeus, 1997). Two of these critical factors, parental support and parental control, are the focus of the present study.

Parental support can be broadly defined as those behaviours which promote positive interactions between parent and child. Such behaviours include open communication, acceptance, interest, aiding in activities, praise, warmth and affection. In

Hoelter and Harper's study (1987), structural and interpersonal family variables were tested to determine the relationship between family influences and adolescent self-concept. The study investigated variables such as family support, family size, family type, and four measures of family conflict for their effect on adolescent self concept. Results indicated that family support had the largest effect on both girls and boys self-concept variables, including self-esteem. Similar results were found by Nielsen and Metha (1994). Their comparative study of clinical and non-clinical adolescents revealed that various dimensions of self-esteem were positively associated with parental support for non-clinical adolescents.

Parental control is reflected in such tasks as how many decisions the parent makes for the child, amount of supervision they implement, and the extent and severity of the rules that they bestow on the child (Amato, 1989). Research on parental control is less definitive than research on supportive parenting behaviours (Demo, et al., 1987). The potential effects of parental control on child self-esteem can be dependent on many factors. For instance, in early to middle childhood, a high level of both support and control is related to high childhood self-esteem (Amato, 1989). However, as children mature they require less parental control in order to achieve greater autonomy (Amato, 1989; Demo et al., 1987). When parenting style reflects a rigid, authoritarian manner adolescents tend to reject parental authority. Amato (1989) found that overprotectiveness and restrictiveness was associated with low self-esteem in adolescents. Similarly, Joubert (1991) found that late adolescent girls who were reared by strongly controlling fathers were likely to have low self-esteem. Conversely, gradual reduction of parental control,

maintenance of close parent/adolescent relationships, and continued guidance maximize the adolescent's independence and positive self-esteem (Amato, 1989).

Most research on the association between parental behaviours and adolescent self-esteem has assumed a unidirectional tone with influences going from the parent toward the adolescent. Research which explores the nature of bi-directionality within the parent/adolescent relationship is rare. Bell and Harper (1977) suggest that if parents are effective in changing their children through various interactions, then they too must be effected by the product of their tutelage. More recently Bogenschneider, Small, and Tsay (1997) studied the characteristics of children and how they influence the quality and quantity of parenting they receive. The body of research which highlights the importance of accounting for the reciprocal nature of the relationship between parent and child is growing (see Kuczynski, Marshall & Schell, 1997). By including both the adolescent and parent's perceptions one can assess the potential bidirectional association between parent and child.

Margolin et al. (1988) have suggested two hypotheses for the reciprocal nature of self-esteem and family interaction: 1) self-esteem affects adolescents' interpretations of other people's actions and 2) self-esteem makes the adolescent easier to interact with, therefore encouraging more favourable repartee. The former suggests that adolescents with high self-esteem feel good about themselves because family members regard them in a positive manner. These adolescents may be more likely to observe and report positive interactions with family members because they experience support and approval, whereas less confident youth perceive disapproval and rejection (Demo et al., 1987; Margolin, et

al., 1988). In this interpretation, the adolescent selectively perceives reality and determines the semantics behind others' behaviours based on their own feelings of self-worth. The latter hypothesis suggests that adolescent self-esteem is grounded in the adolescent's characteristics and disposition. Adolescents with high self-esteem would therefore have a collection of positive traits and attributes, as well as a favourable 'goodness-of-fit' between themselves and their family members. The level of the adolescent's self-esteem is likely a product of the family's influence as well as the adolescent's characteristics and behaviours

(Amato, 1989; Bogenschneider, et al., 1997; Margolin et al., 1988). Although many researchers have speculated about the reciprocal effect of parent and adolescent interactions and perceptions, few have actually studied these assumptions (Amato, 1989; Demo et al., 1987, Margolin et al., 1988, Neilsen & Metha, 1994). The present study explores the presumed reciprocal effect of parenting behaviours and adolescent self-esteem.

The purpose of this investigation is to determine the nature of the relationship between child-rearing behaviours of support, control/rejection, and adolescent self-esteem. Both direct and reciprocal effects are examined through a longitudinal investigation which uses data collected over a two year period. Data were collected from each member of the family triad: mother, father, and adolescent. Each collection of data included estimates of parental support and control, perceptions of others within the triad, and perception of self by the adolescent. The hypotheses for this study are presented below. See Figure 1 for a diagram of predicted associations.

The hypotheses for each prediction are as follows.

Hypothesis 1.1 Prior investigation has shown that parental controlling behaviours are negatively associated with self-esteem in adolescents (Amato, 1989; Joubert, 1991; Openshaw et al., 1984); therefore, it is hypothesized that self-esteem and parental control/rejection will be negatively correlated within each year.

Hypothesis 1.2 As parental support has been positively associated with adolescent self-esteem (Amato, 1989; Barber, et al., 1992; Barber & Thomas, 1987; Bogenschneider et al., 1997; Gecas & Schwalbe, 1986; Nielsen & Metha, 1994; Parish & McCluskey, 1992), it is hypothesized that self-esteem and parental support will be positively correlated within each year.

Hypothesis 1.3 Given that support and control are opposing or polar qualities of parenting behaviours, it is hypothesized that they will be negatively correlated.

Hypothesis 1.4 Based on the notion that an adolescent's characteristics affect parents' behaviour a positive correlation is hypothesized between adolescent self-esteem at year 1 and parental support at year 2.

Hypothesis 1.5 Again, using the notions of reciprocal effects, a negative correlation is hypothesized between adolescent self-esteem at year 1 and parental control at year 2.

Hypothesis 1.6 As suggested in hypothesis 1.2, and employing the symbolic interaction theory, parental support in year 1 is hypothesized to be positively associated with the self-esteem of the adolescent in year 2.

Hypothesis 1.7 Again, according to the symbolic interaction theory, the perceived control behaviour displayed by the parent in year 1 is hypothesized to be negatively

associated with the self-esteem of the adolescent in year 2.

Hypothesis 1.8 Given the evidence that parental practices remain consistent over time (Roberts, Block, & Block, 1984; McNally, Eisenberg, & Harris, 1991), it is hypothesized that parental support and control would remain stable over the 2 year period.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Method

Participants

The total sample of 126 participants included 42 adolescents (19 males, 23 females), along with their mothers (n=42) and fathers (n=42). All families were identified as well-functioning families, and both parents were in their first marriage. The sample was randomly drawn from a larger list of families that were viewed by a panel of county extension specialists in the United States as healthy, functioning households. Adolescents were 15 to 16 years of age in the first year of study. All adolescents were doing well in school, receiving adequate to above average grades. Demographic characteristics of the parents in the first year of study were as follows: mean age of mothers (45.9 years) and fathers (49.2 years); median household income (\$35,000 annually); all fathers and 42% of mothers were employed outside the home; 37% of mothers and 63% of fathers held college degrees. There were no reports of major health or emotional problems requiring professional treatment at the time of the study in any of the households being examined. The sample consisted of an even distribution between rural and urban counties. Rural counties were defined as those with a population of fewer than 10,000 citizens, as opposed to urban counties which held populations of greater than

500,000 residents. Data were collected in two consecutive years.

Measures

Child-rearing behaviours. Parent-adolescent relationships were assessed using items derived from rating scales by Heilbrun (1964) and Schaefer (1965). Five dimensions have been derived from a combination of these scales (Ellis, Thomas, & Rollins, 1976). The sub-scales include: perceived rejection/control, communication, physical affection, withdrawal, and support. The responses were obtained using a five point Likert scale: never, infrequently, sometimes, often, and always. For this study, a factor analysis was conducted on the five sub-scales. The analysis indicated that affection, communication, and support could be grouped together to represent the support measure (ACS) and rejection/control and withdrawal could be combined to represent the control measure (RCW). Cronbach alphas ranged from .83 to .91 for the combined subscales that measure support and control.

Sample items from the adolescent questionnaire include: support ("My mother/father trusts me" or "My mother/father approves of the things I do") and control/rejection ("My mother/father often complains about what I do" or "My mother/father tells me how I should behave"). Sample items from the parent's questionnaire include: support ("I approve of the adolescent and things he/she does" or "I am interested and supportive of the adolescent") and control/rejection ("I am always finding fault with the adolescent" or "I am always trying to change the adolescent").

Self-Esteem. The Offer Self-Image Questionnaire was used to measure self-esteem among the adolescent participants (Offer, Ostrov, & Howard, 1986). This self-

descriptive personality test assesses adjustment in individuals between the ages of thirteen and nineteen. The Offer Self-Image Questionnaire measures adolescents' perceptions of their own psychological world in eleven content areas. This questionnaire has been used quite extensively; the test-retest reliability and internal consistency has been well-documented. In this study, the sub-scales of emotional tone, impulse control, adjustment, and psychopathology were used as an indicator of adolescent self-esteem. These sub-scales were chosen because they measure components of a healthy adolescent adjustment and were consistently found to correlate highly ($\alpha=.74$).

Procedure

Data were collected from 60 well-functioning families (mothers, fathers, and adolescent). The process of data collection occurred within the family home and reoccurred annually over a two year period. The questionnaires were administered and completed by the family members concurrently, while in different rooms of the family home. Subjects completed instruments related to family functioning, psychological functioning, and parental behaviours. For the purpose of this study, only parenting behaviours and adolescent self-esteem were examined. Forty-two subjects had a complete data file for all three family members and were included in this study. Four sets of perceptions were obtained for parental behaviours of support and control/rejection: adolescent's perception of mother, adolescent's perception of father, mother's perception of self, and father's perception of self. Self-esteem was assessed through self report by adolescent respondents only.

Results

A two wave cross-lagged correlation panel design was implemented in order to test the concurrent associations between self-esteem, support, and control/rejection in all four perception situations (adolescent's perceptions of mothers' and fathers' behaviours, as well as, self-perceptions by both mothers and fathers). In addition, the reciprocal nature of these variable across the two years was also tested. Cross-lagged correlations have been suggested as a helpful tool in analysing parent-child relationships in longitudinal studies (Campbell & Stanley, 1963).

Autocorrelations

The results indicate significant positive correlations for all perception on support, rejection/control, and self-esteem from year 1 to year 2. (See Table 1 for correlations and significance levels.)

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Synchronous Correlations

Year I. Correlations between self-esteem and support variables in year 1 show significant positive relations for all four perception situations. Results indicate negative correlations between self-esteem and rejection/control variables for all perception responses. All negative correlations are significant, with the exception of the fathers' self-perception. (See Table 2 for correlations and significance levels.)

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Year 2. Significant positive correlations were found between self-esteem and support variables for year 2. Results indicate that significant negative correlations exist between self-esteem and rejection/control variables for year 2. (See Table 3 for

correlations and significance levels.)

[Insert Table 3 about here]

Cross-lag Correlations

Positive correlations were found between self-esteem of the adolescent at year 1 and the support variables for year 2. Negative correlation between self-esteem of the adolescents at year 1 and the control/rejection variables for year 2 were also evident. The results also reveal positive correlations between support for year 1 and adolescents' self-esteem in year 2. Negative correlations were reported for control/rejection in year 1 and adolescent's self-esteem in year 2. (See Table 4 for correlations and significance levels.)

[Insert Table 4 about here]

Discussion

The focus of this study was to further examine the association between parenting style and adolescent self-esteem. The findings of this study reveal, as expected, that there is a reciprocal connection between parental support, parental control, and adolescent feelings of self-esteem. Metaphoric description might call this the contextual dance of adolescent self-esteem. Not only does the parent appear to influence the adolescent, but the adolescent appears to influence the parent, in a mutual-influencing contextual melody where the adolescent and parent dance together in bidirectional influential ways, each being lead but also leading the other.

Prior research has indicated that parenting style and practices tend to remain consistent over time (Roberts, et al., 1984; McNally, et al., 1991). Therefore, we hypothesized that if parental support and control remained constant, then self-concept too

would remain stable over the two year period. The auto-correlations indicate that the self-esteem, support, and control measures all remained relatively consistent over the two year time period. This consistency across time 1 and time 2 occurred in all four perceptual situations. The consistency found in the auto-correlations strengthens our arguments that the cross-lag comparisons reveal a contextual dance to a mutual melody of influence between parent and youth.

Past scholarship has found a positive association between supportive parental behaviours and adolescent self-esteem (Barber & Thomas, 1987; Hoelter & Harper, 1987; Margolin et al., 1988; Amato, 1989; Barber et al., 1992; Parish & McCluskey, 1992; Bogenschneider et al., 1997). Synchronous comparisons between self-esteem and parental support measures within this study indicate significant positive correlation. The findings support previous research and demonstrate that higher perceived parental support is associated with higher self-esteem of the adolescent.

Just as supportive behaviours tend to predict higher levels of adolescent self-esteem, controlling and rejecting behaviours forecast lower levels of adolescent self-esteem (Demo et al., 1987; Amato, 1989; Feldman & Wentel, 1990; Barber et al, 1992; Bogenschneider et al., 1997). Comparisons between self-esteem and parental control in both year 1 and year 2 display negative correlation across adolescent, mother, and father's perception. This association is observed across all perceptions, with exception for father's self-perception in year 2. This exception displays a non-significant, yet negative trend. It seems that father's perception of his control is less of an indicator of adolescent self-esteem than the perceptions of father by the adolescent. The adolescent's

interpretation of paternal control is indicative of how the adolescent perceives his or herself. It is interesting that the same does not hold true for the maternal results. One may speculate that mother's level of control is significant because she often is the primary giver of support and therefore any rejection/controlling behaviours have a significant negative effect on the adolescent's self-esteem. This is in opposition to father's role which has traditionally been seen as that of a structuring, distant disciplinary figure. Perhaps the adolescent is not as susceptible to paternal controlling behaviours, due to the predisposition to perceive him in a traditional father-figure role. And as the adolescent becomes more independent and develops strong perceptions of self, level of self-esteem is not as sensitive to the father's controlling behaviours. However, the overall finding of this research indicate, that as perceived control behaviour increases, adolescent self-esteem decreases.

The findings on reciprocal associations supports the reciprocity to the parent and child relationship in the development of self-esteem in adolescence. With exception of merely two irregularities which did not exhibit significance (self esteem in year 1 and father's supporting behaviour in year 2), adolescent's perception of both mother's and father's behaviour across all four comparisons were significant and in the predicted direction. These results support the notion that there are reciprocal effects when comparing adolescent's perception of their parents behaviour and their own level of self-esteem. The extensive importance of the adolescent's perceptions and their effect on self-esteem has been documented by previous research (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1986; Demo et al., 1987). Results of this study for both mother's and father's self-perceptions further

the existence of reciprocity, although to a lesser extent than that indicated by the data collected from the adolescent perspective. One may speculate that as the adolescent is in the process of becoming independent, parental behaviours are less determinant than the influence of peers and partners. Although Barber and his colleagues (1992) observed a significant relationship between parent reported variables and adolescent self-esteem, we found significant relationships among three maternal variables: mother's self perception of support (year 1), and mother's self perception of control (year 1 and year 2). Perhaps such findings speak to the phenomenal importance of the mother's perspective when investigating adolescent self-esteem. The importance of including the perceptions and appraisals of mothers when examining adolescent self-esteem has been documented elsewhere by Margolin and colleagues (1988). Their research found that it is possible to substantially improve the power of self-esteem models by including data collected on mother's appraisals of the adolescent (Margolin et al., 1988).

The investigation into reciprocal effects challenges our understanding of parenting and the influential power that adolescents have on parenting behaviours. This investigation suggests that the uni-directional flow of parental behaviour to adolescent concepts of self-esteem does not adequately fit the bidirectional contextual nature of self-esteem and adolescent development. This observation has implications for solely parent-focussed education and prevention programs, more systematic approaches may be necessary to maximize their intended effect. This research points to the need for including all members of the family triad (and perhaps sibling) when attempting to influence the adolescent's feelings of self-esteem. By including both parents and child

in the education and prevention process we account for the reciprocal relationship between parenting styles and adolescent self-esteem, and therefore increase the likelihood of success.

Further research should be conducted to determine how specific child-rearing practices are associated with self-esteem, in order to generate a clear picture of positive parenting behaviours. This research has rendered an interesting finding in regards to influence of mothers' parenting styles. As we approach the year 2000, the structure of our families continue to change. This changing face of our families supplies many interesting opportunities for further investigation.. The reciprocal association between self-esteem and parent-child relationships should be examined further by investigating mother-headed versus father-headed single parent families. It is also suspected that the relationship between parenting style and adolescent self-esteem is influenced by the family type, be it traditional, blended, or single-parent family. Further examination of the adolescent's family structure is warranted. The continuation of research will lead to a greater understanding and enlightenment in how we view parenting behaviours and the self-esteem of adolescents. The data from this study suggests that unidirectional models should be replaced by bidirectional models in the investigation of parent-child relationships and the development of adolescent self-esteem.

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Table 1

Autocorrelations from Year 1 to Year 2

Variables	Year 1/Year 2
Adolescent's Perception of Mother's Behaviour	
ACS	+0.696**
RCW	+0.447**
Adolescent's Perception of Father's Behaviour	
ACS	+0.797**
RCW	+0.649**
Mother's Self Perceptions	
ACS	+0.721**
RCW	+0.533**
Father's Self Perceptions	
ACS	+0.819**
RCW	+0.428**
Adolescent's Self Perceptions	
SE	+0.642**

Note. **p<0.01

ACS = support measure (combination of affection, communication, and support)

RCW = control measure (combination of rejection/control, and withdrawal)

SE = self-esteem (adolescents only)

Table 2

Synchronous Correlations Between Self-Esteem and both Support and Rejection/Control
for Year 1

Variables	Year 1 <u>r</u>
Adolescent's Perception of Mother's Behaviour	
ACS	+0.521**
RCW	-0.493**
Adolescent's Perception of Father's Behaviour	
ACS	+0.303*
RCW	-0.516**
Mother's Self Perceptions	
ACS	+0.448**
RCW	-0.363**
Father's Self Perceptions	
ACS	+0.250*
RCW	-0.163

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

ACS = support measure (combination of affection, communication, and support)

RCW = control measure (combination of rejection/control, and withdrawal)

Table 3

Synchronous Correlations Between Self-Esteem and both Support and Rejection/Control
for Year 2

Variables	Year 1 <u>r</u>
Adolescent's Perception of Mother's Behaviour	
ACS	+0.445**
RCW	-0.282**
Adolescent's Perception of Father's Behaviour	
ACS	+0.345**
RCW	-0.246*
Mother's Self Perceptions	
ACS	+0.216*
RCW	-0.355**
Father's Self Perceptions	
ACS	+0.254*
RCW	-0.265*

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

ACS = support measure (combination of affection, communication, and support)

RCW = control measure (combination of rejection/control, and withdrawal)

Table 4

Significant Correlations for Cross-lag Comparisons

Variables	Significant Cross-lag Associations Year 1/Year2 <u>r</u>
Adolescent's Perception of Mother's Behaviour	
SE/ACS	+0.350**
SE/RCW	-0.379**
ACS/SE	+0.426*
RCW/SE	-0.356**
Adolescent's Perception of Father's Behaviour	
SE/RCW	-0.367**
ACS/SE	+0.272*
RCW/SE	-0.409**
Mother's Self Perceptions	
SE/RCW	-0.275*
ACS/SE	+0.319*
Father's Self Perceptions	
SE/ACS	+0.263*

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

ACS = support measure (combination of affection, communication, and support)

RCW = control measure (combination of rejection/control, and withdrawal)

SE = self-esteem (adolescents only)