

All in the Family: Parenting Style and Risk Behavior in College Students

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Abstract

Since pioneering work by Baumrind in the 1970's, researchers, educators and practitioners have attempted to delineate the impact of parenting style on children (e.g., Baumrind, 1971; 1993). Research suggests that parenting style has a significant impact on both attitudes and behaviors (Baumrind & Black, 1967). Since that time, many in-depth and comparative studies have been done assessing these effects and assessing the extent to which these effects differ depending on economic, ethnic, racial and cultural variables (e.g., Dixon, Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Dekovic&Jannsens, 1992). Parenting style may contribute to family dysfunction (see King, Vidourek&Merianos, 2016) and family dysfunction relates to risk-behavior in college students (e.g., Osborne 2019). The current study attempted to assess parenting style, elements of family dysfunction (Edinburgh Family Scale, Minuchin, Rosman & Baker, 1978) and risk behavior in college students (utilizing the Youth Risk Behavior Survey – CDC, 2017). As predicted, students who rated their parent(s) as authoritarian in style, also reported significantly higher levels of several elements of family dysfunction and reported higher levels of risk behavior in their first year of college than students reporting a more authoritative style of parenting. These effects differed somewhat for males and females.

Keywords: Adolescence, child well-being, family dynamics, health, parent-child relationships, risky behaviors

1. Introduction

Recent research suggests family dynamics are associated with risk behavior in college students (Osborne, 2019). Indeed, understanding risk behavior in children has been a fundamental research question for decades (see Bandura & Walters, 1959; Becker, 1964; Blair, 1996, Deykin, 1972, Minuchin, Rosman& Baker, 1978; Turchik&Gidycz, 2012). Though not first proposed as important to understanding risk behavior in children, Diana Baumrind noticed that behavior patterns in preschoolers could be linked to specific parenting behaviors (Baumrind, 1967). Given that some of these preschool behaviors were problematic, Baumrind's work might be considered one of the first to suggest that parenting style could have long-term negative effects on children. In particular, Baumrind's (1967) work suggested that two parenting dimensions are especially important in terms of impact on children – demandingness and responsiveness. Demandingness relates to how much the parents attempt to control the child's behavior and demand maturity while responsiveness relates to how accepting and sensitive a parent is to the child's developmental and emotional needs. From this work, Baumrind postulated three parenting styles – authoritative, authoritarian and permissive.

The authoritative parent is warm and responsive, sets clear rules and has high expectations. These expectations and rules, however, are tempered by being supportive of the child and his or her efforts and by an encouragement of independence. This style is associated with positive outcomes in children such as higher academic performance, better social skills and lower levels of delinquency. The authoritarian parent, however, is more rule bound. Rules are strict and intractable and children are expected to abide by them without question.

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This parenting style is associated with lower academic performance, poorer social skills, lower levels of self-esteem and higher levels of delinquency – including more alcohol and drug use. The third parenting style outlined by Baumrind (1967) is “permissive.” The permissive parent is warm, responsive and lenient, establishing few rules and indulging the child. Children raised with this parenting style tend to be more impulsive and egocentric developing poorer social skills and demonstrating more relationship problems.

Maccoby and Martin (1983) added to this work by separating the “permissive” parenting style into indulgent and neglectful styles. The indulgent style, of course, closely matches the permissive style proposed by Baumrind while the neglectful style is more cold and unresponsive with indifference and lack of involvement. These children demonstrate more extreme forms of delinquent behavior and impulse control issues and have been suggested to be more likely to contemplate, attempt and commit suicide than children from any of the other styles (e.g., Donath, Graessel, Baier, Bleich&Hillemacher, 2014).

A myriad of studies have followed this early work on parenting style including work attempting to categorize dimensions of family functioning that might create illness within a family (Minuchin, Rosman& Baker, 1978). Indeed, this work suggests that families can become “ill” and that this illness would “carry forward” into a child’s life outside and beyond the home (see Dixon, Graber& Brooks-Gunn, 2008). Indeed, elements of family dysfunction have been shown to have significant physical and psychological effects on children (Minuchin, Rosman& Baker, 1978). Minuchin’s categorization of family dynamics includes overprotectiveness/enmeshment, rigidity and poor conflict resolution strategies. Children from families with high levels of these dynamics (families that Minuchin would refer to as “Psychosomatic”) are more likely to suffer with significant and negative physical and psychological disturbances – including the potential development of eating disorders and alcohol and drug use.

Enmeshment involves poor boundaries – a confusion about where one family member ends and another begins. Alliances within families shift because boundaries are not clearly drawn and the family can become overprotective of one family member such that all are dealt with in comparison to what that family member needs. Rigidity links most closely to work on parenting style as it is a fundamental characteristic of authoritarian parenting. Family interactions are unhealthy and driven by an inflexible code or set of rules – be it religious, moral or just “my way or the highway”. Lack of conflict resolution or poor conflict resolution characterizes the final family dynamic outlined by Minuchin. This could be illustrated by a denial that conflict occurs resulting in the development of complex avoidance strategies or if conflict is acknowledged it is minimized or presented as if ignoring it will make it go away – a kind of “ignorance is bliss” mentality in the family. As a result, no effort is made to resolve problems either because it is assumed if we pretend they do not exist they will go away or they are minimized such that effort is not “needed.” (Minuchin, Rosman and Baker, 1978; Blair, 1996).

It is important to note that the presence of high levels of these parenting dynamics do not, in-and-of-themselves, result in “illnesses” in children. Indeed, research following Minuchin and his colleagues early work outlined a convergence of dynamics that appear to precipitate dysfunction. Three “pathogenic” factors converge to create the “psychosomatic illness” These are: (1) type of family organization (centered around the dysfunctional characteristics), (2) involvement of the child in parental conflict, and (3) some form of physiological vulnerability in the child (Kog, Vandereycken&Vertommen, 1985; Minuchin et al., 1975).

These parenting dynamics have been found to have profound effects on children. In a study assessing mother parenting style and risk behaviors in sons and daughters, Wood and Kennison (2017) found that risk behavior was high in both sons and daughters with mothers exhibiting an authoritarian style but that this impact was significantly higher in daughters. These risk behaviors included risky sexual behavior as well as exposure to potentially risky physical situations. King, Vidourek and Merianos (2016) reported results from a national study on drug use and health. In this study, authoritarian parenting was associated with higher levels of depression in youth. This, combined with studies such as Borowsky, Ireland and Resnick (2001) suggesting that negative parenting style (such as authoritarianism) is associated with increased risk of suicide attempts in adolescents, suggests that parenting style and risk behavior in college students must be understood.

Rauf & Ahmed (2017) assessed the relationship between parenting style and academic performance in Pakistani school children. These researchers found that authoritarian parenting was negatively correlated with academic performance – higher levels of authoritarian parenting were associated with lower academic performance scores – and that parenting style accounted for 38% of the variance in academic performance.

Additional studies have found the same relationship between academic performance and authoritarian parenting style (e.g., Hirani, 2017) but these effects extend to non-academic issues as well. Indeed, Hirani (2017) summarized research on authoritarian parents and children's outcomes. According to this summary, children from authoritarian homes refrain from smoking and drinking more than their peers – while they are in the home. They, however, also report higher levels of mental health problems – such as depression, have lower levels of self-esteem, show passivity and dependency – perhaps making them more vulnerable to peer pressure influences when they leave the home and go to college, have lower levels of academic performance – both while in the home and at college, and show higher levels of aggression.

In a similar vein, LeCuyer and Swanson (2017), found that higher levels of authoritarian parenting were related to poorer limit-setting behaviors in children and poorer self-regulation. It is not a stretch to imagine that poor limit-setting and poor self-regulation would put these young persons at substantial risk for poor behavioral choices in terms of drugs, alcohol and sexual practices when they leave the home and go to college. Munoz, Braza et al. (2017) studied Spanish girls in schools. These researchers found that authoritarian parenting was correlated with aggressive behavior in daughters but that these effects were ameliorated by attendance in Day Cares that did not allow aggressive behavior.

A recent Meta-Analytic study (Pinquart, 2017) sheds a great deal of light on the depth and breadth of the relationships between parenting style and problematic behavior in children and adolescents. In a meta-analysis of 1,435 studies, Pinquart found that (among other parental behaviors) authoritarian and permissive styles were associated with significantly more externalizing symptoms in children and adolescents. These externalizing symptoms include: (1) aggression, (2) disruptiveness, (3) defiance, (4) hyperactivity and, (5) impulsiveness. Although all of these externalizing symptoms could create problems for college students, impulsiveness, in particular, might be related to more risk-taking behavior. On the other hand, Pinquart's meta-analysis showed a consistent small or even negative relationship pattern across the studies between authoritative parenting and externalizing symptoms. In other words, authoritative parenting was either consistently correlated with fewer instances of externalizing symptoms (compared to permissive or authoritarian parenting) and, in some studies, even negatively associated with such symptoms.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the negative impact of authoritarian parenting is not simply a racial, cultural or gender-specific finding. For example, LeCuyer and Swanson's (2017) assessed African American parents and children, while Munoz, Braza et al (2017) studied Spanish families. As noted earlier, Rauf and Ahmed (2017) studied parents and children in Pakistan and many of the other references already included studied parents and children across a variety of economic and racial subgroups. This range of studies includes cultures traditionally thought of as Individualistic (such as the United States) but findings such as those of Uji, Sakamoto et al (2014) yield similar findings in more Collectivist cultures – such as Japan. Indeed, Uji, Sakamoto et al (2014) found that authoritarian parenting was associated with worsened mental health including symptomatic problems, risk to self and others, poorer life functioning, and poorer psychological well-being. This was true for both mothers and fathers with authoritarian parenting styles. Additionally, this tendency to show increased risk is consistent with the findings by LeCuyer and Swanson (2017) and would suggest that these children would be at greater risk for poor choices (as a result of poor limit-setting and self-regulation) in terms of risk behavior in college.

2. Method

The current study was conducted at a large university in the Southwestern United States. Participants were recruited from Introduction to Psychology courses. As such, the assumption was made that all could read at a level necessary to understand the study materials and the informed consent form. The research was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the university. All measures, manipulations and exclusions used in this study were reported.

Forty college students completed a series of measures about Risk Behavior (Youth Risk Behavior Survey, CDC 2017) Family Dynamics (Edinburgh Family Scale, Blair, 1996; Minuchin et al., 1978) and rated their family parenting styles using definitions from “thesuccessfulparent.com.”

For the assessment of parenting style, participants were asked to think about the parenting style in their home. They were taken to the website “thesuccessfulparent.com” on which descriptive and definitional information is provided about three parenting styles: (1) authoritarian, (2) authoritative, and (3) permissive.

After reading these descriptions and definitions, participants were asked to rate (using a 7-point Likert scale with 1 being “my parent(s) never use this style and 7 being “my parent(s) always use this style) the degree to which the parenting style in their home reflected each of these parenting styles and definitions.

2.1 Participants

First year students were recruited using a research participation program called SONA. All Introduction to Psychology students at the university at which the study was completed were required to complete hours of experimentation as part of the course requirements. The only restriction for participation was that students must be in their first year of college at the university (any university). This exclusion was necessary because one of the primary research questions of interest (reported in Osborne, 2019) centers on elements of family dysfunction as they relate to risk behaviors in first year college students.

Participants who consented to complete the study were demographically representative of the enrollment across sections of the Introduction to Psychology course and the university as a whole. In terms of racial distribution, 43 percent identified as White, 35 percent identified as Hispanic, 16 percent identified as African American, and 5 percent identified as Asian. As expected, the average age of participants reflected first-year student statistics with a mean of 18.54.

2.2 Materials

Although multiple measures were administered (including The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), CDC, 2017; the Edinburgh Family Scale, Blair, 1996; Minuchin, Rosman & Baker, 1978; parenting style assessment, www.thesuccessfulparent.com) only scores on the Risk Behavior Survey and parenting assessment scores were used in the analyses for the current study. The YRBS is comprised of 90 questions related to different elements of risk behavior (safety, violence, bullying, suicide/sadness, cigarette smoking/vaping/tobacco, alcohol use, marijuana use, other drug use, sexual behavior, food, physical activity, concussions, other health behaviors, and thoughts about cigarette, alcohol and drug use). Parenting style was assessed using participant ratings of the use of each style in the home based on descriptions and definitions from the website, www.thesuccessfulparent.com.

2.3 Procedure

Participants who met the criteria of being in their first year of college were invited to participate and could access this study (along with various other studies being conducted in the department at the same time), via the participation system. All questionnaires were administered online following the reading and submission of an Informed Consent Form. The presentation order of questionnaires (the Youth Risk Behavior Survey and the parenting styles assessment), was randomized by the experiment program following completion of the short demographic questionnaire. Of the 40 participants, three were excluded from analyses because of a failure to complete all of the surveys.

To assess parenting style, participants were “sent” to the website, www.thesuccessfulparent.com and asked to read the article “Assessing Your Parenting Style.” This article provides descriptions and definitions for three parenting styles: (1) Authoritative, (2) Authoritarian, and (3) Permissive. After reading the article, participants were asked the following: “Rate the parenting styles used in your home. In other words, rate how often your parent(s) use(d) each style.” Participants were then provided with a 7-point Likert scale for rating the frequency of use of each style. The following points were used on the Likert scale: (1) Parent(s) never use this style, (2) Parent(s) almost never use this style, (3) Parent(s) seldom use this style, (4) Parents use this style only when necessary, (5) Parent(s) sometimes use this style, (6) Parent(s) often use this style, (7) Parent(s) always use this style.

3. Results

Overall, participants rated Authoritative parenting as the most often used in the family ($M = 4.12$), Authoritarian style seldom used ($M = 3.62$) and Permissive parenting was reported as almost never used ($M = 2.1$). No significant correlations were found between sex, risk total and dysfunction total – females and males were not reporting significantly different totals of risk behavior or family dysfunction.

As reported by Osborne (2019), those who reported significantly more family dysfunction, also reported significantly higher risk behavior in their first year of college than those who reported lower levels of family dysfunction at home, means of 324.44 and 153.37, $T(1,35) = -22.425$, $p < .001$.

The current analysis, however, attempts to delineate if this relationship between reported family dysfunction and risk behavior in first year college students might be due to parenting style. Participants rated how often each style (authoritative, authoritarian and permissive) were used in his or her home.

A correlation analysis revealed expected patterns. As predicted, total risk behavior scores correlated negatively with reporting of authoritative parenting in the home ($r = -.748$), positively with reporting of authoritarian parenting in the home ($r = .589$) and were not correlated with permissive parenting in the home ($r = .093$). In descriptive terms, then, this means that higher risk behaviors scores were associated with higher reported levels of authoritarian parenting whereas lower level of reported risk behaviors were associated with higher reported levels of authoritative parenting.

Next, risk behavior scores (having been subjected to a median split and then categorized as low or high-risk behavior) were compared to mean reported levels of authoritarian, authoritative and permissive parenting in the home. Mean scores conform to expectations with participants who scored in the lower risk category reporting higher levels of authoritative parenting in the home ($M=5.2941$) than those scoring high on risk ($M=3.2$). Additionally, and as expected, those categorized as high on risk behaviors reported higher levels of authoritarian parenting in the home ($M=4.45$) than those scoring low on risk ($M=2.65$). Finally, there was very little difference between those scoring high or low on risk behaviors and reporting of permissive parenting in the home (Means of 2.25 and 2.06 for high and low risk scorers, respectively).

Lastly, risk behavior scores were assessed using gender (male or female) as a categorical variable and the three different parenting scores as predictor variables. Unlike previous research, such as Wood and Kennison (2017), gender differences in risk behavior were not found in relationship to any of the three parenting patterns, $T(1,35) = -.715$, $p = .479$. Though the pattern of reported parenting styles conforms to expectation, authoritative parenting being reported as most often used with permissive parenting being reported as the least often used, it is somewhat surprising that the gender differences in risk behavior often reported were not found in this study. In order to more fully test for gender differences, gender was correlated with each category of risk behavior rather than just the total risk behavior score. The only significant correlation revealed from this analysis was between gender and risky physical behavior ($r = .371$, $p = .024$) meaning females reported higher levels of physically risky behavior than males. According to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (used in this study to assess risk behaviors), physically risky behaviors include such things as inadequate physical activity and unhealthy sleep behaviors.

4. Discussion

The current study assessed first-year college student self-reports of parenting style and risk behavior in college students by asking participants to self-report parent use of each of the three primary parenting styles and by gathering self-reported risk behaviors using the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (CDC, 2017). In another report from this same dataset, elements of family dynamics (enmeshment, triangulation, rigidity and poor conflict resolution) were shown to correlate with higher levels of risk behavior in first year college students (Osborne, 2019). These same family elements have been shown to be predictive of dysfunction in families and illnesses in children (e.g., Blair, 1996).

The current study did not assess maternal or paternal parenting style separately, indeed no questions assessed the “makeup” of the home. Participants rated how often each “parenting” style was used in the home.

This was done because the current study was not intended to assess differences between paternal or maternal parenting patterns and risk behaviors in college students, though multiple studies suggest that such differences might exist (e.g., Braza et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2013). Consistent with Pinquart’s findings in a meta-analytic comparison of 1,435 studies, authoritarian parenting (at least student self-reports that parent(s) used this parenting style more frequently than either permissive or authoritative techniques) is related to higher participant reports of externalizing symptoms (risk behaviors) on the Youth Risk Behavior Survey ($r = .589$), negatively correlated with authoritative parenting ($r = -.748$). Not surprisingly, the weakest correlation between parenting style and risk behavior was for self-reported use of permissive parenting in the home ($r = .093$).

This appears to be true for both males and females and appears to be the case regardless of which risk behavior is assessed (safety, violence, bullying, suicide/sadness, cigarette smoking/vaping/tobacco, alcohol use, marijuana use, other drug use, sexual behavior, food, physical activity, concussions, other health behaviors, and thoughts about cigarette, alcohol and drug use). When these behaviors were categorized into six categories (safety, tobacco use, alcohol/drug use, sexual behavior, risky eating patterns, and risky physical activities) the only gender difference that emerged was a significant positive correlation for risky physical activity for females.

Future research should likely assess maternal and paternal parenting style and risk behaviors in children separately. Braza et al. (2015) suggest, for example, that negative and harsh maternal parenting (such as authoritarianism) is associated with risk aggressive behaviors in children regardless of the paternal parenting style. Wang et al. (2013) report similar findings when they suggest that harsh maternal discipline is associated with negative externalizing behaviors in children but not for paternal discipline. It seems logical to assume that these externalizing behaviors do not “disappear” when the “children” become young adults and move away from the home to attend college.

Additionally, it would be beneficial to utilize some method for assessing parenting style that goes beyond simple self-report and ratings on Likert style scales. Perhaps a future study could use a “scenario” approach of a positive incident that could happen in one’s home and a negative incident and individuals could respond to how each “primary caregiver” on the home would react to that situation. Naïve raters could then assess each response and score it in terms of each of the “parenting” styles – authoritarian, authoritative and permissive. These scores could then be used as a kind of “manipulation” check to determine if participant ratings of the parenting style used in the home “match up” with the parenting style described in response to those scenarios.

Additional efforts should be made to assess actual family use of Parenting style (rather than just self-report as used in the current study) and other family dynamics (such as number of siblings, birth order, blended families, etc.) that might relate to both levels of family dysfunction, risk behavior and parenting choices. It is also likely that cultural and ethnic differences exist in parenting style and viewpoints about what family dynamics are “appropriate.” Indeed, Carteret (2010) outlines a minimum of five dimensions on which families differ across cultures and these cultural differences should be factored into future work.

5. References

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