NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Relation Between Parents’ Goals and Early Adolescents’ Social Skills

A Capstone Submitted to the

University Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree

With Honors

Department Of

Psychology

By

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DeKalb, Illinois

Dec 16, 2018
University Honors Program

Capstone Approval Page

Capstone Title (print or type)

Relation between parents’ goals and early adolescents’ social skills

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Date of Approval (print or type) December 7 2018

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HONORS CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

This project studied adolescent outcomes of different parent goals. Specifically, this project looks at whether parent centered goals and child centered goals are correlated with adolescent social skills. We broke down adolescent social skills into four different categories - assertion, cooperation, empathy, and self-control. Participants in the study were 78 7th graders and their primary caregiver (usually the child’s mother). Data was collected using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews conducted during home visits. The study failed to find significant correlations between parent centered goals and the outcome variables, as well as between child centered goals and the outcome variables. Because of this, strong conclusions were unable to be made.
Relation between parents’ goals and early adolescents’ social skills

This study looked at how different parental goals are related to adolescents’ cooperation, assertion, empathy, and self-control. Parental goals were divided into parent-centered goals and child-centered goals. Parent-centered goals are goals which are intended to accomplish a desirable or beneficial outcome for the parent, whereas child-centered goals would be goals regarding things that are beneficial to the child. This study examined how these two types of parental goals are related to the four different outcome variables.

Literature review

Parenting goals research has been growing in the past several years. Parenting goals are aims parents have for their children. Hastings and Grusec (1998) have conducted research in the area of parenting goals. The study they conducted was conducted with both mothers and fathers. The study centered around three different categories of goals which were relationship-centered goals, parent-centered goals, and child-centered goals. Relationship-centered goals were goals in which the objective of the parent was to strengthen the bond between her/himself and his/her child. Parent-centered goals are goals in which the parent seeks out an outcome which is desirable for them and not the child. Conversely, child-centered goals are goals in which the parent seeks an outcome that is beneficial for the child.

Hastings and Grusec (1998), in Study 1, gave adults, some parents some not, a hypothetical conflict situation that they were told to imagine having with a 6-year old child. The participants then rated the importance of six different goals using a Likert scale. The six goals were generated based on parent center/child-centered and relationship-centered goals. The researchers then coded the interview responses into seven different codes (hurt, coerce, control, reason, accept, negotiate, and provide affection). They found that parent-centered goals were
Parents’ goals

associated with more coercion, less reasoning, and less acceptance. Parents who rated the empathetic goal as more important were less controlling of the child in their interview answers. Parents who rated socialization or family bonds more highly were more likely to use reasoning, and parents who rated compromise as important were less likely to be controlling of the child in their interview responses. These results demonstrated that studying parenting goals is important because it affects the way in which parents respond to their children and the goals varies, depending on what the parents are seeking to accomplish.

Study 2 (Hastings & Grusec, 1998) sought to replicate these findings using real world examples of conflicts between parents and their children. Study 2 also introduced the concept of location of conflict (public vs private) because it might impact the way in which the parents responded. This reaffirmed the fact that parental goals are predictors of parental behavior towards their children during conflict situations.

Hastings and Grusec’s (1998) Study 3 sought to ensure that these responses by parents were not made solely to justify the way in which they acted. That is to say, that parents may come up with an explanation for their behavior and state a goal which fits into their perceived idea of the actions which would accompany such a goal. To attempt to solve this problem participants were given a hypothetical story about a conflict with their child. The story was then concluded with a sentence which gave the participant either a parent-centered, child-centered, or relationship-centered goal. Study 3 was able to reaffirm much of what was found previously in both Study 1 and Study 2.

Parental goals having an impact on the behavior of parents is important because it can affect the children in many different ways. According to Dix and Branca (2003) parental goals can have large effects on children for three reasons. First, these goals affect the cognitions,
emotions, and actions surrounding interactions. Second, parents are the main way in which a child meets its needs. Third, it influences children’s self-regulatory skills that are just beginning to emerge. Thus, the type of parental goal may also have an impact on many different child outcomes.

Mounts (2008) studied the linkage between parental goals and parental management of peers. The study found that parents were likely to have many different goals when they were managing their child’s peer relationships. Parents were likely to interfere over concerns that their child may be hurt, they want their child to have better peer relationships, their child misbehaved, or their child’s friend misbehaved. Parents differing desired outcomes and then their different ways in trying to achieve them may have an impact on the outcome variables being studied at the present time.

It is possible for parents to have similar desired outcomes/goals for their children but they take different routes to get there. For example, parents of different ethnic groups may take slightly different routes and may rank goals differently. For instance, in Latino and African American households more emphasis may be placed on the family than it is in other ethnic groups, such as European-Americans. Differences may also lie in the fact that what the end goals look like for different parents may not be exactly the same. While most parents will have the goal of socializing their child well, this may not always look the same across different parents. Parents may or may not see their child becoming socially popular at school as an avenue for helping socialization, for instance (Mounts & Kim 2007). Mounts and Kim found, in response to open ended questions, there was much similarity in what goals were present among the three studied ethnic groups. Many of participants from all three groups (African American, Latino, White) mentioned socialization goals, such as avoiding friends with problem behaviors.
However, the socialization goals were not necessarily the same, for instance the difference in the presence of religiosity as an important unprompted socialization goal.

Dix and Branca (2003) suggest the importance of long-term socialization goals, as opposed to parents taking actions which alleviate the immediate problem and make parents immediate circumstances easier, but will not help their child in the long run. This suggests that when parents engage in more child-centered goals in the present study this will be related to better social skills in their children (higher cooperation, assertion, empathy and self-control) as opposed to those who engage in actions just to make things easier for themselves in that present moment (parent-centered goals).

**Research questions**

This investigation examines the following research questions related to adolescents’ social skills.

1) **Cooperation**

   1a) How are child-centered goals related to adolescents’ cooperation?

   1b) How are parent-centered goals related to adolescents’ cooperation?

2) **Assertion**

   2a) How are child-centered goals related to adolescent assertion?

   2b) How are parent-centered goals related to adolescent assertion?

3) **Empathy**

   3a) How are child-centered goals related to adolescent empathy?

   3b) How are parent-centered goals related to adolescent empathy?

4) **Self-Control**

   4a) How are child-centered goals related to adolescent self-control?

   4b) How are parent-centered goals related to adolescent self-control?
Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 78 7th graders (mean age=12.75 years) and their primary caregiver. The primary caregiver was typically a mother, however not always (88% mothers, 7% fathers, 4% grandmothers and 1% stepmothers). The study was ethnically diverse, with the adolescents being 10.8% African American, 2.7% Asian, 8.1% Latino (primarily Mexican), 52.7% White, 9.5% African American/White, 10.8% Latino/White, 1.4% Middle Eastern/White, 2.7% African American/Latino, 1.4% African American/Asian. This study also has a near equal gender representation, with 47% of the adolescents being male and 53% female. Family structure was also diverse among the participants with 54.5% living in intact families, 29.9% living in single-parent families, 13% living in step families, and 5.2% living with other relatives.

Procedure

The participants were recruited in a midwestern middle school near a metropolitan area. Researchers set up a table during parent-teacher conferences of the 2002-2003 school year and parents who were interested were asked to join the study with their child.

The study consisted of home visits to the participants. During these visits, the participants would complete questionnaires or semi-structured interviews. The interviews included open ended questions which allowed for the participant to elaborate on their responses. The interviews were done privately and had a consistent questions list across participants. The participants sometimes brought up relevant data without being prompted by the questions. Because of this, the data was collected from the interviews as a whole and not question by question. The interviews were taped, transcribed verbatim and were conducted in either English
or Spanish. The data was encoded by two separate raters to establish reliability. Disagreements were reconciled via a discussion between the two raters.

Measures

**Child-centered goals.** Child-centered goals were measured using a 3-item scale that was created for this investigation (Mounts, Karre, & Kim, 2013). The response options were 0-7, with 0 = *Never*, 1 = *Rarely*, 4 = *Sometimes*, and 7 = *Often*. An example item is “How often have you become involved because you wanted your child to have better relationships?” The child-centered goals items had an acceptable reliability of α=.66.

**Parent-centered goals.** Parent-centered goals were measured using a 4-item scale that was created for this investigation (Mounts, Karre, & Kim, 2013). The response options were 0-7, with 0 = *Never*, 1 = *Rarely*, 4 = *Sometimes*, and 7 = *Often*. An example item is “How often do you become involved because your child misbehaves?” The parent-centered goals items had an acceptable reliability of α=.70.

**Assertion.** The social skills of assertion, cooperation, empathy, and self-control were assessed using the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) created by Gregham and Elliot (1990). Scores for all four social skills scales were computed based on the SSRS scoring instructions. Assertion was measured using a 10-item scale with the response options being 0 = *Never*, 1 = *Sometimes*, and 2 = *Very often*. An example item is “How often do you invite others to join your activities?” The assertion items had an acceptable reliability with a Cronbach’s alpha of .75.

**Cooperation.** Cooperation was measured using a 10-item scale with the response options being 0 = *Never*, 1 = *Sometimes*, and 2 = *Very often*. An example item is “How often do you follow the teacher’s directions?” The cooperation items had a Cronbach’s alpha of .80.
**Empathy.** Empathy was measured using a 10-item scale with the response options being 0 = *Never*, 1 = *Sometimes*, and 2 = *Very often*. An example item is “How often do you feel sorry for others?” The empathy items had acceptable reliability, with $\alpha=.78$.

**Self-Control.** Self-Control was measured using a 10-item scale with the response options being 0 = *Never*, 1 = *Sometimes*, and 2 = *Very often*. An example item is “How often do you control your temper?” The self-control items had acceptable reliability with $\alpha=.71$.

**Results**

**Intercorrelations of the major variables**

The intercorrelations of the variables are reported in Table 1. Parent-centered goals were not significantly correlated with cooperation, $r = -.18, p = .11$, assertion, $r = -.14, p = .21$, empathy, $r = -.12, p = .30$, and with self-control, $r = -.15, p = .17$.

Child-centered goals were also not significantly correlated with cooperation, $r = -.02, p = .38$, assertion, $r = -.51, p = .19$, empathy, $r = -.13, p = .25$, and self-control, $r = -.14, p = .24$.

Significant correlations were found between parent-centered goals and child-centered goals, $r = .62, p = .000$, such that higher levels of parent-centered goals were related to higher levels of child-centered goals. There were significant correlations between empathy and cooperation, $r = .34, p = .003$, between empathy and assertion, $r = .60, p = .000$, between cooperation and self-control, $r = .43, p = .000$, between self-control and assertion, $r = .25, p = .03$, and between self-control and empathy, $r = .48, p = .000$. For all of these correlations, higher levels of one social skill were related to higher levels of the other social skill.

**Mean differences of the major variables**

T-tests suggested that there were no significant sex of adolescent differences for parent-centered goals, $t (76) = 1.62, p = .11$, child-centered goals, $t (76) = .90, p = .37$, cooperation,
Parents’ goals

Relationship between sex of adolescents, parent-centered goals, and the outcome variables

Regressions of sex of adolescent and parent-centered goals can be found on Table 3. Parent-centered goals did not predict assertion, $B = -.04, p = .25$ and $\Delta R^2 = .02, p = .25$. Parent-centered goals also did not predict cooperation, $B = -.01, p = .73$ and $\Delta R^2 = .00, p = .73$.

Parent-centered goals were marginally related to empathy, $B = -.04, p = .07$ and $\Delta R^2 = .05, p = .07$. Self-control was predicted with high significance $B = -.13, p = .000$ and $\Delta R^2 = .20, p = .000$.

Relationship between sex of adolescents and child-centered goals on the outcome variables

Regressions of sex of adolescent and child-centered goals can be found in table 4. Child-centered goals were not a predictor of assertion $B = -.03, p = .21$ and $\Delta R^2 = .02, p = .21$. They also did not predict cooperation $B = .01, p = .61$ and $\Delta R^2 = .00, p = .61$.

Empathy was marginally significant $B = -.04, p = .053$ and $\Delta R^2 = .05, p = .053$. Self-Control was statistically significant $B = -.07, p = .01$ and $\Delta R^2 = .10, p = .01$.

Discussion

Relationship between parent-centered goals and adolescents’ social skills

No statistically significant correlations were found between parent-centered goals and the social skills outcome variables (cooperation, assertion, empathy, and self-control). There was not expected to be a positive correlation between social skills and parent-centered goals. Based on Dix and Branca (2003) we could even expect that by parents preferring goals that serve

\[ t(75) = -.13, p = .90, \text{assertion}, t(75) = 1.15, p = .25, \text{empathy}, t(75) = -1.60, p = .11, \text{and self-control}, t(75) = .73, p = .47. \]
themselves that they may adversely affect their children. Because of this, a negative correlation would have been expected.

**Relationship between child-centered goals and adolescents’ social skills**

No statistically significant correlations were found between child-centered goals and the social skills outcome variables (cooperation, assertion, empathy, and self-control). This is not what was expected to be found based on prior research. Based on Dix and Branca (2003) the expected result would have been a strong positive correlation between child-centered goals and the different social skills.

**Limitations and future directions**

A major limitation in this study was the fact that child-centered goals and parent-centered goals were highly correlated with one another despite being conceptually very different. This suggests that it is possible that the way in which these constructs were measured was not adequate and did not actually measure these two constructs, given the fact that they would be theoretically unrelated or even negatively correlated with one another.

It is also possible that some responses may be hindered by social desirability effects. For example, it is possible that parents will rate their children more positively on the social skills traits because it is desirable to have a child who is well adjusted.

A potential future direction for research in this area would be to conduct a study in which the method of obtaining information was more diversified in order to help improve the validity of the study. A future study which asks questions that better tap into parent-centered/child-centered goals constructs would also be valuable.
References


Table 1

Means and standard deviations of the major variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
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Table 2

*Intercorrelations among the major variables*

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<td>.60**</td>
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<td>.43**</td>
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** Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-Tailed)
* Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-Tailed)
Table 3

Regression (unstandardized regression coefficients) of sex and parent-centered goals on the outcome variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Assertion</th>
<th>Cooperation</th>
<th>Empathy</th>
<th>Self-Control</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
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Note: *p<.10; *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001
Table 4

Regression (unstandardized regression coefficients) of sex and child-centered goals on the outcome variables

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<td>Child-centered</td>
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<td>.02</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total $\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.12</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: *$p$<.10; *$p$<.05; **$p$<.01; ***$p$<.001