

Gender Differences in Parenting Styles and Effects on the Parent-  
Child Relationship

Approved:

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Dr. Heather C. Galloway  
Director, University Honors Program

Approved:

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Dr. Shirley S. Ogletree  
Department of Psychology  
Supervising Professor

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN PARENTING STYLES AND  
EFFECTS ON THE PARENT CHILD RELATIONSHIP

HONORS THESIS

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By

Meredith Ashley Stephens

San Marcos, Texas

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine if there were any gender differences in parenting styles and if so, measure how they affect the parent-child relationship.

Participants were given a survey asking basic demographic questions, questions about which parent/parents they have lived with the most, and questions that related to the gender roles of each parent. Participants were also given the Parental Bonding

Inventory that measures maternal care and over protectiveness and paternal care and over protectiveness. There were significant gender differences in the ways that parents interacted with their children. For example most young people have been raised by traditional parents and felt closest to their mothers. Mothers on average spent more time with their children in general than fathers, spent more time taking care of their children, were more likely not to work full time, were seen as more overprotective and more caring, spent the most quality time with their children, and still speak to their children more often today. Another gender difference between fathers and mothers was that fathers were more likely to be overprotective of their daughters than their sons.

The results supported traditional gender expectations, with mothers spending more time with their children and children feeling closer to their mothers when growing up.

## Gender Differences in Parenting Styles and Effects on the Parent-Child Relationship

Gender roles are beliefs about the ways in which individual, familial, community and societal roles are defined by gender (Slavkin & Stright, 2000). Traditional gender roles, which are common in traditional families in which the male is the breadwinner and the female is in charge of childcare and housekeeping, define masculinity as being independent, assertive, and aggressive (Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Eagly, 1987). Femininity is defined as being nurturing, sensitive and emotional (Slavkin & Stright, 2000; Bem, 1981).

It is common knowledge that there are often two separate spheres in the household, especially in many traditional marriages between a man and a woman. The man's sphere is usually outside the home in the workplace. The woman's sphere is inside the home taking care of household chores and the children.

Families have changed drastically from the stereotypical 1950's stay-at-home mom and the working dad. Gerson (2002) found that both men and women often expressed strongly egalitarian attitudes toward parenting. However, even though most mothers from the 1980's to today work outside the home, there is still what is called the second shift of housework and childcare when the woman gets home from a full day of work (Hochschild, 2003). Mothers, on average, spend more time taking care of children than fathers (Craig, 2006). It may follow that children would feel more emotional closeness to their mothers than their fathers because they have spent more time with their mothers.

Folbre et al (2001) said that taking care of children is a complicated mixture of work and love in which the relationship itself is very important. Researchers have

begun to study the affect of the child's attachment to the father as well as the mother (Thompson, 2000). Father's relationships with their children are actually very important, despite what many people may think. According to Dalton III, Frick-Horbury, and Kitzmann (2006) reports of father's parenting, but not mothers, were related to the quality of current relationships with a romantic partner. Also, father's parenting was related to the view of the self as being able to form close and secure relationships (Dalton et al, 2006).

The results of a study conducted by Craig (2006) found that mothers were more likely than fathers to spend not only more time overall with their children, but also more time multitasking, more physical labor, a more rigid timetable, more time alone with children, and more overall responsibility for their care. Craig (2006) also found that these gender differences in the amount of time spent with children as well as the circumstances stated above are the same even when the mother works full time. Fathers were found to be more likely to spend time with their children by playing with them, talking with them, engaging in educational and recreational activities more than any other kinds of caring (Craig, 2006). Other research has consistently found that mothers still spend two to three times as much time with children as fathers (Baxter, 2002; Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean, & Hofferth, 2001).

The reason for the gender difference in how much time mothers and fathers spend with their children is probably not due to the fact that fathers don't want to spend time with their children. In fact, Milkie, Mattingly, Nomaguchi, Bianchi, and Robinson (2004) found that men said that they wanted to spend more time with their children.

One common view of mothers is that they are often over involved in their children's lives, while fathers have a much less involved approach, being mostly playmates for their children (Craig, 2006). Also, perhaps it is more acceptable for women to show affection than men, so it might be more difficult for men to show affection towards their sons.

Women are often perceived as more nurturing in our society, and many people think that women are better at taking care of children than men are (Craig, 2006). Men and women are often believed to have certain traits that make men more successful in the workplace, and women are better at taking care of children. Pohl, Bender, and Lachmann (2005) found that women tend to show more empathy than men, and men tend to be more assertive than women. People may assume that that finding applies to all men and women and that there cannot be assertive women and empathetic men. Therefore, society often tends to assume that all women should take care of children and all men should focus on work and leave the childrearing to the mother. It is also assumed that mothers should have a closer relationship to their children than the fathers because mothers are supposed to be more focused on their children.

For my research I expect that many of the people in this survey were not reared by their fathers, that they did not spend much time with their fathers and that they will have spent more time with their mothers when they growing up than their fathers. I expect this result because many people think that taking care of children is mostly the responsibility of the mother, not the father. Single mothers are much more common than single fathers, and you are more likely to hear of a stay at home mom rather than a stay at home dad. In addition, when two parents of a child divorce each other, I think

that it is more common to hear of the mother getting custody than the father. Also, I hypothesize that because children spend much more time with their mothers when they are growing up, even if they grow up with both parents in their life, they will be more likely to feel closer to their mothers.

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants were Texas State University undergraduates (N= 302, 95 males, 207 females) who participated for extra credit in a sophomore-level developmental psychology class. The participants ranged in age from younger than 18 to older than 25. One participant was under 18, 89 were 18 or 19, 122 were 20 or 21, 67 were between 22 and 25, and 23 were older than 25. A subset, the 180 participants (54 men and 126 women) who indicated that they lived with both their mother and father equally when they were growing up, were the main group that was the focus of this study. The material and methods were approved by Texas State University's Institutional Review Board.

### *Materials*

The materials used in this study were four standard survey questions asking about the participant's sex, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and one question asking about the participant's parents' relationship status. There were 13 questions asking about who the participant spent the most time with, felt closest too while growing up and currently, have the most in common with, enjoyed spending time with the most, ect.

The last 50 questions were the Parental Bonding Inventory (PBI; Parker, Tupling and Brown,1979) which is a 50 question self-report survey using a four-point Likert scale, ranging from “very like” (1) to “very unlike” (4), designed to assess the individual’s perception of care and overprotection from each parent during the first 16 years of the individual’s life. One set of 25 questions was completed for the mother and then another set for the father. Care involves measuring parental affection, warmth and empathy. A low score in this category means that the individual saw his/her mother and/or father as caring; a high score means the mother and/or father was perceived as cold, indifferent and rejecting. Overprotection measures such parental behaviors as intrusiveness and infantilization. If the mother and/or father received a low score in this category, they were seen as being overprotective and/or controlling. High scores for the mother and/or father mean that the parent or parents promoted independence in their child. Twelve questions assessed care, which gives a maximum score of 48. Thirteen questions measured overprotection, which gives a maximum score of 52. The PBI has good psychometric properties and is insensitive to the effects of the respondent’s mood (Parker, 1989). Parker (1989) also reported support for the PBI’s validity as a measure of both actual and perceived parenting based on studies using family corroborative witnesses, twin studies, and studies using independent raters (Parker,1989). All questions in the survey are found in the Appendix.

### *Design and Procedure*

Before the survey was given out, the participants were informed about what the survey was about and about how long it would take them to complete it. There were consent forms that were available for the participants to sign. The participants were



told that they did not have to complete the survey if they did not want too. They were told not to put their names anywhere on the survey. There was no time limit for completing the survey.

After the survey was finished, the participants were thanked for their time and participation and given information about when and how they could find out about the results of the study. They were also allowed to keep a copy of the consent form if they chose to do so.

### *Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed using the chi squares, *t*-tests, and correlations.

## Results

### *Survey Questions*

Chi-square tests were used to analyze the frequencies of the questions based on gender of the child and gender of the parent for the subset of participants who lived with their mother and father equally while growing up. Out of the 302 participants, 180 lived with both parents for the same amount of time when growing up. This group of 180 participants made up the subset that we tested. The students left out of the test were 101 students who spent more time living with their mother, 17 students who spent more time living with their father, and 4 students who lived with neither parent. Regarding closeness to parents while growing up, 81 indicated they felt closest to their mother, 32 closest to their father, and 63 felt equally close to both parts,  $X^2(2) = 20.94$ ,  $p < .001$ . Similarly, for which "parent spent the most time taking care of you when you were growing up," 120 participants indicated their mother, 7 indicated their father, and 52 said both equally,  $X^2(2) = 108.48$ ,  $p < .001$ .

See table on next page:

Table 1: Frequencies of parental relationship items for participants who grew up living with both parents equally

Item	Mother	Father	Both Equally	Chi Square
Felt closest too growing up	81	32	63	20.94***
Caretaking time growing up	120	7	52	108.48***
Punished most	52	61	61	.93

\* $p < .05$

\*\* $p < .01$

\*\*\* $p < .001$

#### *Parental Bonding Inventory*

For participants who indicated that they lived equally with their mothers and fathers growing up, mothers were found to be more caring,  $t(158) = -5.236, p < .001$ ; and more overprotective than fathers,  $t(159) = -2.720, p < .01$ . Pearson correlations were used to compare relations among the caring/overbearing variables. The more caring a mother was, the less likely she was to be overprotective,  $r(162) = -.24, p < .01$ . Also, the more caring the father was, the less likely he was to be overprotective,  $r(161) = -.32, p < .001$ . If the mother was perceived as being caring, the father was also seen as caring,  $r(159) = .27, p < .001$ . Also, the more overprotective a father was, the more overprotective the mother was as well,  $r(160) = .56, p < .001$

Regarding differences in parental caring/overprotection depending on participants' gender, only one of the four comparisons were significant. Women were more likely than men to indicate that their fathers were overprotective,  $t(168) = 2.62, p < .01$ .

Data regarding parental closeness, caretaking, and punishment are portrayed in Table 1 (See above) and Figures 1, 2, and 3 (See appendix).

### Discussion

This study focused on the 180 participants who lived with both parents equally; 101 participants, almost as many participants, lived mostly or only with their mother. Only 17 participants, a much smaller number, lived mostly or only with their father, and four participants lived with someone other than a biological parent or parents. If we had not isolated and analyzed the participants who lived with both parents equally, there likely would have been even greater parental differences, especially regarding which parent the participant felt closest to and spent the most time with since children are most likely to live with their biological mother, regardless of whether or not they also live with their biological father. This illustrates the gender expectation that it is the woman's responsibility to take care of her children.

Many of the findings of this survey go along with stereotypical beliefs about parenting, for example, the finding that fathers are significantly more overprotective of their daughters than of their sons. This probably has to do with the belief that women need protection from men and that men are more independent and can make their own decisions. Also, the finding in this study that mothers are more overprotective and caring than fathers probably has to do with the fact that mothers spend more time with

their children than fathers. Stereotypically, a father's role is often seen as a provider role, and a mother's role is seen as the caretaker's role (Gerson, 2002). Also the finding that mothers are perceived on average as spending more time taking care of their children than fathers even when working full time supports what we know about the second shift and men and women's perceived responsibility in and out of the home (Hochschild, 2003).

The second shift as defined by Hochschild (2003) is when a woman comes home after a full day of work and has a second shift of housework, cooking and taking care of the children, while her husband does not do much or any of this work. The second shift accounts for an extra month of housework and childcare a year for women (Hochschild 2003). For participants in my sub sample who lived with both parents equally growing up, the majority had mothers (93 of 179) and fathers (169 of 180) who worked full time. Many children who have two parents that work full time are put into daycare or left with a family member or babysitter. If only one parent worked full time it was probably the father, giving the mother the entire day with the children. When the employed parents come home from work, the second shift begins for the mother who spends much of this time cooking, cleaning and taking care of the children. Often, since men usually make more money than women, women's income is seen as supplemental and if a child is sick, the responsibility usually lies with the mother to stay home from work to take care of the child (Yaremko & Lawson, 2007).

The correlations that were found in this study were also very interesting. The more caring a mother or father was, the less likely they were to be viewed by their adult children as overprotective and vice versa. It seems that being over-protective may be

the opposite of being caring for many participants and their parents. Another interesting finding was that if the mother or father was perceived as caring, the other parent was also very likely to be regarded as being caring. Also if one parent was considered overprotective, the other parent was also more likely to be seen as overprotective. Perhaps it is less likely for one parent to be caring and the other overprotective. Most parents appear to have similar styles, at least in the eyes of their college student children, as far as caring and overprotection go. Also, a very interesting gender difference that was found in this survey is that female students were more likely than male students to indicate that they had overprotective fathers.

This study has some limitations. First of all, the study should be replicated. Even though this study used a fairly large sample size (302 undergraduate students), there were twice as many women than men (95 males, 207 females.) This study could have been improved if there were as many men and women, so that there could have been a more representative sample of males. Also, the number of participants was made even smaller because we only analyzed the participants who lived with their mother and father equally when growing up. This left 180 participants out of the original 302. These results may not be replicated in the larger population and may have been different if the survey had been given to a different age group or two participants living in a different area of the country.

Also, perhaps a social desirability bias affected the data; it is possible that some participants did not want to say that they felt closer to one parent than the other. Faulty memory could also have been a factor since the study was done retrospectively; perhaps participants could not accurately remember things about their parents when

they were growing up. Another factor that might have affected the survey is that the participants took the survey after taking a test, so they might not have thought very carefully about the questions and might not have answered them as accurately as they would have if they had not just taken a test that had exhausted them mentally.

In conclusion, most young people in this sub sample have had traditional parents and felt closest to their mothers. Mothers on average spent more time with their children in general than fathers, spent more time taking care of their children, were seen as more overprotective and more caring, and spent the most quality time with their children. Even though, in the Parental Bonding Inventory, mothers were seen as more overprotective, female students were more likely to say that they had overprotective fathers than male students were. Although I did find data supporting traditional gender roles' continuing influence on parenting, some indication was also found that participants feel close to both parents as adults. Of the participants, 76 (of 176) indicated that they felt equally close to both parents today, and 69 (of 171) participants equally talked to or saw both parents. Also, over half of the participants indicated that they enjoyed spending time with both parents equally.

In the future, it would be beneficial to do more surveys about females being more likely than males to indicate that they had overprotective fathers. There has not been much research done in this area. Also, it would be beneficial if there was more research done on stay at home dads, because they are an important and growing population. From these families, it would be interesting to learn about the relationships between the father and children, and if it is very different from fathers that work outside the home.

I think that in the future, parenting will become more equally divided among mothers and fathers and in turn this will result in children feeling similarly close to both parents. Ganong and Coleman (2001) believe that we are already moving toward the social ideal of fathers as co-parents with mothers. Fathers today are caring more for their children today than in the past (Sandberg & Hofferth, 2001).

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## Appendix

Please fill in your scantron with the appropriate letter for each item.

## 1. Your sex

- a. Male
- b. Female

## 2. Age

- a. Younger than 18
- b. 18 or 19
- c. 20 or 21
- d. 22-25
- e. Older than 25

## 3. Ethnicity

- a. Caucasian/White
- b. African American
- c. Hispanic/Latin American
- d. Asian
- e. Other

## 4. How would you describe your socioeconomic status?

- a. Upper class
- b. Upper-middle class
- c. Middle class
- d. Lower-middle class
- e. Lower class

## 5. Parents relationship status

- a. Biological parents married
- b. Biological parents divorced from each other
- c. Biological parents were never married
- d. Mother is a widow
- e. Father is a widower

## Parenting Questions

6. Which biological or adoptive parent did you live with the most when you were growing up?

- a. Biological mother and father equally
- b. Biological mother
- c. Biological father
- d. Neither biological parent

7. Which biological or adoptive parent did you spend the most time with when you were growing up?
- Mother
  - Father
  - Both parents equally
  - Did not live with either parent
8. Which biological or adoptive parent would you say you feel closest too when you were growing up?
- Mother
  - Father
  - Both parents equally
  - Did not feel at all close to either parent
9. Which biological or adoptive parent spent the most time taking care of you when you were growing up? (Cooking, cleaning, taking you to school, ect.)
- Mother
  - Father
  - Both parents equally
  - Neither
10. Most of the time, did your mother work while you were growing up?
- No
  - Yes, full time
  - Yes, part time
  - Does not apply (lived with father or other family member)
11. Most of the time, did your father work while you were growing up?
- No
  - Yes, Full time
  - Yes, Part time
  - Does not apply (lived with mother or other family member)
12. Which parent punished you the most as a child?
- Mother
  - Father
  - Both parents equally
  - Neither/does not apply
13. Which parent spent the most time playing with you as a child?
- Mother
  - Father
  - Both parents equally
  - Neither

14. Which parent do you think that you spent the most quality time with as a child?
- Mother
  - Father
  - Both parents equally
  - Neither
15. Which parent do you feel closest too today?
- Mother
  - Father
  - Both parents equally
  - Neither
16. Which parent do you talk to or see the most today?
- Mother
  - Father
  - Both parents equally
  - Neither
17. Who do you have more in common with?
- Mother
  - Father
  - I have the same amount of things in common with both parents
  - Neither
18. Who do you enjoy spending the most time with?
- Mother
  - Father
  - Both parents equally
  - Neither

### Parental Bonding Inventory

This questionnaire lists various attitudes and behaviors of parents. As you remember your Mother/Father in your first 16 years, would you please indicate the most appropriate response category. (If you did not grow up with your mother or father, please leave that section blank.)

Please answer these first 25 questions about your ***mother***.

Response categories:

- Very Like
- Moderately Like
- Moderately Unlike
- Very unlike

19. Spoke to me with a warm and friendly voice.
20. Did not help me as much as I needed.
21. Let me do those things I liked doing.
22. Seemed emotionally cold to me.
23. Appeared to understand my problems & worries
24. Was affectionate to me.
25. Liked me to make my own decisions
26. Did not want me to grow up.
27. Tried to control everything I did
28. Invaded my privacy
29. Enjoyed talking things over with me
30. Frequently smiled at me.
31. Tended to baby me.
32. Did not seem to understand what I needed or wanted
33. Let me decide things for myself
34. Made me feel I wasn't wanted
35. Could make me feel better when I was upset
36. Did not talk with me very much.
37. Tried to make me dependent on her/him
38. Felt I could not look after myself unless she/he was around
39. Gave me as much freedom as I wanted
40. Let me go out as often as I wanted.
41. Was overprotective of me
42. Did not praise me
43. Let me dress in any way I pleased

Please answer these second 25 questions about your ***father***.

Response categories:

- a. Very Like
- b. Moderately Like
- c. Moderately Unlike
- d. Very unlike

44. Spoke to me with a warm and friendly voice.
45. Did not help me as much as I needed.
46. Let me do those things I liked doing.
47. Seemed emotionally cold to me.
48. Appeared to understand my problems & worries
49. Was affectionate to me.
50. Liked me to make my own decisions
51. Did not want me to grow up.

52. Tried to control everything I did
53. Invaded my privacy
54. Enjoyed talking things over with me
55. Frequently smiled at me.
56. Tended to baby me.
57. Did not seem to understand what I needed or wanted
58. Let me decide things for myself
59. Made me feel I wasn't wanted
60. Could make me feel better when I was upset
61. Did not talk with me very much.
62. Tried to make me dependent on her/him
63. Felt I could not look after myself unless she/he was around
64. Gave me as much freedom as I wanted
65. Let me go out as often as I wanted.
66. Was overprotective of me
67. Did not praise me
68. Let me dress in any way I pleased

**Thank you for participating in our survey.**

Author's Note

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## Figure Captions

Figure 1: Which parent was the participant closest too while growing up? 1.00, the most common choice is the mother (F=81). 2.00, the least common choice is the father (F=32). 3.00 is both parents equally (F=63).

Figure 2: Which parent does the participant feel closest too today? 1.00, the mother (F=73), 2.00, the father (F=27), 3.00, both parents equally, (F=76).

Figure 3: Which parent spent the most time taking care of the participant when they were growing up? 1.00, the mother (F=120). 2.00, the father (F= 7). 3.00, both parents equally (F=52).

Figure 4: Did the participant's mother work while the participant was growing up? 1.00, No (F=51). 2.00, Yes, full time (F=93). 3.00, Yes, part time (F=35).

Figure 5: Did the participant's father work while the participant was growing up? 1.00, No (F=6). 2.00, Yes, full time (F=169). 3.00, Yes, part time (F=5).





