

The relationship between parenting styles and mental health in children and adolescents

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Abstract: Objective: To explore the differences between paternal and maternal parenting styles and their impact on the mental health of children and adolescents. Methods: A total of 200 patients who met the diagnostic criteria of the 4th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) were assigned to the case group. Additionally, 200 primary and secondary school students were randomly selected to form a normal control group, matching basic characteristics with the case group and excluding any psychological disorders. All participants were assessed using the Family Parenting Style Questionnaire and the Hundred-item Psychological Symptoms Questionnaire. The differences in parenting styles between fathers and mothers, as well as their correlations with children's psychological symptoms, were analyzed and compared. Results: Statistically significant differences were observed between fathers and mothers in the following dimensions: Democracy-Autocracy ($t=2.099$, $P=0.036$), Respect-Humiliation ($t=4.953$, $P=0.000$), Care-Protectiveness ($t=-3.697$, $P=0.000$), and Expectation-Demandingness ($t=35.238$, $P=0.000$). Correlation analysis showed no significant association between the difference in the parental Expectation-Demandingness factor and psychological problems in children and adolescents ($P>0.05$). However, differences in other parental factors were significantly correlated with psychological problems in this population ($r=0.106-0.265$, $P<0.05$ or $P<0.01$). Conclusion: Inconsistent parenting styles between fathers and mothers have a certain impact on the mental health of adolescents.

Keywords: parenting styles, adolescents, mental health

1. Introduction

Numerous studies have shown that parenting styles have a significant impact on the mental health of children and adolescents. It is generally believed that positive parenting styles promote mental health in children and adolescents, while negative parenting styles may impair it [1-3]. However, some studies [4-5] have found that positive parenting styles such as acceptance and warmth can have negative effects on mental health, whereas demandingness exerts a protective effect on most mental health dimensions, autocracy on attention problems, and maternal punishment on obsessive-compulsive symptoms. These findings may be related to traditional Chinese culture and educational philosophies. There is considerable controversy regarding the impact of parental consistency in parenting styles on mental health. Most scholars argue that consistent parenting styles are beneficial for children's healthy development, while others suggest that complementary styles—such as the "strict father, kind mother" model—are more conducive to children's well-being [6-8]. This study aims to preliminarily explore the differences in parenting styles between Chinese fathers and mothers and their impact on the mental health of children and adolescents, with the goal of providing references for child development and mental health counseling.

2. Subjects and methods

2.1. Subjects

Case group: A total of 200 patients from the outpatient and inpatient departments of our center were included. Diagnoses were established by clinical physicians according to the diagnostic criteria of the 4th

edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV). The group comprised 59 cases of anxiety disorders, 58 cases of behavioral and conduct disorders, 39 cases of depressive disorders, 20 cases of schizophrenia, 11 cases of somatoform disorders, 9 cases of learning problems, and 4 cases of other conditions. There were 115 males and 85 females, with a mean age of 16.3 ± 3.6 years and a mean education duration of 9.6 ± 3.1 years. Regarding family structure, 126 cases were from nuclear families, 61 from extended families, 7 from reconstituted (step) families, 4 from single-parent or divorced families, and 2 from other family types. In terms of family economic status, 16 cases were classified as poor, 117 as moderate, 58 as relatively well-off, and 9 as wealthy. Maternal education levels were as follows: 29 cases with primary school education, 69 with junior high school, 52 with high school or technical secondary school, 35 with college diploma, and 15 with bachelor's degree or above.

Control group: A total of 200 primary and secondary school students from Wuxi City were randomly selected to match the basic characteristics of the case group and were confirmed to be free from any psychological disorders. The control group consisted of 117 males and 83 females, with a mean age of 16.5 ± 3.1 years and a mean education duration of 9.7 ± 3.2 years. Family structure distribution included 123 nuclear families, 59 extended families, 2 reconstituted families, 12 single-parent or divorced families, and 4 other family types. Family economic status comprised 11 poor, 122 moderate, 61 relatively well-off, and 6 wealthy. Maternal education levels were: 12 with primary school education, 83 with junior high school, 52 with high school or technical secondary school, 36 with college diploma, and 17 with bachelor's degree or above. No statistically significant differences were observed between the two groups in terms of gender, age, education duration, family structure, family economic status, or maternal education level ($P > 0.05$).

2.2. Methods

2.2.1. Participants and testing procedure

For the case group and the control group, children and adolescents completed the Family Parenting Style Questionnaire (regarding both father and mother) and the Hundred-item Psychological Symptoms Questionnaire independently. In schools, the tests were administered in a group setting, while in the outpatient clinic, individual testing was conducted.

2.2.2. Family parenting style questionnaire

The Family Parenting Style Questionnaire was developed by Cheng Zaohuo in 2008. It consists of 10 dimensions: Acceptance-Rejection, Democracy-Autocracy, Respect-Humiliation, Care-Protectiveness, Tolerance-Indulgence, Encouragement-Punishment, Understanding-Blame, Warmth-Roughness, Discipline-Control, and Expectation-Demandingness. Each dimension contains 12 items, and each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1–5). The questionnaire demonstrates good reliability and validity. Test-retest reliability ranged from 0.654 to 0.822, split-half reliability from 0.635 to 0.869, and Cronbach's α coefficient from 0.496 to 0.824. Factor analysis yielded three factors: positive parenting style, negative parenting style, and conditional parenting style. Higher scores indicate better parenting styles; for example, in the Expectation-Demandingness dimension, a higher score suggests a greater tendency toward the expectation style of parenting.

2.2.3. Hundred-item psychological symptoms questionnaire

The Hundred-item Psychological Symptoms Questionnaire was developed by Cheng Zaohuo in 2010. It comprises 10 symptom dimensions: depressive symptoms, anxiety symptoms, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, somatic symptoms, psychotic symptoms, personality and conduct problems, attention problems, neurotic sensitivity, eating and sleep issues, and impulsive behaviors. Each dimension contains 10 items, and each item is rated on a 5-point scale (1–5). The questionnaire shows good reliability and validity. Test-retest reliability ranged from 0.615 to 0.791, Cronbach's α coefficient from 0.804 to 0.974, and its correlation with the Symptom Checklist-90 (SCL-90) was 0.605–0.823. Factor analysis extracted four factors: emotional symptoms, physiological symptoms, behavioral control, and psychopathology. Higher scores indicate a greater number of psychological problems.

2.2.4. Statistical Analysis

Data was analyzed using SPSS 13.0 for descriptive statistics, difference comparisons, and correlation analysis. The independent samples t-test was used for difference comparisons.

3. Results

3.1. Comparison of parenting styles between fathers and mothers

Statistically significant differences were observed between fathers and mothers in the following dimensions: Democracy-Autocracy, Respect-Humiliation, Care-Protectiveness, and Expectation-Demandingness ($P < 0.05$ or $P < 0.001$). See Table 1.

3.2. Comparison of parenting styles between the two groups

SPSS was used to analyze whether statistically significant differences existed in the discrepancies of parenting styles (calculated as the difference between paternal and maternal parenting style scores) between the case group and the control group. The results showed that the discrepancies in the case group were significantly higher than those in the control group across all dimensions except for Expectation-Demandingness ($P < 0.05$ or $P < 0.001$). See Table 2.

Table 1. Comparison of Parenting Styles Between Fathers and Mothers ($\bar{x} \pm s$)

Factor (score)	Father(n=400)	Mother(n=400)	t	P
Acceptance-Rejection	45.89 $\pm$ 7.02	45.56 $\pm$ 7.29	1.628	0.104
Democracy-Autocracy	43.52 $\pm$ 8.54	43.01 $\pm$ 8.72	2.099	0.036
Respect-Humiliation	49.27 $\pm$ 7.70	48.16 $\pm$ 8.28	4.953	0.000
Care-Protectiveness	46.26 $\pm$ 5.58	46.86 $\pm$ 5.61	-3.697	0.000
Tolerance-Indulgence	48.20 $\pm$ 6.33	48.06 $\pm$ 6.46	0.859	0.391
Encouragement-Punishment	47.03 $\pm$ 8.41	47.61 $\pm$ 6.44	-1.736	0.083
Understanding-Blame	42.79 $\pm$ 8.86	42.42 $\pm$ 9.99	1.325	0.186
Warmth-Roughness	47.26 $\pm$ 7.73	47.44 $\pm$ 7.91	-0.727	0.468
Discipline-Control	41.81 $\pm$ 6.48	41.64 $\pm$ 6.39	0.881	0.379
Exp-Dem	45.58 $\pm$ 4.90	39.48 $\pm$ 4.87	35.238	0.000

Table 2. Comparison of Parenting Style Discrepancies Between the Two Groups ($\bar{x} \pm s$)

Factor (score)	Father(n=400)	Mother(n=400)	t	P
Acceptance-Rejection	6.23 $\pm$ 5.72	5.00 $\pm$ 4.55	2.383	0.018
Democracy-Autocracy	3.23 $\pm$ 4.55	2.33 $\pm$ 3.32	2.242	0.026
Respect-Humiliation	3.07 $\pm$ 4.15	1.98 $\pm$ 3.40	2.854	0.005
Care-Protectiveness	2.49 $\pm$ 2.78	1.90 $\pm$ 2.14	2.365	0.019
Tolerance-Indulgence	2.35 $\pm$ 2.73	1.65 $\pm$ 2.42	2.689	0.007
Encouragement-Punishment	6.05 $\pm$ 4.46	4.32 $\pm$ 3.70	4.192	0.000
Understanding-Blame	3.49 $\pm$ 4.85	2.57 $\pm$ 4.10	2.046	0.041
Warmth-Roughness	3.67 $\pm$ 4.79	2.28 $\pm$ 3.07	3.435	0.001
Discipline-Control	3.06 $\pm$ 3.30	2.22 $\pm$ 2.44	2.842	0.005
Exp-Dem	6.65 $\pm$ 2.88	6.43 $\pm$ 2.04	0.870	0.385

3.3. Parenting discrepancies vs. adolescent mental health

A correlation analysis was conducted to examine the impact of parental parenting style discrepancies on children's mental health. The results showed that, except for the discrepancy in the Expectation-Demandingness factor, which was not significantly correlated with any of the children's psychological problems, significant correlations were found between various factors of the psychological symptom questionnaire and discrepancies in multiple parenting style factors ($P < 0.05$ or $P < 0.001$). Specifically, the discrepancy in the Acceptance-Rejection factor was significantly correlated with obsessive-compulsive symptoms and eating/sleep issues, while the discrepancy in the Encouragement-Punishment factor was significantly correlated with all factors of psychological problems. Furthermore, the total score of the psychological questionnaire was significantly correlated with all parenting style factor discrepancies except for Acceptance-Rejection and Expectation-Demandingness. See Table 3.

Table 3. Correlation Analysis Between Parental Parenting Style Discrepancies and Psychological Problems in Children and Adolescents (R-values)

Factor	Total score	Depression	Anxiety	Obsessive-Compulsive	Somatization	Psychoticism	Conduct Disorder	Attn & Auto	Eating & Sleep	Impulse Control
Acceptance-Rejection	0.097	0.043	0.043	0.143**	0.068	0.098	0.045	0.0810.036	0.140**	0.024
Democracy-Authority	0.117*	0.084	0.096	0.213**	0.063	0.143**	0.060	0.0520.079	0.076	0.045
Respect-Humiliation	0.152**	0.124*	0.113*	0.204**	0.106*	0.115*	0.132**	0.116*0.097	0.088	0.089
Care-Protectiveness	0.121*	0.093	0.123*	0.095	0.129*	0.116*	0.113*	0.0580.081	0.065	0.119*
Tolerance-Indulgence	0.130*	0.101*	0.067	0.138**	0.157**	0.125*	0.137**	0.0870.097	0.082	0.118*
Encouragement-Punishment	0.171**	0.133**	0.153**	0.179**	0.110*	0.132**	0.195**	0.161**0.122*	0.111*	0.107*
Understanding-Blame	0.151**	0.106*	0.147**	0.202**	0.106*	0.152**	0.123*	0.0610.117*	0.094	0.088
Warmth-Roughness	0.183**	0.125*	0.191**	0.265**	0.112*	0.156**	0.129*	0.112*0.124*	0.112*	0.053
Discipline-Control	0.165**	0.111*	0.186*	0.233**	0.095	0.119*	0.102*	0.0930.059	0.056	0.158**
Exp-Dem	0.015	0.060	0.009	0.031	-0.059	0.022	-0.041	0.038-0.035	-0.022	0.050

4. Discussion

4.1. Comparison of parenting style discrepancies between the case and control groups

This study found that, except for the discrepancy in the Expectation-Demandingness factor, statistically significant differences existed between the case and control groups for all other parenting style factors, with the mean discrepancies in the case group being higher than those in the control group. Among these, the mean discrepancies for Acceptance-Rejection, Encouragement-Punishment, and Expectation-Demandingness were larger than those for other factors, indicating relatively greater differences between parents in these three dimensions. Although the parental discrepancy in the Expectation-Demandingness factor was large, it did not reach statistical significance between the case and control groups. This suggests that parental differences in the Expectation-Demandingness dimension may not be a risk factor for psychological problems. Additionally, these findings indicate that discrepancies or inconsistencies in parenting styles between fathers and mothers have a certain impact on the mental health

of children and adolescents. Furthermore, this study revealed that mothers more frequently employed encouragement and warmth in child-rearing, while fathers more often used punishment and harsh methods. This is consistent with numerous previous studies indicating that fathers tend to be stricter and harsher than mothers. Moreover, mothers used rejection more often, which aligns with the findings of Wang [6].

4.2. Expectation discrepancy and psychological problems

This study found no significant correlation between the Expectation-Demandingness discrepancy and psychological problems in children and adolescents, which is consistent with the comparative analysis between the case and control groups, further verifying that the Expectation-Demandingness discrepancy is not a risk factor for psychological problems in this population. Additionally, the correlation coefficients were very low (0.009–0.06), with some even being negative. This may be related to fathers having higher expectations than mothers. Therefore, it can be inferred that a father's high expectations may serve as a protective factor against certain psychological problems in children (e.g., anxiety, somatization, eating/sleep issues, conduct problems, and autonomic nervous system symptoms). This finding bears some similarity to previous research [9] suggesting that an authoritative parenting style can reduce children's psychological problems. An authoritative parenting style is characterized by high responsiveness and high demands, and high expectations are a component of this style. Furthermore, some studies [7-8] suggest that maternal demandingness acts as a protective factor, which may explain why the Expectation-Demandingness discrepancy is not a risk factor for psychological problems in children and adolescents.

4.3. Impact of parenting style discrepancies on children's mental health

This study also found that the discrepancy in the Acceptance-Rejection factor was only significantly correlated with obsessive-compulsive symptoms and eating/sleep issues, suggesting that the impact of Acceptance-Rejection discrepancies on children's psychology is relatively smaller compared to other factors. In contrast, the Encouragement-Punishment discrepancy was significantly correlated with all ten factors of children's psychological problems, indicating that differences in this dimension have a relatively greater impact. Moreover, discrepancies between paternal and maternal parenting styles in several other factors were significantly correlated with certain aspects of children's psychological problems, demonstrating that parental inconsistency in specific areas has a tangible impact on children's mental health, which is consistent with previous research [6-7].

5. Conclusion

Differences in parenting styles between fathers and mothers stem from various factors, including gender, family background, personality, cultural influences, and marital quality. Therefore, parents should communicate more and strive to reduce discrepancies in their parenting approaches—particularly regarding encouragement versus punishment. They should adopt more positive and authoritative parenting styles to provide children with a harmonious family environment, enabling them to grow up healthily and reducing the occurrence of psychological problems. Although this study found that discrepancies in the Expectation-Demandingness factor have little impact on children's psychological problems, the influence of such discrepancies on children's personality, socialization, and other aspects remains unexamined. Future research should continue to explore the impact of parental Expectation-Demandingness on the development of children and adolescents.

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