

PARENT-CHILD INTERACTIONS

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Introduction

The need for information on parenting or childrearing is often expressed by families. During a series of state and local meetings, North Dakota County Extension agents asked 5,000 homemakers to identify those topic areas about which they would like more information. The topic most requested was "parent-child relationships". Specifically, these women and mothers identified lack of communication between parents and children as a number one problem.

While it is possible to describe parent-child relationships in general and distinguish some of the variation found among different groups, the knowledge base is especially limited for certain rural regions of the country. This situation presents particular problems for educators charged with the responsibility for parent education programs pertinent to a rural population. If the concerns of parents and their styles of parenting are not understood, it is difficult to design effective programs. In addition, the absence of localized parent-child data often reduces the credibility of programs for localized audiences.

Socialization of children within our society continues to be a major function of the family unit. Within the context of this unit, the child is expected to learn the prohibitions, proscriptions, and associated values and beliefs of the surrounding culture. Parents can enhance or retard the learning of physical, intellectual, and emotional skills by their children. The more traditional view of socialization, which has guided parent-child research for so long, implied that the child was a passive being who was molded by parental influences. During the past decade or so, however, the view of socialization as a one-way influence process has been questioned because it ignores the child's impact on the parents. In the specific context of parent-child relations, the position that this active child affects adults, too, has been vigorously supported. While parents' actions will bring about changes in the child's behavior, these very changes will, in turn, affect and modify the parent's ap-

proach to the child. Not only do parents socialize the child, but the child socializes the parents, at least to some extent. Present research has not indicated clearly the extent to which the child or parent, mother or father, influence each other during this socialization process.

Purpose of the Study

Research data are needed to adequately plan educational and other community programs that will enhance satisfaction and strengths of rural living, social skills of rural families, optimal development of rural children and overall quality of rural family life. A study of parent-child interactions and socialization processes was developed to obtain information on parenting and parent-child relationships in rural and urban families. Objectives of the study were: 1) to determine the rewards and satisfactions, problems and stresses of parenting among families in North Dakota; b) to assess the relationship between styles of parenting and levels of thinking and social and emotional development of children; c) to determine developmental patterns of parent-child interactions; and d) to examine stages of family and child development as both parents and children age.

The preliminary year of this study has been completed and certain aspects of the family interaction data are presented in this article.

Procedures

Family Interactions

Twenty-one North Dakota families with at least one child 6, 9 or 12 years of age participated in this phase of the study with seven children in each of the three age groups. There were 10 girls and 11 boys. Videotaped family interactions were obtained for mother/child, father/child and husband/wife pairs participating in planned, organized games. The first game required the cooperation of the family members to complete a design on an etch-a-sketch. The etch-a-sketch is a toy in which a design is made by turning two knobs, one controlling vertical lines, the other controlling horizontal lines. The second game consisted of two block designs completed by the parents and children. The blocks are 1½-inch cubes each having four sides of different color, plus two

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diagonally divided sides of two colors. In each game the families were asked to take turns and to talk about the tasks. In order to ensure that children understood directions to the games, a short vocabulary test was administered. The Schaefer Parent as Educator Interview (1) was administered to each mother and father of all participating families. There are two forms of the interview, a mother form and a father form. This interview asks that parents rate their attitudes, beliefs and behaviors with regard to freedom of speech for children, discipline of children, schools and education, and the treatment of children while in school. In addition to the interview, each parent was asked to complete a self-rating of parent behaviors (Iowa Parent Behavior Inventory). The Iowa Parent Behavior Inventory (2) measures parents' views of their behaviors toward their child. The questionnaire obtained information on parental involvement with children, limit setting or family rules, responsiveness to needs of children, reasoning guidance, intimacy or closeness, and free expression of behavior allowed children.

The home visit took approximately an hour. During this time, two interviewers conducted parental interviews and videotaped interactions of each pair of family members. The videotaped information on family interactions during the game playing situations is reported.

Results and Discussion

Sex and Age Differences

Of major importance to the researchers during this first year of the project were interactions of family member pairs. Videotaped interaction data were categorized by two observers. The categories consisted of nine verbal behavioral categories of child and adult¹ and three non-verbal behavioral categories of adult and child². Four of the behavioral categories were not analyzed because so few of these behaviors occurred.

Mean frequency of behaviors by sex of child are presented in Table 1. Behaviors which denote the greatest differences between boys and girls were affection, restriction, providing and requesting feedback and teaching.

¹Teaching (giving instructional directions), positive reinforcement (praising, rewarding verbally), intrusion (interrupting), restriction (placing verbal limits), justification (explaining reasoning), hostility (expressing anger), ignoring (not responding to partner), requests feedback, provides feed back (tells partner how they are doing in relation to correctly completing the task).

²Affection (demonstrates affection/liking for partner), complies (partner follows directions without comment), task oriented (individual concentrates attention on on-going task).

Table 1. Mean Frequency of Behaviors by Sex of Child.

| BEHAVIORAL CATEGORIES | Males | Females |
|------------------------|-------|---------|
| Verbal | | |
| Provides Feedback | 40.9 | 47.9 |
| Requests Feedback | 10.72 | 16.5 |
| Restriction | 5.54 | 1.3 |
| Positive Reinforcement | 1.18 | 1.6 |
| Teaching | 13.54 | 8.0 |
| Non-Verbal | | |
| Task Oriented | 15.5 | 17.8 |
| Complies | 6.3 | 4.9 |
| Affective | 4.29 | 10.1 |

When mean behaviors were recorded by age of child, differences were found for behaviors of task oriented, complies, affection, provides feedback, requests feedback and teaching (Table 2). The number of behaviors increased with the age of the child for teaching, positive reinforcement, requesting feedback and task oriented behaviors. This was not the case for complying behaviors, which declined in number with increasing age of the child. Because some of these behavioral differences were small and no tests for significance were made, they should be interpreted as trends.

Table 2. Frequency of Behaviors by Age of Child.

| BEHAVIORAL CATEGORIES | AGE (in years) | | |
|------------------------|----------------|-------|-------|
| Verbal | 6 | 9 | 12 |
| Provides Feedback | 39.0 | 31.85 | 75.28 |
| Requests Feedback | 12.28 | 18.42 | 22.28 |
| Restriction | 3.57 | 3.0 | 4.28 |
| Positive Reinforcement | 1.0 | 1.28 | 1.85 |
| Teaching | 9.42 | 13.42 | 20.28 |
| Non-Verbal | | | |
| Task Oriented | 29.28 | 37.8 | 49.7 |
| Complies | 12.0 | 8.71 | 7.71 |
| Affective | 5.28 | 4.57 | 11.28 |

Incidence of Child and Parent Behavior

This preliminary report is devoted to a descriptive account of the incidence and structure of child, mother and father behavior to each other in their own homes and to an analysis of differences between mothers and fathers and their children. Categorically coded behaviors of the child, mother and father were summed over the observation sessions for all 21 families. The largest behavioral categories included teaching and requests for feedback and, therefore, were charted to determine the incidence of child initiated vs. adult initiated behaviors. Table 3 demonstrates that mothers in-

Table 3. Mean Frequency of Teaching Behaviors by Sex, Age and Initiator (Mother, Father and Child)

| Six-year-olds: | Initiator | | | Child |
|--------------------------|-----------|-------|--------|-------|
| | Mother | Child | Father | |
| Males | 15.5 | 8.5 | 13 | 2 |
| Females | 8 | 5 | 6.33 | 3 |
| Nine-year-olds: | | | | |
| Males | 14.3 | 10 | 17 | 8.3 |
| Females | 4.75 | 2.25 | 6.25 | 7.25 |
| Twelve-year-olds: | | | | |
| Males | 6 | 11.25 | 14.5 | 6.5 |
| Females | 10 | 10 | 14 | 6.6 |

initiated more teaching behaviors than their 6 and 9-year-old sons and daughters and less than their 12-year-old sons. Generally, fathers displayed more teaching than mothers with children except with 6-year-olds where mothers exceeded fathers in total number of behaviors.

When requesting feedback behaviors were analyzed (Table 4), 6 and 9-year-old girls and their parents tended to exhibit fewer behaviors in this category than did their 6 and 9-year-old counterparts. Twelve-year-old girls, however, requested more feedback from their parents than did 6 and 9-year-olds.

Table 4. Mean Frequency of Requesting Feedback Behaviors by Sex, Age and Initiator (Mother, Father and Child)

| | Initiator | | | Child |
|-------------------|-----------|-------|--------|-------|
| | Mother | Child | Father | |
| Six-year-olds: | | | | |
| Males | 21.5 | 6.5 | 202.75 | 6.25 |
| Females | 9.66 | 7 | 9.33 | 4.66 |
| Nine-year-olds: | | | | |
| Males | 25 | 16.66 | 15 | 6 |
| Females | 5.75 | 9.75 | 7.25 | 5.5 |
| Twelve-year-olds: | | | | |
| Males | 13.75 | 3.75 | 16.75 | 2.5 |
| Females | 16.66 | 25.66 | 20.66 | 18 |

The variability of behaviors demonstrated by parents and their children across the behavioral categories seems to indicate a need for further refinement of these categories. Parents and children tended to react differently to the games based on sex of parent and sex and age of child. Further elaborations and delineations of behavioral categories such as teaching and requests for feedback will help to clarify these differences and similarities in parent-child interaction.

Summary and Implications for North Dakota Families and Family Educators

This study examined parent and child interactions within the family, that is, mother-child and father-child pairs. The preliminary descriptive analyses have revealed some interesting differences in the interaction styles of these parent-child pairs. It seems that each parent plays a different role with the child, boy and girl, and that the child interacts with each parent differently in game situations.

Differences in behaviors by children and their parents were found for categories of affection, restriction, providing and requesting feedback and teaching. Age differences in behaviors also were found for teaching, requesting feedback and task oriented behaviors. When children's and parents' behaviors were compared for teaching and requesting feedback, mothers and fathers initiated these behaviors differently for children at different ages. Likewise, children tended to vary their behavior depending on their age and sex and sex of parent.

Earlier studies of parent-child relations indicated that fathers were minimally involved in the parenting process, deferring to mothers in all areas of child rearing. A study by Gleason (3) reported that, in game-like situations, fathers speak less and, when they do speak, use more orders and threats. The current research found that, despite some age-related differences, fathers and mothers exhibited approximately the same number of behaviors in each category. In fact, fathers displayed more teaching behaviors than mothers, except with 6-year-old children. This might indicate that parents in North Dakota differ from parent groups who responded in other studies, further emphasizing the need to develop a regional knowledge base with regard to parent-child relationships. Another implication of this trend is that groups and agencies serving families should not neglect fathers and, furthermore, may want to emphasize programs which build on current levels of family skill and include all family members in activities.

When the data on age differences are examined, it seems that, in general, parents adjust their communications with their child based on age and sex of the child. For example, research would lead one to expect that parents would provide fewer teaching behaviors as the child's age increases. Further, at each age level parents would teach daughters less than they would sons. North Dakota families did not follow this model precisely. Boys were provided similar numbers of teaching cues, by parents, across all age categories. Twelve-year-old girls were given more teaching cues by both parents than were 6 and 9-year-old girls. However, it seems to be a reciprocal relationship; 12-year-old girls, more than 12-year-old boys, teach each of their parents almost as much as their parents teach them. This may suggest that under certain conditions parents are allowing older daughters to express their thoughts and opinions in the family setting.

The family is viewed by many as the primary educator of its children. In order to educate, parents must communicate with their children. This study indicates that North Dakota families are communicating in specific ways given the age and sex of the child and the sex of the parent. The next steps are to better understand family communication patterns and to develop more effective ways of enhancing this communication.

LITERATURE CITED

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