

What my mother did: Do maternal parenting practices influence those of the next generation?

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A number of studies have examined the intergenerational transmission of parenting (for reviews, see Putallaz et al., 1998 and van Ijzendoorn, 1992). Early investigations began primarily as an attempt to understand the cycle of abusive parenting and domestic violence (Belsky, 1984) and many subsequent studies have consequently focused on the transmission of harsh, authoritarian or abusive parenting practices across generations (Capaldi et al., 2003; Dubow et al, 2003; Simons et al., 1991; Simons et al., 1992). The common finding is that adolescents and children who experienced harsh parenting when they were growing up are more likely to behave aggressively toward their own children (Covell et al., 1995; Hops et al., 2003). This suggests that repeated exposure to aggressive parenting practices “provides individuals with a model of the parent role that they use with their own children in a reflexive way” (Simons et al., 1991: 168). Research on more constructive parenting practices is more limited although the work that has been done again suggests that parents are more likely to be involved and nurturing with their children when they report having experienced the same behaviors from their own parents during childhood (Chen and Kaplan, 2001; Simons et al., 1993; Cairns et al., 1998).

Prior research on the intergenerational transmission of parenting has also found gender differences as it seems that the intergenerational continuity in parenting is stronger for women than for men: pathways that exist between grandparents’ and parents’ behaviors for mothers do not necessarily exist for fathers (Dubow et al., 2003; Belsky et al., 2005). Findings from past

research also suggest that parenting experienced during later childhood may be more important in determining intergenerational transmission than that experienced during early childhood.

In this paper we ask whether parenting behaviors experienced in the family of origin as a child influence later parenting behaviors in the family of destination. Although this is not a new topic of exploration, in our approach we attempt to overcome many of the limitations of prior research. For example, many prior studies use prospective data collected from adults on their own parenting, but the reports on the parenting that they received while growing up are retrospective. Others rely on samples that are small or predominantly white (Belsky et al., 2005; Conger et al., 2003), while others are geographically limited and drawn from small towns and rural areas (Thornberry et al., 2003). Many past studies also focus on parenting *beliefs/attitudes* rather than actual parenting practices, and when they do examine practices it is usually just one aspect such as harsh (Conger et al., 2003), constructive (Chen and Kaplan, 2001) or affective parenting (Belsky et al., 2005). Finally, measures of parenting behaviors may not be the same across generations due to data limitations.

In contrast, this study overcomes many of these previous limitations using data that is nationally representative and geographically diverse. Our data let us examine multiple parenting practices across two generations using prospective data for each generation. Further, they provide the same measures for each parenting practice, captured at roughly the same point in each generation's life span. As van Ijzendoorn (1992: 92) stated, an ideal design on the intergenerational transmission of parenting would be one "in which two or three generations of parents at the same point in their life span [were] studied with comparable, valid parenting measures." We also examine multiple dimensions of parenting using measures of affection, learning and discipline. This is an important advantage over previous studies. As Chen and

Kaplan (2001) note in their research on parenting practices, constructive parenting is not just the opposite of harsh parenting. Rather it is one dimension that likely interacts in complex and dynamic ways with other parenting behaviors. Therefore, a study on the intergenerational transmission of parenting that is able to account for multiple parenting practices would provide a more complete understanding of this process.

DATA & RESEARCH DESIGN

We use data from the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79) and the Young Adult cohort (YA). The first wave of data collection involved 12,686 young men and women between the ages of 14 and 22. In addition to a nationally representative main sample, there were also oversamples of black and Hispanic youth, economically disadvantaged white youth and youth in the military. The latter two subsamples were subsequently dropped but the minority oversamples remain and respondents have been followed annually through 1994 and biennially since. Starting in 1986, data were also collected on all children born to the NLSY79 women, and they too have been interviewed every other year. As these children age, they become young adults starting at ages 14–15 and are then asked many questions that their mothers were asked at similar ages. Therefore, information on the first generation's parenting comes from the female NLSY79 respondents. They answered questions on how they parented their children, who then aged up into the Young Adult cohort. In turn, we have information on the parenting practices of these new young adults as they become parents.

By 2006, approximately 350 Young Adult males and close to 900 Young Adult females report living with at least one of their children. (Although 600 young adult males report being fathers, 250 do not live with any of their children. In contrast, over 95% of the women in our young adult sample do live with their biological children). Our sample consists of young men

and women with at least one co-resident biological child between the ages of 1 and 9. If these young adults report living with more than one child within this age range, we choose the oldest as the focal child.

Our second generation parents range in age from 18 to 33. Because the child collection effort began in 1986, this means that for some of our oldest parents we do not have information from when they were very young children as they were already past their young childhood ages when the child study began. To maximize the sample, we draw information on how they were parented from when they were between 6 and 13 years, depending on the outcome variable. For example, we initially draw our information from when the young adult was 10-11 years old for the affection parenting dimension. For those cases where we have no valid data for this age range, we draw it from when they were ages 12–13, and if there is no valid data from then either, we draw it from ages 8–9. Our other measures of parenting, including learning and discipline, are started at ages 8–9 and then draw from ages 6–7 because this is when the relevant questions were asked. It also makes sense to use data from older childhood ages. The second generation parents are more likely to remember how they were parented and what their mothers did with them in these later childhood years compared to much earlier in their childhoods.

Our study focuses on three parenting dimensions: learning, affection and discipline. We focus on these dimensions for two reasons. First, we want to examine a more complete range of parenting rather than just one aspect, which many studies have done in the past (as noted above). Second, we have prospective data for these dimensions from each generation *and* their measures are consistent across generations (i.e., they were asked of the parents when their children were at similar ages, and the parenting questions were asked in the same way).

To measure the learning dimension, we use a single variable for how often the parent reads to the child. Mothers of the young adults are asked, “How often do you get a chance to read stories or read aloud to your child?” The young adults are asked, “How often do you read to your child?” In figure 1 we present frequencies of the 3 reading categories that we derive from these measures. The first two columns refer to the young adult fathers. The first shows the percent of time that mothers of male young adults reported reading to their sons when they were children; the second column shows reading that these young adult fathers reported when their own children were approximately the same ages. The last two columns refer to mothers. From this graph it appears that the second generation of both mothers and fathers are reading to their children more than their mothers read to them. In other words, the figure illustrates a cohort shift. It also appears as if mothers are reading to their kids more than fathers are reading to theirs.

Affection is constructed by combining answers to two questions for each generation. For the NLSY79 mothers, these are “How many times in the past week have you praised your child for doing something worthwhile?” and “How many times in the past week have you shown your child physical affection, such as kissing, hugging, stroking hair etc.” For the Young Adult parents, these are “How many times have you praised your child in the past week?” and “How often have you shown physical affection to your child in the past week?” Figure 2 shows affection and illustrates another interesting example of potential intercohort change. Between 30 and 35 percent of grandmothers reported showing love or giving praise to their children when they were growing up less than seven times in the week prior to the survey. In comparison, less than 5 percent of today’s young adult fathers and only 5 percent of young adult mothers reported this same low level of affection. (Close to 5 percent of grandmothers reported no praise or

affection at all in the week prior to the survey, whereas all young adult parents reported at least one incident.)

Last, for the discipline dimension we use a single measure for whether the parent spanked their child in the past week. Unlike reading, which has shown an increase over time, the data show that spanking is less in vogue for today's parents than those of the previous generation. We also see that NLSY79 mothers were less likely to spank their daughters than their sons—however, the young adult fathers today are less likely to spank their children than are the young adult mothers, even though the fathers were spanked more. Given the backlash against spanking, it is surprising that 30 percent of young adult fathers and over 40 percent of young adult mothers reported spanking their child during the week prior to the survey interview.

Additional characteristics that we control in our preliminary analyses include the parent's age at the time when their parenting practices are measured; the age of the child at this time; the sex of the child; the race of the child, where white children are compared with blacks and Hispanics; whether the young adult parent had less than a high school education, a high school diploma, or education past high school; and whether the NLSY79 mother had been a teenager when the young adult parent was born.

EXPLORATORY RESULTS

At this stage, our results are preliminary as we continue to create additional background variables and develop more complete models. Nonetheless, exploratory results are promising and show that certain parenting practices may be passed down across generations. The following discussion highlights some of these findings.

Regarding the learning dimension, young adult fathers read to their children significantly less than do mothers. However, regardless of the gender of the young adult parent, those who

were read to as children are more likely to read to their own children. This suggests that reading practices are transmitted across generations. Further, young adult parents who also scored high on affection are more likely to read to their children than those who scored low on affection. And, parents who report having spanked their children 2 or more times in the past week also report reading to their children less frequently. This suggests that affection and parental activities with children (i.e., reading to them) are linked.

We have similar results for affection. Again, the NLSY79 mother's parenting of the young adult as a child is associated with the same kinds of behaviors when the young adult becomes a parent. The effect is statistically significant for mothers but not for fathers, although it was in the same direction. Hence, when including an interaction between sex of the parent and NLSY79 mother's affection, this interaction term was not statistically significant. Further, fathers are less likely to show affection than are mothers, older children are less likely to receive affection, and so are minority children. Although, more educated parents are more likely to show love or praise to their children, as are those who read daily to their children, the effect of reading is significant for fathers only. This suggests that for fathers, parental activities with their children may be one way of showing affection to them.

Finally, with respect to discipline we find that young adult mothers are significantly more likely to spank if they were spanked as children. Young adult fathers are not, although we know that a lower proportion of fathers spank than mothers do. This is also the first time that we see a result pertaining specifically to the sex of the young adult's child—both mothers and fathers are more likely to spank boys than girls, as the generation was before them. Black children are also more likely to be spanked by their mothers than are white children by theirs. Among those parents who did spank their children, a different set of variables are important. More educated

parents, especially fathers, spank less often. Further, those who are affectionate spank more often, and those who read to their children spank less often. This suggests that, for fathers, affection and discipline are closely linked. Perhaps fathers view spanking as a way of showing affection, because it reflects a father engaged in an appropriate or normative fathering duty.

FUTURE ANALYSES

In future analyses, we plan on including other background predictors that might account for some of the associations between the NLSY79 mothers' parental practices and those of their young adult children. For example, family structure could affect the amount of time a parent has to read to their child, or the stress that they feel which could affect their proclivity to spank. We also plan to explore some of our findings further with respect to gender and race/ethnicity. It is also important for us to note that we are modeling the behaviors of "young" mothers and fathers. Whether these results might change if we were able to include children born to older parents in our models remains to be seen. Nevertheless, our initial results lend some support to the idea that parenting behaviors are transmitted across generations: the ways in which young parents were raised influences how they choose to parent in later life.

Figure 1.

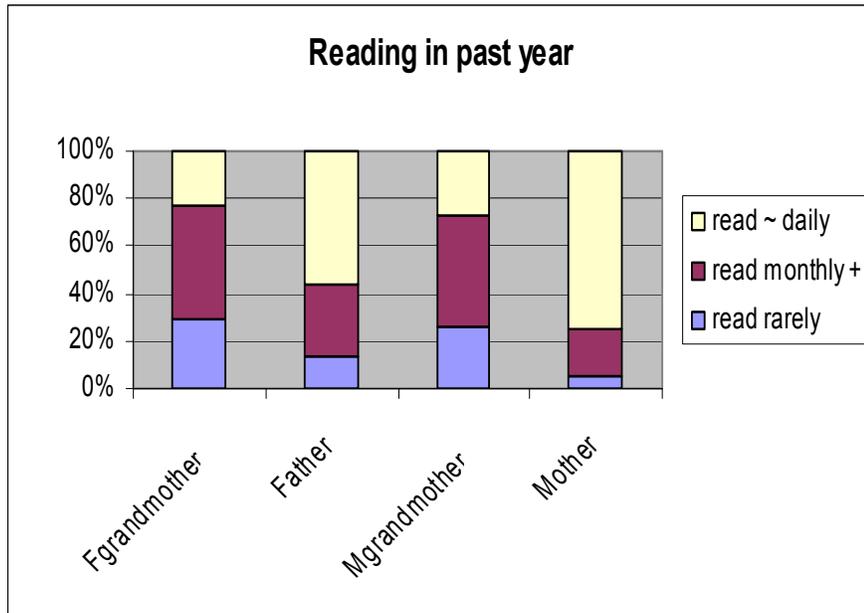


Figure 2.

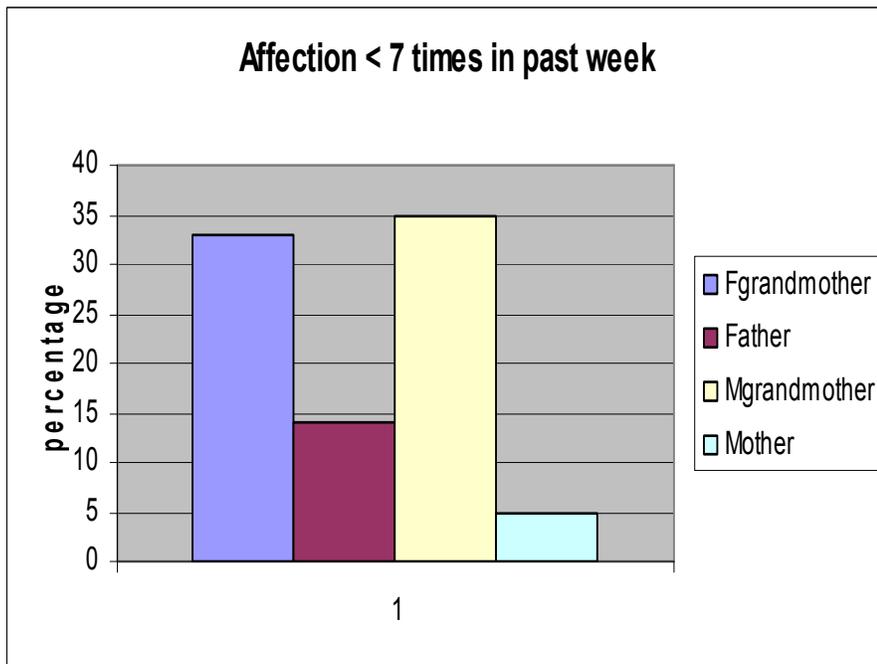
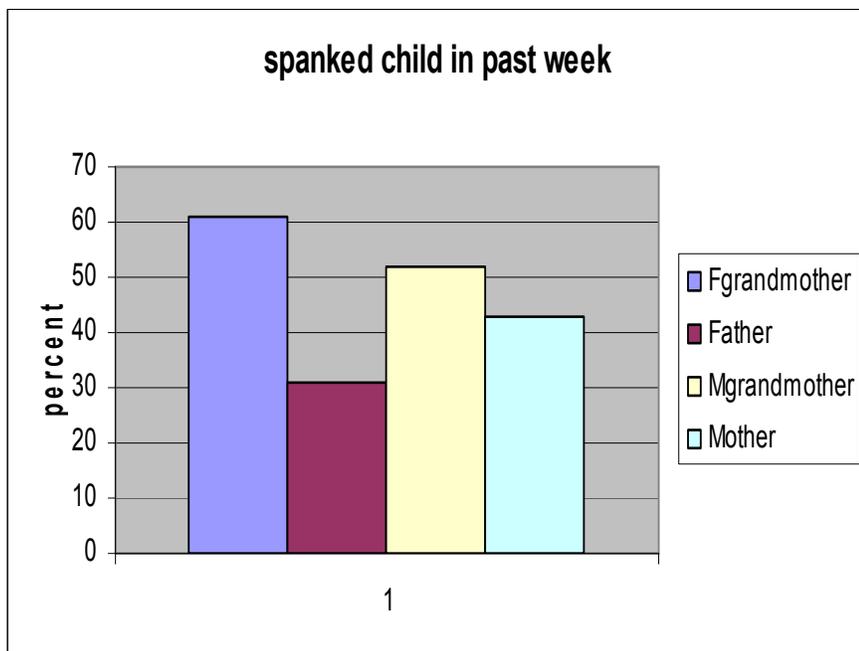


Figure 3.



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