

Gender Differences in Parent's Barriers to Involvement, Children's Anxiety, and
Interpersonal Relationships

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Abstract

The first study focus was to test gender differences for parent barriers to involvement and school involvement and child anxiety and interpersonal relations. The second study focus was to examine the associations between parent barriers to involvement and school involvement and child anxiety and interpersonal relations. Data was collected through surveys in which a total of 92 families participated. Our study found that mothers' and fathers' greater school involvement led to a decrease in child anxiety. Mothers' increased school involvement led to more negative interpersonal relations for the child. Developing a partnership between families and schools to promote a decrease in child anxiety in order to obtain educational success is important. Programs can be implemented to educate parents to build this relationship while maintaining a balance as to not promote negative peer relations in children due to parental involvement.

Keywords: parent barriers to involvement, parent school involvement, child anxiety, child negative interpersonal relations, school-age

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Of the children living in the United States, 13-20% experience a mental disorder in the course of a year, this occurrence is associated with long term effects of substance use, abuse, and dependence; risky behaviors; and poor social skills (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). Anxiety disorders are the most frequently reported conditions experienced in children and adolescents (Kashani & Orvaschel, 1990). Some studies conducted have examined the link between parental involvement and barriers to the involvement during treatment of anxiety disorders but few have examined parental involvement and its potential influence on children's peer relationship qualities and child anxiety (Aydin, 2014). This study was designed to examine the link in the differences between mothers' and fathers' involvement, barriers to involvement, and gender differences in child anxiety and interpersonal relations.

In one study, Jakobsen, Horwood, and Fergusson (2012) investigated the association between positive parent-child attachment and early childhood anxiety, and their contribution to reduced specific anxiety disorders later in adolescence and adulthood. A longitudinal study, using questionnaires, was conducted in New Zealand studying 1,265 children ages 7 to 9 then at 16 to 30 years of age. The study focused on how much of an affect parent-child attachment had on whether or not the child developed anxiety or depression in the future. Although studies have been conducted that found an association between positive parent-child attachment, early childhood anxiety, and later anxiety and depression, the magnitude to which these variables are of effect have not been thoroughly investigated. Research found that early childhood anxiety and negative

relationships with parents, was a predictor of anxiety later in life. The study suggested that parents can participate in programs to increase attachment with their children to reduce the likelihood of anxiety occurring in their children later in life.

In one study, Kenny, Dooley, and Fitzgerald (2013), examined the relationship between interpersonal relations and current of future mental distress among 260 adolescents 12 to 18 years of age through questionnaires. Emotional support, satisfaction, exclusion, and pressure were measured in the participants interpersonal relationships with parents, best friends and romantic partners. Girls reported that higher mother support when they were younger led to better emotional ties when they were older. Boys reported that they had a higher negative relationship and pressure with romantic partners than girls. This study was important because it found a direct correlation between interpersonal relationships in children and adolescence and mental health problems. Findings suggest that interventions promoting positive relationships could be beneficial to one's mental health and programs should be developed to help inform parents of how to accurately support and respond to their children's questions and provide them with the appropriate response.

In another study, Bakhla, Sinha, Sharan, Binay, Verma, and Chaudhury (2013) investigated how child anxiety is related to perceptions of parenting styles in India. Past studies have shown that anxiety is a common disorder in school-age children but little research has been conducted to determine how gender and parenting practices affect the severity of child anxiety, the purpose of this study. The study included 146 school aged students who completed a questionnaire that determined that anxiety was more prevalent in females and if a child viewed his or her parents as authoritarian, they reported higher

levels of anxiety. Educational programs for parents to learn about how their practices influence their child's anxiety could help to lower the incidence of it occurring.

The U.S. Department of Education (1998) analyze different barriers and benefits to parental involvement in school age children's schooling from kindergarten to 12th grade. The grade level of the child, the education level of the parent, and average household income were compared between single parent and two parent household families. Previous research has suggested that parental involvement in their child's schooling has many benefits. This article discussed positive aspects to parental involvement in children's education. There is a positive relationship between parental education level and income and involvement in their child's school which results in the increased potential for the child to graduate from a four year school.

Mendez, Carpenter, LaForett, and Cohen (2009) created a preventative intervention in a preschool program which involved mostly ethnic minority and low-income families, to determine whether parents were involved, interested in becoming involved, or what barriers prevented them from becoming involved in their children's education. Participants included 201 parents and children who were apart of the Head Start program. Mothers completed surveys measuring these issues and researchers interviewed parents with about their psychological support and engagement in education-related activities at home with their child. Many families were aware of the assistance provided but were unable to attend due to multiple different barriers. The most common barrier reported was work and schedule constraints.

One web article, ("The Impact of Parental involvement," 2008) measured the effects that the degree of parental involvement has on a child's education and

investigated specific barriers that would prevent a parent from being involved. Parental involvement has been known to have a positive correlation with how well a child does academically in school and also how well a child develops cognitively. Previous studies showed that when a father is more involved in his child's life, higher test scores and academic achievement, and a more positive attitude are present. Most fathers reported little time spent with their child throughout the day. The most common barriers to parental involvement included work responsibilities, shortage of time, and insufficient education on the parents end.

The purpose of this study was to examine potential gender differences in mothers' and fathers' barriers to involvement and school involvement, and boys' and girls' anxiety and perceptions of their relationships with parents and interpersonal relationships. We hypothesized that fathers would have greater barriers to involvement compared to mothers and mothers would have greater school involvement than fathers. We hypothesized that girls would report greater levels of anxiety and less negative interpersonal relationships than boys. Studying parental involvement and its effects on a child is important because there could be negative consequences, such as anxiety, to different parenting practices. In order to examine these potentially negative consequences we must first address whether there is a difference between mothers' and fathers' involvement. The second purpose of the study was to examine the associations between parental involvement and child anxiety and peer relationships. Thus, our research question examined the associations between mothers' and fathers' involvement and children's levels of anxiety and negative interpersonal relationships.

Method

Overview

This cross sectional study design was quasi-experimental because it was an experiment in which males and females of different ages were compared at once; gender cannot be randomized. The goals of this study were to see if there were associations among mother's and fathers' parent barriers to involvement and school involvement and children's anxiety and interpersonal relations. The independent variables were gender, male and female, and the dependent variables were anxiety, interpersonal relationships, school involvement, and barriers to involvement. The study was also correlational because associations between the parent and child variables were compared. The predictors variables were school involvement and barriers to involvement and the outcome variables were anxiety and interpersonal relationships. The level of measurement for barriers to involvement, school involvement, and interpersonal relations was ordinal because the variables are being ranked and scored. Anxiety was measured on both an ordinal level, because some of the variables are being ranked and scored, and a nominal level, because there are no numerical values or ranking for other variables.

Procedures

Before research began, the Institutional Review Board gave approval, parents consented, and children assented the data collection. Families were selected from the local community and were interviewed in their homes. Research assistants (RAs) interviewed and gave children questionnaires in regards to parenting styles, family relationships, and self-concepts. Both parents and children were told they could skip a question or stop at any time with no penalties. RAs interviewed the children before

administering the questionnaire, allowing breaks if children seemed fatigued. Parents completed surveys independently from their partners and after a break interviews were conducted (Coyle-Shepherd & Hanlon, 2014).

Participants

A total of 92 school aged children and dual parents participated. Nonprobability sampling was used because family structure cannot be randomized. Of the child participants, 36 were males (39.1%), and 56 were females (60.9%). Of the parent participants, 46 were male and 46 were female. The majority of child participants were Anglo-European (60%). The second largest ethnicity was Latinos (20%). Asian and other ethnicities were also studied with the least number of participants (20%). Fathers in the study ranged in age from 25 to 62 with a mean age of 39.85, mothers ranged in age from 23 to 53 with a mean age of 37.81, and children ranged in age from 7 to 13 while the mean age was 9.47. The majority of parents had some college experience (father 29.1%, mothers 39.5%). A majority of the parents made greater than \$65,000 per year (fathers 58.8%, mothers 55.2%).

Materials

The first parent construct was measured using the Parent Codebook and was titled *School Involvement* (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). This measure included five items, two of them being, “I supervise this child’s homework” and “I help this child study for tests” (Green et al., 2007; Walker et al., 2005). The responses were recorded on a 1-5 (disagree-agree) Likert scale where the numbers were added up and the higher the number the greater the level of agreement and involvement. Demographic information

was obtained by the parents completing a survey where they circled or wrote in the correct answer for specific questions. The reliability coefficient for fathers was .76 and for mothers .85.

The second parent construct was also measured using the Parent Codebook and was titled *Barriers to Involvement* (Freeman, Newland, & Coyl, 2008). This measure included 16 items, two of them being “I feel that I don’t get to do all of the things I like to with my child because of lack of energy” and “I feel that I don’t get to do all of the things I like to with my child because of work schedules” (Freeman, Newland, & Coyl, 2008). The responses were recorded on a 1-5 (disagree-agree) Likert scale where the numbers were added up and the higher the score, the more barriers to involvement one had. The reliability coefficient for fathers was .85 and for mothers .82.

The first child construct was measured using the Behavior Assessment System for Children 2 (BASC-2) and was titled *Interpersonal Relations* (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004). This measure included six items, two of them being, “my classmates don’t like me” and “other children don’t like to be with me” (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004). The responses were recorded using a true/false scale where the numbers were added up and the higher the score, the higher the level of negative interpersonal relations. The reliability coefficient was .87. The second child construct was also measured using the BASC-2 and was titled *Anxiety* (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004). This measure included 13 items, two of them being, “I worry about little things” which used a true/false response format, and “I am bothered by thoughts about death” which used a Likert-type response format (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004). The responses were recorded using both a true/false scale and a Likert-type scale (Never-Almost Always) where the numbers

were added up and the higher the score, the higher the levels of anxiety one had. The reliability coefficient was .86. All four of these constructs were presented quantitatively because it was a survey that was scored using numerical data.

Results

The first focus of this study was to test gender differences for parent barriers to involvement and school involvement and child anxiety and interpersonal relations. The second focus of this study was to examine the associations between parent barriers to involvement and school involvement and child anxiety and interpersonal relations. For the first study focus a t-test was used to compare two groups with their mean scores. For the child variables, an independent sample t-test was used because the groups were unrelated. For the parent variables a paired t-test was used because the variables are related by being husband and wife. Fathers' barriers to involvement mean score was $M = 38.67$, $SD = 9.99$; mothers' barriers to involvement mean score was $M = 39.75$, $SD = 10.47$. Fathers' school involvement mean score was $M = 20.34$, $SD = 3.11$; mothers' school involvement mean score was $M = 22.20$, $SD = 3.18$. Boys' anxiety mean score was $M = 47.30$, $SD = 8.47$; girls' anxiety mean score was $M = 49.57$, $SD = 9.81$. Boys' negative interpersonal relations mean score was $M = 52.23$, $SD = 11.11$; girls' negative interpersonal relations mean score was $M = 53.76$, $SD = 8.00$.

We hypothesized that fathers will have greater barriers to involvement than mothers. We further hypothesized that mothers will have greater school involvement than fathers. The t-tests indicated that there is no difference between mothers and fathers barriers to involvement $t(72) = -0.73$, $p > .05$. The paired samples t-test showed a significant mean difference between mothers' and fathers' school involvement, $t(85) =$

4.30, $p < .05$. We hypothesized that girls will have greater anxiety compared to boys. We further hypothesized that boys will have more negative interpersonal relationships than girls. The t-tests indicated that there is no difference in anxiety between boys and girls. The t-tests further indicated that there is no difference in negative interpersonal relations between boys and girls. The t-test for independent samples did not show a significant difference between boys' and girls' anxiety $t(85) = -1.10$, $p > .05$. The t-test for independent samples did not show a significant difference between boys' and girls' negative interpersonal relations $t(88) = -0.76$, $p > .05$ (see Table 1).

We examined the associations between mothers' and fathers' parental barriers to involvement and school involvement and children's anxiety and interpersonal relations. There was a negative, weak statistically significant relationship between mother school involvement and child anxiety $r(83) = -0.30$, $p < .05$. There was a negative, weak statistically significant relationship between father school involvement and child anxiety $r(82) = -0.23$, $p < .05$. There was a positive, weak statistically significant relationship between mother school involvement and child negative interpersonal relations $r(85) = 0.24$, $p < .05$ (see Table 2).

Discussion

We hypothesized that fathers will have greater barriers to involvement than mothers. The paired samples t-test indicated no difference between mothers' and fathers' barriers to involvement. We further hypothesized that mothers will have greater school involvement than fathers. The results of the paired samples t-test for school involvement showed a higher mean score for mothers compared to fathers, confirming our hypothesis. We hypothesized that girls will have greater anxiety compared to boys, however, the

results of the t-tests for anxiety indicated that there is no differences between boys and girls. We further hypothesized that boys will have more negative interpersonal relationships than girls, however, the t-tests for negative interpersonal relations indicated that there is no difference between boys and girls. The correlation between mothers' and fathers' school involvement and child anxiety were weak and negative, indicating that as mothers' and fathers' school involvement increased, child anxiety decreased. The correlation between mothers' school involvement and child negative interpersonal relations was weak and positive, indicating that as mothers' school involvement increased, so did the child's negative interpersonal relations.

Most of our findings were not consistent with previous research but some were. For example, the findings investigated the differences in boys' and girls' interpersonal relations and found that there are no differences in negative interpersonal relations between girls and boys but previous research we reviewed, Kenny, Dooley, and Fitzgerald (2013) showed that boys reported a higher negative relationship with romantic partners and girls reported more positive relationships than boys with their mother and friends. In regards to the study question, are their differences in boys' and girls' anxiety, the findings indicated there was no differences between boys' and girls' anxiety but previous research by Bakhla, Sinha, Sharan, Binay, Verma, and Chaudhury (2013) indicated the majority of people in the study that reported having anxiety were female. When comparing differences in mothers' and fathers' school involvement in the article by The U.S. Department of Education (1998) found that more mothers are involved in their school-age child's life than fathers' which is consistent with the study findings. Lastly, when comparing the differences in mothers' and fathers' barriers to involvement

in the study “Parental Engagement and Barriers to Participation in a Community-Based Preventive Intervention” Mendez, Carpenter, LaForett, and Cohen (2009) looked at what barriers were associated with involvement but not the differences between mothers’ and fathers’.

Two strengths of the study’s methodology were that the sample collected data from both parents and children whereas previous research used to be collected just from the mother. Another strength was that most of the sample data was collected through surveys which increases the reliability of the responses because people are more likely to tell the truth in surveys. Two limitations of the study were ethnic diversity and when reliability. Ethnic diversity was a limitation because in order to get a valid sample for all the data, every ethnic group needs to be included but in some studies where a specific area is questioned, some groups may be left out. Reliability was a limitation because some people, especially when interviewed, may not be as inclined to tell the truth leaving the question how valid is the data. Educating the parents is an important part after reviewing the data. One implication is that there are many programs a parent can participate in to increase the attachment they have with their child and decrease the likelihood of their child developing a disorder later in life so encouraging parents to become informed of these programs is a good start. Also just reviewing the data with parents so they know that specific ways they choose to parent will have an influence on their children’s’ anxiety and interpersonal relations. Lastly, mandatory intervention and prevention programs could be beneficial to parents but although mandatory, not all parents may be able to participate.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics, Alphas, and t-tests for Parental Barriers to Involvement and School Involvement and Child Anxiety and Interpersonal Relations

Variables	α	M	SD	t	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Father Barriers to Involvement	.85	38.67	9.99	-.73	-.11
Mother Barriers to Involvement	.82	39.75	10.47		
Father School Involvement	.76	20.34	3.11	-4.30***	-.59
Mother School Involvement	.85	22.20	3.18		
Boy Anxiety	.86	47.30	8.47	-1.10	-.25
Girl Anxiety		49.57	9.81		
Boy Interpersonal Relationships	.87	52.23	11.11	.76	-.16
Girl Interpersonal Relationships		53.76	8.00		

Note. Combined alpha for boys and girls, *= $p < .05$ **= $p < .01$ ***= $p < .001$

Table 2

Correlations Between Parents Barriers to Involvement and School Involvement and Child

Anxiety and Interpersonal Relations

Variables	Child Anxiety	Child Interpersonal Relations
Father Barriers to Involvement	0.09	-0.01
Mother Barriers to Involvement	0.05	0.17
Father School Involvement	-0.23*	0.14
Mother School Involvement	-0.30**	0.24*

Note. *= $p < .05$ **= $p < .01$ ***= $p < .001$