Gender Differences in Parent’s Barriers to Involvement, Children’s Anxiety, and Peer Qualities

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Abstract

The current study examined gender differences for parent barriers to involvement and school involvement and child anxiety and interpersonal relations. It also examined the associations between parent barriers to involvement and school involvement and child anxiety and interpersonal relations among 92 dual parent households with a school-aged child. Family members completed surveys, indicating 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. While further research is needed to conclude why these constructs differ for mothers and fathers, programs can be implemented to educate parents towards greater involvement in their child’s schooling while maintaining a balance as to not promote negative peer relations 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). Although studies have examined the link between parental involvement and barriers to involvement during treatment of anxiety disorders, a next step is to examine 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, studied 1,265 children ages 7 to 9 then at 16 to 30 years of age. The study focused on the effect of parent-child attachment in relation to the development of child 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.

To understand what causes anxiety to persist later in life, researchers have focused on current children’s relations as a factor. 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 participant’s 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. A direct correlation between interpersonal relationships in children and adolescence and mental health problems was found. Findings suggest that interventions promoting positive relationships could be beneficial to one's mental health and these should be developed to help inform parents of how to accurately support and respond to their children’s needs.

How a parent chooses to respond to their child can affect his or her child later in life. 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 study included 146 school aged students who completed a questionnaire that found that anxiety was more prevalent in females, and if a child viewed his or her parents as authoritarian, he or she reported higher levels of anxiety. Educational programs to inform parents of different parenting practices to reduce child anxiety would be beneficial to implement. Positive parenting practices can be beneficial to children, but can be inhibited by extraneous factors.

The U.S. Department of Education(1998) analyzed 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 yields positive outcomes, confirmed in this article. 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. As children enter school, parents must determine how involved they will be in their child’s education.

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 a part 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, academic achievement, and a more positive attitude are present in the child. However, most fathers reported the least time spent with their child throughout the day. The most common barriers to parental involvement included work responsibilities, shortage of time, and insufficient education of the parents.

The current study seeks 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. 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 is to examine the associations between parental involvement and child anxiety and peer relationships. Thus, our research question examines 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 and gender cannot be randomized. This study aimed to examine associations among mother’s and fathers’ barriers to involvement and school involvement and children’s anxiety and interpersonal relations. The independent variables were gender, and the dependent variables were anxiety, interpersonal relationships, school involvement, and barriers to involvement. Associations between the parent and child variables were compared, making the study correlational as well. The predictor 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 were being ranked and scored. Anxiety was measured on both an ordinal and nominal level because some variables were ranked and scored while others had no numerical values or ranking.

**Procedures**

Before research began, the Institutional Review Board gave approval, parents consented, and children assented to 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 (Coyl-Shepherd & Hanlon, 2014).

**Participants**

A total of 92 dual parents with school-aged children families 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 (50%) and 46 were female (50%). 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 with a mean age of 9.47. The majority of parents were biologically related to their child (father 78.3%, mother 94.5%). The majority of parents had some college experience (father 29.1%, mothers 39.5%). Father’s work hours ranged from 0.00 to 80.00 with a mean of 39.96 hours per week. Mother’s work hours ranged from 0.00 to 80.00 with a mean of 23.44 hours per week. 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; 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 measured using the Parent Codebook 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; the numbers were totaled and the higher the score, the greater 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, 2006). 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, 2006). 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, 2006). The responses were recorded using both a true/false scale and a Likert-type scale (Never-Almost Always); 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 marriage. 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 (see Table 1).

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**

The study examined 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. We hypothesized that fathers would 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 would 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 would have greater anxiety compared to boys; however, the results of the t-tests for anxiety indicated that there are 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. Kenny, Dooley, and Fitzgerald (2013) found that boys reported a higher negative relationship with romantic partners and girls reported more positive relationships than boys with their mother and friends. The findings of this study indicated there are no differences between boys’ and girls’ anxiety, but previous research by Bakhla, Sinha, Sharan, Binay, Verma, and Chaudhury (2013) indicated the majority participants reporting anxiety were female. When comparing differences in mothers’ and fathers’ school involvement, 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.

The present study was strengthened by collecting data from both parents and was further strengthened by collecting data from the children as well. Previous research collected data from only mothers. There are limitations to the study that are important to consider before future research is conducted. Unfortunately, we were unable to collect longitudinal information. We cannot conclude that mothers’ school involvement will continue to affect her child’s negative interpersonal relations later in life. The sample for this study was predominantly of Anglo-European descent; it is important for future research to include more group variability. Overall, it is believed that programs held in schools for parents to increase school involvement is beneficial if the programs give mothers a better understanding of her effect on her child’s negative interpersonal relations.

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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 *d* |
| 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 |  |  |

*Notes*. 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

Juliette and I had two official meetings outside of class, otherwise we completed tasks mostly through the use of Google Docs in which we could see each other’s work. Juliette attended the meetings we had and helped on the statistics worksheets. I would give Juliette a 5 in preparation; she always completed her tasks in a timely manner. If I told her I was having a busy weekend she would make sure to get her portion of the paper in to me before Friday. Juliette always contributed to her portions of the research paper and had the necessary documents to complete each assignment. However, I felt that I would have to correct her writing more than she would correct mine. For this I would give her a 4.75 in contribution. We both struggled with being concise so I would make sure to comb over her paper to keep it in the number of pages needed but it did not seem she always did the same for me or did it for herself. Overall, I felt as if Juliette and I worked well together to complete this assignment.

Amy and I met a total of two times due to the fact that we partnered up very late in the writing process. Those two meeting times we were both present. I would rate Amy’s preparation as excellent (5) because she always completed assigned tasks on time, came to team sessions with necessary documents and materials ready or completed; did additional research, reading, writing, designing, implementing. I would also rate Amy’s contribution as excellent (5) because she always contributed and the quality of the contributions was excellent. Overall Amy was a great partner to have and someone I worked really well with.