

# **“Parent-Child Relationship Quality and Children’s Behavioral Outcomes: Do Close Relationships Matter?”**

**Annaliese Grant and Marcia J. Carlson (University of Wisconsin-Madison)**

PAA Extended Abstract

An extensive literature has shown that family structure and parenting behaviors are linked with children's behavioral outcomes. In particular, family instability (which includes not living with both parents, as well as the number of family transitions) is associated with higher levels of internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems, including delinquent behaviors such as vandalism and illegal use of alcohol and drugs (Brown 2006, Fomby and Osborne 2010). One of the primary mechanisms by which family instability is shown to affect child behavioral outcomes is the level and quality of parenting; parental investment/involvement is typically higher in two-parent families as compared to single-parent families (Fomby and Cherlin 2007). In addition to financial resources (which are typically higher in two- versus one-parent families), differences in parenting behaviors are shown to account for a sizeable fraction of the gap in child outcomes between children in two-parent and single-parent families (Thomson, Hanson and McLanahan 1994, Thomson and McLanahan 2012).

Research on the links between parenting and childhood behavior has focused almost exclusively on what parents are able to provide for their children (e.g., supervision and care, parent-child engagement, etc.), and we know far less about the ways in which the affective quality of parent-child relationships may contribute to childhood behavioral outcomes. Does having an emotionally-close relationship with a mother and/or father influence the amount of ‘trouble’ that children will get into? Also, when youth do misbehave, are those with close relationships with their parents more likely to tell them about any such bad behaviors?

Understanding more about how the emotional quality of parent-child relationships is linked with child and youth behavior is important to better comprehend the nature and implications of family dynamics. Also, having youth's own reports about both parent-child relationships and their behaviors (as we do here) along with reports from mothers and fathers allows us to consider how what youth share with their parents may vary as a function of their relationship quality.

### Conceptual Background and Prior Empirical Research

The dominant theory on parent-child relationships over many years has been attachment theory, which argues that children have one 'principle attachment figure' (typically the mother) on which the child is dependent, and that this close single relationship is critical to a child's emotional and social development (Bretherton 1985, Solomon and George 1999). This research has especially emphasized the importance of establishing a strong mother-child relationship and highlighted the negative consequences of having 'insecure' attachment for a range of behavioral outcomes over childhood and adolescence (O'Connor et al. 2014).

More recently, scholars have moved beyond looking at a singular (usually maternal) relationship with children but have considered the ways in which parent-child relationships and other inter-family relationships may affect a child's development and life outcomes. For example, a positive parent-child relationship is shown to contribute to fewer child social and emotional difficulties (Strazdins et al. 2006), a greater sense of child security (Cummings and Davies 2009), and more warm and connected parent-child relationships in the next generation (Friesen et al. 2013). Conversely, a negative parent-child relationship may lead to more 'anxious love' relationships later in the child's life (Seiffge-Krenke, Overbeek and Vermulst 2010), greater emphasis on peer connections in adolescence (Kretschmer et al. 2016), and more emotional stressors and adverse mental health outcomes later in life (Mallers et al. 2010). Even

analyses of children's overall social environment within families has been found to predict greater risk for mental and physical health concerns (Repetti, Taylor and Seeman 2002).

Despite the breadth and depth of knowledge about parenting, there is relatively little research about the quality of parent-child relationships (closeness, communication, understanding, etc.) and how such may matter for youth behavior, net of family structure and parenting behaviors. There is also little research using child reports about both family relationships and their own development, despite the fact that there is growing recognition of 'child effects' in how families function (Hawkins, Amato and King 2007) and of the empirical validity of child reports of behavior (Bowen 2011, Riley et al. 2004).

In this paper, we will use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to explore how parent-child relationship quality is linked with children's behaviors. Our research will use rich new data reported by mothers, fathers and children to better understand parent-child relationship quality as linked with child behavior outcomes. We will use these data to address two research questions: First, is there an association between parent-child relationship quality and youth behavior? Second, does parent-child relationship quality influence the similarity or concordance of reports about child behavior from parents and from children themselves. In short, do parents seem to know about any delinquent or negative behaviors in which their children have engaged?

### Data and Methods

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is a longitudinal study of 4,897 births that occurred between 1998 and 2000 in 20 large U.S. cities; 3,710 of the births were to unmarried parents and 1,187 were to married parents. Mothers and fathers were interviewed in the hospital within 48 hours of the focal child's birth, and follow-up interviews were conducted

when the child was approximately one, three, five, and nine years old (and the 15-year data will soon be available). Among cases in which the mother had completed a baseline interview, completion rates for the four follow-up waves were 89%, 86%, 85%, and 72% for mothers and 69%, 65%, 64%, and 54% for fathers. Important for our purposes, the focal children were themselves interviewed (in their homes) at the 9-year follow-up wave, and 3,377 children completed this interview (69% of the original child sample). This interview covered a wide range of topics, including parental supervision and discipline, parent-child relationship quality (closeness, communication, understanding), sibling relationships, family routines, school experiences, early delinquency, and health.

For this paper, we will focus on mothers', fathers' and youth's report about both the quality of parent-child relationships and about youth's behavioral problems (both internalizing and externalizing), as well as particular delinquent behaviors. At the 9-year survey, 3,515 biological mothers and 2,652 biological fathers were interviewed; there are 2,303 families where we have reports from all three – mothers, fathers and youth. This sample is far larger than prior samples that have endeavored to examine how parents-child relationship quality is linked with child or youth behavior.

Regarding our methods, we will first conduct bivariate analyses to evaluate the mean levels of parent-child relationship quality and child behavioral problems and delinquent behaviors reported by youth, mothers and fathers – and evaluate the extent to which they are concordant or discordant (and whether such varies by key factors such as family structure, education and race). Second, we will use regression techniques to evaluate how parent-child relationship quality is associated with behavioral outcomes, controlling for a host of demographic and other covariates; we will consider multiple measures of both the independent

and dependent variable as a result of our descriptive analyses above, including dyadic/triadic agreement. Third, we will analyze whether there is greater agreement between youth and mothers/fathers (or both) about particular behavioral issues or delinquent acts when the quality of parent-child relationships is higher.

### Conclusion

This research will extend our knowledge about how parent-child relationship quality (net of family structure and other factors) affects children's behavioral outcomes. It will also identify the extent to which parent-child relationship quality may affect what parents are told about child behavior. In other words, does parent and child agreement about children's own actions depend on how close they are to their parents? We expect that children with closer relationships with one or both parents are less likely to exhibit delinquent behaviors and are more likely to agree on behavioral reports. This research, then, helps us answer two larger questions about family and family research in the U.S. – one, about the important role relationship quality may play in family and child outcomes, and two, about how we can understand reports from different members in the same family.

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