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AUTHOR Landesman, Sharon; Jaccard, James
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ABSTRACT

Reported are findings from a study of the relation of family configuration to family functioning and to young children's cognitive and social development. Each of the 500 participating families had at least one child in elementary school and was interviewed and observed for an average of 15 hours. Findings reported in this paper concern families recruited during the first 6 months of the study. Data were obtained from three self-administered questionnaires concerning the priority and importance that members attached to broad family goals, the quality of family relationships, and sources of social support for parenting and family management. The most important goal domain for families was having strong, positive relationships among all family members. Single and married mothers did not differ significantly in how satisfied they were with their relationships with their children. Fathers were less satisfied than mothers. Single and married mothers differed in influences on their judgment about relationships. The greatest differences between one- and two-parent families were in the area of social support. Grandparents' involvement in one-parent families positively influenced mother-child relationships. Frequency of contact between married mothers and grandparents was negatively correlated with satisfactory mother-child relationships. The few fathers who discussed parenting issues with a close friend had more satisfying relationships with their children. Copies of 10 slides are attached. (RH)

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Goals, Satisfaction, and Social Support in
Single- and Two-Parent Families

Sharon Landesman, Ph.D.*

Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences
University of Washington School of Medicine, Seattle, WA

and

James Jaccard, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Psychology
State University of New York at Albany

Outline of presentation and key findings

Presented at the Society for Research in Child Development

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* First author's new address after May:

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1. Findings to be presented are from an ongoing study of 500 middle-class families (income above \$8,000 and receiving no public assistance) in western Washington. The major focus of the study is on the relation of family configuration (the number of adults; number of children; age, sex, and spacing of children; and roles of family members) to family functioning (day-to-day behavior patterns, satisfaction of family members, nature of social interaction within the family unit) and to young children's cognitive and social development.
2. Brief overview of study design: Subjects are obtained by conducting brief telephone surveys (13,000 households to date). Each family is visited at home 3 times, for an average of 15 hours of interviewing and direct observation per family. All families have at least one child in elementary school (1st - 6th grade). The total sample of families will represent equal distribution of the following characteristics: black/white; married/single; 1, 2, or 3 or more children. (Initially, a pilot study of 60 families was conducted to develop and pilot test the full battery of 42 assessments used with each family.)
3. Today, findings will be presented on families studied during the first 6 months. The data are from a subset of 3 self-administered questionnaires, each of which was completed on 2 separate occasions by all subjects. (Note: the full testing and observational protocols are available from the first author upon request.)

The first tool concerned the priority and the importance that parents and children attach to broad goal domains for their family. These general goal domains emerged from the in-depth pilot study as salient dimensions of family life across all types of families, regardless of the age of family members. The second instrument concerned the quality of relationships that each family member has with all other members. Nine separate dimensions of these relationships are rated on an 11-point scale (from -5, highly dissatisfied, to

+5, highly satisfied), followed by a rating of the overall quality of the relationship. The third questionnaire involved reporting on the sources of social support used to help with parenting and family management. Social support was dimensionalized into four major categories: (1) instrumental (tangible, direct help), (2) emotional or personal, (3) informational, and (4) companionship. For each type of support, the respondent indicates who he or she turns to for that type of help. Then the respondent rates how helpful each person is (from 1, is not helpful, to 5, is extremely helpful) in providing that type of support. Separately, the respondent indicates the approximate frequency with which he or she receives each type of support from each person. Finally, the respondent indicates how satisfied he or she is with the overall help each person provides (from -5, extremely dissatisfied, to +5, extremely satisfied).

Findings

(Refer to copies of slides that are attached)

Test-retest reliability for all 3 instruments was extremely high for mothers, fathers, and school-aged children (mid-.70's to high-.80's).

SLIDE 1. By far, the most important goal domain for families today is "having strong, positive relationships among all family members -- loving, caring, helpful, affectionate." We refer to this as "within family relationships." This domain was ranked the first by single mothers, married mothers, and married fathers. The rating of the importance of this area (on an 11-point scale, from 0, important, to 10, extremely important) also was comparably high for all parent groups. Similarly, children themselves rated this as the most important (based on items about the behavioral contents of each broad goal domain). Although all children rated "within family relations" as the goal that was the most important, children differed in the importance they assigned to the other goals. In particular, when rating the

importance of "having a home that fosters health, safety, and security" (basic care-providing), children from single mother homes perceived this goal as significantly more important to themselves and to their mothers, than children from two parent homes did.

The second most important goal area for parents was "instilling good attitudes and values in family members" (character development), followed by "doing well in school and work; developing special skills and interests" and "having a home that fosters health, safety, and security." Last on the list for all types of parents was "understanding society's rules and expectations and participating in activities outside the family" (societal functioning).

Based on the clearly high value assigned to having close family relationships, we further explored family members' perceptions of their relationships, especially the nature of and satisfaction with that between parents and children.

SLIDE 2. Single and married mothers do NOT differ significantly in how satisfied they are with their relationships with their school-aged children. In fact, they are very satisfied. In contrast, married fathers reported significantly lower rates of satisfaction. Although these rates are reliable, we are not yet sure whether this represents a true difference or the possibility that fathers may use the rating scale somewhat differently (that is, fathers may be more willing to use lower ratings). (Note: later in our analysis, we will be able to differentiate this, relying on an independent social desirability index for parents, in person interviews with parents, and direct behavioral observations.)

SLIDE #3. Fathers also report being significantly less satisfied than mothers in four aspects of their relationships to their children: (1) the way that affection is expressed, (2) the amount of emotional support exchanged, (3) the amount of fun they have with their child, and (4) the amount of

communication they have. Married and single mothers do not differ on any of the nine aspects of relationships that they rated.

Even though single and married mothers are equally satisfied with their parent-child relationships, and with the various components, there are interesting and statistically significant differences in WHAT influences their overall judgement about their relationships. SLIDE #4. For single mothers, only 3 of the 9 dimensions showed relatively high correlations (above .60) with overall satisfaction -- with the most important aspect being how conflict is resolved in these single parent homes. SLIDE #5. For married mothers, twice as many dimensions showed high correlations (6 of 9) -- and the two most important correlates for married mothers were the amount of fun they have with their children and the respect they show for each other. SLIDE #6. For married fathers, almost everything is related to their overall level of satisfaction (7 of 9 dimensions) -- and they, like their wives, report that the amount of fun they have with their children is very important to them, followed closely by the level of shared interests they have with their children.

The area that revealed the greatest differences between one- and two-parent families concerned social support. There were a number of unexpected and interesting differences. This slide (SLIDE #7) presents an overview of these findings. Remarkably, NONE of the OVERALL support indices (either amount or satisfaction) -- comparable to those used in almost all other studies of social support -- related significantly to the perceived quality of the parent-child relationship. However, when we studied the 4 distinct types of social support and the specific sources of support (the social referents), there were significant findings -- concerning group differences and the overall contribution of different types of social support to satisfaction within the family unit.

Finally, when satisfaction ratings are considered as a group, these are relatively more important than quantitative indices of how much help is received -- which is consistent with the findings of others. It is important to remember that the focus in this instrument is on help related to parenting and family management per se, not to all aspects of one's life.

SLIDES 8, 9, AND 10 present the findings separately for single mothers, married mothers, and married fathers. Of prime interest is the finding that single mothers who report higher levels of helpfulness from their parents (the child's grandparents) in terms of informational support, emotional support, and instrumental (direct) help have significantly better relationships with their children. Conversely, those with less helpful grandparents have less satisfying relationships with their own children. This involvement of grandparents was far more important for single than for married mothers, and fathers did not report turning to their parents (or their in-laws) very often for any help related to their own parenting and family management. The negative correlation for married mothers between the frequency of contact with grandparents and satisfaction with their relationship to their child was troubling. (We now are exploring further the reasons for this correlation -- separating out those married mothers who are having serious problems (and thus may be contacting their own parents more often for help) from those who are not. Also, we will study whether there is conflict associated with too much input from outside parties, such as in-laws, in these two-parent families.)

A very fascinating effect related to social support for married fathers did appear -- related to use of close friends as a resource. Generally, fathers use close friends FAR LESS OFTEN than do mothers. YET those fathers who DO discuss parenting issues with a close friend, also have significantly more satisfying relationships with their children. Fathers tend to seek information from their close friends.

Slide 1

RATINGS OF IMPORTANCE OF GOAL DOMAINS

<u>Goal Domain</u>	<u>Mean Rating</u>
Within family relationships	9.19
Character development	8.63
Health and safety	7.31
School and work	7.19
Societal involvement	6.11

Slide 2

OVERALL SATISFACTION WITH PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

	<u>Single Mothers</u>	<u>Married Mothers</u>	<u>Married Fathers</u>
Overall quality	3.85	3.69	3.23*

* p < .05 (-5 to +5)

Slide 3

SATISFACTION WITH PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

<u>Aspect</u>	<u>Single Mothers</u>	<u>Married Mothers</u>	<u>Married Fathers</u>
Expression of affection	3.77	3.69	3.07*
Emotional support	3.42	3.38	2.82*
Amount of fun	3.48	3.39	2.90*
Communication	2.73	3.17	2.82*
Mutual respect	2.75	2.93	2.83
Shared interests	3.00	2.97	2.49
Time together	2.15	2.62	1.95
Conflict resolution	1.90	2.10	1.42
House responsibilities	1.80	1.88	1.42

* p < .05 (-5 to +5)

Slide 4

CORRELATES OF SATISFACTION WITH PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

Single Mothers

How conflict is resolved	.76
Respect for each other	.69
Amount of fun	.67

Slide 5

CORRELATES OF SATISFACTION WITH PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

Married Mothers

Amount of fun	.85
Respect for each other	.77
Amount of communication	.74
The way affection is expressed	.71
Amount of emotional support	.64
How conflict is resolved	.61

Slide 6

CORRELATES OF SATISFACTION WITH PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

Married Fathers

Amount of fun	.85
Level of shared interests	.74
Amount of emotional support	.69
How conflict is resolved	.69
Respect for each other	.65
Amount of time together	.62
Amount of communication	.62

Slide 7

SATISFACTION WITH PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP
AND USE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

1. Indices of overall support do NOT relate to parent-child relationship (satisfaction rating)
2. Specific individuals in social support system, however, play a significant role, depending on the type of support

e.g., single mothers are highly affected by the emotional, instrumental, and info support provided by grandparents

e.g., fathers who share parenting info with "close friends" have better relationships with their children
3. Satisfaction with parenting support is more important than the amount received, though each may be significant

Slide 8

SINGLE MOTHERS
Correlation of Social Support Helpfulness and
Satisfaction with Mother-Child Relationship

1. SOURCE	INFORMATION	EMOTIONAL	INSTRUMENTAL	COMPANIONSHIP
Grandparents	.41	.32	.32	--
Other relatives	.30	--	.44	--
Church/temple	.42	.30	--	--
Ex-spouse	.39	--	--	--

2. Overall satisfaction with relationship to grandparents (.36) and other relatives (.31) related significantly to mother-child relationship
3. Although frequently used and often rated as helpful, the following did NOT correlate with quality of parent-child relationship: close friends, co-workers, teachers, physicians, counselors, books/media

Slide 9

MARRIED MOTHERS
Correlation of Social Support Helpfulness and
Satisfaction with Mother-Child Relationship

1. SOURCE	INFORMATION	EMOTIONAL	INSTRUMENTAL	COMPANIONSHIP
Spouse	.36	.35	--	.33
Grandparents	--	.33	--	--
Church/temple	.32	--	--	--

2. Frequency of contact with grandparents correlated negatively (-.35) with satisfaction rating for mother-child relationship
3. Not correlated with parent-child relationship: helpfulness of other relatives, close friends, co-workers, teachers, doctors, counselors, books/media, or overall rating of quality of relationship

Slide 10

MARRIED FATHERS
Correlation of Social Support and
Satisfaction with Father-Child Relationship

1. SOURCE	INFORMATION	EMOTIONAL	INSTRUMENTAL	COMPANIONSHIP
Spouse	--	--	--	.32
Close friends	.31	--	--	--
Church/temple	--	--	.38	--

2. Overall satisfaction with relationship with spouse correlated significantly (.34) with father-child relationship
3. Not correlated with father-child relationship: helpfulness or overall satisfaction with parenting help from grandparents, other relatives, co-workers, teachers, doctors, counselors, books/media