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ABSTRACT

As adolescents progress from elementary to secondary school, their academic success increasingly depends on their ability to manage their own time and behavior. Because the family plays such an important role in the development of responsible autonomy, this study examined authoritative parenting and the hypothesis that authoritative parents promote school success. Subjects were 157 working- and middle-class families with a first-born child between the ages of 11 and 16 who was enrolled in the public schools. Families completed a measure of the extent and degree of the adolescent's involvement in 10 different household responsibilities; a checklist concerning 17 areas of decision-making on a variety of day-to-day issues used to assess the nature of the family's decision-making style; and adolescents' characterizations of their parents' warmth and use of psychological control. Schools provided information on the adolescents' grades, attendance, and standardized achievement test scores. The results revealed that the adolescents obtained higher grades and attended school more often when their parents used democratic, rather than authoritarian, decision-making practices; when their parents were warm; and when their parents were not overly controlling psychologically. Adolescents from authoritative households (as opposed to either authoritarian or permissive households) performed better in school than their peers, even after controlling for social class and achievement test scores. School grades and attendance records examined one year after the study suggest that authoritative parenting actually promotes school success among high school students. (NB)

Authoritative Parenting Promotes Adolescent School Achievement and Attendance

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As adolescents progress from elementary school into, and through, secondary school, their academic success increasingly depends on their ability to manage their own time and behavior. We see this in many ways. Secondary school students are likely to be more involved in day to day decisions about the courses they take, for example, or in allocated time and energy to school versus nonschool activities. They may weigh the costs and benefits of having a part-time job and attempt to balance the demands of school and work (Greenberger & Steinbderg, 1986). They are more likely to have to do assignments outside of class and to complete this work in the absence of adult supervision. They are even more likely to be responsible for getting themselves to school each day and for supervising themselves when school lets out. Simply put, when a student reaches the secondary school level, it becomes critical that he or she can behave responsibly, not only because society expects adolescents to behave more responsibly than children, but because they may need to be responsible in order to do well in school.

For several years now, my colleagues and I have been studying the development of responsibility during the adolescent years (e.g., Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). We have asked three general sorts of questions. First, what is the process through which responsibility develops during adolescence? Second, how do family relationships affect the development of adolescent responsibility? And, third, how

is the development of responsibility manifested in the adolescent's behavior at home, with friends, and at school? Most recently we have turned our attention to the relation between adolescent responsibility and academic achievement.

It seems reasonable enough to suppose that students' ability to function with an adequate level of responsibility is an important determinant of school success during the secondary years, for all of the reasons mentioned earlier, but a search of the literature reveals that we know very little about the relation between the development of personal responsibility and academic success. Most studies of the psychological characteristics of good versus poor students -- and there are many of these -- have focused on either students' self-esteem or their achievement motivations and beliefs (see Harter, 1983; and Dweck & Elliot, 1983, for recent summaries), but not on their level of responsibility. As one would anticipate, these studies indicate that students who have a healthy self-image and a drive to succeed perform better in school than their less confident or less tenacious peers.

The Family's Influence: An Understudied Issue

Because the family plays such an important role in the development of responsible autonomy (Baumrind, 1978), our research has led us to ask whether certain parenting practices, known to promote adolescent responsibility, have concrete benefits with respect to academic achievement, and

it is this question that is the focus of this article. At first we speculated that the elusive studies of responsibility and school achievement were buried within the literature on familial influences on school success. This turned out not the case, however. In fact, our knowledge about the relation between parenting practices and school success among adolescents is as limited as our knowledge about school success and adolescent responsibility. Studies of familial influences on adolescents' school achievement have focused mainly on the overarching impact of socioeconomic status (e.g., Jencks, 1972) or family structure (e.g., Hetherington, Camara, and Featherman, 1982), not on actual parenting behaviors. In other words, these studies have focused on the importance of the social structure within which the adolescent and parents live, rather than on the concrete linkage between what parents do at home and how their adolescents perform at school. This is an unfortunate and ironic limitation, because parents are more or less powerless to change their social background, but they are certainly able to change the ways in which they treat their children.

Authoritative Parenting: Cause or Effect?

One recent exception to this general trend is found in the work of sociologist Sanford Dornbusch and his colleagues at Stanford University (Dornbusch et al., in press). These researchers have demonstrated that either excessively

authoritarian or excessively permissive parenting is negatively correlated with academic achievement among high school students. This finding is consistent with the more general literature on the socialization consequences of various parenting behaviors (see Maccoby & Martin, 1983), which suggests that a constellation of parenting characteristics psychologists describe as "authoritative" (cf. Baumrind, 1978) is associated with a range of positive outcomes in children. Parents who are authoritative use democratic (as opposed to permissive or authoritarian) decision-making practices, maintain clear and consistent expectations for the child's behavior, avoid using guilt-provoking and other psychologically controlling discipline techniques (and rely on explanation instead), and establish warm and close parent-child relations.

Although the finding that authoritative parenting is correlated with school success is important, it is somewhat difficult to interpret. The parent-child relationship is bidirectional -- parents are affected by, as well as affect, their children. For this reason, it is not clear whether parental strictness or parental permissiveness leads to poor achievement, or whether parents of low-achievers respond by becoming stricter or neglectful. Denver University psychologist Susan Harter (1983) has noted a similar problem in interpreting studies of academic success and self-esteem. Does enhancing self-esteem lead to school success, or is the

reverse true? Actually, studies indicate that self-esteem is more likely to be a consequence than an antecedent of academic accomplishment. In other words, students come to feel good about themselves as a result of doing well in school, not the reverse. Attempts to raise levels of achievement by raising levels of self-esteem may be misguided.

Background for Our Study

In our program of work, we wanted to look more closely at authoritative parenting and, in particular, at the hypothesis that authoritative parenting promotes (rather than merely follows from) school success. The sample for our study is composed of 157 working- and middle-class families with a first born child between the ages of 11 and 16 enrolled in the public schools in Madison, Wisconsin. Our data on family relations were collected during school and home visits conducted between April and June, 1985. Among the many questionnaires the families completed were a measure of the extent and degree of the adolescent's involvement in ten different household responsibilities; a checklist concerning 17 areas of decision-making on a variety of day-to-day issues, that we use to assess the nature of the family's decision-making style; and adolescents' characterizations of their parents' warmth and use of psychological control that are derived from a widely

used assessment battery called the Child Report of Parent Behavior Inventory (see Schwartz et al., 1985).

Schools provided information on the adolescents' grades, attendance, and standardized achievement test scores. Grades for a given year were combined to yield one composite grade-point-average for that academic year, on a 4-point scale, and the number of days of school missed during a given year was used as a measure of each adolescent's level of absenteeism. Data on grades and absenteeism were available for 1985 and 1986, permitting us to look examine whether authoritative parenting actually leads to school success. Because both family relations and school performance vary as a function of the adolescent's age, sex, and socioeconomic status, and because grades in school and school attendance are also correlated with youngsters' scores on standardized achievement tests we controlled statistically for the effects of these likely confounding factors.

The Findings

When we looked at the concurrent relation between family factors and school performance, we corroborated many of the findings reported by other investigators. Specifically, we found that children earn higher grades and attend school more often when their parents use democratic, rather than authoritarian, decision-making practices, when their parents are warm, and when their parents are not

overly controlling psychologically. In short, we find that children from authoritative households perform better in school than their peers -- even after we control for the effects of social class and achievement test scores.

But it is the longitudinal evidence that is especially compelling. When we look at the relation between family relationships in 1985 and school grades and attendance records one year later, we find that authoritative parenting has an over-time payoff as well. Not only did students from authoritative households have better records in 1985 to begin with, their grades and attendance records improved more between 1985 and 1986 than did those of their peers. In other words, authoritative parenting seems to actually promote school success among high school students. On average, being from an authoritative home translated into an improvement in g.p.a. by about one-half a letter grade during the one-year period.

Household Chores: Bad News for Parents

We also looked at the time-honored claim that assigning adolescents chores around the house is a good way to build responsibility and, ostensibly, improve their performance at school. The bad news for parents is that involvement in household chores is associated with poorer school performance. One might be tempted to conclude that youngsters who are heavily involved in familial responsibilities may find that such chores interfere with

homework and other activities related to school success. This interpretation, however, is questionable, for two reasons. First, the absolute number of hours youngsters spend on household tasks is not high, even among those students who are "burdened" by such responsibilities. And second, the amount of time youngsters devote to homework is minimal, indicating that there is not very much for household work to interfere with. We can not determine at the present time just why time spent on household responsibilities is negatively correlated with academic success, but it does seem cautiously appropriate to question the presumption that assigning youngsters chores around the home is a good way to increase their general sense of responsibility.

The Power of Authoritative Parenting

Our study clearly shows that youngsters whose parents are relatively less permissive, more accepting, and less psychologically controlling do better in school than their peers. Although the sample in our study did not permit us to examine the benefits of authoritativeness among nonwhite youngsters, other studies (Dornbusch et al., in press) indicate that these parenting practices have virtually across-the-board advantages for school success. Moreover, we find that the benefits of parental authoritativeness are more or less equal across the early secondary school years. In a new collaborative study we are involved in with

Dornbusch and his colleagues at Stanford, we intend to examine the roel of authoritative parenting further.

One point of clarification: Some readers may find it puzzling that both parental permissiveness and psychological control are associated with poor school performance. The apparent inconsistency is due to the difference between behavioral autonomy, too much of which may leave the youngster without adequate guidance and limits, and psychological autonomy, too little of which may leave the youngster without sufficient emotional resources of his or her own. Parental permissiveness, which may indicate the absence of adequate behavioral demands on the child's behavior, is associated with a range of problem behaviors; whereas psychological control, which may indicate a stifling, dependency-fostering parenting style, is related to deficiencies in the development of self-direction. The challenge for parents of young adolescents may be to grant sufficient psychological autonomy to their child without granting an excessive degree of behavioral autonomy.

The power of authoritative parenting in promoting school success is all the more significant in light of recent studies indicating that parental decision-making and disciplinary practices can be changed through educational and clinical intervention (see Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986). These studies indicate that it is indeed possible to teach parents how to parent more authoritatively. Many

schools have tread lightly where parenting is concerned, fearing, perhaps, that advocating one sort of parenting over another will amount to the endorsement of particular sets of values. Although schools therefore may not desire to take the main responsibility for directing educational or clinical programs for parents, school practitioners nbevertheless can play a role in disseminating information about effective parenting to students' families and in steering families in need of assistance toward appropriate service providers.

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