Parental Self-Esteem and Behavior Problems in Children: Similarities Between Mothers and Fathers

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The relationship between parental self-esteem and behavior problems in children was investigated using 1624 married couple's responses from the National Survey of Families and Households. The sample was weighted to be nationally representative in terms of race and ethnicity. It was hypothesized that the existence of behavior problems among children would be associated with low self-esteem among parents and that the parent's gender, child's gender, parents' gender role attitudes, and parental employment would moderate this relationship. The results indicated that parental self-esteem is negatively associated with behavior problems in children. However, none of the moderating variables had a significant impact. This suggests that the relationship between parental self-esteem and behavior problems among children is robust and does not vary appreciably with the gender of the parent, the gender of the child, the attitudes of the parent, or the employment of the parent.

Gender differences are apparent in most aspects of marriage and family life, including marital communication, the division of household labor, and parenthood (Thompson & Walker, 1991). In relation to parenting, it is usually assumed that motherhood is a more central role to women than fatherhood is to men. Consistent with this assumption, some research has shown that stress in the parental role has a more detrimental impact on

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the well-being of mothers than of fathers (e.g., Baruch, Biener, & Barnett, 1987). However, other studies suggest that most men take the role of father seriously, and that problems in child rearing have similar effects on the well-being of fathers and mothers (e.g., Small, Eastman, & Cornelius, 1988). In the present study, we present new data on the connection between various child problems and the self-esteem of fathers and mothers. We use the recently collected National Survey of Families and Households for this purpose (Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988).

Gender and Parental Stress

A large portion of the literature points to the fact that many women have strong psychological ties to the role of being a mother. Studies show that the role of mother is often highly salient in the identities of women (Hock, Gnezda, & McBride, 1984; Nuttbrock & Freudiger, 1991). Gerson (1986) revealed that many women view the role of parenthood as necessary for the fulfillment of their life values and central to their sense of self-worth. In contrast, men tend to have more of their identity invested in the breadwinner role than in parenthood (Thompson & Walker, 1991).

Identity theory holds that strains that threaten to disrupt an individual's most salient role identities are more psychologically damaging than strains that threaten to disrupt less salient role identities (Thoits, 1991). Because a woman's identity is closely tied to her role as a parent, perceived failure as a parent is likely to threaten a woman's identity and therefore lower her self-esteem. On the other hand, because a man's identity may be more closely tied to his occupational role, failure in the parental role may be less threatening to men than to women and may impact less on their self-esteem.

Research on problems with parenting yields evidence of gender differences. McBride and Black (1984) found that women display a success orientation with children and as a result "may be devastated by any appearance of failure" (p. 245). Men, however, when experiencing a failure, tend to attribute blame to the children. Webster-Stratton and Hammond (1988) studied the effects of raising difficult children and found that women report more stress than do men. Mothers also appear to experience more stress than fathers do when children suffer from chronic illness (Cook, 1988). Also, Schilling, Schinke, and Kirkham (1985) found that mothers and fathers of disabled children differ in their perceptions of the child's needs and how they cope with the daily stresses. Specifically, mothers are more accurate in their perceptions and rely on a variety of internal and