The 1990s: Gender Differences in Parenting Roles

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Seventy European American families with 6-month-old infants participated in this investigation of current parenting roles. Parental reports and observations revealed that mothers were more involved with the infants and fathers were employed outside the home more hours per week than mothers. Both parents rated the mother as a better caretaker of the infant than the father. The mother rated the father's caretaking abilities higher than he rated himself. In concordance with previous research, maternal concerns about separations related to employment were found to be influenced by maternal employment factors. Paternal concerns about separations related to employment were also influenced by maternal employment factors. Changes in parenting roles were discussed.

Traditionally, mothers and fathers have assumed different parental roles. The mother's role has been that of the primary caretaker-nurturer of the infant. The father's parental role has been that of the provider of the infant's material needs. His influence on the infant's development has been viewed as indirect, mediated by the mother, whereas the mother's effect has been viewed as direct (Sigel, Dreyer, & McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 1984). These different parental roles lead to different patterns of interaction between the parents and their infant (Lamb, 1977; Parke & Tinsley, 1987).

1Preparation of this article was made possible by an Indiana University Southeast Summer Faculty Fellowship Award. I wish to thank the families who participated in this research project and the following research assistants: Leslie Angel, Rhonda Bottoff, Kathryn Haendiges, Cora McNab, Beth Smith, and Sandi Wiseheart.

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Due to the different parental roles and the related patterns of interaction the relationship between parents and their infant varies depending upon the gender of the parent.

However, this unidimensional model of parental roles may be inaccurate due to recent changes in family dynamics, specifically, the increase in dual wage earning families within the past two decades. Approximately 60 percent of married women with infants, less than two years of age, are now employed outside of the home (Zill, 1991). However, the increase in participation of women in the work force has not been met with an equivalent increase in participation of males in child care (Menaghan & Parcel, 1990). Though males within dual wage earning families have increased their child care activities, women still have responsibility for over half of the child care (Darling-Fisher & Tiedje, 1990) and have more contact with the infant than the father (Parke & Tinsley, 1987).

The continuing difference between the parents' level of child care involvement may be a product of social cultural mandates which influence the mother's and father's role expectations for themselves and their spouse. Though more and more mothers are employed they still are highly invested in their parental role. Women feel pressure to care for their infants and to be employed outside the home (McCartney & Phillips, 1988). Mothers' employment, after the birth of their infant, is often compelled by a financial need (Owen & Cox, 1988).

The dual pressures mothers experience (i.e., a need to be employed and care for their infant) may create role conflicts. One important aspect of the mother's role conflict is her feelings about separation from her infant. Hock, McBride, and Gnezda (1989) characterize maternal separation anxiety as an unpleasant emotional state that is tied to separations from the infant and may be expressed through worry, sadness and guilt. According to Hock and her colleagues this psychological construct has origins in biology, psychological factors, and social cultural role mandates.

Hock et al. (1989) developed a thirty-five item questionnaire to assess maternal separation anxiety. From the Maternal Separation Anxiety Scale (MSAS) three factors were derived; 1. separation anxiety—reflects anxiety and feelings of guilt about leaving the infant; 2. perception of separation effects on the child—parental attitudes and feelings about the child's ability to adapt to and profit from nonmaternal care; and 3. employment related separation concerns—reflects attitudes and feeling that are specific to work related separations from the infant.

Relationships between maternal employment and maternal separation anxiety have been documented (McBride & Belsky, 1988; McBride, 1990; Stifter, Coulehan, & Fish, 1993). Mothers who did not plan to return to work after the birth of their infants reported greater employment related