Strong Marriage Relationship Central to Positive Parenting

The qualities of the relationship between a husband and wife affect their children's cognitive and social competence. Some psychologists believe that the marital relationship provides the primary physical, emotional, and physical support for parents. As a result, the relationship that exists in the marital relationship affects the couple's parenting behaviors, which in turn impacts the adjustment of the children. For example, studies have shown that a harmonious marriage relationship promotes competence and maturity in their children. Other studies have demonstrated that marital conflict may result in cognitive delay, school difficulties, and antisocial or withdrawn behavior.

Couples who are satisfied in the marriage relationship are more likely to agree about expectations for their children. This provides consistent expectations to the children. In addition, children learn about attachment, love, and security from their early care givers. Parents who model positive relationship behavior contribute to the their children's attitudes toward intimate relationships and long-term relationship stability.

Couples who do not feel supported in the marital relationship may have lower self-esteem and interact differently with their children than their counterparts who have warm, responsive relationships. This seems to hold true regardless of whether a family's oldest child is preschool age or in the nine to 13-year-old range.

A Spouse's Informal Support

Spouses can support each other in several ways:

Emotional Assistance

Spouses can act as potential reservoirs for love and affection, providing both comfort and emotional security for one another. Often self-esteem is bolstered and a sense of efficacy exists.

Tangible Help

It is no secret that child-rearing can be very demanding. However, spouses can provide important tangible assistance for one another. Sharing household chores, child care, work-related tasks, family and friendship obligations, and community responsibilities reduces individual stress loads and provides mutual support.

Cognitive Guidance

Marital partners can be important sources of information, advice, and problem-solving strategies for both personal and work-related matters.
Much time and energy have been devoted to helping parents develop specific parenting skills. However, interventions that help parents improve their personal adjustment and the quality of their marriage may prove beneficial for the marriage, the parent-child relationship, and the child's development.

Developing a Strong Marital Relationship

Develop Family Rituals

Developing family rituals provides meaning for family interactions and helps clarify roles and responsibilities within the family. Family rituals can be anything from religious observances, such as a child's first communion, to daily interactions, such as how family members greet one another when someone returns home. Creating and maintaining family rituals on a daily basis is an important part of family life.

Participate in Leisure Activities

Plan leisure activities as a couple that offer plenty of opportunities for communication. The old saying, "The family that plays together, stays together," may be partially true. However, research has indicated marital satisfaction is more closely related to good communication during leisure activities.

Go on a Date Once a Month

Plan time alone where talk about the children and work are off limits. Going on a date doesn't have to cost a lot of money. In fact, it could be as simple as planning a midnight stroll while the children are staying over with friends or relatives. Some frugal couples swap baby-sitting on date night with the parents of their children's playmates.

Listen When Communicating

Many people want nothing more than the person they care most about to really listen to them. Give your partner focused attention so he or she knows his or her comments are top priority. Listen with an attitude of acceptance and willingness to understand. Listen with an attitude that seeks clarification. You may need to ask questions or paraphrase to be assured you have the correct meaning of the message being sent.

Retain the Passion

A satisfying marriage relationship grows best when a couple nurtures sexual intimacy. The sexual relationship can flourish when the couple creates companionship, makes a lasting commitment, and deepens their passion for one another.

Resolve Conflict

Inevitably, even the best marriages face conflict. When one spouse has been offended by the other, rather than letting a wall go up between the two of them, they must confront the conflict. Usually, resolving conflict requires both seeking forgiveness and granting forgiveness. The final process is working toward reconciliation and rebuilding trust with your partner.
Parents who are concerned about the cognitive and social development of their children can devote their first energies to developing a strong marriage relationship.

The parenting alliance is defined as the "capacity of a spouse to acknowledge, respect, and value the parenting roles and tasks of the partner" (Weissman & Cohen, 1985, p. 26). A disrupted parenting alliance has been associated with child maladjustment, social incompetence, and behavior problems (Abidin & Brunner, 1995; Bearss & Eyberg, 1998). On the other hand, researchers assert that a strong parenting alliance can help parents and children combat the deleterious effects of family stress and even divorce (e.g., Abidin & Brunner, 1995). Despite the obvious importance of this construct, the foundations of this alliance are not yet well understood.

Though the parenting alliance has been described as a separate construct from the marital relationship itself, there is evidence that various characteristics of the marriage, such as marital satisfaction, are related to the strength of the parenting alliance (Abidin & Brunner, 1995; Floyd, Gilliom, and Costigan, 1998). The purpose of this exploratory study is to investigate additional aspects of the marital relationship that may predict the strength of the parenting alliance. Specifically, marital power, defined as "the relative ability of either spouse to influence the other" (Balswick & Balswick, 1995, p. 297), may be another component of the marital relationship that is associated with the parenting alliance, because perceptions of power imbalance may be destructive to parents' view of themselves as a "team."

If marital power is indeed related to the parenting alliance, it is possible that other variables, such as marital satisfaction, marital conflict, and parental depression, mediate this relationship. Previous research has shown that certain patterns of marital power are associated with low marital satisfaction (Gray-Little & Burks, 1983), which may affect investment in parenting, especially for fathers (Floyd et al., 1998). In addition, differential marital power may be related to increased conflict, which may weaken the parenting alliance (Fauber, Forehand, Thomas, & Wierson, 1990; McHale, 1995). Moreover, low marital power has been associated with depression (Mirowsky, 1985), particularly in women, and depression has been related to poorer parenting behaviors (Cummings & Davies, 1992; Kaslow, Warner, John, & Brown, 1992).

HYPOTHESES

Therefore, it was hypothesized that:

1. Lower levels of perceived marital power (high power-other) will be associated with a poorer parenting alliance for both husbands and wives;
2. The relationship between marital power and parenting alliance will be mediated by the following variables: marital conflict, marital satisfaction, and/or parental depression;
3. The relationship between marital power and parenting alliance will be moderated by gender, in that marital satisfaction may only be a significant mediator for fathers, whereas parental depression may only be a significant mediator for mothers.

METHOD

Participants are 60 married parents living in Knoxville, TN. Couples were recruited randomly from a mailing list purchased by the experimenters and were compensated according to their level of participation. As part of a larger, longitudinal study of marital and family interactions, each spouse completed the following self-report measures: the Relationship Dimensions Profile, Power-Partner subscale (RDP; Daiuto & Baucom, 1994); the Dyadic Adjustment Scale, Satisfaction and Consensus subscales (DAS; Spanier, 1976); the Center for Epidemiological Studies − Depression Scale (CESD; Radloff, 1977); and the Parenting Alliance Inventory (PAI; Abidin & Brunner, 1995).

RESULTS

Hypothesis 1:

Means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1. Correlational analyses revealed a strong, negative relationship between marital power and parenting alliance for fathers ($r = -.534$, $p < .001$). As expected, fathers who reported that their spouses have more marital power tended to report a weaker parenting alliance. Contrary to our hypothesis, however, no significant relationship was found between levels of marital power and parenting alliance for mothers. Correlations among all of the variables

are presented in Table 2.

Hypothesis 2:

Because the association between marital power and parenting alliance was significant for fathers but not for mothers, mediation could only be tested for fathers. According to the procedures outlined by Baron and Kenney (1986), multiple regression analyses were used to test the mediational models. As shown in Table 3, the results partially supported the hypotheses. For fathers, only marital conflict fulfilled the requirements for full mediation. The requirements for full mediation are met when the significance of the predictor variable (power-other) drops to nonsignificance with the addition of the mediational variable (conflict) to the regression equation. In summary, the mediational analyses for fathers revealed that marital conflict alone can fully account for the link between marital power and parenting alliance for fathers.

Hypothesis 3:

Because marital power was significantly related to parenting alliance for fathers but not for mothers, the gender differences predicted in Hypothesis 3 could not be tested.

To view the tables, click HERE.

DISCUSSION

This study revealed interesting gender differences in the link between marital power, or the level of power that one perceives his/her spouse to have in the marriage, and the parenting alliance, or the sense of respect and teamwork spouses have for each other as parents. Perceived levels of marital power were associated with the strength of the parenting alliance for fathers, but not for mothers. Moreover, the nature of the link between fathers' perceptions of marital power and parenting alliance appears to be rather complex. The mediational analyses revealed that levels of conflict within the marriage can fully account for the relationship between marital power and parenting alliance for fathers. However, it appears that other variables such as marital satisfaction and depression may also be predictive of the parenting alliance for both mothers and fathers, even though they may not play a mediating role.

The findings of this study may be consistent with the tendency for couples to operate within an egalitarian or traditional marital power structure, versus a wife-favored power structure (Gray-Little & Burks 1983). It may be the case that wives are used to parenting within households where their husbands have as much or more power than they do, and so their parenting is less affected by power differentials.

The results of this study have significant implications for clinical practice. For example, it is important for marriage and family therapists to keep in mind the wide range of marital characteristics that affect spouses' parenting alliance, as well as how this alliance is related to overall family functioning. The implications of this research are important when working with both intact and divorced families. Furthermore, given that the parenting alliance has implications for child behavior and adjustment (Abidin & Brunner, 1995; Bearss & Eyberg, 1998), it is imperative that researchers continue to further delineate the complex relationships between the marital relationship and the parenting partnership.

Associations between Marital Quality and Parenting: Does Marital Quality Affect the Degree to which Parents Encourage Autonomy in their Children?

The current study suggests a connection between the overall quality of marital relationships and the amount of autonomy encouragement and autonomy restriction married parents give to their children. The analyses are based on a sub-sample of fifty-six parents (28 couples) who were participants in the *School Children and Their Families Project* (SAF) and who completed (1) the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), used to measure adults' recollection of receiving encouragement and/or restriction of autonomy from their parents, and (2) "The

Relationship Between My Parents" self-report questionnaire, a measure of adults' perceptions and recollections of the quality of their parents′ marital relationship when they were young children. Overall positive marital quality between grandparents (SAF participants′ parents) was related to grandfathers′ encouraging SAF daughter participants′ autonomy. The quality of the grandparents' marriage was related to grandmothers′ restricting both sons′ and daughters' autonomy. Findings offer further support for the marital-parental relationship linkage and indicate that a supportive marital relationship may facilitate parents′ ability to engage in adaptive child rearing practices. Results highlight the need for further examination of specific parenting practices vital to child development that may be affected by the marital relationship.

Over the last two decades, researchers have devoted increasing attention to the marital relationship, regarding it as a key element in determining family functioning and individual outcomes. The association between marital relations and child functioning is well documented (Burman, John & Margolin, 1987; Cummings & Davies, 2002; Feldman, Wentzel, Weinberger, & Munson, 1990; Gable, Belsky, & Crnic], 1992; Gable, Margolin, Christensen, & John, 1996). Collectively, the empirical investigations indicate that the quality of a marital relationship is predictive of both positive and negative outcomes in children's adjustment across developmental periods in both clinical and non-clinical samples.

Although the correlation between marital relations and children's behavior is widely recognized, the pathways of influence responsible for this relationship remain less clear. The present investigation examines one possible pathway by exploring how the quality of the marital relationship is related to spouses' parenting as measured by the degree to which parents encourage children′s autonomy. The purpose of this investigation is to determine whether parents' overall marital quality relates to the degree to which these parents encourage their children′s autonomy, a dimension in parenting known to have beneficial effects on children. It is hypothesized that marital satisfaction will be positively correlated with parental autonomy encouragement — suggesting that a supportive marital relationship may facilitate parents' abilities to engage in adaptive child rearing practices.

Associations between Marital Quality and Parenting

Although the work of Feldman and colleagues (1990) documents an unmediated, direct effect of fathers' marital satisfaction on sons′ change in academic achievement, it is also likely that children are influenced indirectly by the effects of marital relations on parenting. Indeed, recent research has revealed that marital dysfunction can spill over onto the parent-child relationship and disrupt parenting.

Psychologists have used the term "spill over" -- defined as the direct transfer of mood, affect, or behavior from one setting to another -- to account for the interrelatedness of the relationships between husband and wife and parent and child (Erel & Burman, 1995). In accordance with the "spill over" hypothesis, a harmonious and supportive marital relationship is associated with supportive, responsive and involved parenting from infancy through adolescence (Arias & Fincham, 1996). On the other hand, marital discord results in parents' being less involved with their children and implementing harsh, less consistent and less communicative disciplinary practices in comparison with couples in more harmonious marriages (Cummings & Davies,

2002). These studies suggest that the emotional support parents gain from their spouses and the overall quality of their marital relationship can be expressed in the parent-child relationship. Thus, when the marital relationship is strained, the behaviors and feelings generated in the marriage can "spill over" and adversely affect both parenting and child development.

In a meta-analysis, Erel and Burman found a significant and positive relationship between the quality of the marital relationship and the quality of the parent-child relationship (effect size .27) proving that the marital relationship affects parent-child relationships (Erel & Burman, 1995). However, researchers examining the association between the marital relationship and the parent-child relationship differ with regard to the particular aspect of parenting that they investigate. These dimensions include the overall quality of the parent-child relationship (labeling it as positive or negative), as well as satisfaction with parenting and between-parent consistency (assessing the similarity between parents' ratings). However, few reports look directly at specific parenting practices. In fact, Erel and Burman's (1995) meta-analysis includes only two parenting practices (covert control and discipline) as an index of the parent-child relationship quality. Therefore, simply by concluding that marriages affect parenting based on the parenting dimensions currently in the literature, researchers neglect other unexamined parenting practices vital to children's development that might be affected by the marriage relationship. Thus, an investigation exploring the relationship between marital quality and specific child rearing practices is warranted.

The Role of Autonomy in Child Development

Deci and Ryan's (1985,1991) self determination theory postulates that human beings have psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are essential to their survival and parallel in importance to the body′s basic physical needs such as those for food and water. This theory highlights the importance of autonomy by assuming that mental health is partly dependent upon having relationships that are supportive of autonomy. Studies exploring self-determination theory have shown that parental support of autonomy leads to positive outcomes for children across different developmental periods (Allen, Hauser, Eickholt, Bell, & O′Conner, 1994; Frodi, Bridges, & Grolnick, 1985; Mattanah, 1999).

Clark and Ladd (2000) define "autonomy support" as the degree to which parents are responsive, reflective, and validating of their children's opinions, feelings, and perspectives. By actively encouraging children to explore their environment, make independent decisions, and freely express themselves, parents can foster their children's sense of independence. The capacity to make decisions independently, to serve as one's own source of emotional strength, and to manage life tasks without total dependence on others for assistance, is an important developmental outcome in adolescence (Shaffer, 2002). Investigations looking at the role of autonomy encouragement in adolescence show that psychological autonomy makes independent contributions to the prediction of self esteem, depression, antisocial behavior, social competence, and academic achievement (Allen et al., 1994; Barber, Olsen, & Shagle, 1994; Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989).

This study follows the trend of studies in family research that examine the interrelation of key family relationships. Although much of the interest lies in how subsystems such as the marital relationship affect individual family members, studies like this one focus on the interaction of subsystems, that is, how one relationship (marriage) affects another relationship (parent-child).

It is hypothesized that parents' marital relationship is related to the parents' ability to encourage autonomy in their children because of the close tie between the relationships of husband and wife and parent and child. In turn, it is possible that individuals in supportive relationships are more likely to practice supportive strategies in other relationships. A significant correlation between participants' perceptions of their parents' marital relationship and amount of autonomy encouragement they were given as children, would indicate that there is a systematic link between how the current participants described their parents' relationship as a couple and how they described their parents' encouragement or restriction of their autonomy when they were younger. In other words, participants who are likely to describe their parents' marital relationship as high in quality may also be likely to recall having received positive parenting— because these general, adaptive qualities that characterized their childhood are associated.

Method

This investigation uses data from the *School Children and Their Families Project* (SAF), a longitudinal, intervention study conducted by Philip A. Cowan and Carolyn Pape Cowan at University of California, Berkeley Psychology Department. The SAF project focuses on family systems and its relationship to marriage and child development. The participating families visited the laboratory at five different points between the eldest child's last pre-kindergarten year and ninth-grade. At each phase, families participated in extensive assessments that included structured interviews, structured family observations in the laboratory, and self-report questionnaires completed by parents and teachers.

Participants

This study draws 28 families (28 mothers and 28 fathers) from the larger sample of 100 families participating in the longitudinal study that had both Adult Attachment Interviews coded for autonomy encouragement and self-report data from the Family Relationships Questionnaire. This group of 28 families (a total of 56 participants) comprised the sub-sample used in the current study.

Demographically, the 28 families are representative of the larger San Francisco metropolitan area. Twenty-five percent of the families are African, Asian, or Latin American, and seventy-five percent are Caucasian or European American. The median total annual income for this sub-sample of families is 107,964 dollars. Families were largely middle class, with the majority reporting some college education.

Over the last decade, many research questions have been examined using the SAF project data set. However, to date, no investigation has examined the relationship between scores on the "Relationship Between My Parents" questionnaire and data gathered from the participants' narrative responses to the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI). In order to determine the relationship between marital quality and parental autonomy encouragement this study correlates data from these two measures.

Measures

Family Relationships

The Cowan's Family Relationships Questionnaire assesses an individual's global perceptions of the positive and negative tone of relationships in his/her family of origin —

relationships between the individual and father, the individual and mother, and between father and mother. Each participant rated the quality of these relationships based on recollections from childhood and current perceptions, by answering six separate questions rated on a 7-point Likert scale. The overall quality of the relationship is measured by combining the six scores on separate questions assessing different dimensions: uninvolved-involved, high-conflict, unhappy-happy, distant-close, cold-warm, unsatisfying-satisfying. Scores measuring the quality of parents′ relationships were obtained by taking the sum of the ratings for the six items; therefore, the maximum possible score was forty-two and the minimum was six. Alpha reliability for the six scales describing both past and present relationships were high, ranging from .85 to .95. One component of the Family Relationship Questionnaire is the "Relationship Between My Parents", which asks participants specifically about their parents′ relationship as they recall it from childhood. This study correlates data from the section of the questionnaire asking participants to reflect on their parents' relationship during the participants′ childhood with data gathered from the participants' narrative responses to the Adult Attachment Interview.

Autonomy Encouragement

Adult Attachment Interviews were administered during the SAF adult participants′ eldest child's pre-kindergarten year. In the AAI, the interviewees (SAF parents recruited for the study) report on their relationships with their parents (grandparents of the child in the study). The interviews assess the adult's current state of mind with regard to early attachment and elicit specific descriptors of the adult's early relationship with each parent. This study uses a new coding system developed by Miriam Hernandez (2002) to identify and measure situations in which the participant recalled receiving encouragement of autonomy or restriction of autonomy from his/her parents.

The coding system rated various dimensions of the participants′ recollections of their childhood interactions with their parents. These parenting dimensions included recollections of receiving autonomy encouragement, autonomy restriction and emotional support. Coders made global ratings on these parenting dimensions based on the participants′ reflections throughout the whole interview.

This study focuses on two items from the coding scheme: global autonomy encouragement and global autonomy restriction. Global autonomy encouragement was rated on a five-point scale, ranging from "very high encouragement" to "very low encouragement." Very high encouragement (a rating of 5) is defined as parents actively encouraging their child's independence to a very high degree with strong verbal or physical encouragement. Very low autonomy encouragement (a rating of 1) is defined as the parent never or rarely encouraging his/her child's autonomy. A similar five-point scale was used to rate global autonomy restriction with the scale ranging from "very high restriction of child's autonomy" to " very low restriction of child's autonomy." For every participant, a mean score for both global autonomy encouragement and global autonomy restriction was obtained by averaging the two raters' scores (for the autonomy encouragement and restriction dimensions). This average indicates the degree of autonomy encouragement or restriction that participants recall receiving from their parents during childhood. Two independent coders coded each AAI transcript in the spring of 2002; the reliability among coders was an alpha of .92

Results

Both of the measures used in this design are based on data gathered from the SAF adult participants as they reflected on their relationships with their parents (AAI) and their parents' relationship with each other (Family Relationships Questionnaire) during childhood. In the following analyses, SAF parents (those in the longitudinal study) are referred to as "daughter" or "son," and the parents to whom they refer (the SAF grandparents) are identified as their "mother" or "father."

Global Autonomy Encouragement and Global Autonomy Restriction

For SAF daughters, the mean score for global autonomy encouragement received from mothers and fathers was 2.24 and 2.07, respectively. For SAF daughters, the mean score for global autonomy restriction received from mothers and fathers was 2.30 and 1.69, respectively. For SAF sons, the mean score for global autonomy encouragement received from mothers and fathers was 2.10 and 2.34, respectively. For SAF sons, the mean score for global autonomy restriction received from mothers and fathers was 2.21 and 1.71, respectively. There was no significant difference in how daughters rated their parents on autonomy encouragement and restriction in comparison to sons' ratings of their parents.

Family Relationships Questionnaire

The mean marital quality score for SAF daughters reporting on their parents' past relationship was 26.09 (SD = 8.53), and for SAF sons it was 27.68 (SD = 7.05), with no significant difference between the means.

Overall Marital Quality and Global Autonomy Encouragement and Global Autonomy Restriction

To test the hypothesis that the quality of a marital relationship was linked to the amount of autonomy encouragement given to children, Pearson bivariate correlations were calculated among measures of parental autonomy encouragement and autonomy restriction and the overall quality of the parents' marital relationship. Marital quality was significantly and positively related to fathers' encouragement of their daughters' autonomy ($r = .58$, $p < .01$, df (26)).

After quantitative results were obtained, qualitative analyses were performed by reviewing the AAI transcripts of participants whose scores for global autonomy encouragement/restriction and for marital quality mirrored the quantitative findings. Direct quotes were extracted from incidents when participants described their parent's marital relationship and their parent's encouragement or restriction of their autonomy during childhood. The quotes are used to support and illuminate the relationship between marital quality and parental autonomy encouragement, determined by the quantitative analyses. Qualitative analyses of the AAI transcripts supported the finding that fathers in high quality marital relationships show higher rates of encouraging autonomy in their daughters. For example, an SAF daughter recalling a relationship with her father that was supportive of her autonomy stated that there was,

> ....tolerance with him letting me do what I needed, which was I needed to be alone a lot...I spent a lot of time just gone in the woods, and I always felt it was he who defended that need to let me do that....the tolerance was allowing me to roam.

Reflecting on her parents' relationship, she reported,

> Sort of a white picket fence relationship. I would say they were very, very, very, close, very trusting, very supportive, uhm, in a very traditional way.

The following results demonstrate trends in the statistical analyses that are not statistically significant for the current sample size of 28 families. The correlation coefficients are moderate in effect size and are expected to reach significance with increasing sample size. Mothers, like fathers, appear to encourage their daughters' autonomy when they are happier with their marital quality (r = .29, p = ns). Like daughters, sons appear to receive more encouragement from their mothers (r = .31, p = ns) and fathers (r =. 33, p = ns) when their marital quality is high.

Similarly, when the overall quality of their parents' marriage was rated as highly positive, sons (r = - .23, p = ns) and daughters (r = -.29, p = ns) recalled receiving low levels of autonomy restriction from their mothers, and qualitative analyses were consistent with this finding. Conversely, when adults' recalled negative qualities in the marriages of their parents, they reported greater restriction of their autonomy. For example, an SAF mother explaining her early relationship with her mother said,

> My mom tried to sort of dictate me as to how I was going to be. I think she felt that I could not make my own decisions and I am very independent, and I've always been like that even as a little girl, and that was hard for her to accept.

When speaking about her parents' relationship while growing up, she stated,

> There were times when they would fight, and he'd hit her and knock her around. I think they had visions of how each other was going to be, and it didn't match, and I just don't think they were happy.