



The Contribution of Relational Support to Parental Self-Efficacy in Fathers and Mothers

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Abstract

Research has shown that parental self-efficacy—the degree of confidence in one’s effectiveness as a parent—is an important predictor of behavioral competence in parenting for both fathers and mothers. One factor found to contribute to parental self-efficacy is the level of support and validation that a parent receives from important others in his or her life. In this study, we sought to better understand how mothers and fathers might differentially derive on-going relational support for parenting from various sources of social support and how that support might differently influence mothers’ and fathers’ parental self-efficacy. We hypothesized that relational support offered by partners, friends, and family would predict greater parental self-efficacy for both fathers and mothers. Given that mothers tend to receive more general social validation as parents than fathers, however, we expected that partner support would be a more influential predictor of parental self-efficacy for fathers than for mothers. Findings indicated that relational support equally predicted parental self-efficacy for mothers and fathers and that although both mothers and fathers reported receiving support from their partners, families, and friends, only partner support was related to greater parental self-efficacy for both, and at similar levels.

Keywords: Parental Self-Efficacy; Co-parenting; Social Support; Spousal Support; Father Involvement

Introduction

Over the last two decades, interest in the degree to which fathers engage in interaction with their children has increased, as has social pressure for fathers to be more involved. Fathers are increasingly expected to engage in child-care tasks and the nurturing of children at levels more equal to that of mothers. Yet mothers have traditionally received more social validation for parenting than do fathers. As children, girls receive more socialization for parenting than do boys [1], and as mothers they are often allotted more job flexibility and institutional support [2] and spend more time interacting with and caring for their children than do

fathers [3,4]. Compared to mothers, fathers appear to receive less support and validation for their investment in the parental role, a difference that may be an important factor in understanding and promoting their greater involvement.

One important predictor of the degree to which fathers adopt a central, engaged paternal role is maternal attitudes toward fathers’ involvement [1]. Research on maternal gatekeeping shows that when mothers discourage or attempt to control fathers’ participation or their involvement with their children, fathers are more likely to withdraw [5]. Research has also shown that women who embrace a traditional gender ideology that views mothers as natural

and indispensable nurturers and fathers as supporters are more likely to engage in maternal gatekeeping, constricting fathers' involvement [6]. However, when mothers embrace a more egalitarian view of parenting roles, encourage fathers' participation, and are supportive of fathers' involvement with their children, fathers are likely to engage more with their children [7].

While parenting support from a father's partner may be particularly important for his engagement in parenting, it is unclear whether support from one's partner influences either mothers' or fathers' belief in their ability to parent competently. As part of a larger study in which we sought to understand how parents negotiate parenting roles and how their attitudes and behaviors influence fathers' involvement, we began to wonder if a partner's support has similar levels of influence on mothers' and fathers' sense of parental self-efficacy. In particular, we wanted to know whether the parental self-efficacy of fathers is more likely to be influenced by partner support than is the self-efficacy of mothers. A better understanding of the process of co-parenting and factors associated with fathers' involvement could help increase fathers' engagement with and positive influence on their children's development.

In addition to questions regarding the influence of partner support on parental self-efficacy, we also wondered about the ways in which mothers and fathers may draw upon their other close relationships to support and validate their sense of competence as parents. How might the types of relationships that mothers and fathers rely on differ, and how might the impact of those relationships differently influence mothers' and fathers' parental self-efficacy? We wanted to know specifically whether fathers require more support for parenting from their partner than mothers, and if this also extends to family and friends.

Parental self-efficacy, a parent's perception of their ability to adequately and competently complete parenting tasks, has been found to be an important factor in effective parenting and the motivation to engage and persist in the challenges of parenting and co-parenting [8-11]. Among fathers, greater parental self-efficacy has been associated with higher levels of father-child involvement [12]. Research has indicated that high parental self-efficacy scores are associated with positive outcomes for both parents and their children. For example, parental self-efficacy has been shown to affect the types and quality of parenting practices provided by mothers and fathers, which in turn affects the development of secure parent-child attachments [13,14]. In a meta-analysis conducted by Jones, et al. [9], parental self-efficacy was found to influence parental adjustment and well-being and behavioral problems in both young children [15,16] and adolescents [17,18]. Research has also shown

that parental self-efficacy has important implications for parenting interactions. Under conditions in which mothers were high or fathers were low in parental self-efficacy, mothers were more likely to engage in gatekeeping behaviors and undermine fathers' participation in parenting [5].

Research has further demonstrated that parental self-efficacy is fostered not only by positive experiences as a parent but also by validation and support offered by others [16]. Studies have indicated that mothers and fathers look to each other for affirmation of their parenting skills and competence [19-21] and that spousal support has important implications for family dynamics [10,22]. Yet those effects have appeared to differ somewhat for mothers and fathers. For example, researchers have found that although partner reports of marital satisfaction were negatively associated with parental self-efficacy, this effect was significant only for the parental self-efficacy of fathers, not of mothers. Research also suggests that outside sources of support influence mothers and fathers in different ways. In a study of the association between attitudes toward expressing emotion, perceived social support, and mother's and father's postnatal adjustment, Castle, et al. [19] reported that positive attitudes toward the expression of emotion were positively related to perceived social support for mothers but negatively related to perceived social support for fathers.

The importance of social support in the development of parental self-efficacy has been studied more among mothers than among fathers, and most often in first-time mothers, for whom social support has been found to predict maternal parental self-efficacy and to moderate the relationships between stress and postpartum depression [23]. Leahy-Warren, et al. [23] for a review of the literature; also see [24,25]. House [26] demonstrated that mothers benefit from both formal sources of support, such as nurses, midwives, or doctors, and informal sources, including partners, parents, siblings, friends, and neighbors. But even studies that assess different sources of support often conflate these into a total support score rather than analyzing the unique contributions of various sources of support to parental self-efficacy [25]. In a notable exception, an examination of support from the partners and parents of first-time mothers in Australia, greater support from a mother's parents was related to higher levels of maternal self-efficacy, whereas support from her partner was not [27].

While social support has generally appeared to be linked to maternal self-efficacy, the mixed findings regarding various sources of support led us to seek to better understand differences in the importance of various support relationships and in the influence of these types of support on both mothers' and fathers' parental self-efficacy. We were also interested in learning about the impact of relational

support for mothers and fathers beyond the postpartum transition to parenthood. Accordingly, we recruited parents with varying degrees of parenting experience and examined three different sources of support—from one’s partner, family, and friends—to investigate whether and to what degree these support relationships were associated with mothers’ and fathers’ self-efficacy.

Based on previous research findings, we proposed the following three hypotheses:

- Higher levels of relational support will predict greater parental self-efficacy for both mothers and fathers.
- Support from one’s partner, family, and friends will have a greater influence on the parental self-efficacy of fathers than it will on that of mothers.
- Support from one’s partner will have a greater influence on the parental self-efficacy of fathers and mothers than will the support of family and friends.

Method

As part of a larger study, we recruited a sample of 97 parents (57 mothers and 40 fathers) via social media to complete an online self-report survey and offered a small monetary incentive for their time. To be eligible to participate in the study, parents were required to be married or cohabitating and to have children under the age of seven. Respondents were mostly white (76.5%) or Hispanic (8.2%), with moderate incomes; only 15% earned less than \$35,000 annually, while 44% earned \$35,000 - \$70,000 and 40% earned more than \$70,000. Most respondents, 89%, had attended some college, and the majority, 58%, had obtained a college degree. The length of the parents’ relationship with their partner ranged from 1 to 25 years ($M = 9.85$ years; $SD = 4.89$). Most families had either one or two children, 31% and 51%, respectively, while 18% had three or more children. The age of the children in the families ranged from 0 to 21 and averaged 4.94 ($SD = 3.73$).

To assess the degree to which mothers and fathers utilized various sources of support and their level of parental self-efficacy, participants were asked to complete an online survey. The survey included the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support [28] and the Parenting Sense of Competence Scale [29]. The MSPSS is a 12-item self-report inventory that divides social support into three categorical subscales: support from significant other, support from family, and support from friends. Higher scores for each subscale indicate that a parent reported relying more highly on that subsystem for support. Each subscale contains statements such as “I can share my joys and sorrows with my significant other.” Responses were measured using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 7 (very strongly agree). In previous research [30], Cronbach’s

alpha of .91 was reported for the total scale, indicating a high degree of internal reliability. For this sample, the internal reliability was assessed for each of the three types of support and found to be strong for each subscale: Cronbach’s alpha = .89 for the partner support items, .90 for the family support items, and .88 for the friend support items.

The Parenting Sense of Competence Scale [29] was utilized to measure parental self-efficacy. The PSOC contains 17 items assessing the respondents’ perception of their parental competence and includes items such as “Being a parent is manageable, and any problems are easily solved.” Responses were measured on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Following previous research [31], negatively worded items were reverse-scored and added to the other items to calculate a total scale score, with higher scores indicating a higher sense of paternal competence (Cronbach’s alpha = .85).

Results

Descriptive statistics for all variables are presented in Table 1. To examine differences between mothers and fathers in the level of support they reported receiving from each of the three sources and to examine differences in their levels of parental self-efficacy, we first conducted a multivariate analysis of variance. As shown in Table 1, results indicated that parental self-efficacy did not differ significantly between mothers and fathers. Furthermore, neither the total level of support nor the support received from partner, family, and friends differed significantly between mothers and fathers.

	Sources of Support			
	Parental Self-Efficacy	Partner	Family	Fr
Mothers	4.17 (0.67)	5.80 (1.03)	5.15 (1.25)	5.36
Fathers	4.28 (0.70)	6.02 (1.18)	5.33 (1.35)	5.06
<i>F</i>	0.6	0.96	1.42	1.1
<i>p</i>	0.44	0.33	0.52	0.3

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses.

Table 1: Mean Levels of Parental Self-Efficacy and Support for Fathers and Mothers.

Next, to test our primary hypothesis that higher levels of relational support are related to higher levels of parental self-efficacy, we employed a regression model using the full sample ($n = 96$) in which the parental self-efficacy was predicted by support from partner, support from family, and support from friends. The model was statistically significant, $F(3, 93) = 7.59$, $p < 0.001$, and explained 17% of the variance in parental self-efficacy. However, support from spouse or significant other was found to be the only significant

predictor of parental self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.49$).

Following this, we conducted separate regression analyses for mothers and fathers to examine possible differences in how mothers and fathers derive parental self-efficacy from sources of support. The model predicting parental self-efficacy was significant for both mothers, $F(3, 53) = 3.76$, $p = 0.016$, and fathers, $F(3, 36) = 3.82$, $p = 0.018$. While approximately 13% of the variability in mothers' parental self-efficacy was explained by relational support, 18% of that variability in fathers was explained by relational support, although this difference was not statistically

significant ($Z = 0.35$, $p > .05$). Results also indicated that for mothers, higher levels of support from their partner were significantly predictive of higher parental self-efficacy, whereas support from family and friends was not (Figure 1). The results for fathers showed that higher support from the partner was also associated with higher parental self-efficacy, whereas support from family and friends was not. Comparisons of the beta coefficients in the models for mothers and fathers indicated non-significant differences between mothers and fathers in the contributions of partner ($Z = 0.62$), family ($Z = -0.02$) and friend support ($Z = -1.77$).

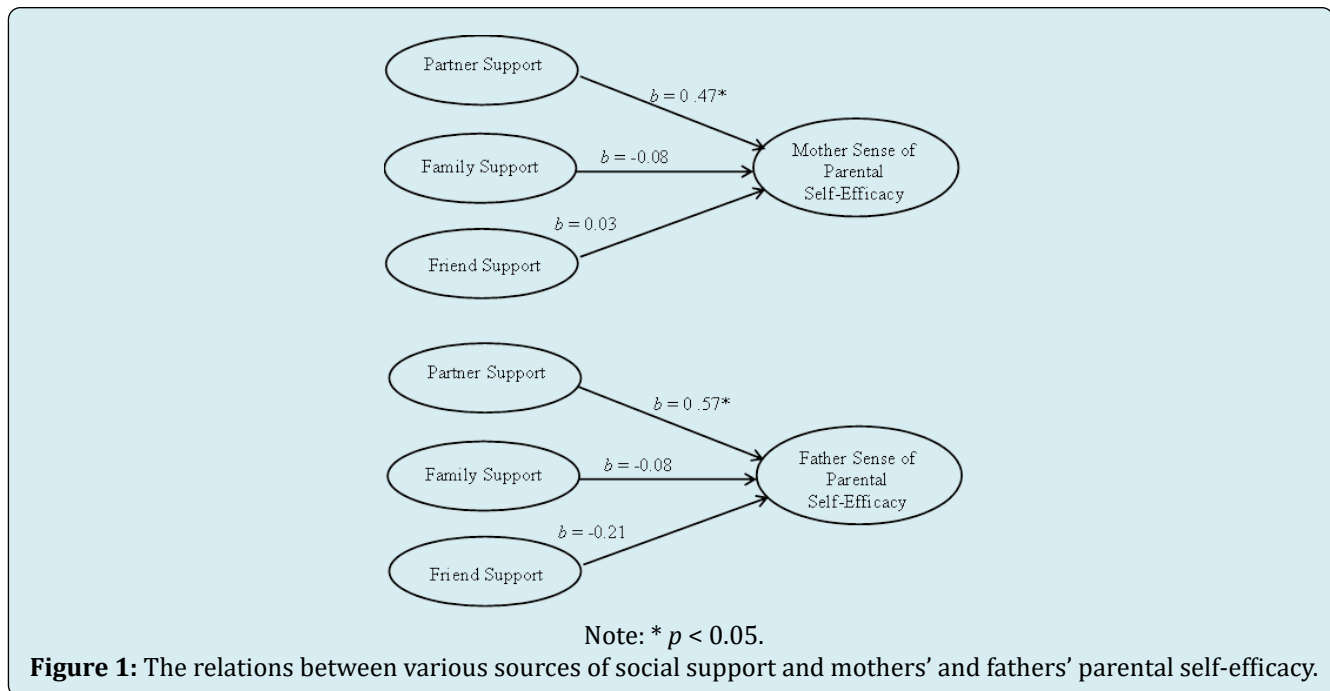


Figure 1: The relations between various sources of social support and mothers' and fathers' parental self-efficacy.

Discussion

The results from this study suggest that relational support is important to both mothers and fathers and that support from a spouse or significant other has important implications for both mothers' and fathers' parental self-efficacy. Our findings thus align with research evidencing a link between relational support and parental self-efficacy and expands on this work by investigating both fathers and mothers, including parents with various levels of parenting experience, and by investigating the contribution of various sources of support.

Contrary to our hypotheses, mothers and fathers reported receiving similar levels of support from partners, family, and friends, and the support they received did not differentially affect mothers' and fathers' parental self-efficacy. As indicated, only partner support was predictive of parental self-efficacy, an effect that appeared to be

roughly equal across mothers and fathers. This finding is inconsistent with Haslam, et al. [27] research suggesting that family support was related to maternal self-efficacy in first-time mothers but partner support was not, which may reflect that the support needs of first-time mothers in the transition to parenthood differ from those of mothers more generally and that partner support becomes a more primary source of support for mothers beyond the early months of first-time parenthood. Future research comparing the support needs of parents generally and during specific transitional periods would provide a better understanding of the role of social support in influencing parental outcomes.

Although this study did not investigate differences in the types of support—emotional, instrumental, informational, etc.—offered by the various sources, assessing the types of support, along with the sources from whence they are drawn might give us a better understanding of how mothers and fathers look to others to for parental support and validation.

Indeed, it is likely that the contribution of social support to parental self-efficacy is more complex than modeled in this study, and further research should consider not only sources and types of support offered, but also mothers' and fathers' motivations in deriving support and differences in mothers' and fathers' perceptions of and response to relational support.

The results of this initial study, however, point to factors that are likely to contribute to the development and maintenance of parental self-efficacy and that deserve additional study. For example, parental self-efficacy has been found to be an important motivator of fathers' involvement with their children [32]. By suggesting that partner support is an important predictor of fathers' parental self-efficacy, the findings of this study align with research on maternal gatekeeping which finds that mothers' attitudes and behaviors toward fathers influence fathers' degree of involvement with their children and indicates that the relation between partner support and parental self-efficacy may be one of the mechanisms through which that influence operates. Additional insight into the importance of mothers' influence on fathers' parental involvement and level of confidence as parents would help us better understand how coparenting interactions can lead to shifts in fathers' investment in the parenting role and offers a promising direction for future research.

The importance of relational support in promoting parental self-efficacy affirmed by this study may also help explain the reported decrease in father involvement that often occurs when parents divorce [33]. Divorced fathers have reported feeling less able to maintain closeness with their children and having lower rates of confidence in their abilities as parents [34,35], which may be explained in part by their being less likely to receive direct spousal support for their parenting. Future research should examine the types of relationship support available to divorced as well as resident fathers and how such support influences their parental self-efficacy.

This study provides an initial step in understanding the role of various sources of social support on parental self-efficacy, and its findings regarding the primacy of partner support upholds considerable evidence suggesting that the quality of the relationships between partners is an important mechanism in promoting parental self-efficacy, more competent parenting, and greater father involvement. Given these findings, it may be particularly important to attend to the degree of support between partners in designing interventions to improve parental adjustment and parenting outcomes.

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