

Palestinians children perception of parenting behaviour in relation to children mental health problems

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Abstract

Aim: The aim of this study was to investigate the Palestinians children perception of parenting behaviour in relation to children mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and somatization.

Methods: The sample consisted of 164 Palestinian children and young adults tested in the Gaza Strip in August 2007. They had been interviewed by: Demographic questionnaire includes sex, age, and citizenship, Assessment of mental health functioning, and Schaefer's Parental Behaviour Inventory Scale.

Results: The study showed that the most common psychological symptoms in children and young people were: feeling fearful (68.9%), loss of energy (64.8), and careless (52.4%). The results showed that mean anxiety symptoms was 24.3, mean somatic symptoms was 15.1, mean bedwetting was 14.1, mean aggression was 14.1 and depression mean was 3.8. Somatic symptoms were correlated with anxiety, bed wetting, and aggression. Anxiety was correlated with bedwetting and aggression. Aggression was correlated with bedwetting. The results showed that 72.6% of children said that fathers allowed them to do what they want and like, 68% said that their fathers do not care for the children mistakes, 65.1% said that their fathers were proud what they the children do, 62.5% said that fathers calm them down when they are afraid or anxious.

The results showed that 84.7% of children see that their mothers calm them down when they are afraid or anxious, 82.2% said that mothers consoles him and tries to make me happy when he is sad, 77.9% of Mothers used to kiss me affectionately when I was small, 76.6% of mothers calm them down when they are depressed or irritable.

The study showed that mean perception of loving and caring father behaviour was 31.4 and rejective and hostile father behaviour mean was 45.9. While the mean perception of loving and caring was 34.9 and rejective and hostile mothers behaviour mean was 46.93. The results showed that there was positive correlation between somatic symptoms of children and perceiving rejective and hostile behaviour of fathers.

Conclusion and clinical implications:

The study showed the Palestine children especially boys perceive their parents as rejective and hostile increase such children mental health problems. It might be helpful to launch a comprehensive, ecological intervention program that will help to improve the quality of the children's home environment and parenting practices and changing of parenting attitude toward their children needs. Special attention may be given to the males. Such interventions may include parental awareness programs that would draw attention to the adverse affects of parental psychological maltreatment, gender inequities, and lack of parental support. The focus would be to train parents in an effort to change their or negative parenting attitudes, involving physical and non-physical punishment.

Key word: Children mental health, parenting behavior, children perception of parenting behavior

Introduction

Studies showed that parenting without warmth and involvement is considered a serious risk to children's mental health (Davies & Windle, 1997; Scherer, Melloh, Buyck, Anderson, & Foster, 1996). Others found that when parents use harsh control, their children are more likely to manifest externalizing problems (Bradley, Corwyn, Burchinal, McAdoo, & Garcia Coll, 2001; Cole, Teti, & Zahn-Waxler, 2003). Harsh control has been linked to poorer self-regulation in children, and poor self-regulation has been linked to externalizing behavior (Grolnick & Farkas, 2002; Olson, Bates, Sandy, & Schilling, 2002).

While parental warmth and sensitivity appear to foster parent– child cooperation and encourage children to share, consider others' feelings, and regulate negative emotions (Campbell, 2002; Denham et al., 2000).

Earlier research has suggested that parents influence each other's parenting (Emery, 1982). Leinonen, Solantaus, and Punamaki (2002) showed that if the father's mental health problems increased his hostility toward his wife, this hostility was associated with compromised mothering. Likewise, if the mother's mental health problems decreased her support for her husband; this decreased support was associated with problems in fathering. Parental and child gender seems to have an influence on family processes, although the results are contradictory. There is evidence of same-sex effects showing that compromised mothering places daughters at special risk and compromised fathering places sons at special risk (Davies & Windle, 1997; Webster-Stratton, 1996). There is further evidence that stress, including economic pressure, differentially affects girls and boys. Boys seem to be more vulnerable than girls to direct effects, whereas girls' mental health is more at risk when family relationships

deteriorate because of the stress (Cummings, Vogel, Cummings, & El-Sheikh, 1989; Elder, 1974; Ge et al., 1994). Interestingly, Elder et al (1985) found a direct effect of family economic pressure on boys' but not girls' sense of self-adequacy and social competence. Barkley et al. (1991) have speculated that the inattentive, hyperactive, and impulsive behavior seen in children with ADHD, increases parent-child conflict and negative family communication. An anxious parent may be more likely to overprotect their child due to their own cognitive bias towards threat, increased perception of danger, and elevated sensitivity to their child's distress (Hudson & Rapee, 2004). Moreover, parents with high levels of anxiety may be more likely to exhibit negativity towards their child as a result of their low perceived control over their child's anxious behaviour (Wheatcroft & Creswell, 2007). Others found that ADHD children with hyperactivity-impulsivity reported higher levels of harsh disciplining and physical abuse than did non-ADHD children Khamis (2006).

A vast amount of research has examined childrearing patterns and childhood anxiety. Substantial findings support the association between overinvolved parenting and child anxiety disorders, while results have been somewhat less consistent regarding the relationship between parental negativity and anxiety (Bogels & Brechman-Toussaint, 2006; McLeod, Wood, & Weisz, 2007). Gar and Hudson (2008) study used two tasks to investigate maternal overinvolvement and negativity/criticism as they relate to mother and child anxiety diagnoses. Data from the speech task demonstrated that mothers of anxious children were more overinvolved than mothers of nonanxious children, regardless of maternal anxiety status. In another study, maternal rejection showed weaker associations with child anxiety than parental control (McLeod et al., 2007; Rapee, 1997)

The aim of this study was to investigate the Palestinians children perception of parenting behaviour in relation to children mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and somatization.

Methodology

Participants

The sample consisted of 164 Palestinian children and young adults tested in the Gaza Strip in August 2007. The sample consisted of almost equal numbers of males ($N = 82$) and females ($N = 82$) who were all years of age 6-24 years . Seventy two of the children were refugee, 25% were citizens, and 3% were returnees.

Procedure

We selected the sample of the children according to the first stage of cohort study in which the names of the families was available for the data collection . We held a meeting and conducted training for 4 hours to 8 professionals working in the children mental health and had previous experience in data collection (4 social workers, 4 psychologist). We explained to them the aim of the study and give them prepared list of number of children to be interviewed. A cover letter was given to each parent to obtain written permission from them to interview their children in the study.

Sociodemographic information for the study population was collected from parents. Each interview took 45 minutes to be completed. Children were informed by data collectors that there was no right or wrong answers and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. Children were also informed that if they had questions when completing the scales. The data collection was done between August and September 2007.

Instruments

The data was collected from children by using the following questionnaires:

Demographic questionnaire.

Demographic information about the participants was obtained using a survey developed by the authors. This questionnaire includes sex, age, and citizenship

Assessment of mental health functioning.

The Mental Health Inventory for children is 27 -item measure of psychological distress and well-being that was specifically designed for use in the general population. Each item on the MHI is rated by participants on a scale from 1 to 6. Throughout the MHI the descriptors attached to the 1 to 6 scale changed but generally reflected the theme 1 (*always*) to 6 (difficult to answer). The assessment inventory contains items related to somatization, anxiety, depression, aggression, and bed wetting.

Schaefer's Parental Behaviour Inventory Scale (Schaefer, 1965; Schaefer & Bell, 1958).

Persevering parental behaviour were assessed by using Schaefer's Parental Behaviour Inventory Scale (Schaefer, 1965; Schaefer & Bell, 1958). The 72 items depict children's perceptions of their mothers' and fathers' behavioural attitudes in the domains of discipline, autonomy, control, expression of affection, and protectiveness. The children indicated whether each item described their (a) mothers and (b) fathers: (1) very well; (2) to some extent; or (3) not at all. For this analysis, two composite scores for both mother and father were formed based on Schaefer (1965). They measure loving and caring parenting on the one hand, and rejecting and hostile

parenting on the other. Perceived *Loving and caring* parenting involves items related to consoling, supporting, and caring (e.g., “Consoles me and tries to make me happy when I’m sad”), sharing activities and interests (e.g., “Enjoys doing things with me”), and the expression of affection and emotional involvement (e.g., “Used to kiss me affectionately when I was small”). *Rejective and hostile* perceived parenting assesses paternal and maternal focus on the child’s misbehaviour and mistakes (e.g., “Reminds me of my mistakes for a long time afterwards”), lack of love and caring (e.g., “I feel she/he never wanted children”), and expression of hostility (e.g., “Treats me as if I were a stranger”). This scale was used before in the same culture and showed strong reliability and validity (Punamaki et al, 1997a, 1997b).

Statistical analysis

The data analysis was done using SPSS ver 14. Frequencies and descriptive statistics are initially including psychological problems rated in children and perception of parenting behaviour. Between-group differences on questionnaire scores (age, gender, citizenship, psychopathology, and parenting behaviour) were estimated by t independent test and ANOVA. The relationship between children’s psychological problems in children and parenting (father and mother) behaviour variables were estimated by Pearson rank correlation test.

Results

Psychological symptoms rated by children

The study showed that the most common psychological symptoms were: feeling fearful (68.9%), loss of energy (64.8), and careless (52.4%). While the least common symptoms were: backaches (1.8%), shorting of breathing (1.8%), spells of weeping (1.8%), rapid heart beats (1.2%), stomachaches (0.6%), tremors (0.6%).

Table 2
Psychological symptoms

Psychological symptoms	Always	sometimes	Rarely	Never	Don't know	Difficult to answer
Fears	68.9	11	7.3	10.4	1.2	1.2
Loss of energy	64.8	21.6	5.6	3.7	0	4.3
Careless	52.4	12.2	13.4	14.6	0	7.3
Loss of concentration and unable to study	36.2	39.3	19.6	1.8	0	3.1
Frustrated	25.6	18.3	10.4	27.4	0.6	17.7
Easily angry	22.6	24.4	11	39.6	0	2.4
Anxious and irritable	18.9	15.2	12.2	51.2	0	2.4
Over occupied	18.3	18.9	12.8	26.2	0	23.8
Depressed mood	12.2	12.2	12.8	60.4	0	2.4
Nightmares	11.6	11.6	11.6	59.1	4.3	1.6
Aggression	11	13.4	10.4	62.2	0	3
Physical aggression toward others	9.8	14	13.4	59.1	0.6	3
Physical fighting	6.1	2.4	1.8	83.5	0	6.1
Headache	4.9	12.2	7.3	73.8	0	1.8
Joints pains	4.9	4.9	2.4	86.6	0.6	0.6
Feeling lonely	4.9	3.7	5.5	81.1	0.6	4.3
Insomnia	4.3	7.9	2.4	84.8	0	0.6
Using bad words	4.3	8.5	15.2	72.0	0	0
Dizziness	3.7	4.3	3	88.4	0	0.6
Hopelessness	3.7	7.9	6.1	59.8	0.6	22
Bed wetting	2.4	4.3	1.8	80.5	0	0
Backaches	1.8	3	4.9	88.4	0	1.8
Shorting of breathing	1.8	1.8	1.8	93.9	0	0.6
Spells of weeping	1.8	0.6	3.0	93.3	0	1.2
Rapid heart beats	1.2	3	4.3	90.2	0.6	0.6
Stomachaches	0.6	2.4	2.4	93.3	0	1.2

Tremors	0.6	0	1.2	97.6	0.6	0
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Means and standard deviation of the children psychological problems

The results showed that mean anxiety symptoms was 24.3 (SD =2.7), mean somatic symptoms was 15.1 (SD – 1.9), mean bedwetting was 14.1 (SD = 3.1), mean aggression was 14.1 (3.1) and depression mean was 3.8 (0.7).

Table 3
Psychological symptoms Means and Standard Deviations of psychological symptoms

	Mean	SD
	92.26	11.01
Anxiety	24.3	2.7
Somatic	15.1	1.9
Bed Wetting	14.1	3.1
Aggression	14.1	3.1
Depression	3.8	0.7

Relationship between psychological symptoms of children

In order to find the relationship between different psychological problems reported by children, a correlation coefficient Spearman test was done. Somatic symptoms were correlated with anxiety ($r = 0.24$, $p = 0.001$), bed wetting ($r = 0.16$, $p = 0.01$), and aggression ($r = 0.16$, $p = 0.01$). Anxiety was correlated with bedwetting ($r = 0.27$, $p = 0.001$) and aggression ($r = .27$, $p = 0.001$). Aggression was correlated with bedwetting ($r = 1.00$, $p = 0.001$)

Table 4
Pearson Correlation Coefficient test between resilience PTSD

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Somatic	1				
2. Anxiety	**0.24	1			
3. Bed Wetting	*0.16	**0.27	1		
4. Depression	//-0.08	//-0.02	//-0.09	1	

5. Aggression	*0.16	**0.27	**1.00	//-0.09	1.0
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Children perception of parental behaviour

According to the children reports, 72.6% said that fathers allowed them to do what they want and like, 68% said that their fathers do not care for the children mistakes, 65.1% said that their fathers were proud what they the children do, 62.5% said that fathers calm them down when they are afraid or anxious, my parents consider me as big problem (7.1%), 6% said that father treats me as if I were a stranger'', 5.4% said that fathers made them feel she/he never wanted children , 4.8% their fathers made them feel that the do not like them, and 1.8% said that fathers are asking them to leave the home and coming back.

Table 5
Children perceiving fathers' behaviour

Items	Yes	Somehow	No
Fathers allowed them to do what they want and like	72.6	7.1	20.2
Fathers do not care for the children mistakes	68	0	32
Fathers were proud what they the children do	65.1	11.8	23.1
Fathers calm them down when they are afraid or anxious	62.5	13.1	24.4
Fathers punishing me for my bad behaviour	58.7	25.7	15.6
Fathers consider me as big problem	7.1	85.7	7.1
Fathers treat me as if I were a stranger''	6	86.9	7.1
Fathers made them feel she/he never wanted children	5.4	80.4	14.3
Fathers made them feel that the do not like them	4.8	87.5	7.7
Fathers are asking them to leave the home and coming back.	1.8	92.3	5.9

The results showed that (84.7%) of children see that their mothers calm them down when they are afraid or anxious, 82.2% said that mothers consoles him and tries to make me happy when he is sad, 77.9% of Mothers used to kiss me affectionately when I was small, 76.6% of mothers calm them down when they are depressed or

irritable, 5.9% consider me as big problem, 5.3% of mothers make them feel that the do not like them, 1.8% of mothers make them made them feel she/he never wanted children, and 1.8% of mothers are asking them to leave the home and coming back

Table 6

Children perceiving mothers' behaviour

Items	Yes	Somehow	No
Mothers calm them down when they are afraid or anxious	84.7	11.8	3.5
Mothers sympathized with me and make me happy when I a feel sad	82.2	12.4	5.3
Mothers used to kiss me affectionately when I was small	77.9	9.2	12.9
Mother calm them down when they are depressed or irritable	76.6	17.5	5.8
Mothers consider me as big problem	5.9	6.5	87.6
Mothers make them feel that the do not like them	5.3	6.5	88.2
Mothers make them feel she/he never wanted children	1.8	13.5	84.7
Mothers are asking them to leave the home and coming back	1.8	5.9	92.4

Means and standard deviations of perceiving parental behaviour by children

The study showed that mean perception of loving and caring father behaviour was 31.4 (SD = 8.98) and rejective and hostile father behaviour mean was 45.9 (SD =9.39). While the mean perception of loving and caring was 34.9 (SD =6.68) and rejective and hostile mothers behaviour mean was 46.93 (SD = 8.58).

Table 7

Means and standard deviations of parental behaviour

Parental behaviour	Mean	SD
Fathers		
Loving and caring	31.4	8.98
Rejective and hostile	45.9	9.39
Mothers		
Loving and caring	34.9	6.68

Rejective and hostile	46.93	8.58
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Perceiving parental behaviour according to children gender

The result showed that mean rejective and hostile father behaviour rated by boys was 48.3 (SD=9.1) compared to 43.4 (SD = 9.1) for girls. There was statistically significant differences toward boys perceiving rejective and hostile father behaviour than girls ($t=3.33$, $p = 0.001$). While there were no statistically significant differences between boys and girls in perceiving loving and caring father behaviour. The result showed that mean boys perceiving of rejective and hostile mother behaviour was 48.6 (SD=7.9) compared to 45.2 (SD = 9.0) for girls. There was statistically significant differences toward boys perceiving of rejective and hostile mother behaviour than girls ($t=2.6$, $p = 0.01$). While there were no statistically significant differences between boys and girls in perception of loving and caring mothers behaviour.

Table 8
T independent test to differentiate between perceiving parental behaviour and sex of children

	Gender	No.	Mean	SD	t	P
Loving and caring	Boy	82	32.2	8.4	1.09	//0.28
	Girl	81	30.6	9.5		
Rejective and hostile	Boy	82	48.3	9.1	3.33	**0.001
	Girl	82	43.5	9.1		
Loving and caring	Boy	82	34.6	7.0	-0.61	//0.54
	Girl	82	35.2	6.4		
Rejective and hostile	Boy	81	48.6	7.9	2.60	**0.01
	Girl	80	45.2	9.0		

Perceiving parental behaviour according to children age

In order to use T independent test, age of children was recoded into children age 12 years and less and 13 years and more. The result showed there were no statistically

significant differences regarding the age groups of children either in perceiving loving and caring or rejective and hostile parenting behaviour in mothers and fathers.

Table 9
T independent test to differentiate between perceiving parental behaviour and age of children

	Age	No.	Mean	SD	t	P
Loving and caring	Less than 12 years	81	31.7	7.7	0.4	//0.7
	13 and more years	82	31.1	10.1		
Rejective and hostile	Less than 12 years	81	47.1	9.3	1.6	//0.1
	13 and more years	83	44.7	9.4		
Loving and caring	Less than 12 years	81	34.9	6.3	-0.1	//0.9
	13 and more years	83	34.9	7.1		
Rejective and hostile	Less than 12 years	80	47.6	8.0	1.0	//0.3
	13 and more years	81	46.3	9.1		

Perceiving parental behaviour according to citizenships

In order to investigate the differences between refugee, citizens, and returnees children, one way ANOVA test was performed in which perceiving parenting behaviour was the dependent variable and citizenship was the independent variable. Post-hoc test using Bonferroni test showed that refugee children were statically percept less rejective and hostile father behaviour than those citizens and returnees ($F = 3.7, p = 0.01$) and no statistically significant differences in perceiving loving and caring fathers behaviour and citizenship.

Post-hoc test using Bonferroni test showed that refugee children were statically perceived less rejective and hostile mother behaviour than those citizens and returnees ($F = 3.3, p = 0.01$) and no statistically significant differences in perceiving loving and caring mothers behaviour and citizenship.

Table 10
One way ANOVA test of perceiving parenting behaviour and citizenship

	Citizenship	No.	Mean	SD	F	P
Loving and caring	Citizen	40	34.2	8.9	2.6	//0.1
	Refugee	118	30.5	8.9		
	Returnee	5	31.2	7.9		
Rejective and hostile	Citizen	41	49.0	7.7	3.7	**0.01
	Refugee	118	44.7	9.8		
	Returnee	5	49.0	7.1		
Loving and caring	Citizen	41	35.1	6.7	0.4	//0.7
	Refugee	118	34.7	6.7		
	Returnee	5	37.4	5.4		
Rejective and hostile	Citizen	41	49.8	6.9	3.3	**0.01
	Refugee	115	45.9	9.0		
	Returnee	5	48.2	3.8		

Relationships between parenting behaviour and children mental health

A correlation coefficient test using Pearson test was done. The results showed that there was positive correlation between somatic symptoms of children and perceiving rejective and hostile behaviour of fathers ($r = -0.28, p = 0.01$). There no other relationships with other parental behaviour and mental health.

Table 11
Relationships between parenting behaviour and children mental health

Psychological problems in children	Loving and caring-father	Rejective and hostile-father	Loving and caring-mother	Rejective and hostile-mother
1. Somatic	0.21	*0.28	0.12	0.12
2. Anxiety	0.11	0.01	0.01	0.01
3. Bed Wetting	0.01	0.01	0.13	0.01
4. Depression	0.01	-0.12	0.01	0.01
5. Aggression	0.01	0.01	0.12	0.01

Discussion

Our study aimed to study Palestinian children perception of their parents behaviour and psychological problems of children. The study showed that the most common

psychological symptoms were feeling fearful, loss of energy, and careless. The presence of psychological symptoms among children was consistent with previous studies in the same area (Thabet et al, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2008, Qouta et al, 2003, 2005). Other studies found similar symptoms such as in study of Sudanese children resettled in the United States found that children were seeking medical care for somatic complaints and health problems often associated with behavioral or emotional problems, including headaches, stomachaches, bad dreams or trouble falling asleep, chest pains and lack of energy for a long time (Gillman et al, 2005). Results from recent study (Abdeen et al, 2008) showed that extensive exposure to violence was associated with higher levels of posttraumatic distress and more somatic complaints in both the West Bank and Gaza regions. More Gaza than West bank students reported symptoms meeting the criteria for PTSD, and more girls than boys in both groups reported somatic complaints.

According to the children reports said that fathers allowed them to do what they want and like, do not care for the children mistakes, proud what they the children do, and fathers calm them down when they are afraid or anxious. However their mothers were differently care for them. The results showed that of children see that their mothers calm them down when they are afraid or anxious, consoles him and tries to make me happy when he is sad, used to kiss me affectionately when they were small, calm them down when they are depressed or irritable. This is consistent with other studies which found that traumatic events negatively affect the way in which children perceive their mothers' and fathers' behaviour, attitudes and emotional expression toward them, and that parenting is harmful to children's well-being. The more the children had experienced traumatic events, the more punishing, rejecting , and

controlling they perceived their parents to be, the poorer the parenting they experienced, the more they suffered from high neuroticism and low self-esteem (Punamki et al, 1997b). Our results consistence with previous studies which found that parenting without warmth and involvement was considered a serious risk to children's mental health (Davies & Windle, 1997; Scherer, Melloh, Buyck, Anderson, & Foster, 1996). Punitive parenting characterized by harsh and often erratic disciplinary actions is associated with children's internalizing symptoms, including depressiveness and anxiety (Conger et al., 1994; Ge et al., 1994; Lempers, Clark-Lempers, & Simons, 1989), and with externalizing symptoms, such as antisocial (Conger et al., 1991; Hoge, Andrews, & Leschied, 1996; Loeber & Dishion, 1983) and aggressive (Skinner et al., 1992) behavior.

Our findings that boys perceiving rejective and hostile of both parents behavior than girl and non existence of differences between boys and girls in perceiving loving and caring of both parents behaviour. There is evidence of same-sex effects showing that compromised fathering places sons at special risk (Webster-Stratton, 1996). There was further evidence that stress, including economic pressure, differentially affects girls and boys. Boys seem to be more vulnerable than girls to direct effects, whereas girls' mental health is more at risk when family relationships deteriorate because of the stress (Cummings, Vogel, Cummings, & El-Sheikh, 1989; Elder, 1974; Ge et al., 1994). Interestingly, Elder et al (1985) found a direct effect of family economic pressure on boys' but not girls' sense of self- adequacy and social competence.

Clinical implications

The study showed the Palestine children especially boys perceive their parents as rejective and hostile increase such children mental health problems. It might be

helpful to launch a comprehensive, ecological intervention program that will help to improve the quality of the children's home environment and parenting practices and changing of parenting attitude toward their children needs. Special attention may be given to the males. Such interventions may include parental awareness programs that would draw attention to the adverse affects of parental psychological maltreatment, gender inequities, and lack of parental support. The focus would be to train parents in an effort to change their or negative parenting attitudes, involving physical and non-physical punishment.

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