Introduction

A child’s academic success and social adjustment are influenced by values and cultural beliefs that guide parenting. Parenting styles are typically looked at through the dimensions of warmth, parental control and autonomy expectations, and self-reported by parents (Domench, Donovan & Crowell, 2009). Studies have found that higher levels of parental warmth, control, and autonomy are associated with academic achievement. In contrast, harsh control, neglectful, and permissive parenting styles have been shown to negatively impact children’s academic success (Pinquart, 2016).

Mother’s education is another important predictor of academic success. Studies have repeatedly found that a positive correlation exists between her education level and children’s test scores and academic success. This is especially true for children in low-income households, who start school at a disadvantage (Magnuson, 2007).

The values of “respeto” and “familismo” are Latino family values that parents try to teach their children. The value of respeto stresses that children respect and listen to adults without interrupting. Familismo is viewed as a strong social and emotional support and the guidance of the family is valued (Calzada, Fernandez & Cortez, 2010). We believe that when children internalize the positive values of their parents’ culture, children may be more successful in school. High warmth and high control is a parenting style associated with the best social and academic outcomes for white, middle class children (Domench, Donovan & Crowell, 2009). However, in a Latino cultural context studies have added the dimension of protectiveness. In a study of 46 fathers and 49 mothers of Mexican (81%) or other Latino (17%), the majority of parents were categorized as protective, while about one-third was categorized as using both high warmth and high control (Domench et al., 2009). Parenting styles also vary by children’s gender. Warmth was relatively equal across gender, but parents were found to grant girls less autonomy than boys and to show more control and to have higher expectations for girls (Domench et al., 2009).

The Current Study

The current study looks at parenting and academic achievements through a new lens: through children’s narrative representations in response to story stems about challenging family interactions.

Research Questions

• Q1: Do children’s narrative representations of protection, affection and discipline predict their academic skills and social relations at the end of first grade?
• Q2: Do these findings differ for boys and girls?
• Q3: Is mother’s education level correlated with academic outcomes and does it correlate with parental representations?

Methods

Sample

• Participants were 46 English-speaking seven-year-old Latino children (24 girls and 22 boys). They were a part of the longitudinal Early Head Start National Research and Demonstration Project (June et al., 2005).
• Mothers were enrolled in the study when they were pregnant or their children were less than one year old.
• The average age of mothers at enrollment was 22 years old.
• Majority (64.4%) of mothers were married.
• 54.3% of mothers at enrollment had completed less than a high school degree.

Procedures

• Data from age 7 assessments conducted in the children’s homes were used.
• During this visit, each child was invited to complete the story stem assessment and the behavioral ratings were recorded. Four stems: Band-Aid, Hot-Soup and Stolen Candy (MSU, Bretherton, Oppeine, Buchbaum, Emde, & MacArthur Narrative Group, 1990) and Bedtime (FAST, Shinn, Schulte & Cummings, 2001).
• Through the use of small dolls (mom, dad and two child siblings) and props, examiners told the beginning of each story and then after the dramatic high point of the story the child was invited to tell the examiner what happened next.
• Examiners also administered assessments of children’s academic skills during this visit.

Measures

Story stem parent representations: focused on the presence or absence of positive and disciplinary parental representations in children’s narratives.

Positive representations included:
• Affection: Actions by parents considered to be affectionate, warm or caring.
• Protective: Representations of a parent protecting a child from possible or actual harm.
• Helpfulness: A parent that helped or assisted the child when needed.
• Caretaking: A parent that showed successful caretaking actions such as tucking them into bed or feeding them.

Discipline: A parent that acted as an authority figure, set limits or told the child what to do. The initial variable was coded as zero if discipline was not present, and one if it was. The discipline representations used in this investigation were then categorized as positive or purely disciplinary. To aid in the reporting of our results, we coined the terms just Discipline and Warm Discipline. When just discipline by itself was represented, without any positive rep the story was coded as Just Discipline. When a story had both any positive representation and also limit setting it was coded as Warm Discipline.


Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) (Dunn & Dunn 1997): age 7 Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test scores

Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) (Flanagin 2001): STRS is a report of teachers perceptions of their closeness to individual students - conflict, dependency, and closeness scores of the STRS

Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) (Gresham & Elliott 1990): SSRS teacher reports focusing on the social skills of self-control, assertion, cooperation.

• Measure of mother’s education = ordinal scale: 1: less than high school, 2: high school or GED, 3: more than high school

Results

Distribution of mother and father representations across stories:
• Reps of mothers and fathers differed in frequency
  • Discipline most frequent representation - especially by mom (almost entire sample at least once)
  • Overall mom represented in more stories in all representations
  • Reps differed based on story - children responded to the stories differently - injury vs misbehavior
• Stolen candy is only story not based in the home, without a direct “caretaking” action

Q1: No relationship was found between parent reps and academic skills and social relations using Pearson correlations for the sample as a whole.

Q2: Significant gender differences - independent t-tests reveal differences between boys and girls representation of Mom Warm Discipline: t(44)=2.425, p<0.019 - Girls represented more than boys. Protection and affection did not differ by gender.

Q3: Children of mothers that had a higher education level had better language (r=.322, p<0.05) and math (r=.268, p<0.01) and children represented mothers in the story stems as Just Discipline more frequently (r=.386, p<0.01)

Discussion

Story stems tap children’s internalized scripts for how to resolve challenges with parents.

Implications

• For convenience, it was useful to label discipline as warm vs just (meaning without positive representation).
• There is a possibility that the absence of warmth reflected in our variable Just Discipline may be seen as rejection to a child. The behavior of the parent may not be intentional, but the child’s perception is what affects their outcomes (Roher, Khaleque & Coursouy, 2012)
• Just Discipline by mom led to negative academic outcomes for boys and Dad Just was associated with higher conflict ratings for girls.
• Parent boys and girls differently: Strictness/ varying expectations
  • more protective mom = less assertion (SSRS) for girls
  • findings suggest that children’s internalized representations of discipline may reflect high expectations of them
• Older moms more affectionate towards girls and less affectionate towards boys also seen in use of Warm Discipline
• It is important to listen to children – what they have to say through story stems is important

Limitations

• Small sample size, missing data for the Band-Aid story
• Mom Discipline is represented so frequently partially because in 3 of the 4 stems Mom is the one who sets the initial limit

Reference: available upon request