

# Research on Parent-child Relationship and Mental Health of College Students

Xia Li<sup>1</sup>, Nannan Wu<sup>2, a, \*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Center for Mental Health of College Students, Wuhan University of Communication, Wuhan, 430205, Hubei, China

<sup>2</sup>Shaoguan University, Shaoguan, 512000, Guangdong, China

<sup>a</sup>64817469@qq.com

\*Corresponding author

**Keywords:** parent-child relationship, mental health, parental rearing behavior, family cohesion, family adaptability

**Abstract:** Parent-child relationship exerts a very significant effect on an individual's physical and mental health as it is the first interpersonal relationship he or she gets into. To college students, whether it exists or develops normally is pivotal to the smoothness and level of their socializing, as well as the occurrence of mental disorder or handicap to them. In this study, 368 college students were surveyed using parental rearing behavior questionnaire, family cohesion and adaptability questionnaire, and self-report symptom checklist to analyze the correlation between parent-child relationship and mental health of college students.

## 1. Introduction

To college students, whether parent-child relationship exists or develops normally is pivotal to the smoothness and level of their socializing, as well as the occurrence of mental disorder or handicap to them. College students have already stayed away from their parents and families, but parent-child relationship still plays an important role in their healthy growth. In this study, parent-child relationship is defined as an interactive process of psychological communication between parents and children to express feelings, show love and care, or exchange mutual values. To be specific, parent-child relationship covers parental rearing, parent-child interaction, parent-child communication, and other aspects.

## 2. Research Object and Methods

### 2.1 Research Object

In this study, college students were taken as the object. Using stratified random comprehensive sampling method, after 400 copies were handed out in total, 368 valid copies were received at a recovery rate of 92%, including 211 copies from the key university, accounting for 57.34%, and 157 copies from the college, accounting for 42.66%. Among respondents, there were 207 male students and 161 female students, accounting for 56.25% and 43.75% respectively.

### 2.2 Research Methods

#### 2.2.1 Instrument

Basic information questionnaire collects such information as gender, age, grade, major, only child or not, single-parent family or not, financial status, family address, parents' educational background, and their occupations.

The Self-Report Symptom Inventory, Symptom Check-List 90 (SCL-90) was developed by Derogati in 1973, consisting of 90 items reflecting 90 common psychological symptoms. Among them, 10 symptom factors are selected to indicate the existence of any psychological symptom as well as their severity. Each item is graded on a scale of 1-5.

Parental rearing behavior scale (Egma Minnen av Barndomsuppfostran, EMBU) was developed by C.Perris, a profession of the School of Psychological Medicine, Umeu University, Sweden, for children to evaluate their upbringing by parents. It was introduced to China and revised by Yue Dongmei *et al.* in China Medical University. The revised version contains 66 items, each of which is graded into levels 1-4. For each item, respondents were required to give their answer regarding parental rearing by their parents when they were young.

“Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale II” (FACE II) was compiled by Olson in 1982. As a self-rating scale, it is divided into two parts and contains 30 items to evaluate two aspects of family, i.e. Cohesion and Adaptability. For each item, there are five levels. Respondents are required to answer how serious the condition described in each item is in their family.

### 2.2.2 Statistical Processing

In this study, parental rearing behavior questionnaire, family cohesion and adaptability questionnaire, and self-report symptom checklist were utilized to survey 368 college students in Wuhan University and Wuhan Huaxia University of Technology. Subsequently, statistical analysis and statistical significance verification were performed with the data collected from basic information questionnaire, self-report symptom checklist, parental rearing behavior scale, and family cohesion and adaptability scale. Main statistical methods were used as follows: descriptive analysis (Frequencies) was conducted for all basic data including sample size and college students’ basic information such as age, gender, grade, major, parents’ educational background, and their occupations; correlation analysis; and multi-factor regression analysis.

## 3. Analysis and Discussion

### 3.1 Correlation Analysis

The results of this study show that: all factors of mental health are negatively correlated with paternal factor I (Emotional Warmth and Understanding), and maternal factor I (Emotional Warmth and Understanding), but positively correlated with paternal factor II (Punishment and Strictness), paternal factor V (Rejection and Denial), paternal factor VI (Overprotection), maternal factor II (Control and Overprotection), maternal factor III (Rejection and Denial), maternal factor IV (Punishment and Strictness). The factors including Actual Cohesion, Ideal Cohesion, Actual Adaptability and Ideal Adaptability are negatively correlated with such factors as SCL-90 Total, Somatization, Obsessive-compulsive Interpersonal Sensitivity, Depression, Anxiety, Hostility, Phobic Anxiety, Paranoid Ideation, Psychoticism, and Others (diet and sleeping). The factor Dissatisfaction with Cohesion is negatively correlated with the factor Phobic.

Table.2. Correlation Coefficient (r) between SCL-90 and Family Cohesion and Adaptability

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Actual Cohesion</i>	<i>Ideal Cohesion</i>	<i>Dissatisfaction with Cohesion</i>	<i>Actual Adaptability</i>	<i>Ideal Adaptability</i>	<i>Dissatisfaction with Adaptability</i>
Total	-0.35***	-0.32***	-0.01	-0.33***	-0.27***	0.01
Somatization	-0.33***	-0.38***	-0.10	-0.29***	-0.32***	-0.07
Obsessive-Compulsive	-0.28***	-0.18***	0.08	-0.26***	-0.15**	0.08
Interpersonal Sensitivity	-0.30***	-0.26***	0.01	-0.29***	-0.22***	0.03
Depression	-0.32***	-0.26***	0.03	-0.31***	-0.20***	0.06
Anxiety	-0.31***	-0.30***	-0.03	-0.29***	-0.26***	-0.01
Hostility	-0.28***	-0.27***	-0.02	-0.27***	-0.26***	-0.03
Phobic Anxiety	-0.24***	-0.31***	-0.10	-0.22***	-0.28***	-0.10
Paranoid Ideation	-0.26***	-0.28***	-0.05	-0.26***	-0.24***	-0.02
Psychoticism	-0.35***	-0.32***	-0.01	-0.33***	-0.30***	-0.02
Others	-0.33***	-0.25***	0.04	-0.32***	-0.22***	0.06

Note: \* indicates  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , and \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table.3. Correlation Coefficient (r) between Parental Rearing Behaviors and Family Cohesion and Adaptability

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Actual Cohesion</i>	<i>Ideal Cohesion</i>	<i>Dissatisfaction with Cohesion</i>	<i>Actual Adaptability</i>	<i>Ideal Adaptability</i>	<i>Dissatisfaction with Adaptability</i>
Paternal Emotional Warmth and Understanding	0.59***	0.53***	0.01	0.56***	0.48***	0.01
Paternal Punishment and Strictness	-0.29***	-0.32***	-0.07	-0.24***	-0.28***	-0.08
Paternal Control	0.02	0.01	0.00	0.04	0.03	-0.01
Paternal Favoring Subject	-0.11	-0.06	0.03	-0.08	-0.04	0.03
Paternal Rejection and Denial	-0.29***	-0.31***	-0.06	-0.25***	-0.27***	-0.06
Paternal Overprotection	-0.01	0.02	0.03	0.01	0.06	0.06
Maternal Emotional Warmth and Understanding	0.59***	0.52***	-0.01	0.55***	0.48***	0.02
Maternal Control and Overprotection	0.00	-0.01	-0.01	0.01	0.05	0.04
Maternal Rejection and Denial	-0.30***	-0.30***	-0.03	-0.25***	-0.26***	-0.05
Maternal Punishment and Strictness	-0.28***	-0.36***	-0.12	-0.22***	-0.30***	-0.12
Maternal Favoring Subject	-0.11	-0.07	0.02	-0.08	-0.04	0.03

Note: \* indicates  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , and \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

The factors including Actual Cohesion, Ideal Cohesion, Actual Adaptability and Ideal Adaptability are positively correlated with paternal factor I (Emotional Warmth and Understanding), and maternal factor I (Emotional Warmth and Understanding), but negatively correlated with paternal factor II (Punishment and Strictness), paternal factor V (Rejection and Denial), maternal factor III (Rejection and Denial), and maternal factor IV (Punishment and Strictness).

The results reveal that children have better mental health, family cohesion and adaptability if they are more often respected and understood by parents. On the contrary, if children are often exposed to strictness, punishment, denial, rejection, overprotection and control, they will have worse mental health, family cohesion and adaptability. In other words, emotional warmth and understanding is positive among parental rearing behaviors, and helps nurture children's mental health, while strictness, punishment, rejection, denial, overprotection and control are negative parental rearing behaviors, which may cause trouble in children's mental health.

### 3.2 Regression Analysis

To identify the effect of parental rearing behaviors, family cohesion and adaptability on mental health of college students, this study utilizes multiple linear regression analysis for further check. As revealed in the results, Paternal Emotional Warmth and Understanding, Paternal Overprotection and Ideal Cohesion play a significant role in the predicted average of college students' mental health. Among them, Paternal Emotional Warmth and Understanding, Maternal Punishment and Strictness, and Ideal Cohesion significantly affect the prediction of Somatization; Paternal Overprotection significantly affects the prediction of Obsessive-Compulsive, Interpersonal Sensitivity and Anxiety; Paternal Emotional Warmth and Understanding, Paternal Overprotection, Ideal Cohesion, and Ideal Adaptability significantly affect the prediction of Depression; Paternal Emotional Warmth, and Paternal Overprotection play a significant role in the prediction of Phobic and other factors; Paternal Overprotection, Maternal Rejection and Denial, and Ideal Cohesion significantly affect the prediction of Paranoid Ideation; Paternal Emotional Warmth and Understanding significantly affects the prediction of Psychoticism. The other parental rearing behaviors are not included in the optimal multiple linear regression equation, reflecting their little effect on the mental health of children.

Obviously, parental rearing behaviors are particularly influential on the mental health of college students. Father can affect children in a way that mother could never achieve, especially in some

aspects, e.g. children's relationship with peers, and academic achievement. Psychologists believe that father's involvement is important to the upbringing of children, especially when a father is able to provide emotional comfort for children. According to some studies, father's influence is lasting. Hence, father's participation in children's education is certainly important.

As revealed in the above analysis, the parent-child relationship of college students has the following characteristics: gender difference exists in parental rearing behaviors, family cohesion and adaptability; financial status affects parental rearing behaviors, family cohesion and adaptability; difference exists in parental rearing behaviors, family cohesion and adaptability between rural and urban areas; college students at different ages are affected differently by parental rearing behaviors, family cohesion and adaptability; parents' educational background affects their parental rearing behaviors; parent-child relationship is a significant factor to the mental health of college students.

Table.4. Multiple Regression Analysis with SCL-90 Average on Parental Rearing Behaviors and Family Cohesion and Adaptability

<i>Model</i>	<i>Variable Used in Equation</i>	<i>Partial Regression Coefficient B</i>	<i>Quasi Regression Coefficient Beta</i>	<i>t</i>
1	(Constant)	2.37		8.60
	Paternal Emotional Warmth and Understanding	-0.27	-0.30	-2.44*
	Paternal Punishment and Strictness	-0.08	-0.08	-0.72
	Paternal Rejection and Denial	0.04	0.05	0.49
	Paternal Overprotection	0.18	0.18	2.57*
	Maternal Emotional Warmth and Understanding	0.19	0.22	1.77
	Maternal Control and Overprotection	-0.08	-0.06	-0.80
	Maternal Rejection and Denial	0.11	0.12	1.08
	Maternal Punishment and Strictness	0.09	0.10	0.79
	Actual Cohesion	0.00	-0.07	-0.69
	Ideal Cohesion	-0.01	-0.25	-2.03*
	Actual Adaptability	-0.01	-0.11	-1.12
	Ideal Adaptability	0.01	0.14	1.14

Note: \* indicates  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , and \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

#### 4. Conclusion

This study mainly addresses the status and characteristics of parent-child relationship as well as its effect on the mental health of college students. Conclusions are drawn as follows:

(1) These college students have 21.29% detected with positive results in terms of mental health. Among them, 288 college students are mentally healthy, accounting for 78.71%; 67 have mild mental disorder, accounting for 18.36%; and 11 show severe mental disorder, accounting for 2.93%. The clearest symptom is Obsessive-Compulsive. Moreover, male students have significantly lower level of mental health than female students.

(2) In terms of parental rearing behavior, parents often lack emotional understanding of male students and show denial, rejection and strictness towards them in parenting, but mostly have emotional warmth and understanding of female students, which even becomes overprotective or controlling in parenting. Female college students have stronger family cohesion than male college students.

(3) Students from the key university and those who are only child in family (including students from the other university) find it easier to feel the emotional warmth and understanding from their parents. Students from the other university and those who are not only child in family (including students from the key university) feel the favor of parents more strongly. Students who are only child in family have stronger family cohesion than those who are not only child in family.

(4) Families in good financial status nurture more understanding and warmth for children, so that the students from these families feel the warmth and cohesion of family.

(5) Paternal Emotional Warmth and Understanding, Paternal Overprotection, and Ideal Cohesion play a significant role in the predicted average of college students' mental health. Among them, Paternal Emotional Warmth and Understanding, Maternal Punishment and Strictness, and Ideal Cohesion significantly affect the prediction of Somatization; Paternal Overprotection significantly affects the prediction of Obsessive-Compulsive, Interpersonal Sensitivity and Anxiety; Paternal Emotional Warmth and Understanding, Paternal Overprotection, Ideal Cohesion, and Ideal Adaptability significantly affect the prediction of Depression; Paternal Emotional Warmth, and Paternal Overprotection play a significant role in the prediction of Phobic and other factors; Paternal Overprotection, Maternal Rejection and Denial, and Ideal Cohesion significantly affect the prediction of Paranoid Ideation; Paternal Emotional Warmth and Understanding significantly affects the prediction of Psychoticism.

(6) Father's educational background significantly affects the prediction of such factors as Paternal Emotional Warmth and Understanding, and Paternal Punishment and Strictness, while mother's educational background is very influential on the prediction of such maternal factors as Punishment and Strictness, Rejection and Denial, and Favoring Subject. Father's educational background can positively affect the prediction of Paternal Emotional Warmth and Understanding, but negatively affect the prediction of Paternal Punishment and Strictness. Mother's educational background plays a positive role in the prediction of Maternal Rejection and Denial, and Punishment and Strictness, but negatively affects the prediction of Maternal Favoring Subject.

## 5. Recommendations

An individual's mental health is affected by multiple factors such as family, society and school. In this study, attention is paid only to parent-child relationship among them. This study takes college students as the object for two reasons: first, they are outstanding individuals among peers, so that their mental health is of great significance to themselves, their family and the whole society; second, it is expected that college students understand the importance of parent-child relationship to children's mental health, and will nurture the mental health of their own children in the future, so as to promote the development of parental education in China.

## References

- [1] An Boxin. Parenting Style, *Parent-Adolescent Communication and Their Effects on Adolescents' Social Adjustment*: Thesis [Master]. Shaanxi Normal University, 2004.
- [2] Meng Yuqun *et al.* An empirical study on diagnosis and adaptation of parent-adolescent relationship. *Educational Research*, 1997, 11: 67-68.
- [3] Langer Tsetal: A screening inventory for assessing psychiatric impairment in children 6 to 8. *J Consult Clin Psychol*, 1998, 44: 286-296
- [4] Benjaminsen.S, Krarup.G, Lauritsen.R. Personality, parental rearing behaviour and Parental loss in attempted suicide: a comparative study. *Aeta Psychiatrica Scand*, 1990, 82: 389-390

Table.1. Correlation Coefficient (r) of SCL-90 and Parental Rearing Behaviors

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Paternal Emotional Warmth and Understanding</i>	<i>Paternal Punishment and Strictness</i>	<i>Paternal Control</i>	<i>Paternal Favoring Subject</i>	<i>Paternal Rejection and Denial</i>	<i>Paternal Overprotection</i>	<i>Maternal Emotional Warmth and Understanding</i>	<i>Maternal Control and Overprotection</i>	<i>Maternal Rejection and Denial</i>	<i>Maternal Punishment and Strictness</i>	<i>Maternal Favoring Subject</i>
Average	-0.29***	0.27***	0.05	0.05	0.29***	0.17**	-0.25***	0.13*	0.30***	0.27***	0.07
Somatization	-0.34***	0.29***	0.01	0.04	0.32***	0.07	-0.30***	0.10	0.33***	0.35***	0.05
Obsessive-Compulsive	-0.17***	0.12*	-0.00	0.08	0.11*	0.13*	-0.14**	0.08	0.14**	0.11*	0.08
Interpersonal Sensitivity	-0.24***	0.20***	0.05	0.05	0.21***	0.15**	-0.21***	0.11*	0.21***	0.18***	0.06
Depression	-0.26***	0.23***	0.05	0.04	0.26***	0.18***	-0.21***	0.10	0.24***	0.20***	0.06
Anxiety	-0.24***	0.24***	0.07	0.04	0.29***	0.17***	-0.20***	0.16**	0.28***	0.26***	0.06
Hostility	-0.22***	0.24***	0.02	0.07	0.24***	0.12*	-0.21***	0.07	0.28***	0.26***	0.08
Phobic Anxiety	-0.24***	0.29***	0.09	-0.01	0.30***	0.21***	-0.21***	0.18***	0.32***	0.31***	0.02
Paranoid Ideation	-0.21***	0.23***	0.07	0.01	0.26***	0.19***	-0.19***	0.18***	0.31***	0.27***	0.03
Psychoticism	-0.30***	0.25***	0.03	0.07	0.30***	0.12*	-0.27***	0.09	0.30***	0.27***	0.08
Others	-0.27***	0.23***	0.06	0.02	0.23***	0.14**	-0.23***	0.12*	0.25***	0.24***	0.05

Note: \* indicates  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , and \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .