

Modeling the Relationships Between Parent Strengths, Parenting Efficacy Beliefs, and Child Social-Affective Behavior

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to evaluate the relationships between child participation in parent interest-based and parent ability-based everyday activities, parenting efficacy beliefs, and child well-being. A strengths-based positive psychology framework was used to guide the conduct of the study and to posit hypothesized relationships among the study variables. 344 parents and other primary caregivers of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers residing in 49 of the 50 States in America. Latent variables were used to measure two child learning constructs (parent interest-based and parent ability-based activities), two parenting efficacy belief constructs (confidence and competence), and two child well-being constructs (positive well-being and negative well-being). Structural equation modeling was used to evaluate the direct and indirect effects of parent-provided everyday child learning opportunities on parenting efficacy beliefs and child well-being. Child participation in parent interest-based and parent ability-based everyday activities was directly related to parenting efficacy beliefs and indirectly related to child well-being mediated by parents' belief appraisals. Parenting efficacy beliefs were also directly related to child well-being. Findings illustrate how parent and child shared experiences are interrelated, and how strengths-based, positive parenting practices are related to both parenting efficacy beliefs and child well-being.

Introduction

Transactional models of child and parent behavior emphasize the influence of child behavior on parent functioning and parent behavior on child functioning (Sameroff, 2009). Positive parental well-being, for example, is related to positive child well-being, whereas parental negative well-being is related to attenuated child well-being (Newland, 2015). The same is the case for the influence of child well-being on parental well-being (Nelson, Kushlev, English,

Dunn, & Lyubomirsky, 2012). These bi-directional relationships manifest themselves throughout the infant, toddler, and preschool years of development and beyond. Different family, parent, and situational factors are related to child-well-being (Dunst, Trivette, & Hamby, 2014; Flauquer, 2014). Most of the research, however, has focused on the negative effects of deleterious personal and environmental factors on child well-being. This research, for example, shows that parent stress, depression, and other mental health

conditions are related to poor child social and emotional development (Noonan & Fairclough, 2018). Less is known about the range of child, parent, and environmental factors associated with positive child well-being. Findings from several studies indicate that positive parenting experiences translate into positive child outcomes (Richter, Bondu, Spiess, Wagner, & Trommsdorff, 2018; Rosenberg, Jarus, Bart, & Ratzon, 2011). These experiences include but are not limited to, shared parent and child activities that have positive effects on both child and parent functioning. Goldberg (1977), in a seminal paper on parent-child interactions, hypothesized that parenting practices that have expected outcomes positively influence parenting confidence and competence, whereas parenting practices that have unexpected or negative outcomes attenuate parenting beliefs. For example, parenting practices such as responses to infant crying that result in decreased infant distress are likely to strengthen parenting efficacy beliefs, whereas responses that have no quieting effects are likely to negatively influence parenting efficacy beliefs (Tikotzky, 2017). Parenting efficacy beliefs are one personal factor that is associated with parental well-being, psychological health, and other positive mental health indicators (Albanese, Russo, & Geller, 2019). These belief appraisals, in turn, are associated with young children's mental health status (Albanese et al., 2019). Parenting efficacy beliefs are judgments of one's ability to carry-out everyday parenting roles and responsibilities confidently and competently (Wittkowski, Garrett, Calam, & Weisberg, 2017). The study described in this paper employed a positive psychology perspective of human strengths to examine how positive shared parent and child activities are related to parent and child functioning (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; Lopez, Pedrotti, & Snyder, 2014). The focus of the analysis was how parents' interests and individual abilities were sources of everyday child learning opportunities where child learning was related to both parenting efficacy beliefs and child well-being. Parents' interests and abilities were operationalized as human strengths where these strengths were sources of parent and child shared experiences. Biswas-Diener (2011), for example, noted that "positive psychology concepts such as strengths can best be understood in the context of

individual interests [and abilities]" (p. 25). Personal interests are predispositions to engage in desired or preferred activities (Renninger & Su, 2019). Individual abilities are the skills and competencies needed to engage in an activity in a proficient manner (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2003). A positive psychology perspective of human strengths considers interests and abilities as factors motivating people to engage in positive experiences and life events (Donaldson, Csikszentmihalyi, & Nakamura, 2011)

Purpose of the Study

The study is part of a line of research and practice by the author and his colleagues investigating how parent-provided everyday child learning opportunities influence child and parent outcomes (Dunst, 2020a; Dunst et al., 2002; Dunst et al., 2001). Findings from this research and practice indicate that child interest-based and child ability-based interventions influence both child and parent behavior and functioning (Dunst & Raab, 2012; Swanson et al., 2011; Trivette & Dunst, 2011). Trivette et al. (2004), for example, found that interest-based child learning opportunities were related to a number of positive parent and child benefits not associated with noninterest-based learning activities. Results from a structural equation modeling study showed how child interest-based and child ability-based learning opportunities had both direct and indirect effects on parenting beliefs, child and parental well-being, and child functioning (Dunst et al., 2016). Each of these studies traced the effects of interest-based and ability-based child learning opportunities on child and parent functioning mediated by belief appraisals. The objective of the present study was to determine the extent to which parents' interest-based and ability-based everyday experiences that engage their infants, toddlers, or older preschoolers in those activities were related to parents' competence and confidence belief appraisals and, in turn, were related to child well-being. Findings from different studies indicate that child participation in parent and child shared activities is related to both child and parent benefits (Finn & Vandermass-Peeler, 2013; Iiari, 2005; Waugh et al., 2015). Dunst (2008) conducted a pilot study where community member strengths

(interests and abilities) were used as sources of young children's learning opportunities where the results showed that these learning opportunities were related to positive child and parent behavior and functioning. The model that was the focus of investigation is shown in Figure 1. Parents' interest and ability experiences which included their young children, where parents reported that the children learned new behavior and skills, was expected to be related to

positive parenting efficacy beliefs. Positive parenting beliefs were expected to be related to positive child social and emotional behavior (child well-being). Parent-provided child learning opportunities were expected to be indirectly related to child well-being mediated by parenting efficacy beliefs. These hypothesized relationships are based on research by the author and his colleagues (e.g., Dunst et al., 2016) and others interested in the role everyday learning

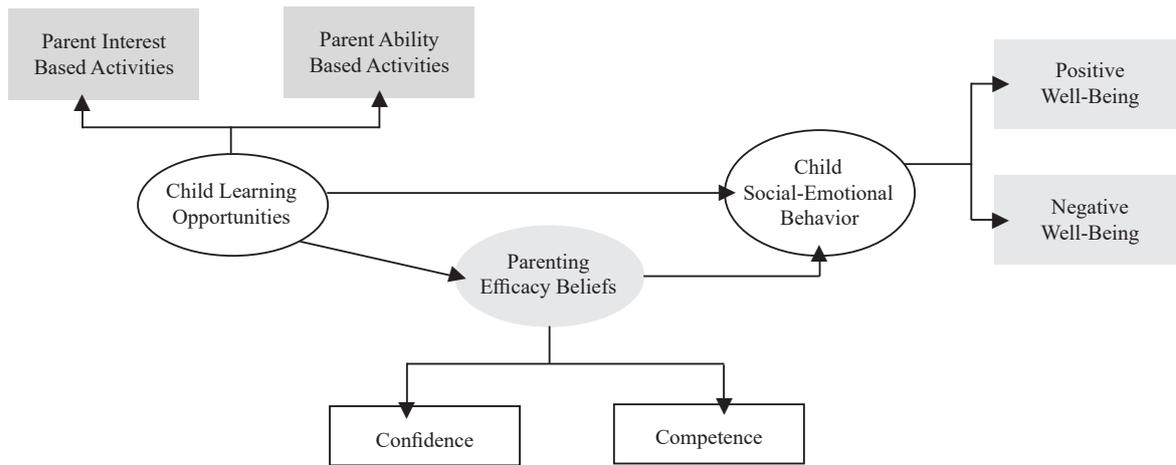


Figure 1: Model for evaluating the relationships between parent interest-based and ability-based activities, parenting efficacy beliefs, and child well-being

Data for the study were obtained from a national survey of households throughout the United States in order to obtain a representative sample of parents of infants, toddlers, and older preschoolers. Results from the study were expected to add to the knowledge base in terms of how ordinary, everyday shared experiences are contexts for parent and child shared activities, and how those experiences are related to parenting beliefs and child well-being. Shared activities were considered the types of experiences and life events that are the sources of positive parent and child outcomes (Richter et al., 2018; Zumeta, Basabe, Wlodarczyk, Bobowik, & Paez, 2016).

Methods

Participants

The participants were 344 parents (83 percent mothers,

14 percent fathers) and other primary caregivers (e.g., grandparents, foster parents) of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers residing in 49 of the 50 States in America. A mailing list obtained from a consumer marketing company was used to recruit participants by sending a letter explaining the purpose of the study and a postage-paid postcard to return to the author to indicate interest in the study. The letter stated that parents or other primary caregivers of children 6 years of age or younger were eligible to participate in the study. Letters were sent to 1000 households where the response rate was 34.4%. (This is a conservative estimate since it is not known how many letters were not deliverable or were delivered to households with children older than 6 years of age.) The parents and other caregivers differed in terms of their ages (less than 18 years to 50+ years), years of formal education (less than high school to an advanced graduate

degree), marital status (married/living with a partner, divorced/separated, never married), employment status (not working, working full time, working part-time), and race and ethnicity (African American, Asian American, American Indian, Caucasian, Latino/Hispanic, Biracial). The background characteristics of the participants were much like those in the general population in the United States (United States Census Bureau, 2017). The children were almost equally divided between girls (52%) and boys (48%). The majority of children were less than 3 years of age (94%). This was expected since participants rearing more than one child between birth and 6 years of age were asked to complete the measures described below on the youngest child in the household.

Measures

Parents and other primary caregivers returning a postcard were sent an informed consent letter (approved by the author's Institutional Review Board), a survey, and a postage-paid envelope to return the completed information to the investigator. The survey included a list of 70 everyday activities for investigating Parent strengths, 10 parenting efficacy belief items, and 8 child social and emotional behavior indicators. The survey also included a section on child and parent background characteristics for describing the study sample.

Everyday activities (Parent strengths). The 70 everyday activities that were the focus of investigation were identified from an extensive review of research on parent and family rituals, routines, activity settings, and activities of daily living (Dunst, Hamby, Trivette, Raab, & Bruder, 2000; Fiese et al., 2002; Hasselkus, 2006; Ireson & Blay, 1999; Maynard, 2005; Ronka & Korvela, 2009). The activities included things such as meal preparation, family meals, family gatherings, caring for pets, visiting neighborhood parks, attending religious activities, doing yard work, eating out, and musical activities. Participants were asked to indicate for each activity whether it was a personal interest or individual ability, or both. An activity was considered a personal interest if a participant indicated that "the activity was something he or she enjoyed doing." An activity was considered an individual ability if a participant indicated that "the activity was something that he or she was good at doing." For

each activity identified as a parent interest or ability, the participants were asked to indicate if his or her youngest child was "typically involved in the activity with me" and if involved, whether the child "learned new things from being involved in the activity with me." Each participant's responses were used to compute an interest-based child learning measure and an ability-based child learning measure. Each measure was the sum of the interest-based and ability-based parent activities for which child learning was reported.

Parenting efficacy beliefs. The 10 parenting efficacy belief items included 5 competence indicators (e.g., "I am good at calming my child when he or she is upset") and 5 confidence indicators (e.g., "Being a good parent comes naturally to me"). The items were obtained from both existing scales (Crncec, Barnett, & Matthey, 2010; Wittkowski et al., 2017) and the author's research on parenting efficacy beliefs (Authors). Each item was rated on a 7-point scale ranging from Never to Always (how I see myself as a parent). The coefficient alpha for the 5 competence indicators was .85 and the coefficient alpha for the 5 confidence indicators was .93. The sums of the ratings for each set of items were used as measures of parenting competence and parenting confidence efficacy beliefs respectively.

Child well-being. The 8 child social and emotional behavior items included 4 positive behavior indicators (e.g., "Smiles and laughs") and 4 negative behavior indicators (e.g., "Fusses or cries") which were used as proxy measures for positive and negative child well-being (Halle & Darling-Churchill, 2016). Each item was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from (my child) Never to Quite Often (does the behavior).

Methods of Analysis

Structural equation modeling (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 2014) was used to evaluate the fit of the relationships among the variables in the model to the hypothesized pathways in Figure 1. The measured variables included two child learning measures (parent interest-based child learning opportunities and parent ability-based child learning opportunities), two parenting efficacy belief measures (confidence and competence), and two child social and emotional behavior measures (positive well-being and negative well-being). The

correlation matrix among the six measured variables was used as the input for the structural equation modeling analysis. Latent variables were used to measure the three primary constructs in Figure 1. The fit of the data to the hypothesized pathways in the Figure 1 model was evaluated by the chi-square test, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the comparative fit index (CFI), normed fit index (NFI), and incremental fit index (IFI). A nonsignificant chi-square test, a RMSEA less than .08, and a CFI, NFI, and IFI greater than .90, indicate an adequate fit of the data to the model. The closer RMSEA is to zero, and the closer CFI, NFI, and IFI are to 1.0, the better the fit of the data to a model. The standardized structural coefficients for the direct and indirect effects for the pathways in Figure 1 were used as the sizes of effect for discerning the strength of the relationships between parent interest-based and ability based child learning opportunities, parenting efficacy beliefs, and child well-being.

Results

Fit Statistics

The fit indices for the Figure 1 model were chi-square = 10.07, $df = 6$, $p = .122$, RMSEA = .05 (90% confidence interval = .00, .09), CFI = .99, NFI = .97, and IFI = .99. These statistics indicate a more than adequate fit of the data to the hypothesized relationships in the Figure 1 model.

Structural Equation Modeling Results

Child participation in and learning from parent interest-based and ability-based everyday activities were not related to child well-being ($B = -.02$, $p = .563$) but were directly related to parenting efficacy beliefs ($B = .15$, $p = .010$). The results indicate that parent-reported child learning in interest-based and ability-based parent activities was positively related to parents' confidence and competence beliefs. Parents whose efforts to engage their children in interest-based and activity-based shared activities where child learning was reported resulted in positive judgments of parenting confidence and competence. Parenting efficacy beliefs were directly related to child well-being ($B = .84$, $p = .000$). Enhanced parenting confidence and competence beliefs were

related to more positive and less negative child social and emotional behavior. That is, parents who made judgments of their parenting practices were the same parents' who reported more positive and less negative child well-being. The results also showed that child participation in and learning from parent interest-based and ability-based everyday activities were indirectly related to child well-being mediated by parenting efficacy beliefs ($B = .13$, $p = .015$). This was discerned by the product of the direct effect of child learning on parenting efficacy beliefs and the direct effect of parenting efficacy beliefs on child well-being ($B = .15 \times .84 = .13$). Findings indicate that parents who successfully engaged their children in everyday shared activities that were the parents' personal interests and individual abilities were related to child well-being as a function of enhanced parenting confidence and competence beliefs.

Discussion

Findings from the study showed that parent-reported child learning in interest-based and ability-based shared activities was directly related to parenting efficacy beliefs and indirectly related to child well-being mediated by parenting belief appraisals. The results are consistent with a positive psychology perspective of human strengths where personal interests and individual abilities are considered factors engaging people in desired experiences and activities (Biswas-Diener, 2011; Donaldson et al., 2011; Heine, 2007). This was illustrated in the present study by showing how parents' interests and abilities were used to engage their children in shared activities where those experiences had positive consequences in terms of parenting efficacy beliefs and child well-being. The relationship between shared activities and parenting efficacy beliefs are consistent with Goldberg's (1977) assertion that parenting experiences that result in expectant outcomes would be related to an enhanced sense of confidence and competence. Parents who engaged their children in interest-based and ability-based activities where children learned new behavior and skills influenced parents' judgments of their parenting capabilities. According to Bandura (1994), "The most effective way of developing a strong sense of efficacy is

through mastery experiences” (p. 71, emphasis added). Findings from the present study indicate that shared activities that result in positive outcomes are these types of mastery experiences.

The manner in which shared parent and child activities are indirectly related to child well-being is best understood in terms of the influences of positive parent-child experiences on parenting beliefs and the effects of belief appraisals on parents’ judgments of child positive and negative well-being. Confident and competent parenting include positive appraisals of one’s own behavior which sets the tone for positive judgments of children’s behavior. Newland (2015), Richter et al. (2018), and others (e.g., Albanese et al., 2019; Dunst et al., 2014) noted the links between parents’ efficacy appraisals and child well-being. The results from this study establish these links as evidenced by both the direct and indirect effects of shared activities on parenting beliefs and child well-being. The study differed from other studies of shared activities by specifically investigating parents’ personal interests and individual abilities as sources of young children’s learning opportunities (Dunst, 2008, 2020b). Young children in general, and infants and toddlers in particular, are participants in everyday parent and family activities as a matter of dependence on parents and other caregivers for their routine care and entertainment. Results from the present study indicate that the child benefits of these everyday activities are maximized when the experiences are the parent interest-based and ability-based activities. Findings also indicate that different types of parent and family activities are important experiences for influencing child well-being (Scabini, 2016; Zumeta et al., 2016).

Conclusion

Findings illustrate how parent and child shared experiences are interrelated and how strengths-based, positive parenting practices are related to both parenting efficacy beliefs and child well-being. Positive shared activities involving young children, their parents, and other family members are the very types of experiences that positive psychology emphasizes as events contributing to enhanced well-being and improved quality of life (Aspinwall &

Staudinger, 2003; Lopez et al., 2018).

Limitations

One limitation, in particular, deserves comment. The data for the study described in this paper is cross-sectional where the investigation of the direction of effects is potentially problematic and especially the ability to identify the mechanisms through which parenting efficacy beliefs are influenced by shared activities and is a factor influencing child well-being. This limitation is lessened by two sources of information. First, positive psychology (Donaldson et al., 2011), self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997), and activity theory (Petrenchik & King, 2011) all emphasize the role positive mastery experiences play in influencing child, parent, and family functioning. Second, results from the study show that shared activities are not directly related to child well-being but rather indirectly related to child behavior mediated by parenting efficacy beliefs. Both sets of information, therefore, suggest that shared activities have time precedence in terms of being a factor influencing parenting efficacy beliefs and child well-being.

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