

Running Head: PARENT STRESS AND THE ACTIVE CHILD

Parent Stress

and

The Active Child

Karen Erickson

Megan Prom

University of Wisconsin – River Falls

## Abstract

The purpose of the current study was to look at whether a child's activity level was correlated with the level of stress a mother experiences. Parents can describe their children as having distinct and recognizable patterns of behavior as young as in infancy (Paaren, Hewitt, Lemery, Bihun & Goldsmith, 2000). Even at birth, some children are much more challenging to parents, while other children are notably more easygoing and carefree (Oliver, 2002). Since parenting involves the relationship between a child's personality style (temperament) and the parent's response, the relationship is a reciprocal process in which parent and child are constantly affecting each other (Suarez & Baker, 1997). It was hypothesized that child activity level would correlate positively with the level of stress a mother experiences. When mothers rated the activity level of their most active, pre-kindergarten aged child, results revealed that the percentile of mother stress was positively correlated with child activity at a statistically significant level ( $r = .294, p < .05$ ). The relation of parent stress and additional demographic variables (e.g., family income, number of children, marital status) was analyzed, resulting in insignificant results.

### Mother Stress and Child Activity Level

There is no doubt that parenting is a job that requires patience, flexibility and determination. But are some children more difficult to parent? Researchers have long been aware of the potential influences of child behavior on parenting. Suarez and Baker (1997) found that, compared with mothers of compliant children, mothers of children with externalizing behavior problems reported more negative feelings about parenting. Current research examining the relationship between child characteristics and parental behaviors focuses on the extreme side of child temperament, such as children who have exceptionalities like Attention Deficit Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder or other neuropsychological disorders. Most notably, research has given much attention to the construct of the difficult temperament, defined as irregular rhythm, negative withdrawal response to new stimuli, no or slow adaptation to change; and intense moods, often negative (Alba-Fisch, 2000).

Temperament has been implicated as having both direct and interactive effects on parent-child relationships (McBride, Schoppe, & Rane, 2002). Research has shown difficult temperament to be related to less positive maternal behaviors such as lower maternal responsiveness, less teaching effort (Maccoby, Snow, & Jacklin, 1984) and higher parent stress (Ross & Blanc, 1998). Additionally, Grych and Clark (1999) found that child temperament predicted higher parent stress at 4 and 12 months for all fathers.

In a model of parenting stress, analogous to Belsky's (1984) model of the determinants of parenting, Mash and Johnston (1990) proposed that child characteristics, such as temperament, have an influence on parent-child interactive stress. In support of this notion, Muslow, Caldera & Pursley (2002) found that mothers

of temperamentally difficult children, ages 1 to 36 months, reported higher levels of parenting stress. Current research supports the notion that difficult temperament in children is related to higher levels of stress in their parents (Suarez & Baker, 1997).

Parent stress can be caused by a number of factors, including a shift in the focus of the relationship with the arrival of a new baby, lack of sleep, monetary concerns and daily issues relative to raising a child. Along with the challenges of becoming a parent, a child's personality may also contribute to their parent's level of stress. Research suggests that a child's personality can impact the level of stress that a parent experiences (Paaren et al, 2000); (Suarez & Baker, 1997). Though there are many components that make up a child's temperament and personality, the area this study focused on was the child's activity level.

Parents can often identify the personality of their child as young as a newborn. Even babies can be described as having different characteristics, such as being easy-going, active or shy. Activity level, which describes individual differences in the general energy level and frequency of movement in children (Alba-Fisch, 2000), has received research attention in terms of its potential influence on parent-child relationships. High activity level, like difficult temperament, has also been linked to less positive mother-child relationships (Buss, 1981). Andra and Thomas (1998) noted that parents who experienced more total stress reported that their children exhibited more externalizing behavior problems. There is evidence to suggest that children on the extreme high end of the activity dimension may increase parenting stress for mothers (Mash & Johnston, 1990).

In contrast to the findings discussed so far, additional literature suggests that parents who access outside support systems, such as Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) classes, report a lower level of stress (Dunn, Burbine & Bowers, 2001). For example, Ostberg and Hagekull (2000) found that low social support related directly to more parent stress. Smith, Oliver and Innocenti, (2001) found that social support predicts parent stress much better than other factors related to child functioning. Additionally, Muslow, et al, (2002) found social support to be most important in predicting the stress level in mothers with two-year old children. Because of the implications of social support as it relates to parent stress level, the study has controlled for this outside influence by identifying parents who attend ECFE classes.

While it has been repeatedly shown that parents of children with exceptionalities experience more stress than parents of children without disabilities (Ross & Blanc, 1998), this study was particularly interested in how child activity level impacts parent stress in families without exceptionalities. Do parents of more highly active children experience more stress than parents of less active children? This study anticipated that the mothers of more highly active children would report higher levels of stress.

#### Purpose of the Study

Some children are viewed as being easier to parent based on their temperament. It has been shown that specific aspects of parent stress and infant temperament are associated over time (Paaren, et al, 2000). The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a correlation between the activity level of the child and the level of stress a mother experiences, while controlling for parent support. It was hypothesized that

there would be a relationship between high child activity and high levels of mother stress.

It is hoped that this study will help mothers get a clearer picture of their own levels of stress and identify areas in which conflicts with their child arise due to their child's activity level. When there is friction between parent and child, it is more reasonable to expect that the parent will adapt to their child's needs. When a parent understands their child's activity level, he or she can organize the environment so that "goodness of fit" is more likely to happen (Oliver, 2002). The research on temperament consistently states that a child's temperament is mostly inborn, and not something caused by "good" or "bad" parenting (Carey, 1997). When parents understand their child's activity level, they can learn to adjust with it. By understanding the reciprocal nature of this relationship and adjusting accordingly, problems may be prevented and stress may be reduced.

The following research questions and hypothesis were addressed in the study:

- a) What is the nature of the relationship between child activity level and mother stress?  
It is hypothesized that child activity level and mother stress will be highly correlated.
- b) Is there a significant difference between the stress level of the mothers receiving support through the ECFE program and those not receiving parent support through ECFE? It is hypothesized that the mothers of highly active children who received support on a weekly basis will have a significantly different (lower) stress level compared to mothers of highly active children who did not receive support.
- c) Do demographic variables such as level of income, number of children or marital status have any impact on the level of stress a mother experiences? It is hypothesized

that families with a higher level of income, fewer children and in a married relationship will experience a lower level of stress than their opposite counterparts.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants in the current study included 52 mothers; 45 were married, 5 were single mothers and 2 were divorced. 50 of the subjects were Caucasian, 1 Hispanic and 1 Asian. Their ages ranged from 21 to 50 ( $m=33$ ). The participant's number of children ranged from 1 to 3 ( $m=2.15$ ). The present study asked mothers to rate their most active, pre-kindergarten aged child. Twenty-six of the subjects were Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) participants and twenty-six subjects had no involvement in the ECFE program. The level of education of the participants ranged from non-high school graduates to doctoral level. The mode level of education was an undergraduate degree. The range of income for the subjects was \$26,000 to more than \$101,000 for annual household income ( $m=\$78,000$ ).

### *Apparatus*

#### *Parent Stress*

The Parenting Stress Index-Short Form (PSI), Third Edition (Abidin, 2000) was used. This measure is a 36-item screening instrument designed to provide an indication of the overall level of parenting stress an individual is experiencing. Items from this measure examine stressors associated specifically with the parental role and do not include stressors associated with other life roles and events. The Parenting Stress Index consists of three subscales. The Parental Distress sub-scale consists of 12 items that tap the distress parents experience in their roles as parents as a function of personal factors

that are directly related to parenting. The Parent-Child Dysfunctional Interaction sub-scale consists of 12 items that focus on parents' perceptions that their children do not measure up to their expectations and that their interactions with their children are not reinforcing to them as parents. The Difficult Child sub-scale includes 12 items that focus on some of the basic behavioral characteristics of children that make them either easy or difficult to manage. Mothers responded to each of the items on the Parenting Stress Index along a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Items were reverse scored before creating the subscales and total scores, so higher scores reflect higher levels of parental stress. Internal consistency for the three subscales was relatively high, with Cronbach alphas ranging from 0.81 to 0.86. The PSI has been validated in transcultural research. See the PSI manual for additional psychometric data.

#### *Child Activity Level*

The authors of this study created a measure for child activity level which was completed by each participant (see Appendix A). This scale was created after reviewing the Temperament Assessment Battery for Children, (Martin, 1988), the Diagnostic Statistic Manual, fourth edition, revised, (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), and a comprehensive review of current literature on temperament (McBride, Schoppe & Rane, 2002, Mash & Johnston, 1990, Maccoby, Snow & Jacklin, 1984). Some of the questions from the scale were formed after reviewing the Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder criteria from the DSM-IV-R. Specifically, the criteria for hyperactivity and impulsivity were reviewed to assist in creating the questions. This measure consists of items describing behaviors of children as they occur in the home or in a classroom

setting and is intended for use with children who are pre-kindergarten. Mothers responded to each of the items on the scale using a response key of (N) never, (S) sometimes, (O) often and (A) almost always. Each participant completed a series of six questions, rating their perception of their most active child's activity level.

### *Procedure*

The researchers went to an ECFE class and read the directions aloud to the participants. The researchers also found mothers not involved in ECFE through actively seeking out those who were not involved in the ECFE program at two local daycare centers. The researchers met with each participant involved in the study and each was asked to complete the Parent Stress Index, an activity level scale (see Appendix A), and a demographics survey (see Appendix B). Data was collected to measure the stress the mother experienced as well as the activity level of the child.

### Results

A bivariate correlation was run to examine the first research question which questioned the nature of the relationship between child activity level and mother stress. When mothers rated the activity level of their most active, pre-kindergarten aged child, results revealed that the percentile of mother stress was positively correlated with child activity at a statistically significant level ( $r = .294, p < .05$ ). When squared, this correlation coefficient suggests that about nine percent of the variance in mother stress was dependent upon the activity level of the child.

In order to answer the second research question, an independent samples t-test was used to test for stress level differences between mothers receiving support through the ECFE program and those not receiving parent support through ECFE. An

examination of the mean stress levels revealed that the level of stress for those attending ECFE was unexpectedly higher ( $m = 55.5$ ) compared with non-ECFE participants ( $m = 43.62$ ). However, an independent samples t-test revealed that there was no significant difference between the two groups ( $t = 1.446, p > .05$ ).

Finally, the third research question addressed the impact of other demographic variables, such as income, number of children, or marital status on the level of stress a mother experiences. Results suggested that none of the varying demographics had a clear impact on the level of stress a mother experiences. Family income was not significantly correlated with level of mother stress ( $r = -.025, p = > .05$ ), nor was number of children ( $r = .034, p = > .05$ ), or marital status ( $t = -.744, p > .05$ ).

### Discussion

The results of the present study have suggested that there is a relationship between the stress a mother experiences and child activity level. Other research (Buss, 1981); (Ross & Blanc, 1998), supports that highly active children may increase parenting stress level for mothers resulting in a less positive parent-child relationship. These results may help mothers identify the contributing factors to their stress level. When a parent understands their child's activity level, they can adjust their parenting style and in turn reduce their level of stress. The results of this study seemed to indicate that mothers who were experiencing a higher level of stress sought out support through structured ECFE parenting classes. Future studies could investigate whether the involvement in ECFE helped to reduce stress, through pre and post assessments of stress level.

A limitation of the study was that there was very little diversity within the participants. Subjects were limited to middle to upper income, married, Caucasian, educated mothers with an average of two children. Further studies could focus on a more culturally diverse group to examine what their support network is and how this helps lessen stress.

In addition, future studies could target groups of mothers with higher levels of stress for the purpose of looking at interventions to reduce stress of mothers with highly active children. This current study indicates that parents who have more highly active children experience a higher level of stress than parents who rate their children as having a lower level of activity. It would be beneficial for parents to identify this active temperament in their child early in order to seek out appropriate interventions and education. For example, providing an outlet for their child's activity through community activities and educating parents through support group and classroom instruction.

Despite the limitations of the current study, the results of this study provide evidence that high levels of child activity are associated with higher levels of stress in mothers. Therefore, early identification of child temperament along with appropriate intervention and education, are important in fostering a quality, fulfilling relationship between highly active children and their mothers.

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## Appendix A

**Activity Level Scale**

Please use the following key to rate your perception of your child's activity level. Please rate **one child** in your family whose age falls between 2 and 6 years old. If you have more than one child in this age range, please describe the child you consider to be the most challenging (the same child you will consider as you respond to the Parent Stress Index). Please circle one of the four possibilities, no "in-between's."

**Response Key:****N = Never****S= Sometimes****O = Often****A= Almost Always**

Child's Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Child's gender (Please circle one): Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_

- |  |         |
|--|---------|
| 1. Prefers physical activities like running and climbing   | N S O A |
| 2. Has difficulty remaining seated (e.g., at the dinner table, fidgets in seat in a class setting) | N S O A |
| 3. Plays quietly for long periods of time  | N S O A |
| 4. Frequently shifts from one uncompleted activity to another                                      | N S O A |
| 5. Talks excessively   | N S O A |
| 6. Prefers solitary and quiet activities   | N S O A |

Appendix B

Questionnaire

Gender: Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_

Race: \_\_\_\_\_

Marital Status: Single \_\_\_\_\_ Married \_\_\_\_\_ Divorced \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Children: \_\_\_\_\_

Ages of Children:

Your Age:

20 and under \_\_\_\_\_

21 to 25 \_\_\_\_\_

26 to 30 \_\_\_\_\_

31 to 35 \_\_\_\_\_

36 to 40 \_\_\_\_\_

41 to 45 \_\_\_\_\_

46 to 50 \_\_\_\_\_

51 to 55 \_\_\_\_\_

55 and above \_\_\_\_\_

Your Highest Level of Education:

High School \_\_\_\_\_

Vocational Degree or Trade School \_\_\_\_\_

Undergraduate \_\_\_\_\_

Post-Graduate \_\_\_\_\_

Doctoral \_\_\_\_\_

Other \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Total Household Income per year:

\$1 to \$15,000 \_\_\_\_\_

\$16,000 to \$25,000 \_\_\_\_\_

\$26,000 to \$40,000 \_\_\_\_\_

\$41,000 to \$55,000 \_\_\_\_\_

\$56,000 to \$70,000 \_\_\_\_\_

\$71,000 to \$85,000 \_\_\_\_\_

\$86,000 to 100,000 \_\_\_\_\_

\$101,000 and above \_\_\_\_\_

Do you attend ECFE?

Yes

No