The Impact of Adlerian-Based Parenting Classes on Self-Reported Parental Behavior

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Abstract

Public health research shows that the authoritative parenting style protects youth from risky and dangerous behavior. The purpose of this study was to evaluate whether Adlerian-based parent education classes influence parental behavior in the direction of being more authoritative. To this end, over 1,250 participants completed assessments at the end of 110 Adlerian parenting classes in the United States and Canada. Parent-guardians reported statistically significant changes in behavior: setting clearer limits, increasing their sense of positive connection, and decreasing harshness. These changes toward a more authoritative parenting style (based on parent report of their own behaviors) were statistically significant. The greatest changes were in younger parents, women, those with the lowest income, and those with fewer children. Results were also useful for the parent educators in assessing their teaching.

There is substantial evidence that parenting style has an impact on the youth in our communities and on the communities themselves. The parenting styles that are the most effective are those that are both demanding and responsive, that is, parenting that is both firm and kind and which fosters a sense of connection while setting clear limits. The nature and quality of the parent-child relationship can either reduce or exacerbate the chances that a child will smoke, drink, or engage in violence (Baumrind, 1991; Jackson, Bee-Gates, & Henriksen, 1994; Resnick et al., 1997). The adult-child relationship also can increase or reduce the likelihood of academic success (Assadi et al., 2007; Deslandes, Royer, & Turcotte, 1997; Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989; Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, Mounts, & Dornbusch, 1994). There is now little question about what kind of parenting serves to promote development and protect youth from social risk. The question is whether parenting style is modifiable. This was clearly stated by Steinberg (2001):

We can stop asking what type of parenting most positively affects adolescent development. We know the answer to this question. The challenges ahead involve finding ways to educate adults with regard to how to be authoritative, and help those who are not authoritative to change. (p. 13)

In response to Steinberg's challenge, an international study of Adlerian-based parenting classes was initiated to examine whether group parenting classes might be one way of changing parent behavior toward becoming...
Impact of Parenting Classes

authoritative, both firm and kind. Parents who completed parenting classes reported changes in their behavior toward becoming more authoritative. Younger parents, women, those with the lowest income, and those with fewer children reported the greatest changes.

Authoritative Parenting

Baumrind (1966) described three models of parental control (authoritarian, permissive, authoritative) and proposed that “authoritative control can achieve responsible conformity with group standards without loss of individual autonomy or self assertiveness” (p. 905). Baumrind (1991) applied these models of parenting styles to research on adolescent outcomes. She examined optimal competence in a sample of 139 teenagers in relation to the parenting style to which each teenager was exposed. She defined “competence” as the “integration of agency and communion” (p. 61), communion as “the need to be of service and to be included and connected” (p. 61), and agency as “the drive for independence, individuality and self-aggrandizement” (p. 61). She hypothesized that

adolescents are most likely to be “optimally competent,” that is, both communal and agentic, able both to criticize and sustain attachment to their parents, when parents are both highly demanding and highly responsive, but increase the ratio of freedom to control in order to match the developmental level of their child. (p. 61)

She categorized parenting styles for preadolescents by the extent to which the styles were demanding and/or responsive. She identified authoritative parents as being both “demanding and responsive” and noted that “[t]hey monitor and impart clear standards for their children’s conduct. They are assertive, but not intrusive or restrictive. Their disciplinary methods are supportive rather than punitive” (Baumrind, 1991, p. 62). In contrast, she identified authoritarian parents as “demanding and directive, but not responsive” and noted that they are “obedience- and status-oriented and expect their orders to be obeyed without explanation. They provide an orderly environment and a clear set of regulations, and [they] monitor their children’s activities carefully” (p. 62). Parents who were noted to be “more responsive than they are demanding” (p. 62) were called permissive or non-directive. Baumrind described them as follows: “They are nontraditional and lenient, do not require mature behavior, allow considerable self-regulation, and avoid confrontation” (p. 62). In a fourth category, which she called Rejecting-neglecting or disengaged, she put parents who were “neither demanding nor responsive” and who do “not structure and monitor, and are not supportive, but may be actively rejecting or else neglect their child
Figure 1. Relationships with children according to the dimensions of firmness (demandingness) and connectedness (responsiveness). Baumrind (1991) further refined these definitions in describing parents of adolescents by factoring in what kind of control was used by parents (assertive, supportive, directive, intrusive) and found that “[a]dolescents’ developmental progress is held back by authoritarian, officious, or nondirective and disengaged practices, and facilitated by reciprocal balanced, committed care-giving characteristic of both authoritative and democratic parents” (p. 91).

The impact of authoritative parenting has been studied by a number of other researchers as well. Steinberg (2001) summarized findings that “preschool and elementary aged school children who are raised by authoritative...
parents fare better than their peers who are raised in other types of households on virtually every indicator of psychological health studied" (p. 8) and that

adolescents raised in authoritative homes continue to show the same advantages in psychosocial development and mental health over their non-authoritatively raised peers that were apparent in studies of younger children. Adolescents from authoritative homes achieve more in school, report less depression and anxiety, score higher on measures of self reliance and self esteem and are less likely to engage in antisocial behavior, including delinquency and drug use. (p. 8)

In their findings from the National Evaluation of Adolescent Health data on 90,000 adolescents, Resnick et al. (1997) found that a youth's perception that a parent or guardian cares and a sense of connection to the parent or guardian reduce many different kinds of health risks. These included emotional distress; suicidal thoughts and attempts; cigarette, alcohol, and marijuana use; violent behavior; and early sexual activity. Simons-Morton, Haynie, Crump, Eitel, and Saylor (2001) found that teenagers who perceived parental support and positive parental regard were less likely to drink and smoke. In particular, these teenagers noted that they communicated with their parents, spent time with their parents and perceived that their “parents like them, take them seriously, listen to them and give reasons for rules and decisions that involve them” (p. 104). Pierce, Distefan, Jackson, White, and Gilpin (2002) looked at the initiation of smoking in adolescence and found “that adolescents in families with more authoritative parents were half as likely to smoke by follow up as adolescents in families with less authoritative parents” (p. 73). Authoritative parenting also increases academic success (Deslandes et al., 1997; Steinberg et al., 1989). Some of the effects of authoritative parenting may be due to indirect influence on peer group affiliations, which in turn more directly influence behavior (Brown, Mounts, Lamborn, & Steinberg, 1993). When studied over time, the beneficial effects of authoritative-democratic parenting are maintained as youth get older (Aquilino & Supple, 2001) and the negative impacts of nonauthoritative parenting increase, particularly for styles that include neglect and intrusive control (Steinberg et al., 1994).

The positive effects of authoritative parenting appear to hold across cultural, racial, and social backgrounds, though in some cultures and communities the negative effects of authoritarian parenting seem to be less (Steinberg, 2001). Of particular interest are studies comparing parenting styles in cultures that are more collectivist. In general, it appears that the authoritarian style has less negative effect on youth in communities that have a more collective focus (Chao, 1994; Dwairiy, Achoui, Abouerie, & Farah, 2006; Rudy & Grusec, 2001). There are two tenable explanations for
this finding. One is that in collectivist contexts “authoritarian parenting is associated with more positive parental attributions” (Rudy & Grusec, p. 204). That is, while the parenting practices may look directive and controlling, the child is seen as inherently good and the parenting is interpreted by the child as being caring and loving. Chao uses the concept of guan to explain this. While guan literally means “to govern,” it can also mean “to care for” or “to love” (p. 1112). In this context then, “parental care, concern and involvement are synonymous with firm control and governance of the child” (p. 1112). In contrast, in more individualistic cultures, the controlling and directing parenting practices are more frequently associated with the belief that the child is inherently bad (or will be bad without strict control).

Another explanation is that authoritarianism may have a “culture bound meaning and therefore within an authoritarian/collective culture, authoritarian parenting has only minor or negligible negative influences on children’s mental health” (Dwairy et al., 2006, p. 264). Dwairy et al. point to the consistency between the culture and the parenting practice as being important. Even so, in their study of Arab adolescents in eight Arab societies, they found that “authoritative parenting is associated with a higher level of adolescent family connectedness” (p. 267) and “was clearly associated with fewer psychological disorders” (p. 268). They also found that youth who perceived their parents as either authoritarian or authoritative fared much better than youth who saw their parents as inconsistent but concluded that “it seems that the authoritative parenting style is the style that is associated with better mental health in the West as well as in the Arab world” (p. 269).

In a study evaluating academic success across three different social communities in Tehran, Assadi et al. (2007) hypothesized that authoritative parenting would be associated with academic success, but held out the possibility that in the more traditional authoritarian communities studied, the authoritarian parenting style might be more consistent with the culture and hold some advantages. They found, however, that “authoritative parenting was the style associated with the highest academic outcome . . . independent of socio-cultural context” (p. 178).

Studies of the impact of parenting styles in African American families have not yielded consistent results. Several studies suggest that African American children are not negatively affected by an authoritarian parenting style (Baumrind, 1972; Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1996; Steinberg, 2001) while others indicate that there is definite benefit from the authoritative parenting style. In a study of serious juvenile offenders who were largely poor and ethnic minority members, Steinberg, Blatt-Eisengart, and Cauffman (2006) found that the adolescents who described their parents as authoritative were more academically competent and more psychologically mature (p. 56). They also found that youth raised in both authoritative
and authoritarian homes were less prone to internalized distress and externalizing problems than those raised in indulgent and neglectful homes (p. 56). In a study of parenting styles in African American families of preschool children, Querido, Warner, and Eyberg (2002) found that even after controlling for acculturation, income, and the mother’s education, the authoritative parenting style was the most predictive of positive child outcomes. They specifically suggest that “effective preventive interventions for young children with behavior problems should include components that address relationship-building skills and clear limit setting” (p. 276).

The Impact of Parent Education

Given what is known about the impact of parenting styles, a next logical step is to establish how, as Steinberg (2000) puts it, to “engage . . . parents in the business of parenting” (p. 10). Studies of the results of parent education generally show a positive impact, though the measures vary greatly and are not directly related to authoritative parenting. In their review of the history and evaluation of parent education, Croake and Glover (1977) noted many of the challenges in evaluating parent education, including small sample size, study group composition, educators evaluating their own classes, and statistical problems. Early studies that they cite, however, did show changes, including an improvement in the sociometric standing of the children and changes in parental attitude. In his analysis of 21 studies evaluating Adlerian parenting programs, Burnett (1988) concluded that “changes in a positive direction were noted on measures of children’s behavior, children’s self-concept, parental behavior and parental attitude” (p. 74). The studies themselves however used a variety of assessment tools and define “positive” in terms that are not consistent and not directly related to the authoritative parenting style. Mullis (1999) evaluated 385 parents’ perception of their children’s behavior and found that their perceptions were more positive after a video-based parent education class than they were before the class.

Studies that examined either changes in the children or the behavior of the adults are few. Stanley (1978) studied the impact of a 10-week, 25-hour Adlerian parenting class on a small sample of parents and teenagers. One of the three classes she studied had both parents and their teenagers in attendance. She found that all the families showed an increase in effectiveness of egalitarian decision making. One group showed a bigger change in parental attitude, another in parental behavior. Her results also showed that the adolescents who participated in the class improved their scores in moral reasoning significantly. The gain was maintained at follow up. Moore and Dean-Zubritsky (1979) studied the impact of Adlerian study groups on a very
small sample of parents of preschoolers whom they later videoed in interaction with their children. They found that the parents in the study group had more engagement with their children and offered more encouragement than the control group. Schultz and Nystul (1980) studied 47 pairs of children aged four to eight years and their mothers who had attended parent education classes. They did show differences between the control group and the parents who attended 12-month behavior modification classes, or 12-month Parent Effectiveness Training, but not with Adlerian book study groups.

The use of experiential techniques, including role plays, appears to be particularly effective. Stone, Clark, and McKenry (2000) identified the role plays and the interactive component of their program as a significant contributor to their program’s success.

The Adlerian Parenting Model

Alfred Adler developed a system of child guidance clinics in Vienna beginning in 1920 (Terner & Pew, 1978). By 1927, there were approximately 30 clinics in Vienna based on his theories of holistic and social psychology (Terner & Pew). Adler and colleague Rudolf Dreikurs, who also directed one of the child guidance clinics, both immigrated to the United States and were influential in developing parent education programs in this country (Terner & Pew). Adler’s measure of mental health was Gemeinschaftsgefühl, the sense of being connected and able to contribute to the social group or community (Mosak & Maniaci, 1999). This is quite similar to what Baumrind (1991) described as “competence”: the integration of communion and agency (p. 61). Adler taught that children lacking the skills to find the internal sense of belonging and significance in socially useful ways find other, mistaken ways to approximate those feelings (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). He recommended the development of horizontal relationships and cooperation, those in which everyone is treated with equal dignity and respect and in which the adults play a clear leadership role. He and his students taught teachers and parents concrete skills for parenting with firmness and kindness at the same time (Terner & Pew). His model fits the democratic and authoritative model of parenting.

Methods

Participants. Data were collected from 110 Adlerian parent education classes from the United States (102) and Canada (8) taught by 69 parent educators. The parenting classes varied in size from 4 to 64 participants and included a total of 1,772 parents, guardians, and grandparents. The average
class size was 16 participants. Seventy-four percent of the participants attended the last class of the parenting series and filled out the survey (n = 1,311). Some participants left some questions unanswered. Asked for their gender, 863 (71.3%) of participants said female and 348 (28.7%) said male. Asked for their parental status, 1,051 (88.9%) of participants said they parent with a partner, 125 (10.6%) said they parent individually, and 6 (0.5%) identified themselves as grandparents. The median number of children in each household was 2, with the number of children varying between 0 and 15 (1,266 responses). Most of the participating parents were White (89.6%). Others identified themselves as Hispanic/Latino (3.8%), Asian (3.3%), Black/African American (2.6%), Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (0.7%), Native American (0.5%), and Other (0.9%), which included Jewish, Ethiopian, multiracial, East Indian, and Italian (1,252 responses; some participants selected more than one ethnicity identifier). Most of the participants reported a high annual family income (see Table 1). Though this information was not
included on the survey, the facilitators reported that only a few of the participants were mandated attendees who requested a certificate of attendance.

**Procedure.** At the end of the last meeting of the 6–10 week parenting course, participating parents were asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire describing their assessment of their behavior before and after the parenting course. All of the participants attending the last night of class completed questionnaires, although not every parent answered every question. The participants were asked to rate their behavior before the parenting class and their behavior “now” (the last night of the class). Out of the sample, 74% of the parents completed the courses. Most of the respondents in this study spoke English. The data include one class in Spanish (less than 1% of the sample).

The curricula of the parenting classes in this study were all founded on Adlerian principles, although the courses did not share an identical curriculum or teaching approach. The classes were general parenting classes for parents who had not previously taken a parenting class. Fifty-eight of the classes were taught primarily experientially, and 52 of the classes were taught using both lecture and experiential activities. None of the classes were primarily video-based, book study groups, or primarily lecture format.

Although the material was presented in different orders, each of the comprehensive courses included the following topics: the impact of belonging and significance, using solutions or logical consequences instead of punishment, the power of encouragement, firmness and kindness at the same time (being firm without being mean, kind without being permissive), the impact of different parenting styles, the difference between praise and encouragement, an introduction to family meetings, communication skills, understanding the belief behind the behavior (the mistaken beliefs or goals about how to find belonging and significance that result in misbehavior), tools for handling conflict, communicating caring, and mutual respect. All of the classes used some kind of printed material, either a book or handouts or both. Those classes that used books used *Children: The Challenge* (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964), books from the Positive Discipline series (Nelsen, 1996; Nelsen, Erwin, & Duffy, 1998; Nelsen & Lott, 2000), or books from the STEP parenting series (Dinkmeyer, McKay, & Dinkmeyer, 1997; Dinkmeyer, McKay, Dinkmeyer, Dinkmeyer, & McKay, 1997).

**Measures.** A retrospective comparison method questionnaire was developed for the purpose of this study. The questionnaire consisted of 18 statements and participants were asked to rate their behavior with regard to the statement using a 4-point scale (*No, Sometimes, Often, Usually*). Questions were designed to look at examples of firmness and connection (see Figure 2). There were also two blank spaces for parents to add other changes that they noticed. The responses were assigned numbers (1–4) at tabulation.
For each item, parents were asked how often they engaged in that particular behavior.

Questions were also included that reflected behavior that is indicative of less effective parenting, such as yelling at children or hitting children. The responses to these questions were reverse coded. Figure 2 shows the text for each item. The survey also included demographic questions, the results of which were reported above.

Reliability of the 18-item parent questionnaire was evaluated in two ways. First, the internal reliability of the instrument was computed using Cronbach's alpha. The computed alpha coefficient was 0.85 on the pre-class items and 0.83 on the post-class items.

Second, two sets of similar questions were compared. The correlation of Item 3 to Item 11 and the correlation of Item 8 to Item 13 were computed. These item pairs were chosen because the contents of the item pairs are somewhat similar, though not exactly the same. Item 3 inquires about a sense of positive connection to the child and Item 11 asks whether the parent enjoys and interacts positively with the child. Item 8 inquires about slapping or hitting a child and Item 13 inquires about spanking. The correlation of Item 3 to 11 was $r = 0.65$ on the pre-class responses and $r = 0.61$ on the post-class responses ($ps < .0001, n = 1,274$). The correlation of Item 8 to 13 was $r = 0.47$ for pre-class responses and $r = 0.50$ for post-class responses ($ps < .0001, n = 1,273$).
Estimation of the instrument reliability was relatively high, indicating that parental responses can be viewed as consistent. The correlation coefficients computed for the two paired items were lower, but as these items are only relatively similar these lower values are understandable. Overall, these correlation coefficients indicate that parental responses can be viewed as generally consistent.

Results

Overview of analysis procedures. We used a repeated-measures mixed-model ANOVA to test for demographic and other participant-specific effects, to test for differences between the responses to the items, and to account for the dependencies of the item responses within an individual’s responses. This ANOVA model tested for differences in behavior before and after parent education as perceived and reported by the parent-guardians (i.e., each parent-guardian’s survey is treated as independent, but the model accounts for the fact that the responses to each of the items are correlated within each particular questionnaire). The model was extended using a baseline covariate to test for the amount of change attributable to parental education. Additionally, a separate repeated-measures ANCOVA, which included the demographic variables (no. of children, age, gender, income, ethnicity), the baseline covariate, the item number, and the interaction of the item number with the demographic variable, was performed on each item to clarify the differential effects of each of the demographic and other participant-specific variables. The primary analysis indicated that the degree of change varied as a function of some demographic characteristics (age, gender, income) but not others (race/ethnicity). We used an ANCOVA to examine the size and direction of these differences that the primary analysis had identified. Individual ANCOVAs were also calculated to show the interaction between each questionnaire item and the demographic variables. All the primary repeated-measures tests were performed at $\alpha < 0.05$ using JMP software (version 7.0.1, SAS Institute, Inc.) The $p$ values of the individual ANCOVAs were not corrected for the number of significance tests.

Change for each item. Table 2 shows the mean ratings for each item before and after the parenting class, with 95% CIs. Additionally, the change estimated from a repeated-measures mixed-model ANOVA is shown in the change column. This ANOVA of parent-guardians’ responses on the questionnaire showed statistically significant change in reported behaviors after taking the Adlerian parenting class ($p < .0001$) for each of the 18 items in the direction of becoming more authoritative. The pre-class responses mean was $2.5$ ($SE = 0.10$), corresponding to 65.0% of parents in the “sometimes”
### Table 2
Results of the Retrospective Parenting Assessment Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment Item</th>
<th>No. of Responses</th>
<th>Behaviors Before the Class</th>
<th>Behaviors After the Class</th>
<th>Change</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>95% CI</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<td>2.27</td>
<td>2.35</td>
</tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>1,283</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>2.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1,269</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>1.80</td>
</tr>
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<td>2.70</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>2.74</td>
</tr>
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<td>2.71</td>
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<td>2.15</td>
<td>2.25</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>1,291</td>
<td>3.69</td>
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<td>1,283</td>
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<td>1,270</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>2.05</td>
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</table>

Note. For each item, responses were 1 (no), 2 (sometimes), 3 (often), 4 (usually). Some items were reverse coded. The changes and their 95% confidence intervals were estimated using a repeated-measures mixed-model, as described in the text. Items are presented in Figure 2.

To "often" range. The post-class responses mean was 3.5 (SE = 0.08), corresponding to 81.8% of parents in the "often" to "usually" range. The overall mean change of 0.97 units (SE = 0.087) and significant change can be seen in each of the individual items.

Pre-class responses by demographic characteristic. A repeated-measures ANOVA of parent-guardians' retrospective ratings of their behavior before class (see Table 2) included item numbers and the following demographic variables: age group of children, parental status, parental age,
gender, income, and race/ethnicity. This model identified participants as random effects. The results of this ANOVA model indicated that the before-class ratings were not significantly different when analyzed by parental status ($p = 0.24$), age group ($p = 0.18$), gender ($p = 0.67$), income group ($p = 0.18$), and race/ethnicity ($p = 0.25$). There was a negative relationship between the number of children and positive behaviors ($p < 0.0001$): Parents with more children reported they had fewer authoritative behaviors before taking the class.

The ANOVA model also indicated that there were significant differences between items ($p < 0.0001$). The patterns of responses indicate that the responses to the questionnaire were not random. The before-class item means shown in Table 2 indicate levels of authoritative behaviors from 1, low authoritativeness (either harsh or less connected), to 4, high authoritativeness (either firm without harshness or connected). Tukey's HSD indicated that two of the reverse coded items (Item 8 “slap” and Item 13 “spank”) had significantly higher mean scores; before attending the parenting class only 3.3% hit or slapped their children and only 3.3% spanked their children. The next highest means corresponded to Items 3 (“positive connection”) and 11 (“interact . . . positive”). That is, approximately 65% of parents responded “often” or “usually” to these items. The lowest scored items were Items 18 (“jobs”), 12 (“calm down”), 4 (“understand belief behind behavior”), and 16 (“family meetings”). More than 76% of parents responded “no” or “sometimes” to these items.

Change related to demographic characteristics. A repeated-measures mixed-model ANCOVA of the “change” score included the following demographic variables from Table 1: age group of children, parental age, gender, income, race/ethnicity, item number, the interaction of item number with each of the demographic variables, and the before-class covariate. The results of this ANCOVA model indicated that change toward more authoritativeness was shown on all of the items (see Table 2), but some items changed more than others ($p < .0001$). Three items changed more than one unit. The largest change occurred in Item 4 (“understand belief behind behavior”). Among before-class responses, 89% reported “no” or “sometimes,” but among after-class responses, 74% reported “often” or “usually.” The next largest change occurred in Item 6 (“how I respond influences how child responds”). On this item, 62% reported a before-class response of “no” or “sometimes,” and 94% reported an after-class response of “often” or “usually.” Item 12 (“calm down before problem solving”) also changed more than one unit. Among before-class responses, 81% reported “no” or “sometimes,” but among after-class responses, 76% reported “often” or “usually.” Large changes (more than 3/4 unit) also occurred in Item 2, Item 7, Item 10, Item 14, and Item 16 (see Table 3).
Table 3
Comparison of Before-Class and After-Class Responses for Selected Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Before-Class Response of “No” or “Sometimes”</th>
<th>After-Class Response of “Often” or “Usually”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>70%</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The parenting classes had the least impact (change less than 1/2 unit) on Items 8 and 13. In Item 8 (“slap child”), 3% reported that before the parenting class they “often” or “usually” slapped their child ($n = 42/1,278$). This was reduced to 1.1% ($n = 14/1,278$) after the class. However, the largest change on this item appeared to be that 15% changed from “sometimes slap” to “no slap” ($n = 198/1,278$). Overall, the no-slap rate changed from 75% pre-class to 91% post-class. Similarly, the “spank my children” (Item 13) behavior overall showed very little change. Pre-class, the “often” or “usually” rate was 3.3% ($n = 43/1,291$), and this was reduced to 0.8% ($n = 11/1,291$). The largest change on this item appeared to be that 16.3% changed from “sometimes spank” to “no spank” ($n = 210/1,291$).

The single repeated-measures ANCOVA of the “after attending” minus “before attending” change scores with the “before attending” score as covariate took into account all the group differences in the “before attending” results and also the differences between items, and then investigated whether the change scores were different depending upon the demographic characteristics collected.

The amount of change in behavior and attitudes reported by parents and guardians (the difference between the reported pre-class and post-class ratings) was significant, but it was influenced by some demographic characteristics. Overall, those in the following groups showed the largest change: younger participants, those with fewer children, women, and those in the lowest income category (see Table 4). The amount of change did not vary by race/ethnicity.

To illustrate these differing changes, we performed separate ANCOVA analyses for each item. The ANCOVA model of the “change” score included the following demographic variables: age group of children, parental age, gender, income, race/ethnicity, and the pre-class covariate. The results of
Table 4
Analysis of Change by Demographic Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect p-value</th>
<th>No. of Children</th>
<th>Participant Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main effect</td>
<td>0.0047</td>
<td>&lt; .0001</td>
<td>0.0071</td>
<td>0.0348</td>
<td>0.0659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>0.0070</td>
<td>&lt; .0001</td>
<td>0.0020</td>
<td>0.0004</td>
<td>0.0040</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Results are from a repeated-measures mixed-model analysis.

These tests (see Table 5) show that the degree and the type of changes made varied by demographic characteristics. For example, parents with fewer children made significantly greater changes than parents with more children for the following items: Item 2 (respond with kindness and firmness), 3 (have a sense of positive connection), 14 (encourage by listening), 17 (yell less). For Item 16 (family meetings), the trend was reversed; that is, families with more children showed a significant increase in family meetings compared to other families. For the remaining items, there was significant change but the amount of change was not influenced by the number of children in the family. Similarly, younger caregivers changed more than older caregivers and this was evident in 11 of the 18 items. Female caregivers changed more than did male caregivers on Items 1 (set appropriate limits), 6 (how I respond influences child behavior), 7 (see mistakes as opportunities to learn), 15 (know how to take care of my stress), and 18 (children have household jobs). (All of the tables for each of the demographic characteristics on each of the items are too numerous to publish but are available from the authors on request.)

Caregivers' comments. One third of the participants (469) added comments to their surveys identifying yet another change that they considered to be important as a result of the class. One of those comments identified "no change" and all of the others indicated a change in the direction consistent with the authoritative parenting model. The following comments exemplified the most common: "I'm remaining more firm in my limits." "My own anger level and frustration has decreased." "I have a better relationship with my children." "I'm better at problem solving." "I have more confidence in my parenting skills." "I calm myself down instead of reacting." "I have more hope for who my child will become." "We have more fun as a family." "I enjoy parenting more." "There is less yelling now." "Fewer power struggles now." "I respect myself more and my child more."
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>No. of Children (Fewer)</th>
<th>Age (Younger)</th>
<th>Gender (Female)</th>
<th>Income (Lower)</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity (Caucasian)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.4529</td>
<td>0.0039</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
<td>0.7312</td>
<td>0.4081</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.0016</td>
<td>0.0008</td>
<td>0.6483</td>
<td>0.8011</td>
<td>0.1018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.0067</td>
<td>0.0008</td>
<td>0.3211</td>
<td>0.1879</td>
<td>0.3675</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.0925</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
<td>0.1449</td>
<td>0.1530</td>
<td>0.6808</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.5839</td>
<td>0.6154</td>
<td>0.1853</td>
<td>0.6063</td>
<td>0.7024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.7996</td>
<td>0.0632</td>
<td>0.0079</td>
<td>0.0654</td>
<td>0.7350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.3779</td>
<td>0.2396</td>
<td>0.0004</td>
<td>0.8651</td>
<td>0.0435</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.6939</td>
<td>0.1257</td>
<td>0.1227</td>
<td>0.0216</td>
<td>0.9814</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.4505</td>
<td>0.0100</td>
<td>&lt; 0.0001</td>
<td>0.0689</td>
<td>0.2655</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.4692</td>
<td>0.3290</td>
<td>0.3338</td>
<td>0.2760</td>
<td>0.5920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.0205</td>
<td>0.0010</td>
<td>0.2667</td>
<td>0.9348</td>
<td>0.0750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.5759</td>
<td>0.0158</td>
<td>0.2592</td>
<td>0.2989</td>
<td>0.0873</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.0949</td>
<td>0.2324</td>
<td>0.2024</td>
<td>0.3552</td>
<td>0.3861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.0324</td>
<td>0.0094</td>
<td>0.0485</td>
<td>0.0531</td>
<td>0.2592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.1937</td>
<td>0.1257</td>
<td>0.0027</td>
<td>0.0219</td>
<td>0.0192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>0.0294</td>
<td>0.0433</td>
<td>0.3305</td>
<td>0.1626</td>
<td>0.5149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>0.0034</td>
<td>0.0285</td>
<td>0.2465</td>
<td>0.0498</td>
<td>0.0022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>0.4891</td>
<td>&lt; 0.0001</td>
<td>0.0265</td>
<td>0.9701</td>
<td>0.6769</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* See Figure 2 for item texts. Mean difference effect sizes for this table are available from the second author.
Discussion

The aim of this study was to determine the effect of Adlerian parenting classes on self-reported parenting behaviors and attitudes and to determine whether the parenting class resulted in more authoritative parenting behaviors. Not surprisingly, the results show that parent-guardians did not completely change their parenting style after taking a parenting class but significant changes were made in the direction of being more authoritative. Parent-guardians’ retrospective assessments of their behaviors before and after class indicated that there was significant change. Overall, parents reported that their behaviors had changed in the direction of increasing connection and firmness while decreasing in harshness, though the degree of change in behavior varied from item to item.

The descriptions that the parent-guardians gave of their pre-class behavior varied from participant to participant, but there were few significant patterns across groups. The results did not vary by parental status, age, gender, income, or race/ethnicity, but parents of larger numbers of children rated their pre-class behaviors as less authoritative.

The degree of reported change varied item by item and also by the characteristics of the participants. Changes were the largest for behaviors and attitudes where parents rated their pre-class behavior as less authoritative. These included calming down before problem solving, understanding the belief behind the behavior, understanding how parenting style influences child behavior, taking time to encourage by listening, and using fewer bribes and rewards. The mean change for the item was less where most parent-guardians described their pre-class behavior in a way that was already consistent with the authoritative style. Most parent-guardians began the class reporting that they never slapped or spanked their children, and the mean change for these items were both quite low. However, closer examination reveals 15% of all of the participants changed from sometimes slapping their children to not slapping their children, and of the 3% of the parent-guardians who spanked their children at the beginning of the class, 63% reported that they stopped spanking.

When isolated, parent-guardians who reported the most change in behavior were younger or female or lower income or had fewer children. Race/ethnicity had less of an impact on the degree of change; however, our sample was almost 90% White.

Though the methods of instruction and design of the classes varied to some degree, the gathered results from every individual class evaluated showed a trend of behaviors changing in the direction of increasing a sense of connection, and increasing skill in setting limits, as well as decreasing harsh behavior (yelling, hitting, and spanking). In addition, participants reported
improved skill in self-calming and handling stress as well as problem solving and sharing family responsibilities. All of the changes reported were in the direction of behaviors that are more authoritative and more supportive of healthy young adults.

The retrospective survey used in this study allowed parent-guardians to give an assessment of their behaviors from a single point in time. This is important because before beginning a parenting class, parents often have a limited view of their behaviors and the options they have in responding to their children. For example, in the trial study, parents rated themselves as more poorly skilled on their post-class surveys than they had on their pre-class surveys, but they also gave descriptive comments regarding how useful the material from the class was and about how much more skilled they were. It became apparent that the parents not only gained new skills, but they changed their perception about how skilled they had been prior to the class. The parent-guardians did not know what they did not know prior to taking the parenting class and so the pre-class assessment was not useful.

The survey is subjective; each participant’s assessment of what “sometimes” and “often” might mean could be different. But because the questions are answered at one sitting, it can be reasonably assumed that if a parent reported a change from “sometimes” to “often” it is their perception that something different is happening.

The comments that parents wrote on their surveys about the changes that they noticed at home were (with one exception out of more than 400 comments) uniformly positive, and all reflected either an increased satisfaction with their sense of family, an increased ability to set limits, or an increased ability to have a sense of connection with their children. These are powerful statements on the impact of classes on individual families.

One of the challenges with this retrospective model, however, is that participants are biased by the class that they have just completed. Another challenge is that complete demographic data are not collected on participants who do not complete the class. Using the retrospective model, which recognizes the challenge of assessing a skill before parents know what the skill is, also makes using a control group much more difficult.

All of the participants surveyed participated in community-based classes. Each class followed a curriculum that was taught based on Adlerian philosophy, which is consistent with authoritative parenting. The classes used similar but not identical materials and similar but not identical content. While some would consider this variety a fault of this study, we see it as a strength. The process of teaching parent education is most vibrant when the facilitator is able to respond to the needs of the particular parents in his or her class. In this community-based study, the participants of every class noted changes in their behaviors toward a more authoritative approach. Cumulatively, the
changes were statistically significant and provide a compelling response to Steinberg's (2001) call to look at what can effectively "engage . . . parents in the business of parenting" (p. 10).

More work needs to be done in the evaluation of parent education programs. While this study included primarily White, upper-class parent-guardians in their 30s and 40s who attended class voluntarily, the results indicate that the methods are effective for other populations as well. The data comparing the degree of reported change for each item and demographic characteristics should also be replicated because of the number of significance tests that were run.

Our study focused on the participants' perception that their behavior and attitudes were different. We did not survey what was actually happening in the home, the children's perception of the change, or whether the change was long-lasting. Because much of the work correlating authoritative parenting and reduction of social risk is based on the youth's perception of the parenting style or direct observation, collecting data from the youth may be an even better assessment of actual effects than parental self-assessment. We are planning a 2-month follow-up of parents using the same survey as well as a survey of teenagers about parental behavior before and after their parents attend a parenting class.

The study also only surveyed the three quarters of the parents who completed a parenting class. One quarter of the participants did not come to the last class and so did not complete the survey. Although in some instances this was because of external events (there were significant weather events that limited last-night participation in two of the classes), the results may be skewed by only surveying participants who chose to come on the last night. It is further limited as demographic data were not collected on the class members who did not attend the last night of class. However, the fact that three quarters of the participants did continue through to the end of the 6–10 week classes suggests that many found the classes a valuable and productive use of their time.

The study did have an unexpected benefit. In addition to documenting the positive impact of a large group of parenting classes, the information from this study has been a useful form of feedback to individual instructors. Each parent education instructor has had the opportunity to review the results of his or her class. This has led to some interesting self-evaluation. One group was able to see, for the first time, the income distribution of the parents attending courses and has since begun to charge for the classes with scholarships offered for any requesting participant. They have also made an effort to make classes more accessible to a more diverse community. Another group of instructors, noting how few parents were actually doing family meetings, restructured the curriculum so that there was more time for practice and discussion about family meetings.
Implications for Practitioners

Given current knowledge about the effects of authoritative parenting, it is important that communities begin to support parents with the skills and tools of authoritative parenting. Parenting classes based on the Adlerian philosophy are an effective method of supporting change in parental behavior for those parents who complete the course. All parent-guardians, regardless of income, gender, or race/ethnicity reported significant changes in their attitudes and behaviors in the direction of becoming more authoritative. A short post-class questionnaire by which parent-guardians report their own perception of what they learned is also a useful tool for parent educators and could be used as well by agencies supporting this work. Further study will be important to link parent reported success to observed changes in behavior.

References


