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OPTIMISM IN PARENTS OF 8-YEAR-OLDS AND ADOLESCENTS: RELATIONS WITH PARENTAL EFFICACY, AGE OF THE CHILD, AND GENDER

by

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Abstract

Parental optimism may be an important parenting characteristic that influences the parenting process, along with other parent, child and social characteristics. Optimism has generated a great deal of research in social psychology, but has remained relatively unstudied in the context of parenting. Parental optimism is distinguished from personal optimism in the sense that it is the specific tendency for parents to be positive about their child's future development. In the present study, 35 families completed a series of questionnaires concerning their 8-year-old, first-born child (17 males and 18 females). Measures included the Parent Expectations Index (the measure of parental optimism), a Child Social Adjustment Measure, a Parental Influence Measure, the Life Orientation Test and the Parenting Sense of Competence Scale. Parental optimism was found to be distinct from dispositional optimism, but significantly related to parental reports of positive child behaviour for both mothers and fathers. Higher feelings of parental optimism were positively correlated with higher perceptions of efficacy and influence for both mothers and fathers as well. Mothers of 8-year-old children from the present study and mothers of older adolescents drawn from another sample, the Futures Study (children ages 19-20) did not significantly differ in their parent optimism scores. In the present sample (parents of 8-year-old children), mothers were significantly more optimistic than fathers and they also felt as though they possessed more influence in their parenting role. As well, both mothers and fathers felt as though they actually had more influence over their daughters than their sons. Parental optimism thus appears to be an important component to feeling efficacious in one's parenting role. Consistent with previous findings for parents of older children, it appears relatively distinct from dispositional

optimism about one's own outcomes. This factor should continue to be studied in combination with other parent, child and social factors in the exploration of parenting dynamics.

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Optimism in Parents of 8-Year-Olds and Adolescents: Relations with Parental Efficacy, Age of the Child, and Gender

The role that parental behaviours play in shaping and influencing child development has been of central interest for much of the 20th century. Specifically, the study of characteristics and consequences of parenting has received a great deal of attention. However, the study of why parents engage in the parenting practices that they do has received relatively less attention, aside from examining general status factors such as social class. Jay Belsky (1984) recognized this deficit in the literature and attempted to identify the determinants of individual differences in parenting. He proposed a model in which parenting is directly influenced by three classes of factors, those within the child (child characteristics), within the individual parent (parent characteristics), and from within the broader social context in which the parent-child relationship exists (social context).

A parent characteristic of particular interest in the present paper is optimism. Recently introduced in the literature, parental optimism is the specific tendency for parents to be positive about their child's future outcomes and development (Pratt, van de Hoef, Norris, & Arnold, 2001). In an initial study, with adolescents and their families, this parental characteristic was associated with different parenting practices; for example, more optimistic parents subsequently tended to be less punitive and more willing to grant their adolescent autonomy (Pratt et al., 2001). In a second study, parental optimism was associated with different attributional styles. Mothers who were more optimistic were more likely to attribute their adolescent's antisocial behaviour to external and unstable causes (Werner & Pratt, 2000). Both of these studies will be explained in greater detail in

the following pages. However it is important to note that both were successful in demonstrating the hypothesized relationships between parental optimism and both parenting practices and attributional style. Therefore, it seems reasonable to make predictions about a new relationship, between parental optimism and parents' feelings of efficacy.

This paper will address the importance of parental characteristics in the parenting process as outlined by Belsky and colleagues (1984). Secondly, parental optimism will be distinguished from dispositional optimism, and literature relevant to the construct of parental optimism will be discussed. Lastly, a study investigating parental optimism and parental efficacy in parents of 8 year-olds will be presented.

Determinants of Parenting Practices

As noted, Belsky's (1984) process model of parental functioning identified three general sources of influence: child characteristics, parent characteristics and contextual sources of stress and support. The first component, child characteristics, has been widely recognized in the literature. The model incorporates previous findings which suggest how adults parent may be influenced by the characteristics of their child. Child temperament has received the most research attention in terms of its influence on parental functioning. Some findings illustrate that child temperament, especially in infancy, can have a considerable impact on parenting behaviours (Campbell, 1979). Children who are more or less difficult in temperament seem to elicit different patterns of parental care. Therefore, research suggests that a child's temperament, with its accompanying positive or negative behaviour, will influence how parents respond.

Second, enduring characteristics of parents themselves may influence their parenting practices. The development of optimal child functioning has been associated with parents who are warm, attentive, stimulating, consistent, responsive, non-restrictive, and who use induction or reasoning when interacting with their children (Orraschel, Weissman, & Kidd, 1980). These qualities suggest that an individual who is sensitive in his or her parenting role will be more likely to promote positive developmental outcomes. Much evidence suggests that greater parental maturity and psychological well-being foster optimal child development. For example, mothers who are depressed tend to provide a disruptive, hostile, rejecting home environment for their children, rather than the more optimal one which is provided by psychologically healthy mothers (Orraschel, Weissman, & Kidd, 1980).

The final component in Belsky's (1984) model addresses the context of parent-child relations. It is important to consider social support and stress as contributors to observed differences in parent functioning. Social support may be beneficial, in the sense that it provides parents with a sense of acceptance, necessary assistance and advice, as well as indications of what is and is not appropriate behaviour. Stress of any form, whether it is marital, employment-related or from a lack of social support, may cause strain and affect the parent-child relationship (e.g., Conger et al., 1994). It is important to consider this component in combination with parental and child characteristics (Belsky, 1984).

The three determinants of parental functioning as outlined by Belsky (1984) are interconnected. Child, parental and contextual characteristics are all influential in the parenting process, and can interact with each other to influence parenting. One parent

characteristic that may influence the quality of adults' parenting is optimism. This characteristic has generated a great deal of research in social psychology (e.g., Armor & Taylor, 1998), but has remained relatively unstudied in terms of parenting and is lacking in the literature on developmental psychology. In the social psychology literature, Armor and Taylor (1998) make the distinction between "situated" and "dispositional" optimism. The latter refers to a generalized inclination to expect favourable life outcomes, whereas situated optimism pertains to expectations regarding specific situations. A similar distinction is provided by Peterson (2000), who terms specific positive expectations, "little" optimism, and generalized positive expectations about life outcomes, "big" optimism. An initial expectation for the construct of parental optimism suggests that the characteristic is context-specific (for example, to a particular child), and relatively independent of parents' general expectations of their own future life outcomes. Following this line of thinking, the investigation of parental optimism falls under "situated" or "little" optimism. The following section will review both situated and dispositional optimism, illustrating the relative distinctiveness and importance of each.

Dispositional Optimism and Parental Optimism (Specific Expectancies)

Dispositional optimism is construed as an individual's generalized inclination to expect favourable life outcomes for the self. Optimistic individuals have the tendency to believe that good as opposed to bad things will, in general, occur in their lives (Scheier & Carver, 1992, p.216). These generalized expectancies are relatively stable across time, and form the basis of an important personality characteristic. Optimism as a dispositional characteristic has been associated with several aspects of psychological and physical well-being (e.g., Scheier & Carver, 1993). For example, previous research has shown

that optimists cope with stress by using more effective coping strategies, have fewer health problems and recover more quickly from illness than others, and experience less negative affect (Scheier & Carver, 1992).

Scheier and Carver (1992) suggest that dispositional or "generalized optimism may be more of an emergent phenomenon, arising out of domain specific expectancies, but being somewhat separate from them". This form of optimism represents a general outlook; however it may vary depending on the specifics of the situation. The study of specific outcome expectancies is important because it may reveal different outcomes than those found in studies of dispositional optimism. Situated optimism allows for considerable variation in the positivity of one's thinking from one context to the next. For example, a person who is quite optimistic about recovering successfully from a car accident may be far less optimistic about landing the big promotion that is up for grabs at work (Scheier & Carver, 1993). Although the progression of specific expectancies to generalized ones has yet to be fully explored, the distinction between specific and dispositional expectancies has been documented, both in terms of statistical independence and in terms of their differing consequences (Armor & Taylor, 1998).

Studies that have compared dispositional optimism, as measured by Scheier and Carver's (1985) Life Orientation Test (LOT), with measures of optimism about specific expectancies, have generally indicated weak associations between the two measures (e.g., Fitzgerald, Tennen, Affleck, & Pransky, 1993). Taylor and colleagues' (1991) research on coping with risk for AIDS, for example, suggested that specific and dispositional optimism are largely independent and that both types of expectancies are useful in the prediction of behaviour. Consistent with Armor and Taylor's (1998) ideas, Pratt et al.

(2001) predicted that specific optimism as a parent would be relatively independent of individuals' own dispositional optimism. Specifically, Pratt et al. expected that parental optimism about one of their children's future outcomes would be context-specific, and relatively unrelated to parents' dispositional optimism regarding their own future life outcomes. Parental optimism was defined as the specific tendency for parents to be positive about their child's future development, and was assessed from parent narratives about the child, and from a measure called the Parent Expectations Index (PEI). The PEI is a newly designed questionnaire index of optimism that measures expectations about the future of one's child, for example, regarding the likelihood of him or her having a happy and fulfilling life as an adult. The authors used the LOT to measure dispositional optimism. Congruent with their expectations, the researchers concluded from a weak, non-significant correlation ($r = .16$) that parental optimism on the PEI and dispositional optimism on the LOT appeared to be relatively distinct constructs. In general, knowledge of an individual's generalized expectancies will not accurately predict how optimistic that individual will be for specific outcomes in specific situations (Armor & Taylor, 1998).

Although parental optimism has been introduced only recently in the literature, research conducted by Pratt et al. (2001) suggests that it may be related to parenting practices. These researchers examined the relationship between parental optimism as assessed in stories told by parents about teaching children, and types of parenting practices used two years later. Pratt and colleagues felt that parental optimism about the child's potential might partially reflect the parent's views of the child's underlying dispositional nature and thus influence choices of parenting practices. Specifically, they expected that feeling more positive about the adolescent's future would be associated

with more willingness to grant the adolescent autonomy, and with less punitiveness in response to their adolescent's misbehaviours, because these would be seen as less problematic. The authors measured parental optimism through ratings of parent narratives about when they taught an important value to their adolescent child. Information about parenting practices was obtained both from adolescents' own stories about autonomy-granting by the parent in dealing with a parent-child "problem," as well as from separate interview data with the parent, both collected two years later. Results indicated that greater maternal optimism in stories at Time 1 predicted less punitiveness and more autonomy granting toward the child two years later.

The authors suggested that a possible explanation to account for these findings might be related to parents' attributions (Pratt et al., 2001). Parents with greater parental optimism may make different types of attributions to account for their adolescent's behaviour, and in turn use different parenting practices. Attributional style can be examined based on Weiner's (1979) ideas of attributional dimensions, and Peterson and Seligman's (1984) account of positive and negative explanatory styles.

Attribution Theory

Weiner developed a theory that contained three basic dimensions to help explain the attributional process. These three dimensions were termed locus of causality or intentionality, stability, and controllability. He proposed that among the causes of behaviour, some remain relatively constant, such as ability, while others are seen as unstable and changeable, such as effort. In terms of controllability, he gave the example of physical coordination as something that is internal, yet uncontrollable. This theory has been used to explore the role of attributions as mediators between antecedent events and

resulting affect, motivation, and behaviour. For example, research using this attribution theory framework will examine how attributions vary on their locus of causality (internal-external), stability (stable-unstable) and controllability (controllable-uncontrollable) (Weiner, 1990).

The dimensions outlined by Weiner (1979) can be used to think about the types of attributions that parents make. The term attribution, in reference to parental attributions, refers to how parents explain and evaluate their children's behaviour. When parents observe prosocial or antisocial acts displayed by their children, they may make certain inferences about the causes of these acts. For example, they may infer, following Weiner's model, whether the cause of the behaviour was situational or dispositional in origin, whether the cause of the behaviour is something that remains stable over time, and the level of control the child had over the behaviour.

A similar cognitive model emerged to account for the phenomenon of learned helplessness in humans (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978). In this model, people's causal explanations for past events influence their expectations for, and responses to, future events. These explanations thus influence subsequent feelings and behaviour. As this model developed, it began to incorporate individual differences, and the possibility that an individual may have a stable tendency toward using one or another type of attribution. Individuals who make internal, stable and global attributions for negative events are said to have a negative explanatory style, whereas individuals who explain bad events in terms of external, unstable and specific causes are said to have a positive explanatory style. These two patterns of explanatory style later came to be characterized as "optimistic" versus "pessimistic" (Peterson, 2000; Peterson & Seligman,

1984). This theory differs slightly from Weiner's attributional account in the sense that it is based on the belief that people are relatively unaware that they are making certain attributions. Instead, they engage in a spontaneous and automatic attributional process. Weiner's theory, in comparison (1972), suggests that attributions are dependent on the given stimulus and are more likely to be controlled and effortful.

Positive explanatory style thus may seem very similar to dispositional optimism. There is a clear conceptual link between dispositional optimism and attributional style. Both constructs are explicitly cognitive in nature and each is related to the vigour or passivity with which individuals meet demands of the world. However, even though related, these two constructs also differ. The difference between dispositional optimism and attributional style is best exemplified in the way that the two are measured. Attributional measures focus on people's judgments about why events occurred, whereas dispositional optimism measures focus directly on expectations for the future (Scheier & Carver, 1992).

The background provided by Weiner (1979), and by Peterson and Seligman (1984), may help to explain the results that Pratt et al. (2001) found. Recall that greater parental optimism predicted less punitiveness and more autonomy granting toward the child two years later (Pratt et al., 2001). One possible explanation to account for this finding may be an attributional one. It seems plausible that mothers who are more optimistic about their child's development may be more likely to rely on a positive attributional style. For example, parental optimism may lead to more positive attributions regarding child behaviours, which in turn may lead to less punitiveness and more autonomy-granting. This latter argument is based on research by Dix, Ruble, and

Zambarano (1989), who determined that attributional style does appear linked to how parents respond to their children's problem behaviour. In addition, many researchers have examined how parental attributions vary depending on the type of child behaviour exhibited. For example, Johnston and Freeman (1997) suggested that parents of children with ADHD viewed their children's behaviours as more stable and less controllable than did parents of nonproblem children. These researchers employed a model that reflected Belsky's (1984) framework. They emphasized the "cumulative and reciprocal effects between child characteristics, parental cognitions, and parental responses" (Bugental, Johnston, New & Silvester, 1998, p.473).

The study conducted by Dix et al. (1989) explored whether attributions about children's competence and responsibility for misconduct mediated the relations between parental characteristics and their discipline preferences. Optimism was not studied as a parental characteristic in this research, but the authors did examine parental beliefs, values and ideologies about child rearing. Previous literature suggested that stable beliefs and values can influence attribution and information processing, by guiding attention, memory and judgment processes (Feather, 1985). Dix et al. gathered from this research that relatively enduring values and attitudes about child rearing might influence how parents interpret negative child behaviours, and therefore how they think they should respond to them. They hypothesized that when parents make the attribution that children understand and intend their negative behaviour, they will be more likely to evaluate power assertive disciplinary responses more favourably, and "inductive," explanatory disciplinary responses less favourably. The belief that children are less responsible for negative behaviour should occur when adults believe children have limited capabilities

relevant to their misbehaviours. This should result in parents becoming less upset and thinking that calm explanation and reasoning is an appropriate response (Dix & Grusec, 1985). Their hypothesis was supported, and the researchers concluded that attributions involving children's intentions for their negative behaviour caused mothers to feel more upset and to prefer power-assertive discipline. Furthermore, mothers with authoritarian ideologies about child rearing preferred power assertive discipline, partly because they inferred greater responsibility and competence on their child's part in relation to negative behaviour (Dix et al., 1989). This result was thus consistent with the mediational hypothesis proposed.

Both Pratt et al. (2001) and Dix et al. (1989) examined parenting practices in response to problem child behaviour. An association was found between parental optimism and parenting practices (Pratt et al., 2001) and between attributional style and parenting practices (Dix et al., 1989). The missing link, or association, that was not investigated in the Pratt et al. study, is that between parental optimism and attributional style. There is apparently no direct evidence for this link in the literature pertaining to the newly developed construct of parental optimism, and attributional style. However, two studies are indirectly related. First is a study conducted by Sharrock, Day, Qazi, and Brewin (1990), who examined how the level of staff optimism was related to attributions made for patient behaviour in a medium secure residential unit for mentally disordered offenders. Secondly, Brody et al. (1994) investigated the relationship between family financial resources, the level of dispositional optimism among parents and co-caregiving support and conflict.

Sharrock and colleagues (1990) examined levels of staff optimism and attributional style. They proposed that external, unstable, and uncontrollable attributions of a patient's negative behaviours would be associated with greater staff optimism, whereas attributions of behaviour problems to internal, stable, and controllable factors would be associated with reduced optimism among the staff. Furthermore, they suggested that helping behaviour directed to patients is more likely if staff attribute an external, unstable, and uncontrollable cause for the problem behaviour. This was predicted because they felt that attributions of behaviour problems to internal, stable, and controllable factors suggest that the helper may feel that his or her help is less likely to be successful, thus reflecting a more pessimistic view. Conversely, if an external, unstable, and uncontrollable attribution is made for a patient's negative behaviour, this would be associated with greater staff optimism, because they might then be more likely to regard the behaviour as changeable and perceive greater benefits from helping. To measure staff optimism, the researchers selected items from the optimism subscale of the Optimism-Pessimism scale (Moores & Grant, 1976), and modified the items to make them more appropriate to the mentally ill rather than the mentally handicapped. The results supported their hypotheses. It was found that the tendency for staff to make attributions of problem behaviour toward unstable factors was related to higher levels of staff optimism, and this in turn was associated with increased helping behaviour. Second, attributions of internal causality and controllability were negatively associated with optimism. The authors suggested that perhaps ascribing causality to factors controllable by and internal to the patient may have reduced staff optimism because the staff may have felt the target patient intended to misbehave.

Research conducted by Brody and colleagues (1994) investigated a proposed family process model with a large sample of poor, rural families. They hypothesized that low per capita income would be associated with less general optimism among parents and, in turn, would affect parental co-caregiving and child developmental outcomes. The researchers thought that more optimistic parents would be more likely to use effective communication skills, and to provide one another with instrumental and emotional support on child-rearing tasks. Optimism was assessed using the mothers' and fathers' scores on the optimism subscale of the CES-D, as well as their score on Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (Brody et al., 1994). Both of these scales were viewed as measures of dispositional optimism. Results suggested that higher levels of optimism among parents served to mediate the link between family financial resources and co-caregiving relationship quality, and therefore contributed to positive child outcomes. Furthermore, the authors speculated that an attributional pattern might help to explain the findings. For example, optimistic parents may be more likely to attribute family problems to situations that are alterable, whereas less optimistic parents may attribute difficulties to family members' personalities, which tend not to change.

The above research began to address the need for research pertaining to optimism and attributional style; however, the findings cannot be extended to explain the findings by Pratt et al. (2001) because dispositional optimism, rather than parental optimism, was measured. Armor and Taylor (1998) assert that it is typically more informative to measure the optimism that corresponds to a specific situation. Empirically, also, Pratt et al. (2001) reported that parents' level of dispositional optimism and their parental optimism about a particular child were relatively uncorrelated. Therefore, to examine

attributional style and optimism in terms of parenting processes, parental optimism should be assessed. Previous research (Werner & Pratt, 2000) expanded upon the work begun by Pratt et al. (2001) and Dix et al. (1989), by further validating the construct of parental optimism and investigating how it is related to the types of attributions that parents make regarding their older adolescent's behaviours.

The study conducted by Werner and Pratt (2000) assessed the validity of the newly developed questionnaire, the Parent Expectations Index (PEI), which was studied in relation to a narrative index from mothers' written stories about an incident of which they were proud. It was hypothesized that narratives with a higher score on positivity of tone would be related to higher scores on the PEI questionnaire measure. Second, the stability of parental optimism was also assessed, by comparing the most recently administered parental optimism measure (the Parent Expectations Index) to an earlier assessment collected one year earlier (1999) completed by the same mothers. It was expected that this measure would be moderately stable over the one-year time period. Third, parental optimism was predicted to be context-specific and should therefore vary across siblings. This prediction was examined by comparing the mothers' PEI scores in 2000 across two different siblings from the same family. Fourth, mothers who were more optimistic in their parenting role as assessed on the PEI, were expected to be more likely to attribute their adolescent's antisocial behaviour to external, unstable, and uncontrollable causes. Lastly, more optimistic mothers were expected to be more likely to attribute their adolescent's prosocial behaviour to internal, stable and controllable causes.

To test the above hypotheses, 40 mothers completed the PEI (Werner & Pratt, 2000) and the Causal Dimension Scale (Russell, 1982) for the target child, and also filled

out the PEI for the sibling next youngest from the target child. The Causal Dimension Scale was designed to assess how the attributor perceives the causes he or she has stated for an event. It assessed causal perceptions in terms of locus of causality, stability and controllability as described by Weiner (1972). Mothers were asked to think about six events concerning their child's hypothetical behaviour. Of the six events, three were positive, for example, "your child applies for a position that he or she wants very badly and ends up getting it", and three were negative, for example, "your child goes on a date and it goes badly". Mothers first provided an open-ended explanation for this event, and then answered nine questions about the cause that they provided for their child's behaviour on a 9-point scale. Three items measured locus of causality (internal-external), three measured stability and three measured controllability. The three items for each dimension were summed and high scores on the dimensions indicated that the cause of their child's behaviour was perceived as internal, stable and controllable. The PEI for the target child and the LOT (Scheier & Carver, 1985) had been administered one year earlier, and only the PEI was re-administered in this study. Parent narratives were used from the data collected in 1999. Cronbach's alphas for all dimensions on the Causal Dimension Scale fell at an acceptable level (.70 or above). Cronbach's alpha for mothers' PEI scores in the sample was .84 (Werner & Pratt, 2000).

The first finding regarding the relationship between a narrative measure of mothers' optimism about their older adolescent children and a questionnaire index of parental optimism indicated that the PEI was significantly positively related to independent ratings of the tone of mothers' proud stories ($r = .38$). This correlation provided supportive evidence for the newly developed PEI. To further explore parental

optimism, the stability of the PEI was assessed over a one-year period. As predicted, a significant positive correlation was found between the two parental optimism scores regarding the target child, collected one year apart ($r = .47$). Thus, parental optimism as measured by the PEI seems to be a moderately stable characteristic for a particular adolescent child.

The third hypothesis, that levels of parental optimism would be context-specific, and should vary across siblings, was also supported. The results indicated that parental optimism was not significantly correlated across siblings, $r = .14$. This finding suggests that parental optimism is quite specific and may be bi-directional, meaning that the characteristics of the child influence the parent as well as vice-versa. Therefore, even though parental optimism seems to be relatively stable for each child, it may depend quite a lot on the specific characteristics of each child. Some children may exhibit characteristics that make parents feel quite optimistic about their future. However, siblings from the same family may exhibit less desirable characteristics and parents may feel considerably less optimistic about their future.

Hypothesis 4, that more optimistic mothers would be more likely to attribute their adolescent's antisocial behaviour to external, and unstable causes, was supported. Mothers who were more optimistic were significantly more likely to attribute external and unstable causes for their adolescent's antisocial behaviour ($ps < .05$). As suggested by Armor and Taylor (1998), it may be that people who are the most optimistic going into a situation, will most likely be the ones to view their outcomes favourably, regardless of whether their predictions were actually fulfilled. This finding seems to be consistent with Armor and Taylor's suggestion. Optimistic parents may expect their child to exhibit

prosocial behaviour. However, if their expectations are not met, they may try to interpret this failure in the most favourable way. This may entail viewing the negative behaviour as purely situational and unstable, and thus unrelated to the qualities of the adolescent. The correlation of the PEI and the controllability dimension for negative behaviours approached significance in the hypothesized direction as well, $r = -.27$ ($p < .06$).

The final hypothesis predicted that more optimistic mothers would be more likely to attribute their adolescent's prosocial behaviour to internal, stable and controllable causes. This prediction was not supported, with correlations for all three measures with the PEI very close to zero. The fact that patterns of association with parental optimism were only apparent for antisocial, and not prosocial, behaviour is consistent with some past literature. Taylor (1991) found that negative events appear to elicit stronger physiological, cognitive, emotional, and social responses than do positive events. This arousal state is followed by more vigorous counteracting attributional activity that reverses, minimizes and even erases the impact of a negative event. Perhaps the more optimistic mothers made more extreme attributions for hypothetical negative behaviours of their adolescents to help maintain their high level of optimism.

One limitation of the above research is that the mothers who participated in this study had an older adolescent between the ages of 18-20. This is a rather old sample for examining the parenting of children. Optimism level may vary, depending on the age of the child. This study had examined the level of parental optimism only at the end of adolescence and early adulthood. Examination of parents with children in younger age groups would be needed to further explore parental optimism over the entire child rearing period.

The prior research was intended to provide supportive evidence for the validity of parental optimism and to discover some of the defining properties of the construct. Results supported the validity of the PEI, a newly-developed questionnaire designed to measure parental optimism, as it was positively related to independent ratings of the tone of mothers' proud stories. The PEI seemed to effectively measure parental optimism as we had defined it, which was the specific tendency for parents to be positive about their child's future development. In an attempt to further define the construct, we found that levels of parental optimism about the target adolescent over a one-year period were moderately stable, suggesting that mothers' optimism is somewhat consistent over time. Maternal optimism seemed to be target-specific, however, in the sense that mothers' optimism levels about two different children were found to be uncorrelated. As predicted, more optimistic mothers were significantly more likely to make more external and unstable attributions for the adolescents' negative behaviours. However, there was no relationship found between optimism and mothers' attributions for adolescents' prosocial behaviours.

Optimism and Efficacy

These findings expanded on the preliminary analyses of parental optimism provided by Pratt et al. (2001), and successfully predicted the relationship between parental optimism and attributions for adolescent antisocial behaviour. Now that we have a more detailed definition of parental optimism and have used an attributional measure to further establish the construct, it is of interest to explore how it is related to other parental measures. One measure of interest is efficacy. Perceived self-efficacy is defined as one's judgment of how effectively and competently one can execute a task or manage a

situation that may contain novel, unpredictable, and stressful elements (Gross, Conrad, Fogg, & Wothke, 1994). Bandura (1986) characterized self-efficacy as being specific to particular situations, rather than a dispositional expectancy that one's ability will lead to desired outcomes in all situations. Both self-efficacy and parental optimism are construed as one's beliefs about a particular situation.

A heightened understanding of parental efficacy is beneficial because it seems that parents who feel more efficacious have a positive influence on their child's development (Schaefer, 1985). For example, parents who attribute a high degree of parental efficacy to themselves are more likely to experience positive parenting outcomes (Johnston & Mash, 1989). Increased feelings of parental efficacy have also been associated with greater involvement by parents. The parental involvement literature generally concludes that "involved parents" have a positive influence on their children (Swick, 1987). Therefore, it is important for research to focus on factors that may influence and promote parental efficacy.

Just as level of parental optimism was related to parental attributional style, it may also be related to how efficacious one feels in his or her parenting role. First, it is important to look at the literature examining the relationship between dispositional optimism and self-efficacy. When constructing the Life Orientation Test, Scheier and Carver (1985) acknowledged that a person may hold favourable expectancies for various reasons, including a belief in personal efficacy, because he or she is lucky, or favoured by God. The end result of these favourable expectancies should be an optimistic orientation, that is, the generalized expectation that good things will happen.

The belief that a person may hold favourable expectancies because he or she may feel more efficacious is evident in a study conducted by Scheier and Carver (1985) to explore the impact of dispositional optimism on processes underlying coping with stress in a health-relevant context. A group of college students were studied during a very stressful time for them, the final four weeks of their academic semester. Again, the researchers' reasoning was that if optimism is a generalized expectancy for favourable outcomes, then optimism should instil a sense of confidence in dealing with the various obstacles encountered. Assuming that the students felt that their problems could be resolved, the positive expectancies held by optimistic students should lead to continued effort and cause them to deal with the problems more effectively than those less optimistic in orientation.

Scheier and Carver (1985) had students complete the LOT and a physical symptom checklist twice, at the beginning of the study and four weeks later. Results were as expected; optimism was negatively associated with symptom reporting at both assessment periods, and optimism and symptom reporting were also negatively correlated across time. Therefore, students who reported being optimistic at the start of the study were the ones who reported fewer symptoms four weeks later. Perhaps it was the students' beliefs that they could effectively deal with problems that prevented them from experiencing the various physical symptoms, although this hypothesis was not tested directly.

The above findings can also be interpreted from a motivational framework. It was noted that if students felt that their problems were capable of solution, the positive expectancies held by optimistic students would give rise to continued effort even if

obstacles were encountered. The idea that people's actions are greatly affected by their beliefs about the probable outcomes of those actions, has had a long history in psychological theories of motivation (e.g., Bandura, 1977). Following this line of thought, Scheier and Carver (1987) also believe that people's actions are greatly influenced by their expectations. For example, people who see desired outcomes as attainable continue to exert effort at attaining those outcomes, even when it becomes difficult. However, when outcomes seem unattainable, people reduce their efforts and eventually disengage themselves from pursuit of the goals.

Scheier and Carver (1985) have also investigated the role of dispositional optimism when people encounter difficulties in goal attainment. They suggested that dispositional optimism may have implications for the way in which people deal with these stresses. For example, the inverse relationship they found between optimism and symptom reporting in the sample of college undergraduates, suggests that dispositional optimism is a determinant of how well people respond to stress. One line of research to determine what optimists are doing differently from pessimists has been to look at the different strategies that optimists and pessimists use to cope with stress. Scheier, Weintraub, and Carver (1986) found that optimists have the tendency to rely on active, problem-focused coping (which involves action with the goal of eliminating or reducing the threatening stimulus), especially when they believe that something constructive can be done about the stressor. In addition, they also report being more planful when confronting stressful events, meaning that they are more likely to devise a clear plan of action to handle the problem. Both of these coping strategies seem to be consistent with

an optimistic and efficacious viewpoint, in which actively dealing with the obstacle would be expected to have a positive outcome.

The relationship between parental optimism and self-efficacy has not yet been examined in the literature. However, in a definition provided by Swick and Taylor (1982), parental efficacy is positively related to parental perceptions of work, marital relationships, parent-child interactions, self and intimate others. It seems plausible that parental optimism could be added to this list. Parents who have the specific tendency to be positive about their child's development, may feel more effective in their parenting role. It may be that more optimistic mothers feel as though they have all of the necessary parenting skills to deal with the challenges of parenting.

There are also some empirical data on this issue in our adolescent data set. Parental feelings of efficacy were not directly measured, but mothers were asked to report how much influence they felt they actually had over their adolescent. Parental feelings of influence were studied in relation to level of parental optimism as assessed by the PEI, in the Futures Study already described above (Werner & Pratt, 2000). The influence measure in that research contained nine topics, such as attending college or university, the importance of being happy in life, and children's religious beliefs. Mothers were asked three questions about each of these nine topics: how often they had discussions with their adolescents about the given topic, how much they tried to influence their adolescent in the given area, and how successful they felt they had been in actually influencing their adolescent in the given area. Correlational analyses indicated that more optimistic mothers as assessed by the PEI reported feeling more influential in all three dimensions of this measure. They reported discussing more with their adolescents, trying

to influence them more frequently, and feeling as though they were more successful in influencing them.

A disadvantage of the above Futures Sample was that it consisted only of mothers of older adolescents (e.g., Werner & Pratt, 2000). Given an interest in examining the relationship between parental optimism and parental efficacy, it makes more sense to study parents of younger children. When children are younger, parents are more actively involved in the parenting process. Examination of parent optimism and efficacy with a younger sample of children will overcome one of the limitations of the Futures Study, and will also provide an opportunity to investigate any age-related differences concerning parental optimism. Findings from the Futures Study suggested that parental optimism is "context-dependent," meaning that it is associated with the characteristics of the individual child. Consistent with this finding, parents' level of optimism about their adolescents' future should be related to the adolescents' pattern of previous behaviour. In late adolescence, mothers may feel as though their children are less likely to change and that their child's current behaviour and situation are predictive of the future. However, parents may be more optimistic about younger children, because of the belief that there is still plenty of time for the children to mature and to change any negative behaviour. Also, parents know that they will continue to assist with all aspects of positive socialization (Goodnow, 1986). In addition, the present study will further explore the bi-directional relationship between parent and child characteristics to see if in fact parents are more optimistic about their younger children who exhibit positive social skills. This investigation should contribute to further construct validation of the PEI.

Another limitation of the Futures sample was that it did not provide the opportunity to examine how positively fathers feel about their child's future development. Since we are studying parental optimism, both mothers and fathers should be investigated. Differences by gender with reference to levels of parental optimism have not been studied systematically in the literature, though Pratt et al. (2001) found little evidence of differences between mother and fathers in narrative optimism about early adolescents. However, Wile (1995) has noted a gender difference in parental reports of parenting involvement and ability. Wile (1995) found that parental reports and observations indicated that mothers were more involved with their infants, while fathers were employed outside the home more hours per week than mothers. Second, both parents rated the mother as a better caretaker of the infant than the father, and the mother rated the father's caretaking abilities higher than he rated himself. Darling-Fisher and Tiedje (1990) reported similar findings to those of Wile (1995), indicating that even though fathers become more involved in childcare when their wives are employed, women remain the primary caregiver regardless of employment status. With this difference suggested between gender, and parental attitudes and participation, it would be interesting to examine the relationship between gender, parental efficacy, and parental optimism. It might be expected that parental feelings of efficacy will be stronger when the parent is more involved and responsible, and therefore higher for mothers than fathers. In turn, such feelings of efficacy could also lead to a stronger sense of optimism about the child for mothers as well. It is important to note that Wile (1995) examined only parents of infants, and Darling-Fisher and Tiedje (1990) examined parents of preschool-aged children. It seems plausible that involvement levels and perceptions of

caretaking abilities may vary in relation to the age of the child, with fathers perceiving themselves as more efficacious when they have older rather than younger children. Specifically, if fathers become more involved when their children are older, it seems reasonable to suspect that their feelings of efficacy will become stronger when their child reaches adolescence, and perhaps their levels of optimism might increase as well, as reported by Pratt et al. (2001) for early to mid-adolescence.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to use a sample of mothers and fathers of younger children from an ongoing longitudinal study to replicate and extend previous findings on parent optimism drawn from the Futures Study involving older adolescents. I wanted to further explore the construct of parental optimism by investigating its relationship with parental efficacy and gender of the parent in families with younger children. Questionnaire measures were used to examine parental optimism in relation to efficacy in this study. The study also provided for a cross-sectional comparison, so that we could examine the relationship between parental optimism and age of the child.

Hypotheses

The hypotheses for this study thus included the following, for both mothers and fathers:

1. More optimistic parents should report greater feelings of parental efficacy, as indicated by higher scores on the Parenting Sense of Competence Scale (Ohan, Leung, & Johnston, 2000) and by reports of feeling as though they actually influence their children more often than do less optimistic parents.

2. Mothers of 8-year-old children should be more optimistic than mothers of older adolescents (ages 18-20). Therefore mothers in the present study, as assessed by the PEI, should be significantly more optimistic than mothers from the Futures Study described above.
3. Mothers should be more optimistic and feel more efficacious than fathers because they typically engage in parenting tasks more often than fathers when their children are young (pre-adolescent). Mothers should score significantly higher on the PEI and PSOC, and also report that they feel as though they have more influence over their children than do fathers. Child gender was also examined in relation to parental optimism, efficacy and perceived influence.

Method

Participants

Participants were drawn from an ongoing longitudinal study (Beaton, Norris, & Pratt, 2003). They were recruited from the Kitchener-Waterloo or Guelph areas through a newspaper advertisement for a study of "family value socialization". In order to participate, families had to have an 8 year-old, first-born child. At this final recruitment, 24 of the original 73 families remained involved in the study. Additional couples with a first-born child aged 8 years (N = 11) were recruited through newspaper ads, for a total of 35 couples in all (including 17 males and 18 females). The couples were generally married (97%), middle class, Caucasian, and moderately well-educated; mothers' mean was 4.03, "some university" on our 1-6 scale (SD = 1.44), whereas fathers' mean was 4.18 (SD = 1.34). Mothers' age averaged 36.8 years (SD = 3.38), and fathers' age averaged 38.5 years (SD = 3.65). In terms of health, both parents reported themselves in

"very good health" on average, which was a 4 on our 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) scale. Of 34 fathers (one failed to complete the questionnaires), 30 reported being employed (26 had full-time work), 1 was a student, and 3 were stay-at-home fathers. Of the 35 mothers, 19 were employed (11 had part-time work), 14 were "homemakers," and 2 were students.

Participants from the Futures Study were recruited from the Kitchener-Waterloo area (Werner & Pratt, 2000). The study began by sampling high school students who were 16-19 years in age. Two years later, these students were then asked for permission to contact their parents. After consent was obtained, 70 mothers agreed to participate in the study. Mothers were generally married (84%) with the remainder (16%) being either divorced, separated or single. On a 1-6 scale, from 1 (some high school) to 6 (post-university degree), mothers' mean was 3.30 (SD = 1.61) indicating that they had some college or university. Of 70 mothers, 58 were employed, 11 were homemakers, and 1 was unemployed. In terms of financial status, adolescents generally reported that their families were average to above average. Mothers were not required to indicate their age, although it seems reasonable to presume that they were approximately 10 years older than the mothers in the family- based study described here (~ 47 years of age), where children were aged 8-9 on average.

Procedure

Families were interviewed in their homes for two hours by a team of one male and two female graduate students. Each parent and child were interviewed separately, except for two short parent-child discussions and one couple discussion. Each parent also completed a questionnaire package, and then mailed it back in order for the family to

receive an honorarium of $50 for their participation. The measures for the present study were all drawn from the parent questionnaires. The PEI was presented first in the questionnaire package, followed by the Child Social Adjustment Measure, Parental Influence Measure, Life Orientation Test, and lastly, the Parenting Sense of Competence Scale (only the Efficacy Scale of the PSOC was used).

Measures

Parent Expectations Index (the PEI; Werner & Pratt, 2000; see Appendix A)

The Parent Expectations Index is a newly-developed measure of parental optimism. It focuses on parents' expectations about their child's future life outcomes. This scale has 18 items and contains a range of topics, such as career outcomes (6 items), financial success (3 items), social and family relationships (5 items), and personal adjustment (4 items). Of the 18 items, eight were worded negatively and were reverse scored, for example, "how likely is it that your child will experience serious difficulty in finding work", and 10 were worded positively, for example, "how likely is it that your child will have a happy and successful marriage". Responses are indicated on a 5-point scale that ranged from 0 (not at all) to 4 (extremely likely). Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .84 in the Futures Sample in 1999; one year later, the alpha was .79. In the present sample, Cronbach's alpha was .81 for mothers, and .80 for fathers.

Child Social Adjustment Measure (Roberts & Strayer, 1996; see Appendix B)

This 9-item scale was adapted from Roberts and Strayer (1996) and measured how frequently the child exhibits prosocial sharing and cooperative behaviours, as well as some antisocial behaviours. Parents responded on a 5 point scale, from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely likely). Example items included, "tries to be fair in games or activities,"

"cares about other people" and "is difficult to get along with" (reverse-scored). A few filler items were added as well. Reliabilities for this scale were .83 for mothers and .91 for fathers in the present sample.

Parental Influence Measure (Werner & Pratt, 2000; see Appendix C)

A parental influence measure comprised of 7 topics was administered. This measure was adapted from the one used in the Futures Study with parents of adolescents (Werner & Pratt, 2000). Topics included attending college or university, religion, moral values, personal values, and personal achievement. For each topic, parents' feelings of influence over their child were assessed by the following three questions; "how often do you discuss?", "how much do you try to influence?", and "how much influence do you actually have?" We only used the last question on actual influence for the present study because it was the item that most closely related to parental efficacy. Parents indicated their response on a 5-point scale, from 0 (none) to 4 (a great deal). A high score indicates a greater sense of parental influence across life domains. Cronbach's alphas in the Futures Sample for a similar measure in 1999 ranged from .61 to .73. In this sample, Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .70 for mothers and .78 for fathers.

Life Orientation Test (the LOT; Scheier & Carver, 1984; see Appendix D)

The LOT, a standard 8-item index of dispositional optimism was included in the questionnaire for the present study. An example item is "I always look on the bright side of things." Four of the items have negative wordings and were reverse-scored. Parents responded to the items on a 1-9 scale, from –4 (very strongly disagree) to +4 (very strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .82 for mothers and .87 for fathers in the present sample.

The Parenting Sense of Competence Scale (the PSOC; Ohan, Leung, & Johnston, 2000; see Appendix E)

The PSOC measures both parental feelings of efficacy and satisfaction. For this study, only the Efficacy Scale was used and it consists of 7 items (there are 17 items in total when both the Efficacy and Satisfaction Scale are included). All items are worded positively, for example, "Being a parent is manageable, and any problems are easily solved." Items are answered on a 6-point scale that ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate greater parenting self-esteem. This 7-item scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .79 for mothers and .71 for fathers in the present sample.

Results

Mothers and fathers reported feeling efficacious in their parenting role. For the overall means and standard deviations for mothers' and fathers' measures, see Table 1. The mean for mothers' feelings of efficacy was M=30.29 (SD = 4.40) while for fathers, M=29.35 (SD = 4.14), as assessed by the Parenting Sense of Competence Scale (the PSOC: Ohan, Leung &Johnston, 2000). This scale ranges from 7 (strongly disagree on all 7 items) to 42 (strongly agree on all 7 items). Similarly, our measure of parental influence asked parents how much influence they felt they actually had over their son or daughter on seven distinct topic areas. This measure indicated that mothers felt generally influential as parents (scale range is 0-28), M=19.34 (SD = 3.61), and for fathers, M=16.83 (SD = 4.14). When these two measures, the PSOC and parental feelings of influence, were correlated, it was found that they were related for mothers $r(29) = .36$, $p < .05$, but not for fathers, $r(27) = -.07$, ns. Mothers and fathers tended to agree on the PSOC, $r(30) = .36$, $p<.05$, but not on the influence measure, $r(31) = .08$.

Parental optimism was measured using the Parent Expectations Index that ranges from 0-72. Mothers reported feeling quite optimistic about their children, M=55.71 (SD = 6.89), though fathers were somewhat less so, M=42.85 (SD = 6.05). The correlation between parental optimism for mothers and fathers in the same family was positive and significant, $r(32) = .52$, $p < .01$. This indicates that there is agreement between parents' views of their child's future. In addition, a partial correlation analysis demonstrated that this relationship was present even when each parent's report of child behaviour was controlled statistically, partial $r(30) = .56$, $p < .01$.

Before examining our specific hypotheses, we tested to see if there was a relationship between parental optimism and qualities of the child, as might be expected. Specifically, we examined the relationship between parental optimism and the child's present level of social adjustment, as assessed on the scale from Roberts and Strayer (1996). Both mothers and fathers rated how often their child engaged in positive social behaviours. Parents from the same family agreed on these ratings of the child $r(32) = .46$, $p < .01$. When this child behaviour measure was correlated with the PEI, results indicated that rated child behaviour was significantly related to levels of parental optimism. This was true for both mothers and fathers, $r(32) = .32$, $p < .05$ and $r(32) = .40$, $p < .05$, respectively. All correlations for mothers and fathers are presented in Table 2.

As expected, parental optimism was also found to be distinct from dispositional optimism, as indicated by the nonsignificant correlations between the PEI and the LOT. For mothers, feelings of optimism toward their child were not related to their general

dispositional level of optimism, r(30) = .25, ns. Parental and dispositional optimism were slightly more related for fathers, though still not significantly so, r(32) = .32, p=.07.

Testing the hypotheses

The first hypothesis explored the relation of these measures further. It was predicted that more optimistic parents should report greater feelings of parental efficacy. In fact, level of optimism toward the child was positively correlated with feelings of efficacy, for both mothers and fathers. One outlier was discovered when examining the maternal distribution for feelings of parental efficacy (the PSOC), which was over 3 standard deviations below the mean. Accordingly, this outlier was removed, and a 2-tailed test was performed to determine the relationship between mothers' level of optimism (PEI) and feelings of efficacy (PSOC) for the rest of the sample. The two variables were significantly correlated, r(31) = .38, p = .03. For fathers, higher optimism scores also were positively correlated with feelings of efficacy, r(32) = .33, p = .054. As for the influence measure that asked parents how influential they felt over their son or daughter, it too was significantly positively related to father's parent optimism scores, r(27) = .38, p = .04. This alternate measure of parental efficacy was also positively related to mothers' feelings of parental optimism on the PEI, r(30) = .26, p = .16, though the correlation was not significant.

We wanted to control these zero-order correlations for child characteristics since the optimism measure was positively correlated with this index. For the PEI and PSOC for mothers, the partial correlation, controlling for child behaviour, remained significant, r partial (30) = .37, p < .05. For the PEI and feelings of influence for mothers, controlling for child behaviour, r partial (29) = .25. For fathers, the partial correlation for the PEI

and PSOC, controlling for child behaviour, also remained significant, r partial (31) = .30, $p < .05$ and for the PEI and father's feelings of influence, r partial (31) = .30, $p < .05$.

It is also worth noting the relations between parents' own dispositional optimism on the LOT and their feelings of efficacy on the PSOC and the influence measure. As might be expected from the arguments above, none of these correlations proved significant. For mothers, the correlation between the LOT and the PSOC was .25, ns, and for the LOT and the influence measure, $r(32) = .10$, ns. For fathers, the correlation of the LOT and the PSOC approached significance, $r(32) = .33$ ($p < .06$), but the correlation of the LOT and the influence measure was not significant, $r(32) = .23$.

The second hypothesis examined the relationship between maternal optimism and age of the child. It was predicted that mothers of 8 and 9-year-old children should be significantly more optimistic than mothers of older adolescents (18-20), based on scores on the PEI. This was measured using the PEI data collected in the present study, and comparing them to the PEI data previously collected in the Futures study of older adolescents, as described above. As mentioned above, the PEI (range is 0-72) indicated that mothers of 8 and 9-year-olds were quite optimistic, M=55.71 (SD = 6.89). Mothers of older adolescents were also optimistic, though slightly less so, M=53.81 (SD = 8.24). However, a 2 (Age Group) x 2 (Child Gender) ANOVA across these two data sets showed no significant age effect, $F(1,104)=1.25$, ns, nor any other significant effects. Thus there was no support for our second hypothesis.

The third hypothesis examined the differences between mothers and fathers in their levels of parental efficacy and optimism. It was hypothesized that mothers would be more efficacious and feel more optimistic than fathers overall. Differences associated

with child gender were also investigated. The PSOC indicated that mothers of boys had an average score of M=29.63 (SD = 5.38), and mothers of girls, M=30.89 (SD = 3.36). Similarly, the PSOC mean for fathers of boys was M=28.37 (SD = 4.57), and for fathers of girls, M=30.22 (SD = 3.62). The average scores associated with parental efficacy for daughters versus sons were higher for both mothers and fathers, however there was no significant effect of child gender found in a 2 (Parent Gender) x 2 (Child Gender) ANOVA, with repeated measures on the first factor. There was also no effect of parent gender found, nor any interaction.

Parental efficacy was also assessed by asking parents to report on how much influence they felt that they actually had over their son or daughter across seven topic areas. Mothers felt quite influential over their daughters and sons, M=20.53 (SD = 3.45) and M=18.00 (SD = 3.40), respectively. Fathers felt less influential in their parenting role than mothers for both daughters and sons, M=17.93 (SD = 4.23) and M=15.64 (SD = 3.84), respectively. A two-way ANOVA, 2 (Child Gender) x 2 (Parent Gender), was conducted, and significant main effects for both child and parent gender were found. The findings indicated that mothers felt as though they had significantly more influence over their children than fathers, F (1,26)=12.20, p=.002. Secondly, mothers and fathers felt that they had significantly more influence over their daughters than their sons, F (1,26)=5.33, p=.03. There was no significant interaction. Interestingly, Ohan et al. (2000) reported a significant effect of child gender on the PSOC, with parents of 5- to 12-year old girls reporting higher efficacy scores than parents of boys. This effect was not significant when the PSOC was employed in the present study, as noted above.

However, this finding was replicated in the present study when our own measure of parental influence was used.

The exploration of patterns of differences between mothers' and fathers' level of optimism and child gender resulted in one significant effect. Mothers of boys had an average parental optimism score of 56.56 (SD = 6.50), and mothers of girls scored 56.70 (SD = 6.09). In comparison, fathers of boys had an average parental optimism score of 41.67 (SD = 7.50), and fathers of girls scored 44.20 (SD = 3.55). A 2 (Child Gender) x 2 (Parent Gender) ANOVA, indicated a significant effect of parent gender. Mothers felt significantly more optimistic than fathers about both sons and daughters, F (1, 17)=58.34, p=.001. There were no effects of child gender, and no interaction. Thus, for two of the three measures investigated, mothers scored significantly higher than fathers, as hypothesized.

Discussion

This study further explored the newly developed construct of parental optimism in a sample of parents of 8 year-olds. Congruent with previous findings, parental optimism was correlated with both child and parent factors. Parental optimism may be one important parent quality that should be examined within Belsky's (1984) framework to assist in explaining the parenting process. For this reason, it is necessary to understand the defining characteristics of parental optimism.

General analyses of this novel construct indicated that it was relatively distinct from dispositional optimism as measured on the LOT of Scheier and Carver, as we had expected. This finding is congruent with the research presented by Armor and Taylor (1998), which separated "situated" from "dispositional" optimism, and by Peterson

(2000), which distinguished "little" optimism from "big" optimism. Secondly, parental optimism was shown to be significantly related to parental reports of positive child behaviour for both mothers and fathers. This suggests that parental optimism is influenced by qualities of the child him or herself and therefore contains some degree of realism. It is likely that parents base predictions for the future on what the child is presently like and how she or he is seen to behave. The implication regarding this finding is that there may be a bi-directional relationship between parent and child characteristics, such as the one suggested by Belsky (1984). It may be that parents are influenced by the characteristics of their child. More specifically, children's adjustment may predict and even influence parental optimism. These results are also consistent with findings that parental optimism is quite specific to particular children within the same family (Werner & Pratt, 2000). Furthermore, dispositional optimism for parents was generally not related to feelings of parental efficacy in this study.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that more optimistic parents should feel more efficacious in their parenting role. This hypothesis was supported for both our efficacy and influence measures; however, more weight should likely be given to the widely used Parenting Sense of Competence Scale (PSOC) that assesses feelings of efficacy than our newly-developed "influence" measure. For the PSOC measure in particular, more optimistic mothers felt significantly more efficacious as parents. Fathers also showed this pattern, with higher parental optimism scores linked with higher scores on the PSOC. Mothers and fathers were also asked to report how much influence they felt they actually had over their child. This scale was used as a secondary measure of parental efficacy. It was predicted that parents who felt as though they had more influence over their child would

feel a greater degree of parental optimism. Fathers who were more optimistic were significantly more likely to feel as though they had more influence over their child; results for mothers were parallel, but not significant.

These findings may be seen as consistent with the previous social psychological literature that has found a relationship between efficacy and one's ability to problem solve and manage life events. Scheier and Carver (1985) found that increased personal dispositional optimism is associated with more effective coping and a more positive outlook on life, and Scheier, Weintraub, and Carver (1986) reported that optimists are more planful when confronting stressful events. Armor and Taylor (1998) state that optimistic people engage more frequently in active, problem-focused coping mechanisms. In particular, an individual who is optimistic anticipates being able to cope with life stressors and is more persistent when faced with difficult tasks.

This general discussion about personal optimism can be extended to explain the relationship between parental optimism and feelings of efficacy in one's role as a parent. It seems probable that the benefits of optimism may translate into the parenting context in parallel ways. A parent who is more optimistic should exercise active, problem-focused coping, and engage in more planning when dealing with challenging child rearing events. This in turn should result in an increased feeling of parental efficacy. Specifically, because a parent will actively engage in solving problems to reach a desired effect, he or she will feel more capable in his or her role as a parent. Optimism may lead to not only more effective coping and problem solving skills, but in general, a more effective use of resources. More optimistic parents may utilize many resources more effectively, for example, spousal, educational and social support. Furthermore, greater persistence on

difficult tasks and a positive outlook on life should also contribute to increased feelings of parental effectiveness. Childrearing poses many difficult challenges, where persistence and a positive outlook are essential to sustaining feelings of parental efficacy. It is probable that some or all of these general benefits of optimism affect experience in the parenting role and contribute to increased feelings of parental efficacy in this particular context.

The second hypothesis, that mothers of eight-year-old children should be more optimistic than mothers of older adolescents (ages 19–20), was not supported. The results from the Parent Expectations Index (PEI) showed no significant age differences across these two samples. The absence of support for this hypothesis may be explained in part by the pattern of fluctuations in parental optimism. Preliminary longitudinal evidence provided by Pratt, Norris, van de Hoef and Arnold (2001) suggested that stories told by parents of young adolescents (age 14) were less optimistic than stories about the same children two years later, particularly for fathers. The researchers concluded that the level of optimism in parent narratives appears to fluctuate considerably over early to middle adolescence. Based on this research one may postulate that such complex changes in parental optimism were not detected here because data were not collected systematically across childhood to later adolescence, but only at two points widely separated in time, childhood and late adolescence.

Optimism has been described as a cognitive characteristic, referring to a goal, an expectation or an attribution (Peterson, 2000). Emotion plays a role in all three of these defining elements. Early to middle adolescence is a time when parents' expectations for their children are challenged. Collins (1995) suggests that pubertal and social changes

may contribute to the challenges faced by parents and may also help to explain the fluctuation in parental expectations. It is probable that the level of parental optimism will be less consistent because parental emotions will come into play during this challenging time. Perhaps early adolescence is an especially difficult time for parents to feel optimistic about their children's futures, but this age range was not examined here.

It is important to note also that this second hypothesis was tested using two different samples. One sample consisted of parents of eight-year old children, and the second a sample of parents of older adolescents, ages nineteen to twenty. The two samples were drawn from groups that may have differed on many other variables. In order to truly determine differences in maternal optimism with child age it would be necessary to follow the same family over time in a longitudinal study. It would also be important to collect data at more frequent intervals in order to accurately plot any fluctuations in parental optimism over the course of the child's development, as noted above. Lastly, Goodnow (1986) suggested that parents of young children believe that there is still plenty of time for them to mature and to eliminate their problem behaviour. Due to this belief, parents anticipate continual improvements in their behaviour. However, further analyses of the present data indicated that this might not be the case. Parents may instead base their predictions on present child behaviour, and so may not be as optimistic in some cases as might have been predicted.

Hypothesis three focused on gender differences between mothers and fathers in their levels of optimism and efficacy, with mothers hypothesized to be generally higher on both these qualities than fathers. The PEI was used to measure optimism, and both the PSOC and influence measure were again used to measure parental efficacy. The findings

of these analyses for the PEI indicated a significant parent gender effect. Specifically, mothers were significantly more optimistic about their children's futures than were fathers for these 8 year-old children. Mothers felt as though it was more likely that their children would have a positive future, for example, have a successful career, become well liked in the community and have a happy and fulfilling life. They felt it was less likely that their children would experience negative outcomes, such as needing social assistance, getting in trouble with the law or having few real friends.

Analyses were also conducted to determine any differences between mothers and fathers and their feelings of parental efficacy and influence. The PSOC did not indicate any significant effects of parent or child gender; mothers and fathers both felt quite efficacious in their parenting of both sons and daughters. However, analyses of the parental influence measure did show both parent and child gender effects. The parent gender effect found indicated that mothers felt as though they had significantly more influence over their children than fathers. The second effect, child gender, indicated that both mothers and fathers felt as though they possessed significantly more influence over their daughters than sons.

Throughout this study, levels of efficacy and influence have been measured and interpreted similarly. However, it is important to note that efficacy and influence are distinct concepts, although some of the defining characteristics of each may overlap. These two measures were in fact uncorrelated in the present investigation for fathers, and only weakly related for mothers. The findings from the influence measure indicated that mothers felt as though they had more influence in general over their children than did fathers. Furthermore, this measure suggested that parents generally felt higher levels of

influence over their daughters than their sons. The finding that parents felt more efficacious when parenting a daughter is consistent with the existing literature published by Ohan and colleagues (2000). These researchers used the PSOC on parents of 7-to-9-year old children and found that parents of girls report higher efficacy scores than parents of boys. Although this result appeared only on the influence measure in the present study, and was not significant for the PSOC, it is parallel to the results of Ohan et al. (2000).

Parents of girls apparently report greater feelings of efficacy in their parenting role because they feel that they have more control over their daughter's behaviour. In contrast, parents of boys may feel as though they are less able to play a significant guiding role in their son's development. Eight-year old boys (as in the present sample) may be seen as less mature than girls, and as well may be more prone to problem behaviours and a higher activity level. These factors may contribute to the perception that the behaviours exhibited by boys are more challenging to parenting skills than behaviours exhibited by girls. In addition, Ohan and colleagues (2000) suggest that girls may provide parents with more positive feedback regarding their parenting skills than do boys. For example, girls may display more emotion, respond more often to parental requests and more frequently model parental behaviour. All these factors may make parents feel that girls are generally more tractable than boys in preadolescence. Our findings are generally consistent with these arguments.

The influence measure also showed that mothers felt as though they possessed more influence over their children than fathers felt. This finding may simply be due to the fact that the majority of mothers are more involved in their children's lives at this

point in time (age 8-9) than are fathers. Both Wile (1995), and Darling-Fisher & Tiedje (1990) reported that mothers of young children (infants and preschoolers) are the primary caregivers. Mothers may spend more time with their children, thereby increasing the number of opportunities to enhance their parenting skills and observe the positive effects of their efforts. A number of these results are consistent with this evidence.

After finding that mothers felt as though they had more influence in their parenting role than did fathers, the data indicated that they felt more optimistic about their children's futures too. An extension of the above reasoning would lead one to expect this pattern. It only follows that if mothers feel more involved and influential as parents, they may then feel more optimistic about their potential to shape children's futures in a positive direction. Recall that the results for hypothesis 1 suggested that mothers who reported higher levels of parental optimism also reported higher levels of influence and efficacy. Overall, then, there was considerable support for the third hypothesis – mothers tended to feel both more influential and more optimistic about their younger children's futures than did fathers. However, this pattern may be less true for older children and adolescents, for whom fathers may be relatively more involved (Pratt et al., 2001). Further research is needed to clarify this matter.

Limitations

As mentioned above when discussing the second hypothesis, there are some limitations of this research that must be considered. To test to see if parental optimism varies with age of the child, two different samples were used in the present study. This cross sectional method may have prevented the discovery of any patterns of parental optimism throughout childhood and adolescence. It was predicted that mothers of eight-

year-old children would be more optimistic than mothers of older adolescents. There was no support for this hypothesis. However, had the study been longitudinal and included both mothers and fathers at all ages, age and parent gender differences may have been detected. Perhaps, for example, there is a decline in parental optimism after age eight into early adolescence, but by age nineteen or twenty it has returned to the level it reached in childhood. Unfortunately, there was no way of determining this because of the structure of the study.

It would also be interesting to determine if there are any parent gender effects when examining the age of the child. Since we found that mothers were more optimistic about their eight-year-old child's future than were fathers, it would be reasonable to predict that parental optimism differences may diminish by adolescence, when fathers may be relatively more engaged. Indeed, Pratt et al. (2001) did not find a difference between mothers and fathers of 14 and 16 year-olds when using a narrative index of parent optimism. One might predict greater gender similarities with parents of adolescents, as fathers are typically more involved in that stage of parenting. Therefore, future research should examine parent gender in relation to age of the child when studying parent optimism more comprehensively.

Aside from conducting a longitudinal study and including both mothers and fathers, sample size should also be increased to allow for greater power. A number of results reported here were borderline in nature, and further study with a larger sample is thus required. Furthermore, the use of additional, established measures would also be beneficial. The PSOC was used to validate the parental influence measure. It was hoped that the two measures would highly correlate and tap into parental efficacy; however they

turned out to be only weakly related. Both the PEI and parental influence measure are not fully established, and thus a greater number of more widely used measures needs to be incorporated into future research to help establish these new constructs.

Applications

Previous research has highlighted the importance and beneficial effects experienced by parents who feel efficacious in their parenting role. Schaefer (1985) argues that parents who have higher levels of parental efficacy are more likely to positively influence their children's development. The present study has suggested that parental efficacy may be linked to how optimistic parents feel about their children's future. It appears that optimism may be an important component to feeling efficacious. Additional studies need to be undertaken to confirm the relationship between parental efficacy and parental optimism, because there may be applied consequences. For example, if more optimistic parents feel as though they are more effective as parents and thus experience the benefits of strong feelings of parental efficacy, it only follows that parents who are pessimistic should receive training to increase their level of optimism. This idea is realistic according to Martin Seligman (1990) who states "optimism is a learned skill, one that can be permanently acquired". He believes that the self can change the way it thinks, for example, from a pessimistic explanatory style to an optimistic one. This change is accomplished by learning how to actively dispute pessimistic explanations through the use of evidence, alternatives, implications, usefulness, and distraction as tools. After individuals successfully learn how to use these tools, Seligman feels that many benefits will follow. He feels that optimism will lead to greater resiliency and physical health, and greater achievements at work, school and on the playing field.

Seligman (1990) did not specifically address the advantages experienced by parents who feel optimistic, particularly about their children's future. However, his beliefs can easily be extended into the area of parenting. A resilient parent who quickly bounces back from setbacks and weathers childrearing-related problems better should be more able to handle many of the challenges that he or she will encounter. Also, parents who view most of their parenting experiences as positive, and acknowledge and value their contribution to child rearing achievements, should feel highly efficacious as parents. Perhaps if parents learn how to utilize an optimistic explanatory style, then they will experience all of the benefits described by Seligman, as well as strengthen their feelings of parental efficacy.

Brody and colleagues (1994) also found that having an optimistic outlook is beneficial. They found that a higher level of personal optimism in parents is one contributing factor to positive child outcomes. Specifically, parental optimism is one of the factors that may affect family processes, which in turn affects child developmental outcomes. Their longitudinal results showed that low levels of parental optimism appeared to interfere with the child's development of self-regulation, and negatively influenced academic competence and socioemotional adjustment. The researchers suggested that optimism may lead parents to attribute family difficulties to situations that can change rather that attributing problems to reasons that tend not to change, but to persist over time. Again, drawing on Seligman's (1990) research, if parents undergo training to be optimistic about their child (to more frequently use an optimistic explanatory style), not only will they themselves experience the beneficial effects but their children will as well, according to this research of Brody et al. (1994).

In conclusion, this study enabled the exploration of an important and relatively new concept in developmental psychology, parents' optimism about their children's future outcomes. Several defining characteristics of parental optimism were noted. Findings suggested that it is positively related to feelings of parental efficacy and influence, and that mothers of young children possess higher levels than fathers. Overall the levels of parental optimism, efficacy and influence were quite high in this sample. These findings are encouraging, given the research conducted by Brody and colleagues (1994) suggesting that parents' general optimism is one of the factors that contributes to positive child outcomes, notably academic performance and socioemotional adjustment. It is also encouraging considering that Pratt et al. (2001) found that parental optimism may be associated with growth-enhancing parenting practices, such as an authoritative style, and more encouragement of autonomy. Taking into account the findings by Pratt et al. (2001), Brody (1994) and the current data, specifically that parental optimism may be an important component to feeling efficacious, it seems reasonable to suggest a general model. Perhaps, parental optimism influences feelings of parental efficacy, which in turn promotes a more effective parenting style, such as authoritative and autonomy-enhancing behaviours. However, as Belsky (1984) and the results of the present study reinforce, it is important to recognize the reciprocal relationship between child and parent characteristics.

Further longitudinal research is needed to test the above model and to determine if positive developmental outcomes will ensue from higher levels of optimism, specifically regarding the child. A parent training study is also recommended to test the validity of Seligman's notion that optimism is a learned skill. Optimistically, future research will

demonstrate that pessimistic parents can learn to be more optimistic and that this optimism impacts and sustains positive child developmental outcomes.

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Table 1.

Means and Standard Deviations for Mothers' and Fathers' Measures

Measure:	Mean:	Standard Deviation:	Possible Range:	Actual Range:	Alpha:	N:
Parent Optimism (PEI):						
Mothers:	55.71	6.89	0-72	43-70	.81	35
Fathers:	42.85	6.05		29-51	.80	34
Personal Optimism (LOT):	13.72	10.06	(-32)- +32	(-8)- +32	.82	32
Mothers:	11.97	9.44		(-14)- +31	.87	34
Fathers:						
Child Social Adjustment Measure (Parent Report):	36.47	4.78	9-45	21-44	.83	35
Mothers:	35.18	6.63		18-45	.91	34
Fathers:						
Parent Influence:						
Mothers:	19.34	3.61	0-28	13-28	.70	33
Fathers:	16.83	4.14		10-28	.78	32
Parent Efficacy (PSOC):						
Mothers:	30.29	4.40	7-42	17-37	.79	34
Fathers:	29.35	4.14		19-37	.71	34

Table 2.

Correlations for Mothers and Fathers

	PEI	LOT	Child Social Adjustment	Parent Influence	PSOC
PEI	1.00	.25	.32*	.26	.31*
LOT	.32	1.00	.22	.10	.25
Child Social Adjustment	.40*	.19	1.00	.13	.50*
Parent Influence	.38*	.23	.21	1.00	.36
PSOC	.33	.33	.23	.07	1.00

Note:

Mother's correlations above diagonal and father's correlations below

$p < .05$, df = 30-33

Appendices

Appendix A

Parent Expectations Index

Parents often have a sense of what kind of life their children will have when they become adults. For each of the following please indicate **how likely** you think it is that this will happen to your child when he or she becomes an adult, using the scale below.

0	1	2	3	4
not at all likely	somewhat likely	moderately likely	very likely	extremely likely

How likely is it that your child will:

1. _____ Have a happy and successful marriage.
2. _____ Be dissatisfied with his or her work.
3. _____ Have few real friends.
4. _____ Complete his or her schooling successfully.
5. _____ Experience severe financial hardship at some point.
6. _____ Have well-adjusted children.
7. _____ Experience serious difficulty in finding work.
8. _____ Experience marital separation or divorce.
9. _____ Have a successful career.
10. _____ Become well-known and well-liked in his or her community.
11. _____ Receive some kind of award or recognition for his or her work.
12. _____ Abuse drugs or alcohol.
13. _____ Need social assistance.
14. _____ Have close, long-lasting friendships.
15. _____ Get into trouble with the law.
16. _____ Achieve a leadership role in his or her career or profession.
17. _____ Become wealthy.
18. _____ Have a happy & fulfilling life.

Appendix B

Child Social Adjustment Measure

We'd like to know what your child is like now. For each behaviour, please indicate how characteristic each behaviour is for your oldest child by recording the appropriate number.

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all	Somewhat	Fairly Characteristic	Quite	Extremely

____a) Behaves aggressively with other children
____b) Tries to be fair in games or activities.*
____c) Is warm and friendly with other children.*
____d) Can work easily in a small group.*
____e) Is bossy.
____f) Is often difficult to get along with.*
____g) Is generally cooperative.*
____h) Gets into fights or arguments frequently.
____i) Shows concern and sympathy for others feelings.*
____j) Cares about other people.*
____k) Shares play, food or other materials with others.*
____l) Is generous in donating own time, or contributing toward purchases of gifts for others, charities, etc.
___m) Is aware and considerate of the feelings of others.*

* Items included in the Child Social Adjustment Measure

Appendix C

Parental Influence Measure

Children often look to their parents for guidance. We are interested in the kinds of advice and guidance you may have given your son or daughter. Using the scale below, please indicate the types of guidance you may have offered in each of the areas listed in the box.

0	1	2	3	4
none	a little	a moderate amount	quite a bit	a great deal

	How often do you discuss?	How much do you try to influence?	How much influence do you actually have?
a) living by good moral values			
b) religious or spiritual beliefs			
c) the importance of achieving success in life			
d) the importance of being happy in life			
e) the importance of working hard at school			
f) the need to help out with family chores			
g) attending college or university when grown up			

Appendix D

Life Orientation Test

Please use the following scale to indicate your agreement with the following statements. Write your answer in the space provided.

-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4
very strongly disagree				neither agree nor disagree				very strongly agree

____a) In uncertain times I usually expect the best.
____b) If something can go wrong for me, it usually will.
____c) I always look on the bright side of things.
____d) I am always optimistic about my future.
____e) I hardly ever expect things to go my way.
____f) Things never work out the way I want them to.
____g) I'm a believer in the idea that every cloud had a silver lining.
____h) I rarely count on good things happening to me.

Appendix E

Parenting Sense of Competence Scale

Please indicate how much you agree with each statement by circling the point on the scale below it.

a) The problems of taking care of a child are easy to solve once you know how your actions affect your child, an understanding I have acquired.

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly disagree Strongly agree

b) I would make a fine model for a new mother/father to follow in order to learn what she/he would need to know in order to be a good parent.

1 2 3 4 5 6
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

c) Being a parent is manageable, and any problems are easily solved.

1 2 3 4 5 6
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

d) I meet my own personal expectations for expertise in caring for my child

1 2 3 4 5 6
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

e) If anyone can find the answer to what is troubling my child, I am the one.

1 2 3 4 5 6
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

f) Considering how long I have been a mother/father, I feel thoroughly familiar with this role.

1 2 3 4 5 6
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

g) I honestly believe I have all the skills necessary to be a good mother/father to my child.

1 2 3 4 5 6
Strongly disagree Strongly agree