

Mothers, but not fathers, follow their own moms' parenting practices

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When it comes to how they raise their children, mothers today tend to follow the same practices their own mothers did, according to a new study that looked at parenting practices across two generations.

Fathers, on the other hand, don't seem to use their moms as parenting role models, at least for some practices.

Researchers at Ohio State University looked at how often parents in the 1990s spanked, read to and showed affection to their [children](#), and compared that to how these parents were treated by their own [mothers](#).

"We were surprised that mothers seem to learn a lot about the parenting role from their own mothers, but fathers don't follow their mothers as much," said Jonathan Vespa, co-author of the study and doctoral student in sociology at Ohio State.

"There was good reason to expect that fathers would have learned parenting from their mothers," Vespa said.

"These fathers were growing up in 70s and 80s and received much of their parenting from their mothers. Although more women were entering the workforce then, they still did the lion's share of parenting and childcare."

Fathers may have been more influenced by their dads rather than their moms, but the surveys used by the study didn't examine their fathers'

behavior, Vespa said.

"We really need to learn a lot more about how fathers learn to parent," he said.

The study also revealed significant generational changes in parenting practices, with great increases in the amount of reading and affection shown to children today, and reductions in the amount of spanking.

"While parents, particularly women, are learning many parenting practices from their mothers, there is also a lot of new practices they are picking up from the broader culture," he said.

Vespa conducted the study with Elizabeth Cooksey, associate professor of sociology at Ohio State, and Canada Keck, a senior research associate at Ohio State's Center for Human Resource Research.

They presented their research Aug. 9 in San Francisco at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association.

One of the strengths of the research is that it looked at actual parenting practices over two generations, following parents and their children over many years, and then continuing to follow the children as they had their own kids, Vespa said.

The data came from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, a nationally representative survey of people nationwide conducted by Ohio State's Center for Human Resource Research. Men and women aged 14 to 22 in 1979 were interviewed annually from 1979 to 1994, and once every two years from 1996 forward. A second survey followed all the children born to mothers in this original survey, from birth through adulthood, as they became parents themselves.

The final sample included 1,133 young adult parents of the mothers from the original NLSY79 survey.

In both generations, the researchers looked at how often parents spanked their children in the past week; how often they showed their child physical affection and praised them in the past week; and how often they read to their child in the past month.

Results showed that for all three behaviors, the second generation of mothers closely followed what their mothers did. For example, mothers who were spanked at least once a week are nearly half as more likely to spank their own children than mothers who weren't spanked at all.

In most cases, there was no relationship between mothers' parenting practices and the parenting practices of their sons - the one exception being spanking. And in that instance, fathers who were spanked as children were less likely to spank their own children.

"A little spanking of boys seems to deter them from spanking their own children later in life," Vespa said.

Overall, there was a large generational shift in which the second generation of parents was much less likely to spank than were their own parents. The reduction was particularly dramatic for fathers - only 28 percent of the second generation of fathers reported spanking their children, compared to 43 percent of mothers.

"The evidence suggests that mothers are more the disciplinarians in the family than fathers are today," Vespa said.

Another surprising finding was that fathers who spanked their children also tended to show high levels of affection.

"Some fathers might feel that being a strict disciplinarian is part of the way that fathers show affection to their children," he said.

There was no such connection between affection and spanking for mothers.

In general, the amount of affection parents show their children increased significantly over the generations. Sixty percent of [fathers](#) and 73 percent of mothers in the second generation reported showing their children physical affection and praising them within the last week. But only about 40 percent of their parents showed open affection on a weekly basis.

Reading to children also showed a generational shift. Nearly three times more mothers in the second generation reported reading to their children daily compared to their own parents.

Vespa said the results show that some parenting practices are passed down from mother to mother - but only to a point.

"If parents really just learned from their own parents, we wouldn't witness such dramatic generational shifts as were seen in this study," he said.

"We need to look at the broader culture to find other sources of change that shape how [parents](#) learn to parent."

Source: The Ohio State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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