

Relationships between General and Digital Parenting: Evidence from Four Cities in China

Research Overview

The rapid advancement of digital technologies means that children are growing up in an increasingly digitalized environment. This trajectory compels parents to navigate technology in their child-rearing, that is, digital parenting. Relatedly, parenting in the offline environment (i.e., general parenting) has to evolve to the online environment (i.e., digital parenting).

Purpose of Study

Effective digital parenting is needed to enable children to benefit from online opportunities and to minimize online risks for children. However, parents differ in their enactment of digital parenting, thereby giving rise to a digital parenting divide. This divide refers to systematic differences in how parents support and regulate children's digital lives, and can arise for various reasons, including differences in parental resources.

Framed from the perspective of the digital parenting divide, the present study examines the relationships between general parenting and digital parenting. Digital parenting refers to parental endeavors for understanding, supporting, and managing children's activities in digital contexts. General parenting, which is a type of parental resource, refers to broad patterns of attitudes and behaviors that characterize how parents relate to and socialize their children.

The present study examines the relationships between general parenting and digital parenting, controlling for parental (sex, age, highest educational level attained) and children's demographics (sex, grade levels). General parenting is conceptualized as comprising four dimensions, namely, warmth/instrumental support, autonomy support, psychological control, and behavioral control. Digital parenting is conceptualized as

comprising three dimensions (active digital parenting, restrictive digital parenting, and parent-child co-use), with each dimension comprising various digital parenting practices.

Research Methods

Sample

The sample comprised 795 parent-child dyads (21.13% fathers, 43.27% primary school children, 50% boys) from four cities in China (Chongqing, Guangdong, Jiangsu, Hong Kong) who participated in an online survey on digital parenting and children's digital outcomes.

Measures

Parents indicated the frequency in which they enacted digital parenting (active and restrictive digital parenting, parent-child co-use) using a five-point scale (*Never* to *always*). Active digital parenting was measured by four practices (parent-child discussion, parental encouragement, parental instruction, parents role-modeling digital use). Restrictive digital parenting was measured by seven practices (basic rule-setting, content-specific rule-setting, crisis intervention, hovering, monitoring, filtering, digital use in school-based involvement). Parent-child co-use was measured by three practices (parent-child joint digital engagement, sharenting, participatory learning).

Parents indicated the frequency in which they enacted general parenting comprising warmth/support (five items), instrumental support (14 items), autonomy support (four items), and psychological control (six items) using a five-point scale (*Never* to *always*), and behavioral control (five items) using a three-point scale (*Doesn't know* to *Know a lot*).

Parents provided data on their sex, age, and education level. Children provided data on their sex and grade level.

Analytical Strategy

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to determine the factor structures of digital and general parenting. Digital parenting comprised three second-order factors (active digital parenting, restrictive digital parenting, co-use). General parenting comprised warmth/support (a second-order factor measured by warmth and instrumental support), autonomy support, psychological control, and behavioral control. After the factor structures were determined, a structural equation model (SEM) where the four general parenting dimensions were modelled to predict the three dimensions of digital parenting, controlling for parental and children's demographics, was fitted to the data.

Results

Separate CFA results for digital and general parenting showed that the items loaded on their intended factors at more than .50. The measurement models provided an acceptable fit to the data (measured by χ^2 , CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR). The scales were valid (construct validity measured by average variance explained and discriminant validity measured by low inter-factor correlations) and reliable (measured by MacDonald's Omega).

The SEM results showed that among the general parenting dimensions, only warmth/support was positively related to active digital parenting. As for restrictive digital parenting, warmth/support and psychological control were positively related whereas behavioral control was negatively related to the variable. Lastly, only warmth/support was positively related to parent-child co-use.

Discussion

The present study advances the scholarship on parenting in four ways. First, it evidences the conceptualization of digital parenting as a comprehensive three-factor second-order construct (with each factor measured by specific digital parenting practices). Second, the different relationships involving different dimensions of general and digital parenting illustrate the complexity when parenting evolves from the non-digital to digital environments.

Third, our study highlights the important role of parental warmth and instrumental support for their children, relative to other general parenting dimensions, for digital parenting. Lastly, our study highlights the complexity involving restrictive digital parenting, as evidenced by the findings that among the three digital parenting dimensions, restrictive digital parenting has the greatest number of associations with the different general parenting dimensions examined, as compared to active digital parenting and parent-child co-use.