



EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTING PRACTICES AND CHILDREN'S CHARACTERISTICS

Demetris Hadjicharalambous¹,

Loucia Demetriou²ⁱ

¹Lecturer, Dr.,
Psychology and Social Sciences Department,
Frederick University,
Cyprus

²Associate Professor, Dr.,
Psychology and Social Sciences Department,
Frederick University,
Cyprus

Abstract:

The present research examined the relationship between parenting practices and children's characteristics. Specifically, the study focused on the children's characteristics, such as age, gender, birth order, and family structure, which influence parenting practices and have an impact on children's family relations, school performance, social competence, and children's self-esteem. The sample consisted of 336 Greek-speaking parents who had children age six up to twelve years old. Most of the participating parents were mothers (77%), with an average age of 35,7 +5,18. A large majority of the participants (75%) were a part of two parents-family, and 25% were a one parent-family. Parents answered four self-report questionnaires: A Personal Information Form (PIF) was used to collect information about family and children's characteristics, the Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ-mother and father version), the Parental Authority Styles (PAQ) Questionnaire and the Children's Family Relations, School Performance, Social Competence, and Self-Esteem Questionnaire. Research results showed that children's characteristics (gender, age, and birth order) are significantly related to parents' parenting styles. Furthermore, the family structure (one or two parents - family) was statistically significant in parenting practices. As a result, parenting practices affected children's family relations, social competence, school performance, and self-esteem.

Keywords: children's birth-order, family relations, parent-child relationship, parenting practices, parenting styles

ⁱ Correspondence: email soc.cd@frederick.ac.cy, pre.dl@frederick.ac.cy

1. Introduction

According to Buss and Plomin (1984), children's development and personality are affected by environmental and cultural influences, heredity, individuality, and temperament. Chess and Thomas (1984) postulated that children's characteristics affect parental effectiveness and parenting practices. Research findings support that children's temperamental characteristics and interactions with the environment, initially with the family environment, shape their personality (Dimitriou, 2012). LeMaistre (1999), Taniguchi et al. (2003), and Baider et al. (2003) consider the family as the most crucial source of support for children. Family support could help reduce stress levels and coping better in various stressful situations. Families with high levels of social support maintain greater well-being and a better quality of life. Indeed, according to Daniel et al. (1985) and Dunn (1988), children who received social support from their mothers were more adaptable and displayed less antisocial behaviors than those who did not feel supported. Similarly, mothers who showed more affection and tenderness towards their children promoted significant social support and higher self-esteem in their offspring.

In this study we placed the following research questions:

- 1) How do children's characteristics, age, gender, and birth order affect parenting practices?
- 2) In which ways do the various family structures impact parenting practices?

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Child's Birth Order

Adler was the first to acknowledge the importance of birth order. He postulated as early as 1928 that the child acquires unique characteristics depending on his/her birth order. From a very early age, children realize their order, position, and role within the family. Although parents consider that all their children grow up in the same environment and believe that they offer them equal love, affection, and care, every child develops a unique character, quite different from its siblings. In view of the fact that the dynamics of the family members' relationships are never static and are continually changing (Lehmann, 1996), more recent studies indicate that the child's birth order, the child's position in the family, and its gender play an important role in taking on specific roles in the family and in shaping each child's personality (Zervanos, 2009; Papadioti – Athanassiou, 2000).

2.1.1 Firstborn Children

Initially, firstborn children are like only children and enjoy all the privileges. When the second child is born, firstborn children, inevitably, cease to be in the centre of their parents' attention and they have to adjust to sharing the parental attention and love with their sibling(s). Research shows that, frequently, parents have unrealistic demands and high expectations of their firstborn children. Thus, children experience all the stress and the weight of their parents' hopes and expectations on their shoulders (Gerald, 2005).

Parents, often, spend more time with their firstborn children but once another child comes along, their behavior changes. They adapt to different demands, but they also become more flexible, possibly due to the previous experiences they have acquired from parenting their first child (Dunn, 1988). Frequently firstborn children tend to adopt the role of the protector and the leader. This role is often taken on within the family by adopting leadership positions and a tendency to impose themselves on their younger siblings (Zervanos, 2009; Prekop, 2008; Papadioti - Athanassiou, 2000).

According to Prekop (2008) and Lehmann (1996), younger siblings are often educated by firstborn children, even though this process causes them stress. Firstborn children seem to choose to communicate with older or younger people than themselves and more rarely with peers, which is likely due to the special relationship they had with their parents and younger siblings. Firstborn children struggle for power, so sometimes they become dominant, aggressive, ambitious, and jealous (Napier, 1997; Prekop, 2008).

Herbert (1998) claims that firstborn children are at greater risk of developing psychological problems, perhaps due to parental overprotection. This overprotection may cause the first child to lack self-confidence, hypersensitivity, and insecurity. It is also important to note that firstborn children have difficulty accepting the second-born child; the intense relationship that the firstborn children enjoyed with their parents is significantly reduced with the second child's arrival. The firstborn children often express a desire to have a baby sister or brother. When firstborn children are prepared for a new family member, they would be ready to face the family system's upcoming changes. Parents are the ones who should establish the relationship between siblings from the moment of pregnancy (Prekop, 2008, Baum, 2003).

2.1.2 Middle or Second Children

Second-born children will never have the exclusive care of their parents, so middle children try to emulate the achievements of their older sibling. Often second-born children develop characteristics not shared by their older brother or sister in order to earn the praise of their parents and teachers. (Gerald, 2005).

According to Prekop (2008) and Lehmann (1996), the second-born children seemingly live in "*anonymity*" as parents do not pressure them, nor do they expect them to achieve what the older siblings have achieved so far. The second-born children do not gain as many privileges as the firstborn children, so they learn to share. When the second-born children become middle children, due to a third child's arrival, they may initially believe that they will enjoy the same higher position as the firstborn children. However, they realize, soon enough, that they have neither the firstborn child's nor the younger child's privileges (Dreikurs, 2007).

Compared to their firstborn siblings, second-born children are more independent, less introverted and neurotic, and more cheerful and expressive. Ultimately though, a different situation forms within the family dynamic when the second-born children become middle children. The second-born children find themselves squeezed between two other siblings and may react to this status by becoming demanding and even

competitive children who try to attract others' attention with negative behaviors or are shy and hypersensitive. The realization that they will neither enjoy the exclusive attention as firstborn children nor their parent's excessive affection as the younger siblings may lead them to develop extreme behavior, which is how they react to a sense of abandonment they come to experience (Dreikurs, 2007).

According to Baum (2003), Ryckman (1989), and Adler (1928), the middle children believe that parents do not love them so much, they do not care, and they do not pay much attention to their parents, so they tend to enjoy more freedom, to decide for their choices and desires more than their siblings. The middle children's characteristics are that they have a large circle of acquaintances, usually creating close personal relationships.

2.1.3. Youngest Birth Children

The youngest birth children often enjoy more pampering by their family. Many families treat the youngest children as helpless, and they are overprotective with them, while they fail to offer the child equal participation in family matters. As a result, the youngest child develops selfish behavior or repulsions, respectively (Herbert, 1998).

According to Malikiosi - Loizou (1999), the youngest birth children are the most pampered, just like the first-born, and are often more prone to present behavioral problems. On the other hand, due to the exhaustion of all their emotional effort to raise older children, parents often ignore youngest children's needs resulting in them becoming emotionally neglected children rather than spoiled (Baum, 2003).

Zervanos (2009) and Dreikurs (2007), postulate that the youngest birth children tend to be more rebellious, very social, inventive, imaginative, and ready for new experiences and new acquaintances. Also, the youngest birth children are given more freedom from their parents in their daily activities. They often remain the "baby of the family" through adulthood, and they tend to expect others to take responsibility for their actions

2.1.4. Only Children

Due to the lack of other children in the family, the only children tend to be more oriented towards adults, which offers them various stimuli, thus sharpening their verbal ability, critical thinking, mental and emotional maturity. The only children in a family are at the same time, the firstborn children, and they usually gather the positive characteristics of the firstborn children (Bezeveggis, 2012).

According to Zervanos (2009), only children are at the center of their family, a position they will always hold. Usually, the only children combine the firstborn children's characteristics and the youngest-born children's exclusivity by their parents and relatives. Only children are characterized by high levels of self-esteem, motivation, and academic performance and independence. Only children spend time with adults, which contributes to their maturation process; they also acquire various skills through the adults' motivations and stimuli around them. On the other hand, parents have enormous demands on only children, making them overly stressed.

2.2. Children's Gender and Age

It is worth mentioning that regarding the effect of the birth order on children's personalities, children's gender and age play an important role in children's personalities. If the first child in a family is a boy and the second child is a girl, they probably have two firstborn children's characteristics. Also, if the youngest child is about five years older than the other siblings, then many second-born child characteristics are similar to those of the firstborn child (Prekop, 2008; Lehmann, 1996).

According to Baum (2003), Xountoumadi (1996), and Dunn (1988), children's age plays a vital role in sibling relationships and in shaping their personality. Siblings who only have a slight age difference between them are more cordial and friendly to one another, probably because they have common interests and often share space.

On the other hand, some parents state that their children have a good relationship with each other, precisely because they are very different. The older child does not feel so dethroned; consequently, it behaves in a friendlier and more positive manner towards the younger siblings. The younger siblings usually imitate the older ones, especially when they are of the same gender (Dreikurs, 2007; Dunn, 1988; Xountoumadi, 1996).

Research points to the view that girls are more affectionate with their younger siblings, especially when they are of the opposite gender, and they act and behave as "moms". Similarly, older boys are more supportive of the family's younger boys (Dreikurs, 2007; Baum, 2003).

2.3 Family Structure – Parenting Practices

Family structure is an essential factor that influences parental effectiveness and parenting practices. Nowadays, the family exists in different kinds and types. The nuclear family consists of parents and their children; on the other hand, the extended family includes parents, children, and other relatives such as grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins. The adopted family adopts a child, the foster family hosts a child until the child is adopted, or until the child can return to its biological family; the same gender family consists of two parents of the same gender, while the single-parent family, consists of only one parent. A single-parent family type occurs mainly after the parents' divorce, or widowhood, or mothers who choose to remain unmarried. The single-parent family household may have already faced various problems and consequences like a reduction of family resources, a reduction of time that parents devote to their child as well as the changes in the parent-child relationship (Amato and Keith, 1991; Dimitriou, 2001).

The family structure has changed as divorce rates have increased; thus, many children do not grow up in the same home with both biological parents. In some cases, when raising a child in a single-parent household (more likely with the mother as the sole caregiver), the possible adverse effects of a father's absence may be alleviated by having a network of supportive extended family and friends. Other factors, such as the child's age and gender, or even the reasons behind the household presenting as single (death, divorce) and the mother's attitude may play a significant role in the child's emotional development (Dimitriou 2001). Hetherington's findings (1982) showed that the smooth

children's development after a divorce depends on their characteristics and the relationship that the parents maintain whether they live together or are divorced.

Tantaros et al. (2004) point out that the nuclear family provides the best family type for child development. The family structure seems to be the most important factor influencing children's academic life, and this type of family indirectly linked to children's problems at school and the socio-economic level of the family.

Artis (2007) showed that children's development and adjustment are an essential factor in children's quality of life, including family's financial resources, maternal depression symptoms, and parental care practices.

3. Method

3.1. Sample

The study took place in the city of Limassol in Cyprus in the Spring of 2019. Participants were 336 Greek-speaking parents who had children in the public primary school age 6 – 12. Specifically, the sample consisted of parents who mostly had one or two children (93%); only 7% of parents had three or more children. Most of the parents were mothers (77%), with an average age of 35,7 +5,18. The majority of the participants were two parent-families (75%), and 25% were single parents. Out of the 87% of the participating parents, 57% referred to first-born sons and 30% to first-born daughters.

3.2. Procedure / Data Collection

We collected our data through face-to-face meetings. Participating parents were informed about the purpose and the aims of the research. The research team explained the questionnaires' information, and emphasized that they were to answer all the questions concerning their child, six up to twelve years old. The researchers collaborated with and asked parents to complete 1. the Personal Information Form (PIF), 2. the Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ), 3. the Parental Authority Styles (PAQ) Questionnaire and 4. the Questionnaire of Children's Family Relations, School Performance, Social Competence, and Self-Esteem.

3.3. Instruments

The participating parents completed four (4) questionnaires in their Greek language versions, including a Personal Information Form (PIF) i.e., a short demographic questionnaire to collect information about the family type and children's characteristics (age, gender, and birth order). The Personal Information Form consisted of fifteen questions.

The second questionnaire was the Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ-mother and father version) (Ronher, 2004). The PARQ is a self-report questionnaire that explores parental (maternal and paternal) behavior as perceived by children (Rohner & Khaleque, 2005, 2010). The instrument loads to four factors 1. warmth

and affection, 2. hostility and aggression, 3. indifference and neglect, and 4. undifferentiated rejection.

The third instrument was the Parenting Authority Styles Questionnaire (Buri, 1991). The PAQ questionnaire explores parental styles that parents apply to their children's education and rearing. The questionnaire loads to three factors. The first factor is "authoritarian parenting," the second factor refers to "authoritative parenting," and the third factor refers to "permissive parenting."

The fourth Questionnaire was Children's family relations, school performance, social competence, and children's self-esteem (Kontopoulou, 2008). The questionnaire of family relations, school performance, social competence, and self-esteem for children (Kontopoulou, 2008) examines parent's perceptions for their children's developmental characteristics 7-12 years old. The questionnaire loads at three factors: The first factor is family competencies, the second factor is social competencies, and the third factor is school competences to sum up all factors indicates the score of children's self-esteem.

3.4. Data Analysis

We conducted our data analysis by utilizing the SPSS 25.0 package program. Data analysis included descriptive statistics as mean, standard deviation, frequencies, percentage to describe participants' and their children's characteristics. In order to examine our two research questions, we applied the statistical analysis t-test, one-way ANOVA, two-way ANOVA, and multivariate ANOVA (MANOVA) to compare means between parental practices, parental styles, children's characteristics and their impact on children's self-esteem, family relations, school performance, and social competences. We postulated the following research questions:

- 1) How do children's characteristics, age, gender, and birth order affect parenting practices?
- 2) In which ways do the various family structures impact parenting practices?

4. Results

Regarding our first research question, namely "How do children's characteristics, such as age, gender and birth order affect parenting practices" our data analysis showed the following significant tendencies. As far age the child's age is concerned, we detected a statistically significant difference between the parents of younger and older children in the variable "Parental Neglect" [$F(1,335) = 3,806, p < 0.000$]. Parents with a child of 6-7 years seemed to neglect their child ($m = 9.62 \pm 1.89$) less than participants with a child 8-12 years old ($m = 10.92 \pm 2.32$).

The other dependent variables in which our data analysis showed a statistically significant difference between children's gender (boy – girl) were: "Parental Neglect" [$F(1,335) = 4,400, p < 0.001$], whereas the participants whose child was a girl neglected their child less ($m = 9.87 \pm 2.08$) than those parents who had a boy ($m = 10.81 \pm 2.29$). "Authoritative parenting" [$F(1,335) = 5,755, p < 0.000$]; Parents of girls were

more democratic ($m = 32.12 \pm 4.04$) than those raising a boy ($m = 31.19 \pm 3.47$). "*Affection / Warmth*" [$F(1,335) = 2,260, p < 0.022$]; The participating parents of boys displayed less affection ($m = 13.44 \pm 4.90$) than the parents of girls ($m = 16.73 \pm 6.99$). "*School competence*" [$F(1,335) = 2,550, p < 0.04$]. Parents whose child was a boy considered that their child had more school competence ($m = 21.95 \pm 7.19$) than participants with girls ($m = 18.47 \pm 7.27$). "*Social competence*" [$F(1,335) = 6,332, p < 0.001$] whereas participants with boys claimed that their children had more social competencies ($m = 26.69 \pm 7.12$) than those raising girls ($m = 24.06 \pm 7.42$). "*Child self-esteem*" [$F(1,335) = 5,006, p < 0.011$]; the participating parents of boys stated that their child had a higher self-esteem ($m = 68.44 \pm 19.61$) than the parents of girls ($m = 60.52 \pm 19.50$). "*Family competence*" [$F(1,335) = 3,445, p < 0.003$]; where we detected that parents of boys claimed that their child had more family competence ($m = 19.80 \pm 6.03$) than the parents of girls ($m = 17.98 \pm 5.89$). "*Parental Rejection / Acceptance*" [$F(1,335) = 3,890, p < 0.01$]; participating parents whose child was a girl were less rejecting ($m = 44.50 \pm 11.65$) than the participants whose parented a boy ($m = 50.46 \pm 13.07$).

The dependent variables in which our data processing showed significant relationships with children's birth order were the following: "*Parental Neglect*" [$F(1,335) = 2,850, p < 0.01$]; where our analysis showed that the parents of our sample exhibited more neglecting attitudes toward their younger children ($m = 10.91 \pm 2.94$), as compared to their older, and in particular they seemed to show significantly less neglect toward their firstborn children ($m = 9,71 \pm 2,10$). "*Affection / Warmth*" [$F(1,335) = 6,432, p < 0.001$]. The parents of our sample were more affectionate toward their younger children ($m = 15.77 \pm 5.46$) as compared to their firstborn children ($m = 11.51 \pm 3.90$). "*School competence*" [$F(1,335) = 4,456, p < 0.001$] participants stated that their youngest children had more school competence ($m = 24.75 \pm 5.41$) than their firstborn children ($m = 18.77 \pm 7.51$). In regards to "*Social competencies*" [$F(1,335) = 3,912, p < 0.03$] our participants stated that their younger children had more social competence ($m = 30.04 \pm 4.52$) than their first-born children ($m = 24.13 \pm 7.65$). As far as the "*Child self-esteem of their offspring was concerned*" [$F(1,335) = 5,480, p < 0.001$] participants stated that their younger children had a higher self-esteem ($m = 76.44 \pm 12.99$) compared to their older children and to their first-born children ($m = 60.89 \pm 21.18$). "*Family competence*" [$F(1,335) = 3,690, p < 0.01$] parents' answers indicated that they considered their youngest children as more competent regarding family relations ($m = 21.65 \pm 3.84$) than their firstborn children ($m = 17.99 \pm 6.85$). "*Parental Rejection / Acceptance*" [$F(1,335) = 8,206, p < 0.000$] the participants were more rejecting towards their firstborn children ($m = 48.37 \pm 12.29$) and less rejecting towards their younger children ($m = 41,93 \pm 11.01$). "*Permissive parenting*" [$F(1,335) = 6,112, p < 0.013$]. Parental responses showed that they were less permissive with their firstborn children ($m = 23.83 \pm 2.70$) and more permissive with their younger children ($m = 27.28 \pm 2,54$).

The dependent variables in which we observed a statistically significant difference depending on the number of children are the following: "*Affection / Warmth*" [$F(1,335) = 4,126, p < 0.01$]. Here, participants with one or two children seemed to display more

affection ($m = 15.59 \pm 8.32$) than the parents with three or more children ($m = 9.73 \pm 1.53$). "School competence" [$F(1,335) = 2,244, p < 0.05$], whereas participants with three or more offspring stated that their children had less school competencies ($m = 19.76 \pm 7.22$) than those parents with one or two children, who believed that their children had more school competencies ($m = 27.69 \pm 3.34$). "Social competence" [$F(1,335) = 4,556, p < 0.011$] parents with three or more children stated that their children displayed less social competence ($m = 24.80 \pm 7.47$) than participants with only one or two children ($m = 33.15 \pm 2.79$). "Child self-esteem" [$F(1,335) = 6,332, p < 0.001$] with parents who were raising three children (or more) stating that their children had a lower self-esteem ($m = 63.21 \pm 20.08$) than those parents with only one or two children, who stated that their children had a higher self-esteem ($m = 84.69 \pm 6.91$). "Family competence" [$F(1,335) = 2,260, p < 0.05$]; participants with three children or more claimed that their children had less family competence ($m = 18.64 \pm 6.24$) than parents raising just one or two children ($m = 23.84 \pm 1.86$). "Parental Rejection / Acceptance" [$F(1,335) = 5,224, p < 0.04$], with parents raising three or more children appearing to be more rejecting ($m = 46.89 \pm 15.24$) than parents who only had one or two children ($m = 36.50 \pm 3.89$). "Permissive parenting" [$F(1,335) = 3,914, p < 0.01$]; participants with only one or two children were less permissive ($m = 23.86 \pm 2.92$) than the parents with three or more children ($m = 28.11 \pm 2.53$). The children's gender as well as their birth order showed statistically significant differences with the dependent variable "Authoritarian parenting" [$F(1,335) = 3,400, p < 0.05$]. Our data indicated that parents with a second-birth order girl applied more "Authoritarian parenting practices", than other parents.

Data analysis also showed that *Family structure* (one or two parents - family) was statistically significant with the dependent variables "Parental satisfaction" [$F(1,335) = 4,970, p < 0.026$], "Parental Neglect" [$F(1,335) = 4,725, p < 0.03$], "Parental Self-Esteem" [$F(1,335) = 7,790, p < 0.01$], and "Parental Effectiveness" [$F(1,335) = 8,890, p < 0.01$]. Our results showed that one parent - families had a higher level of "parental satisfaction" than two parents - families ($m = 12.40 \pm 1.90$). In regards to "Parental Neglect" two parents-families seemed to neglect their child more ($m = 10.40 \pm 2.06$) than one parent-families ($m = 9.87 \pm 2.59$). "Parental Self-Esteem" where parents in two parent-families had a lower self-esteem ($m = 70.03 \pm 6.72$) than single parent-families ($m = 73.41 \pm 7.12$). Last but not least, when evaluating their "Parental Effectiveness" parents belonging in a two parents-family structure felt that they were less effective in their parental role ($m = 33.98 \pm 5.28$) than single parents ($m = 35.94 \pm 4.09$).

5. Discussion

Question 1: The children's characteristics, age, gender and birth order influence parenting practices.

In the present study, we explored two research questions. In our first question, we examined whether children's characteristics, such as age, gender, and birth order, affected parenting practices. Indeed, we detected a statistically significant relationship

between children's gender and parenting practices. Research results showed that girls received more affection and warmth from their parents and boys received more neglect and rejection from their parents than girls. Parents stated that they applied "authoritative parenting" more often to their girls than to their boys. Parents who raised boys stated that their boys had more self-esteem, family, school, and social competence than parents who raised girls. Our findings are similar with those of Rohner & Khaleque (2013) and Leaper (2002) regarding the perceived "Parental Acceptance / Rejection," in that girls receive more "Acceptance / Warmth" from their fathers than boys. Mothers seemed to be more demanding of their daughters and less of their sons. Through this behavior and parental expectations, children from a very young age create specific patterns about their parents' role, depending on their gender (Leaper, 2002). Deliliga (2015) had similar findings: girls were more aware that they were receiving affection/warmth, while boys were receiving more hostility and neglect.

Research findings showed a statistically significant difference between younger and older children concerning parenting practices. Older children were more likely to be rejected by their parents. Our findings are consistent with Woolfson and Grant's (2006) findings, who established that younger children's parents adopted a more supportive and permissive style.

Furthermore, we found differences in parenting styles depending on the children's birth order; firstborn children seemed to receive more affection and warmth. The youngest children appeared to be the ones most often neglected by their parents. Parents felt more effective and satisfied with their parental role with their youngest children, towards whom they tended to adopt a more permissive attitude. However, parents also stated that the youngest children had more family, school, and social competence, while at the same time, they claimed that the firstborn children had a higher self-esteem than younger children born after them. We also observed that parents with a second-born daughter applied more "Authoritarian parenting" than other parents.

Our research findings are confirmed by those by Gerald (2005), Barclay, Hällsten, & Myrskylä, (2017), in that parents placed more often unrealistic demands, high expectations, and their unfulfilled dreams on their firstborn children, and they believed (or hoped) that their children should fulfil such expectations. Parents spent more time with their firstborn children, and when they had second birth children, they began to adapt and to differentiate their behavior; for example, they became more lenient and flexible, perhaps due to the experience they had already gained from the firstborn child (Dunn, 1988).

According to Krug et al. (2020), D'Onofrio et al. (2009), and Malikiosi - Loizou (1999), the youngest children, which are supposed to be the most pampered, just as the firstborn children are, were more prone to behavioral problems. On the other hand, parents, due to the exhaustion of all their emotional and physical effort in raising their older children, often ignore their youngest children's needs, who become more emotionally neglected than those who are spoiled (Baum, 2003).

Galani (2011) stated that there is a strong correlation between the children's birth order and the support that parents offer to their children. Parents are more supportive of their youngest children than of their firstborn children. Youngest children tend to acquire more social competencies and more freedom due to their parent's patience and practices.

Question 2: Family structure and number of children influence parenting practices.

The present study's findings showed that there was a statistically significant difference between the number of children in the family and parenting practices. Data analysis indicated that parents with two children in the family were more affectionate towards them in comparison to parents with one or three children, who appeared to be more rejecting. Parents with three or more children seemed to be more effective and satisfied with their parental role but, at the same time, more permissive towards their children. Parents raising two children stated that their children had more family, school, and social competencies, while parents with three or more children evaluated their children's self-esteem as higher. Similar results to the present study were shown by Deliliga (2015), who stated that the supportive parent type depends on the number of children. In our research we were able to observe that parents who had one or two children came through as more supportive than those who had three or more children. Similar results were shown by Galani (2011), who found that children from families with two children received more support from their mothers. An important finding, which is substantiated by the present research, is that parents with three or more children believed that their children had higher self-esteem than parents with one or two children.

In the present study there was a statistically significant difference between families with two parents and families with one parent in relation to parenting practices. Research results showed that two-parent families were more likely to neglect their children, to be less effective and less satisfied with their parental role than one-parent families. However, other researchers stated different findings: after divorce, single parents provided less emotional support to their children, were less affectionate and stable in their parenting methods, and did not have good communication with their children. Nevertheless, perhaps the most critical factors in children's development are each parent's characteristics and the quality of the parents' relationship, regardless of whether they live together or they are divorced (Hetherington et al., 1982).

On the other hand, parents in one-parent families, having left a troubled relationship, may have been able to maintain a balanced relationship with their ex-spouse and a better relationship with their children. According to Bezeveggis (2012), all research on divorce's consequences concludes that the most crucial factor for children's development is the parental relationship quality following the divorce. Good relationships between parents ensure better communication and a more comfortable handling of any problems related to their children. Children who live in an environment where parents have a positive relationship, love, and affection seem to experience more security and stability in their lives. According to Hadjicharalambous & Dimitriou (2020),

parents who stated that their children enjoyed good family relations also claimed that their children displayed better school performance and social competencies, and high self-esteem. According to Patterson (1982), Almeida, Wethington, and Chandler (1999), Anderson, Lindner, and Bennion (1992), when family conflicts and lack of affection put the family at risk of breaking up and also affect children's psychosocial development as well as affect the parent-child relationship. Parents who are often drawn into marital conflicts may be less willing to recognize and act on their children's emotional needs

6. Conclusion

Research results showed that children's characteristics (gender, age and birth order) are significantly related to the parenting styles that parents adopt.

Our findings showed that parents tended to neglect more their youngest children and applied more authoritative parenting practices to their daughters than their sons. At the same time, our participants stated that their sons had more self-esteem, social skills, better family relations, and higher school performance than their daughters. Parents seemed to be more permissive with their youngest children, and more rejecting toward their firstborn children. Interestingly, parents stated that their youngest children had higher self-esteem, better family relations, better school performance, and more social skills and competencies than their older offspring. Families with two children claimed that they displayed more affection/warmth and were less permissive than families with three or more children.

Furthermore, the family structure (one or two parents - family) was statistically significant in parenting practices. Consequently, we were able to establish that parenting practices affect children's family relations, social competence, school performance, and self-esteem. Our findings also showed that parents in single-parent families were more satisfied and effective in their parental role than those in two-parent families. Parents applied positive parenting practices towards their children while happy and satisfied with their parental and marital roles, which seems to play an essential role in children's adjustment. Future parenting studies would benefit from including more factors that affect parenting styles and children's characteristics. Some factors worth examining are children's residence and parental stress, satisfaction, and effectiveness.

6.1 Limitations

The present study has some limitations that should be noted. The first limitation regards the numbers in the paternal and maternal samples. The fathers' sample is significantly smaller than the mothers' sample. Also, the sample of families with three or more children is smaller than that of families with one or two children. A second limitation in our research might be that all the instruments that we applied were self-report questionnaires. As with any research using quantitative data and measures, it was assumed that participants' responses were reliable and honest, but this cannot be confirmed. Last but not least, our study was conducted exclusively in the Limassol

district, which is the second largest of four districts in Cyprus. It should be better understood as representing the experiences of a selected group of parents (mothers and fathers) but cannot be generalized to all Cypriot parents.

Acknowledgement

The authors are grateful to the parents who participated in the research.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Authors' Contribution

Both authors contributed equally to the conception and writing of the manuscript.

About the Authors

Dr. Demetris Hadjicharalambous is a licensed social worker and he works as Lecturer at the Department of Psychology and Social Sciences at Frederick University Cyprus.

Dr. Loucia Demetriou is an Associate Professor of Psychology and currently chairs the Department of Psychology and Social Sciences at Frederick University Cyprus.

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