

**A Comparison of Direct Observation and Self-  
Report Measures of Parenting Behaviour**

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## List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Term
ADHD	Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
APQ	Alabama Parenting Questionnaire
B:G	Ratio of boys to girls
CBCL(6-18)	Child Behavior Checklist 6-18 years
CDI	Child-Directed Interaction
CMPSSI	Child Management Problem Solving Skills Interview
CRPQ	Child-Rearing Practices Questionnaire
CRPR	Child-Rearing Practices Report
C-TRF	Caregiver-Teacher Report Form
DAS	Dyadic Adjustment Scale
DPCIS	Dyadic Parent-Child Interaction Scale
DSI	Disciplinary Style Interview
DSM-III-R	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Version III Revised
DSM-IV	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Version IV
EPCS	Early Parenting Coding System
ERA	Parent Child Early Relational Assessment
FICS	Family Interaction Coding System
FOS	Family Observation System
FOS-RIII	Family Observation System – Third Revision
FRFC-P	Family Risk Factor Checklist - Parent
GHQ	General Health Questionnaire
HOME	Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment
ICD-10	International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, 10 <sup>th</sup> Edition
IOR	Inter-observer reliability

Abbreviation	Term
ISSI-SF	Interview Schedule for Social Interaction – Short Form
IQ	Intelligence quotient
LAX	Laxness
LIFE	Living in Family Environments Coding System
Ns	Not significant
NS	Not stated
Obs	Observed
ODD	Oppositional Defiant Disorder
OVER	Overreactivity
PACIC	Parent-Child Interaction Code
PACS	Parental Account of Child's Symptoms
PAQ_R	Parental Authority Questionnaire
PBC	Parent Behaviour Checklist
P-CIPA	Parent-Child Interaction Play Assessment
PCIT	Parent-Child Interaction Therapy
PDI	Parent-Directed Interaction
PPC	Parent Problem Checklist
PPP	Positive Parenting Program
PPS	Parenting Practices Scale
PQ	Parenting Questionnaire
PS	Parenting Scale
SD	Standard deviation
SES	Socioeconomic status
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TRF	Teacher Report Form

## **Abstract**

The importance of parenting behaviour as a risk factor for the development and persistence of externalising behaviour problems, and as a focus for early interventions, has led to a desire for the accurate measurement of parenting attitudes and practices. Several methods of measuring parenting behaviour have been employed in theoretical research and program evaluation, including self-report and observational measures. Both of these methods have advantages and limitations, but a systematic comparison of self-reports and observations of parenting behaviour has not been conducted. This study compared self-reports and observations of parental responsiveness and control in a sample of 68 parents of preschool children in metropolitan Adelaide, South Australia. Videotaped observations of parents interacting with their children in four set tasks (free play, drawing, pack-up and no distraction) were interval-sampled using behavioural items that paralleled self-report items on the Parenting Scale and the Child-Rearing Practices Questionnaire. In addition, parents completed questionnaires about their child's behaviour and temperament, and factors associated with parenting behaviour including parental psychopathology, social support, marital adjustment, disagreements about child-rearing and demographic characteristics. Reports of children's behaviour at preschool were also obtained from teachers. When the correlations between corresponding behaviour domains on the self-report and observational measures were compared, the only significant correlation was for parental warmth. Observations of parental control practices (such as permissiveness, inconsistency and overreactivity) were not significantly associated with self-reports of these behaviours. The observational system used in this study yielded observations of permissive and inconsistent parenting that had good validity and reliability, whereas self-reports of harsh and overreactive parenting practices were more validly and reliably assessed using self-report methods. Self-reports and observations of

responsive parenting practices demonstrated results that are more equivocal. Possible explanations for these results and the implications for the use of self-report and observational measures in parenting research are discussed.

## Thesis Statement

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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## Preface

Persistent externalising behaviour problems of early onset in children have been identified as a precursor of antisocial, criminal and delinquent activity in later years (Greenwood, Model, Hydell, & Chiesa, 1998). Externalising behaviour disorders include undercontrolled behaviours such as noncompliance, difficulty controlling aggression and antisocial behaviour, and have been identified as costly disorders for both society and individuals (Karoly et al., 1998). Longitudinal studies show that correlates of persistent externalising problems of early onset include an increased risk of criminality, drug use, school drop-out, teen pregnancy, and receipt of government welfare benefits (Greenwood et al., 1998; Minde, 1992; Olds et al., 1997; Ramey et al., 2000; Verhulst, Eussen, Berden, Sanders-Woudstra, & van der Ende, 1993).

Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have implicated various aspects of parenting and parenting practices in both the development and persistence of children's externalising behaviour disorders. Behaviour management, and parental discipline strategies, in particular, is among the strongest correlates of such disorders (Campbell, 1995; Cunningham & Boyle, 2002; Keown & Woodward, 2002; Rubin, Stewart, & Chen, 1995). Other features of parenting that have consistently emerged as correlates of childhood behaviour problems include a lack of parental responsivity or warmth and inconsistent approaches to behaviour management by individual parents within a family (Campbell, 1995; Gardner, 1989; Keown & Woodward, 2002; Kochanska & Murray, 2000). Interventions that focus on changing parenting practices have repeatedly demonstrated positive outcomes for children's behaviour (Bor, Sanders, & Markie-Dadds, 2002; Kazdin, 1997; Marshall & Watt, 1999).

The importance of parenting behaviour as a risk factor for the development and persistence of externalising behaviour problems, and as a focus for early interventions has led to a desire for the accurate measurement of parenting attitudes and practices. Several methods of measuring parenting behaviour have been employed in theoretical research and program evaluation, including self-report and observational measures. However, the degree of concordance between the methods, and how well either approach measures the constructs of interest are still largely unknown (Gardner, 2000; Holden & Edwards, 1989; O'Connor, 2002).

Because of their ease of administration, their low cost, and the ability to compare large numbers of parents on such measures, there has been a reliance on self-report questionnaire measures to assess parenting attitudes and behaviour (Holden & Edwards, 1989). However, parents' responses to items on self-report questionnaire measures of parental behaviour may not be a true reflection of their actual behaviour with their children on a day-to-day basis (Mrazek, Dowdney, Rutter, & Quinton, 1982).

The direct observation of behaviour is generally considered more objective than self-report methodologies in that the actual behaviours are observed, rather than relying on parents' perceptions of their actions in particular situations (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor, & Tindall, 1996). However, direct observation methods also have their disadvantages. Behaviour can only be observed in a limited number of settings and participants may react to the process of being observed (for example, by displaying only socially desirable behaviours or exhibiting nervousness). Furthermore, observation of participants is expensive and time consuming to conduct and code. Direct observation requires extensive training, with some programs requiring weeks or months of training to achieve sufficient observer reliability (Belsky, Domitrovich, &

Crnic, 1997; Belsky, Hsieh, & Crnic, 1998; Whipple, Fitzgerald, & Zucker, 1995). Because of its expense and time requirements, direct observation of parenting behaviour is usually restricted only to small or clinic-based samples (Arnold, O'Leary, Wolff, & Acker, 1993; Banister et al., 1996).

This thesis compares two methodologies (self-report questionnaire and direct observation) for measuring parenting techniques that are commonly investigated in studies of associations with childhood behaviour problems. Within these methods, there are several options for measurement of parental behaviours. The two self-report parenting questionnaires employed in this study were chosen because they assess a wide range of behaviours using different response formats. The direct observations were designed to allow the observation of parenting behaviours that were operationalised directly from the self-report items.

The major aim of this study was to better understand the relationships between self-reported and observed parenting behaviour and children's behavioural development.

The specific aims of the study were to:

1. Assess the degree of agreement between self-report questionnaire and direct observation measures of parental responsivity and control;
2. Directly compare the relationships between the different measures of parenting behaviour and family characteristics (e.g., parent gender, child gender, socioeconomic status, marital satisfaction, parental psychological functioning and social support, and child temperament); and
3. Examine the relationships between the different measures of parenting behaviour and parent- and teacher-reports of children's externalising behaviour.

This thesis is divided into nine chapters. The first two chapters review the literature

describing children's externalising behaviour, parenting behaviour and the measurement of parenting styles. Chapter 3 describes the methodology employed in this study. Chapters 4 to 8 present the results of the study, examining: sample characteristics (Chapter 4); the reliability and validity of the self-report scales used (Chapter 5); the reliability and validity of the observational tool developed for the study (Chapter 6); direct relationships between the self-reported and observed data (Chapter 7); and the relationships between the parenting measures, family risk factors and children's behaviour (Chapter 8). The results of the study are discussed in each of these chapters, and a more general summary is presented in Chapter 9. This final chapter also presents the limitations of the study as well as recommendations for future research.