

## Measuring Competencies that Predict Successful Parenting: A Preliminary Validation Study

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*Abstract:* In an Internet study with 2,059 subjects in 23 countries (mainly the U.S. and Canada), a new 10-scale test of parenting skills proved to be both a reliable and valid measuring instrument. All of the scales were derived from empirical studies of effective parenting. The content validity of test items and scales was also confirmed in a blind procedure with 11 independent parenting and child development professionals. Test scores were good predictors of self-reported parenting ability, quality of relationship with children, and happiness of children, and were moderately good predictors of the health and success of children (all self-reported by parents). Parents scored substantially higher than non-parents, and parents who had had parenting training scored substantially higher than those who had not. Small or no effects were found for gender, race/ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and other demographic variables. Practical outcomes such as the happiness of children and the quality of the relationship with children were best predicted by three of the 10 test scales: Love and Affection, Stress-Management Skills, and Relationship Skills.

*Detailed summary:* A number of tools have been developed in recent decades to assess various aspects of parenting, among them validated tests such as the Parent Behavior Checklist (Platz et al., 1994) and the Parent Success Indicator (Collinsworth et al., 1996), along with many non-validated tests available on the Internet, which are presumably now being widely used. Some tests assess parenting skills; others focus on issues such as parenting styles or attitudes.

The present test derives from a review of more than 50 studies that predict positive outcomes of many aspects of parenting. These studies suggest that 10 different categories of parenting competence contribute to positive outcomes: Autonomy and Independence (treats child with respect, builds self-esteem, encourages self-reliance, etc.), Behavior Management (uses reward systems extensively, uses minimal but effective discipline, etc.), Education and Learning (promotes and models learning, supports school curriculum goals, etc.), Healthy Lifestyle (supports and models healthy eating and exercise habits, etc.), Life Skills (manages money responsibly, plans for emergencies, etc.), Love and Affection (praises child frequently, listens actively, etc.), Relationship Skills (maintains positive marital/partner relationship, coordinates parenting with the other parent, etc.), Religion and Spirituality (supports spiritual or religious development of child, etc.), Safety (takes necessary precautions to protect child, maintains age-appropriate awareness child's activities), and Stress Management (reduces sources of stress for self and child, practices relaxation techniques, etc.).

Based on these studies, a 10-scale test was developed with 10 Likert-scale questions per scale (nine scored items, plus one dummy item – a variant of one of the scored items used to determine internal consistency of responding). A typical item for the Autonomy and Independence Scale, for example, was “I try to teach my child how to solve problems on his or her own.” Basic demographic questions were also asked, along with criterion questions to be used to assess test validity, such as, “On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is the highest, how happy have your children been (on average)?” Questions were also asked regarding marital history and parenting training. The test was made available online through more than a dozen websites, including that of the National Effective Parenting Initiative.

The present analysis is based on scores of 2,059 people who took the test between April 24, 2007 and October 4, 2009, ranging in age from 14 to 89 (mean, 37.8). 77.1 percent were female and the rest male. 73.6 percent were white; non-white test takers (25.2 percent) included American Indians, Asians, Blacks, Hispanics, and others. More than 50 percent of test takers were college educated, nearly twice the proportion found in the general U.S. population. 93.2 percent identified themselves as straight, and 5.8 percent as gay, bisexual, or other. Most test takers identified themselves as currently married parents, and 28.5 percent were divorced. 92.2 percent were from the U.S. and Canada and the rest from 21 other countries.

Content validity was assessed in a blind procedure with 11 independent parenting and child development professionals unknown to the authors. Ratings of the scales were high, the only exception being the Religion and Spirituality Scale; some raters questioned its appropriateness for the test. Item ratings were generally high. Because the test is Internet based, test-retest validity could not be assessed.

Standard measures of internal-consistency reliability were high (Cronbach’s alpha 0.96; Guttman split-half 0.94), as was the average internal consistency measure provided by the matched dummy pairs. Total test score also proved to be a good predictor of key criterion questions: self-reported parenting ability ( $p=0.43^{**}$ ), quality of relationship with children ( $p=0.43^{**}$ ), and happiness of children ( $p=0.37^{**}$ ). It predicted other criterion questions moderately well: health of children ( $p=0.20^{**}$ ) and success of children ( $p=0.26^{**}$ ). On a percentage basis, parents scored more than five points higher than non-parents, and scores were correlated with the number of hours of parent training people had received.

Demographic analysis produced a range of results, some surprising. Females outscored males by only 1.2 percentage points ( $p=0.04$ ). When the “other” category was eliminated, no significant differences were found among scores by race/ethnicity. Small, marginally significant effects were found for both age and sexual orientation, with gays outscoring straights by 1.3 percentage points ( $p=0.03$ ). Having more children did not increase test scores, and married parents did not outscore parents who had never married. Parents who had divorced scored the same as parents who had never divorced. A factor analysis yielded a general factor for parenting competence, as well as factors for behavior management, relationship skills, and life skills.

The most interesting results were obtained from several regression analyses. Contrary to assumptions that are held by at least some parenting professional, the best predictors by far of key outcome measures (such as happiness of children and quality of relationship with children) were three scales, two of which involve little direct interaction with children: Love and Affection (the most predictive scale, which does involve direct interaction with children), Stress Management Skills, and Relationship Skills, with Safety making a *negative* contribution to the regression models.

## **References**

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