



Published in final edited form as:

J Med Assoc Thai. 2010 March ; 93(3): 293–300.

Parenting and Adolescent Problem Behaviors: A Comparative Study of Sons and Daughters in Thailand

Orratai Rhucharoenpornpanich¹, Aphichat Chamrathirong¹, Warunee Fongkaew², Michael J. Rosati³, Brenda A. Miller⁴, and Pamela K. Cupp⁵

¹Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University, Thailand ²Department of Medical Nursing, Chiang Mai University, Thailand ³Department of Mental Health, Ministry of Public Health, Thailand ⁴Prevention Research Center / Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, Berkeley, CA, U.S.A. ⁵Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, Louisville, KY, U.S.A.

Abstract

This study investigates parenting practices and the reported sexual and delinquent behaviors among Thai adolescents, by focusing on the difference between sons and daughters. Data were derived from 420 families whose adolescents aged 13–14 were randomly selected from seven districts in Bangkok using the probability proportional to size (PPS) method. Interviews were conducted with one parent and one adolescent. Female adolescents reported higher levels of parental monitoring, parental rules, communication about sex and parental disapproval of sex, as compared to males. There were no gender differences in the reported sexual and delinquent behaviors among the adolescents. For males, high levels of parental monitoring, greater perception of parent disapproval of sex, and being raised by authoritative parents were associated with less delinquent behaviors. Among females, parental monitoring and parental closeness served as protective factors against sexual and delinquent behaviors. These findings should be useful for developing a body of knowledge and understanding on adolescent rearing among Thai parents.

Keywords

Parenting; Thai adolescents; problem behavior; risk behavior; delinquency

Introduction

Sex is a natural determinant of physiological difference between “male” and “female” and brings about “gender” which influences how men and women are brought up and socialized. It is that process of socialization that accounts for large part in the development of a set of social norms that guide appropriate behavior for each gender. Consequently, sex is a significant factor that affects childrearing behaviors of parents for sons or daughters.

Previous studies, mostly in the United States, reported findings consistent with this assertion. For example it has been reported that parents were likely to be much more strict and controlling in raising their daughters as opposed to sons ^(1–6). Sons are more free to express their needs, to engage in outdoor activities that are more exposed to deviance peers than daughters ^(4,7). By contrast, daughters are more likely to be closer and more interactive with parents, as compared to sons ^(8–10). Thus, some theorists indicated that juvenile delinquency was more common in male than female adolescents and attributed this to less parental monitoring of sons than daughters ^(11,12).

Children and adolescents' drug use is associated with level of parental supervision and parenting styles. Adolescents who were less supervised or controlled by parents were more likely to have friends or join a peer group who used drugs^(13,14). In the case of the parents who were able to monitor and control their adolescents, these adolescents were less likely to use drug and alcohol⁽¹⁵⁻¹⁷⁾. Moreover, findings on adolescent sexual behaviors were similar in that early sexual intercourse, no condom use, sexual transmitted disease and unwanted pregnancy were all related with the level of parental monitoring^(18,19). Perceived parental disapproval of premarital sex is also found to be associated with decreased adolescents' likelihood of engaging in risky sexual behavior⁽²⁰⁾.

In Thailand there are few studies on parenting behaviors. A recent study on parenting styles and female adolescents' sexual behaviors in congested communities in Bangkok shows that female adolescents who were raised under democratic parenting style had higher scores of perceived ability to say no and discuss sexual issues more frequently than those who were raised under over protected, permissive and neglected parenting styles⁽²¹⁾. Other studies center on familial relationships, parental attachment and communication, and parental time spent with children. These factors have been analyzed with other factors to reveal significant negative association with drug use, sexual behavior, aggressive, delinquent and illegal behaviors⁽²²⁻²⁵⁾. However, there presently does not exist any research in Thailand using systematic measurement of parenting behaviors in various dimensions, such as parenting style, parental monitoring and supervision, rules or regulation or restriction of activities outside the home. To the authors knowledge, this is the first study that uses objective behavioral measurement tools to assess the relationship between parenting and gender differences in adolescents' behavior. This paper presents preliminary findings of parenting behaviors which appear to be different between sons and daughters, as well as investigates whether or not parenting behaviors have an influence on problematic behaviors in male and female adolescents.

Method

Sample and Procedures

Data used in this study were collected as a part of a larger research study entitled "Thai Family Matters" and is a collaboration between the Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University and the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation. Data for these analyses were obtained in Bangkok from April to June 2007⁽²⁶⁾. The project was supported by the National Institutes of Health of the United States. Under the project, data on 420 families whose adolescents aged 13 –14 were collected. At first stage of data collection, Bangkok Metropolis was divided into three areas: inner, middle, and outer areas. The research teams selected seven districts from the 50 districts in the three areas using the probability proportional to size technique (PPS): Pathum Wan in the inner area, four districts-Bangkok Noi, Bangkorlam, Wang Thong Lang and Suan Loung in middle area, and two districts- Saimai and Meenburi in outer area. From each district, 35 study blocks were randomly selected by the National Statistical Office using the PPS technique, resulting in a total of 245 blocks. As a result, approximately 30,471 households were identified across the seven districts. The identified households were then enumerated to select target households with 13 or 14 year-old adolescents. In total, 420 households with 13 or 14 year-old adolescents, 60 households per district, were randomly selected for interview and assessment. Data were collected by interviewing either the father or mother using structure interview questionnaire. Data from adolescents were collected using a self administered questionnaire via Audio-Computer-Assisted Self-Interview (ACASI).

Measures

Two measures were used to assess the dependent variable of problematic behaviors in the Thai adolescents: sexual and delinquent behaviors. Six measures of parenting processes were employed as independent variables: parental monitoring, parental rules, parental closeness, parent-adolescent communication about sex, parental disapproval and parenting styles.

Sexual behavior—One survey item was used to determine the sexual behavior. Teens were asked whether they have ever had sexual intercourse in their life time.

Delinquency—Delinquency was measured using questions modified from Elliot, Ageton, Huizinga, Knowles and Canter⁽²⁷⁾. Teens were asked whether they had ever participated in any of six behaviors including: participated in gang fights; gave drugs to friends; joined a gang at school; stopped by police and told to go home; taken to a police station and arrested; or ran away from home.

Parental monitoring—Two scales were created; one scale indicated parents' rule-setting behaviors while the other reflected parents' knowledge of their teen's whereabouts^(28,29). For the former, youth completed four items asking about their parents' rule and limit-setting behaviors over the past 6 months, such as setting and enforcing curfews and restricting activities and companions. Responses ranged from "none of the time" to "all/almost all of the time" on a 4 - point scale. Items were averaged to create the scale (alpha = .68). For the latter scale, youth answered three items regarding their parents' knowledge of their whereabouts and activities when away from home over the past six months. As above, responses ranged from "none of the time" to "all/almost all of the time" on a four-point scale. Items were also averaged to create the scale (alpha = .66).

Parental closeness—Parental closeness was measured using questions from the Add Health Study⁽³⁰⁾. Teens answered four questions, indicating both how close they felt to each parent, and how much they thought each parent cared for the teens themselves. The youth answered on a 4-point scale ranging from "not at all" to "very much." The four items were averaged to create a closeness scale (Cronbach's alpha = .66).

Parental communication about sex—Parent-adolescent communication was assessed through nine items asking teens about their experiences in talking with parents related to issues of physical appearance, sexuality, condom use, HIV/AIDS and other sexual transmitted infections, as well as adolescent pregnancy. Responses for each item varied from "1 = never" to "4 = a lot of time". Cronbach's alpha for the nine-item scale was .91. Higher scores indicate higher perceived levels of communication with parents.

Parental disapproval of sex—Teens responded to five-item which ask about their perception on parents' feeling and worrying with respect to themselves, sexual activity and prohibition of sex. The five items were average to create a parental disapproval of sex scale (Cronbach's alpha = .84)

Parenting style—Parenting style was assessed using questions adapted from the *Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire*⁽³¹⁾. Parents answered how frequently they exhibited certain parenting behaviors, using a 4-point scale ranging from "never" to "most of the time—almost daily." The 36 items measured three types of parenting style: *permissive*, *authoritarian*, and *authoritative parenting*. Permissive parenting style was measured in five items (Cronbach's alpha = .64) which asked the parent to rate the frequency with which he/she exhibited each of the five behaviors within an indulgent dimension (for example: "states

punishments to the child and does not actually do them”). Three dimensions, physical coercion, verbal hostility, and non-reasoning/punitive, measured authoritarian parenting style ($\alpha = .82$), with four questions each. Authoritative parenting was also measured by a scale ($\alpha = .86$) reflecting three dimensions, connection, regulation, and autonomy, each with four questions. For example, “explains consequences of behavior to child,” was a behavior measured in the regulation dimension.

Plan of Analysis

Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS for Windows. Bivariate analysis, ANOVA (F-test) and χ^2 test were used to assess gender differences in parenting practices and outcome behaviors of adolescents. Multiple regression analysis was used separately to predict delinquent and sexual behaviors for male and female adolescents. An alpha of 0.05 was used to determine statistical significance unless otherwise noted.

Results

Sample Characteristics

All of the identified households agreed to participate in our study. Participants were either the father or mother and their adolescents aged 13 – 14 from the 420 target families. Most of respondents (85 percent) were mothers (average age was 41 years old), about one-half (47 percent) were born in Bangkok. Of the 53 percent not born in Bangkok, one-fourth (25 percent) were from the Northeast and one-fifth (20 percent) moved from provinces in the Central Thailand; approximately 5.5 percent were from the north and south of Thailand.

Concerning parental education, half of the parents interviewed finished primary education (4 to 6 years). About one-third (37 percent) finished secondary education and high school. The rest attained a diploma or higher. The total family income of more than half of respondents (52 percent) was less than 20,000 baht per month; 22 percent earn 20,000–40,000 baht per month. The rest (26 percent) earn more than 40,000 baht per month. Among sampled households the sex of adolescents was nearly equal in number (49 percent male, 51 percent female).

Parenting Behaviors

As shown in Table 1, results from analyzing parenting behaviors in raising sons and daughters reveal no difference in three parenting styles—permissive, authoritarian and authoritative among sons and daughters. Most parents use integrated styles and tend to be authoritative parenting, i.e. parents use reasons and allow sons and daughters to think and act at certain level.

There are different patterns of childrearing among parents in different education and economic status. Educated parents (diploma or above) have higher score in authoritative style than low educated parents. Among parents who have earned more than 40,000 baht monthly have higher score of permissive style than low income parents (not shown in Table).

No significant differences between sons and daughters in terms of parental closeness and perception on parental concerns. There are significant differences in setting rules and a trend for knowledge of whereabouts. Specifically, daughters are more supervised and restricted than sons. The average score of parents monitoring and supervising behavior is higher among daughters than sons: setting rules or restriction for some activities ($p < .001$), knowledge of whereabouts ($p < .01$).

Concerning communication about sex, parents tend to talk to their adolescents to some extent but not often. This is probably related to Thai culture and values where parents are less likely to openly talk about sex with their adolescents. The study reveals that both sons and daughters report that their parents will not permit them to have sex as indicated by the average score in parental disapproval about sex is rather high (3.3 – 3.5) in our questionnaire. Comparing parental concerns about sexual behaviors between sons and daughters, it is evident that parents of daughters pay more attention to their adolescents' sexual behavior than parents of sons. The average score in parental communication about sex and prohibition of having sex is higher among daughters than sons ($p < .001$).

Adolescent Problem Behaviors

Table 2 compares children's problematic behaviors between sons and daughters. Although it is not statistically significant, sons seem to have more problematic behaviors than daughters in every kind of behaviors, although not in sexual experience or aggressive/ delinquent behaviors. However, when measuring serious delinquency by total numbers of aggressive/ delinquent behaviors, it is found that the average number of serious delinquent events is fairly higher in sons than in daughters if constructed the 90 per cent confidence interval.

Taking parents education and income into consideration, it is found that parents who have more income (more than 40,000 baht a month, average score of adolescents' serious delinquency is higher than that of parents who have moderate income (20,000–40,000 baht), and low income parents ($\leq 20,000$ baht a month). This is consistent with analysis in parenting style, thus, it is found that more income parents have permissive style more than lower income parents. It can be said that parenting permissive style partly leads to serious delinquency.

Parental Influence on Problem Behaviors of Male and Female Adolescents

In order to dissect out factors affecting problematic behaviors, all six parenting behaviors i.e. monitoring and supervision, communication about sex, parent-child relationship, perception and awareness of parental disapproval about sex, as well as styles of childrearing were analyzed while controlling parent education and family income. To assess the influence of parenting behaviors on adolescents' problematic behaviors on the basis of gender difference, analysis was done using separate models and factors affecting behaviors of sons and daughters.

Among sons, as shown in Table 3, their perception and awareness of parental concern about sexual behaviors and knowledge of whereabouts are protective factors for aggressive or delinquent behaviors with statistical significance. That is to say, male adolescents with more perception on parents' worrying about their sexual activities, perceived more parental monitoring are less likely to engage in delinquent behaviors. Concerning early sexual initiation among sons, the adolescents' perception of parental disapproval about sex is the only statistically significant protective factor.

Among daughters, also shown in table 3, more perception on parental monitoring (knowledge of whereabouts) is protective factor against sexual risk behavior, whilst perceived more parental closeness predicts the lower level of delinquency.

Discussion

The results of the study demonstrate the important of understanding that parenting behaviors differentially affect the sons and daughters, particularly in urban Bangkok. Information gained from this study is useful for developing further body of knowledge and designing intervention culturally appropriate to the Thai context. This is due to the fact that a review of

the literature on this subject indicates a lack of research studies focusing on different parenting behaviors toward son and daughter's behaviors in Thailand. The extent to which such exists, they have been conducted in foreign countries. These foreign-based studies have provided findings that sons were less likely to be monitored and supervised than daughters⁽¹⁻⁶⁾. More freedom and less supervision in sons could lead to more chance for them to engage in risky and problematic outside activities, and to be susceptible to greater peer than daughters^(4,7).

Our findings are consistent with the international studies indicating parental childrearing depending on the sex of the child- in that we also found that parents exhibit different behaviors in taking care of sons as opposed to daughters. In addition, our study indicates that parental behaviors may affect adolescents' delinquency. Specifically, monitoring, supervision and close contact and care in sons may be not sufficient for reducing risky sexual behavior or aggressive and delinquent behaviors. Our study also indicated that parents need to tell their sons about their concerns and worries, including their desire that their adolescents not engage in sexual and undesirable behaviors. Parents need assistance and training in communication skills in order to gain more understanding and practice which will result in more effectively protecting their sons from problem behaviors. For daughters, as indicated in this study, clear and consistent parental rules could be supportive factors to prevent daughters' increased participation in risky sexual behaviors.

Most parents in the study use integrated parenting styles and tend to be democratic as is evidenced by the authoritative parenting style. The results of this analysis reveal that authoritative parenting style could be a considerable protective factor against delinquent behaviors for sons and sexual risk behaviors for daughters ($p < 0.1$). Further research is needed to test for relationship between parenting styles and adolescent risky behaviors.

Although other studies found parent-adolescent communication about sex to be a significant factor for preventing or reducing risky sexual behavior among adolescents⁽³²⁻³⁵⁾, in this study we found no statistical significance in that regard. However, findings from this study did show a low level of communication about sex between parents and adolescents at this age (average of 1.9 in sons and 2.1 in daughters from maximum score of 4). This reflects that Thai parents still do not perceive the importance and needs to communicate with children at this age about sex, as well as calls into question the degree to which parents possess the pre-requisite skills to talk with their adolescents about sex. As a consequence, many feel that they dare not to talk about sex with their adolescents. They might feel that talking about sex could pave the way for initiating adolescent's interest in sex, or 13-14 years old adolescents are too young to discuss about sex.

The findings from this study point to the importance of promoting family institution and parents' childrearing. Although there are differences in parental childrearing by sex of the adolescents, the potential problem behaviors of sons and daughters are not to be underestimated in their magnitudes. Specifically, parents should start to pay more and closer attention to their adolescents without consideration of the gender of adolescents. Giving more freedom including freedom about sex to sons than daughters may push the sons to become sexually risky and delinquent. At present, urban families prefer having one or two children, and, as a consequence, parents have difficulty in comparing or differentiating childrearing between son and daughter within their families. However this study should serve to remind parents that childrearing should not rely on "sex" and "gender" in determining child-rearing strategy. Regardless of son or daughter, without adequate and appropriate care and attention of the parents, adolescents have equal chances to engage in all sorts of problematic behaviors.

Acknowledgments

The project described was supported by Award Number R01AA015672 from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism or the National Institutes of Health.

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Table 1

Mean Scores on Parenting Measures by Child Gender

Parenting	Mean (SD)		Possible Range
	Sons (N = 205)	Daughters (N = 208)	
Parenting styles			
Permissive parents	2.03 (0.48)	2.08 (0.48)	0 – 4
Authoritarian parents	1.85 (0.41)	1.82 (0.44)	0 – 4
Authoritative parents	3.15 (0.45)	3.12 (0.47)	0 – 4
Parental behaviors			
Knowledge of whereabouts	2.95 (0.71)	3.16 (0.66) **	0 – 4
Parental rules	2.68 (0.63)	2.94 (0.64) ***	0 – 4
Parental closeness	3.81 (0.38)	3.81 (0.39)	0 – 4
Communication about sex	1.86 (0.76)	2.14 (0.18) ***	0 – 4
Perception on parents' disapproval of sex	3.32 (0.48)	3.53 (0.22) ***	0 – 4

**
p < .01,

p < .001

Table 2

Number, Percentage and Mean Scores of Child Problem Behaviors by Child Gender

Problem behaviors	Sons (N = 205)	Daughters (N = 208)
Having sex		
Never	196 (96 %)	204 (98 %)
Ever	9 (4 %)	4 (2 %)
Delinquent behaviors		
Never	141 (69 %)	156 (75 %)
Ever (1 or more behaviors)	64 (31 %)	52 (25 %)
Mean scores on delinquent behavior measure (Scale range potential 0–6)	0.59	0.41

Table 3
Multiple Regression for the Relationship between Parenting Behaviors and Sex, Delinquent Behaviors in Sons and Daughters

Variables	Sons				Daughters			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	Sexual experience	Delinquent behaviors	Sexual experience	Delinquent behaviors	Sexual experience	Delinquent behaviors	Sexual experience	Delinquent behaviors
	Standardized Coefficient	p-value	Standardized Coefficient	p-value	Standardized Coefficient	p-value	Standardized Coefficient	p-value
Parents' education	-.007	.925	.010	.889	-.055	.483	.081	.308
Family income	.120	.115	.034	.639	.143	.071	.039	.619
Permissive parenting style	-.054	.528	-.058	.485	-.154	.097	.128	.170
Authoritarian parenting style	-.074	.381	.076	.348	.081	.369	.058	.519
Authoritative parenting style	-.069	.354	-.139	.053	-.134	.089	-.026	.740
Knowledge of whereabouts	-.130	.091	-.255	.001	-.196	.012	-.135	.084
Parental rules	-.020	.782	-.048	.499	.125	.102	.014	.857
Communication about sex	-.023	.756	-.035	.620	.046	.531	-.035	.634
Parental closeness	-.092	.223	-.094	.194	.008	.913	-.175	.021
Perceived parents' disapproval of sex	-.235	.002	-.206	.004	.085	.260	.009	.905