

2022

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Ashley Bruehlman
Minnesota State University, Mankato

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Recommended Citation

Bruehlman, Ashley (2022) "Together: Exploring a Solution-Focused Activity for Parent and Young Adult Relationships," *Journal of Undergraduate Research at Minnesota State University, Mankato*: Vol. 22, Article 4.

Available at: <https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/jur/vol22/iss1/4>

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Together: Exploring a Solution-Focused Activity for Parent and Young Adult Relationships

Ashley Bruehlman – B.S., Psychology; M.S. of Marriage & Family Therapy Candidate

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Edgewood College, Madison, WI

Dr. Dan Moen – Ph.D., CFLE, LMFT, Mentor

Professor - Department of Family Consumer Science

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Researchers would like to thank the Minnesota State University, Mankato Foundation Grant (\$1,000) for providing a research stipend. Additionally, researchers would like to thank the Center for Scholarship and Research (CESR) at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

Abstract

Parents and young adults share an important and interdependent relationship that. This mixed-methods cross-sectional study examined the systemic impact of a brief solution-focused activity to promote empathy within parent/young adult relationships (paired, $n = 73$). Baseline well-being and empathy scores were recorded on 5-point Likert scales. Quantitative findings highlight above average well-being scores for parents and young adults. Researchers found a significant correlation between parent and young adult well-being and empathy scores suggesting an interdependent relationship. Additionally, researchers found a significant linear correlation for parent and young adult well-being scores as predictive of empathy scores. Qualitative findings from the brief solution-focused activity provided key insights into solution-oriented ideas collaboratively constructed by parents and young adults. Parents and young adults are seeking more togetherness, communication, and laughter in their relationships. Parents and young adults reported feeling the most connected when their family were able to laugh together. Findings from this study may have practical implications for family life educators (CFLE), clinicians, and family advocacy efforts, showing where preventative and therapeutic efforts may be best channeled. Additionally, this study seeks to update and inform current and future studies.

Keywords: Parent, Young Adult, Relationship, Solution-Focused

Relationships

Many families in the United States have been directly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic; experiencing greater uncertainty, schedule conflicts, increased parenting responsibilities, isolation/disconnection, and declines in overall well-being (e.g., anxiety/depression; Prime et al., 2020; Russell et al., 2022; Singletary, 2022). Additionally, the pandemic's systemic fallout appears to have contributed to heightened levels of stress among young adults and parents with 80% of adults (Canady, 2020) and 84% of young adults reporting an increase in stress levels (Mohler-Kuo et al., 2021). The increase in perceived stress has been associated with lower overall personal well-being (Prime et al., 2020) which may be linked to a lowered capacity for empathy (Shanafelt et al., 2005); or the ability to connect, understand, and relate with another person at an emotional level (Kimmes et al., 2014).

Young adulthood (e.g., 13-25 years of age) is seen as a time of great importance in terms of emotional development and parent-relational dynamics (Faw et al., 2019). Young adults may be seeking more independence from their parents, yet still rely on emotional support and connection from their parent(s) (Mortimer, 2012). Parents indeed walk an invisible line between giving freedom and knowing when to lend a hand.

Well-Being

Well-being is an overall measure of health, consisting of physical, mental, emotional, and social aspects related an individual's life. A healthy parent/young adult relationship plays a key role in positive longitudinal childhood well-being outcomes (Biglan et al., 2012; Van Wel et al., 2000). There is emerging evidence to support well-being as a predictor of capacity for empathy (e.g., Shanafelt et al., 2005).

Empathy

A secure and attune emotional connection between parents and young adults is widely accepted as a predictor of young adult longitudinal success (Lanz, & Tagliabue, 2014). A key component of emotional-relational connection is the capacity for empathy. Empathy develops rapidly during the stage of young adulthood. The capacity for empathy is associated with healthy parent/young adult relationships, supporting overall family unity, and communicative attunement (Henry et al., 1996). Parents and young adults are interdependent members, impacting the whole family systemically (Alexander, & Robbins, 2019).

Family Systems Theory

Family systems theory provides researchers with a lens to understand family functioning as a set of interdependent parts, where one's actions influence another and so on. Families develop a pattern of behaviors, expectations, and communication styles over time. Familial patterns are predictive of outcomes. Therefore, when investigating parent/young-adult relationship outcomes, it is important to take in the whole picture and systemic patterns. Implementing change through a family activity can be tricky as families naturally tend to resist change (e.g., homeostasis; Alexander, & Robbins, 2019). Thankfully, there is an evidence-based practice of solution-focused therapy that helps to circumvent a family's natural tendency towards status quo (De Shazer et al., 2021).

Solution-Focused Therapy

Solution-focused therapy gained popularity for its agile and creative way to inspire an internal source for change within the family. This is not a prescriptive form of change. Families are posed with a solution-focused question, such as, "when were you and your family the happiest? What was unique about this time?" These questions are geared toward finding what works. In most cases, families can conjure a memory, circumstance, or future idea of their goals.

This unique set of questions provides families the autonomy and creativity to come up with their own solutions without a hyperfocus on the past, problems, or finger-pointing (De Shazer et al., 2021). This style of questioning may be adapted within other realms of prevention/treatment.

Hypotheses

Developing prevention/treatment strategies to promote healthy parent/young-adult relationships is paramount in promoting our next generation of adults and families. As we have seen, the parent/young-adult relationship holds great responsibility and impact over the life-course in terms of relational and emotional outcomes (Faw et al., 2019). Parents play a key role in their young adult's transition to adulthood (Fingerman et al., 2012). Additionally, parents and young adults have been shown to share an interdependent relationship where each person has an acute and longitudinal impact into adulthood (Knoester, 2003).

This mixed-methods cross-sectional study sought to examine the impact of a brief solution focused (Trepper et al., 2006) activity to promote empathy within parent/young adult relationships (paired, $n = 73$). Researchers hypothesized that parent and young adult well-being and empathy scores would share an interdependent relationship. Next, researchers hypothesized that there would be a linear relationship where well-being is a predictor of empathy scores. Finally, researchers hypothesized that young adult/parent dyads could work together to find a shared solution-focused image of how they can imagine are more empathetic relationship, together.

Method

This cross-sectional mixed-methods study recruited parent/young adult dyads ($n = 73$) to participate in a 20-minute online Qualtrics survey. Data was collected from December 2021-

February 2022. Most participants were recruited from the Principal Investigator's (PI's) courses (two 100 level and two 400 level), offering a minimal (< 1% total points) amount of extra credit as a reward for participation. Additionally, researchers posted a hyperlink for the Qualtrics survey along with a recruitment script to their social media accounts. All participants were encouraged to send the survey link to anyone they thought might participate. This recruitment style created both a convenience and snowball sample. The survey consisted of demographic questions to help with generalizability and differentiate between groups.

Demographics

The student sample was homogeneous and consistent with that of a university family studies student population (mostly female) with 11% of young adults reporting as male, 88% reporting as female, and 1% preferred not to respond. The parent sample was also consistent with 13% reporting as male, 85% as female, and 1% preferred not to respond. Young adults reported a median age of 20, while parents reported a median age of 50. Ages were also consistent with that of average life-stage ages. As shown in Table 1, ethnicity was predominantly Caucasian (~80%). Regarding education, majority of parents reported "some" college" (over 90%; see Table 2). As displayed in Table 3, over 80% of the parent sample reported an annual average household income of \$51,000 or more, making this sample more generalizable to a middle-class population. In addition, nearly 66% of all participants reported as living in a rural community (i.e., dichotomized by individuals living in a population under 50,000 as rural, and over 50,000 as urban). Over 80% of parent participants reported owning a home (see Table 4) and 62% of parent participants reported being married (see Table 5). Another unique characteristic of the sample was that families reported a mean average of 1.5 children per household, below the national (U.S.) average of 1.9 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

Measures

Well-Being

Well-being is an inclusive term used to measure one's emotional, physical, and physical health. Participants were asked to rate on a 1-item 5- point Likert scale regarding their overall well-being. This was done to establish a baseline well-being score as a correlate with empathy.

Empathy

Empathy was the term utilized to measure the capacity to connect within the parent/young adult relationship. Researchers created a 5-item empathy survey asking participants to rate on a 5-point Likert scale. Parents and young adults were asked to complete their own responses independently from one another. The parent survey asked participants to rank the following statements as 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree; (1) I have a good idea how my young adult is feeling, emotionally. (2) My young adult feels comfortable sharing how they feel with me. (3) I feel comfortable asking my young adult how they are feeling, emotionally. (4) I feel very close with my young adult. (5) We are a supportive team. Young adults were asked the same set of five questions, but with the word "parent" instead of "young adult" inserted into each statement. This was done to establish a baseline empathy, score as a correlate with well-being.

Brief Solution-Focused Activity

Researchers employed an adapted solution-focused activity to promote empathy within parent/young adult relationships. A solution-focused activity was chosen since it is an adaptive evidence-based perspective to support a variety of constructive activities for participants. Specifically, solution-focused therapy is future-focused and goal oriented, promoting a unique and creative approach to solving issues within interpersonal relationships (Nelson & Thomas,

2012). The solution-focused questions listed are verbatim, exactly what researchers asked of participants to complete. Qualitative data was collected from the following exercise:

Even if you scored all 5's on the empathy scales, consider any improvements you would like to see in your parent/teen relationship. How does your family look and feel when you are most connected? Happiest? Closest? Under what conditions or circumstances do you feel things work best in your relationship? What could you change in your interactions to improve your relationship? This is a cooperative answer. Work together, taking ownership for your own choices only and what you can do together. No blame, criticism, etc. Allow for at least 5 minutes to discuss, however you may take as much time as you wish. This exercise encourages creativity as well as functional answers. There is no right or wrong answer, as it is your interpretation. Once you have a solid answer, please record your plan/answers in the box below (Lutz & Berg, 2002).

Results

Researchers created a 1-item 5-point Likert scale to measure self-reported “Well-Being” scores. Researchers operationalized the concept of “Well-Being” as, quality of life, how happy you are, how healthy you are. Scores followed a Likert model as; 1=Very Poor, 2=Poor, 3=Neutral, 4=Good, 5=Great. Baseline data for parents and young adults on their self-reported scores of well-being were recorded (see Table 6). Parents reported slightly higher average scores of 4.19 compared to young adults ($M=3.96$). Researchers found a significant correlation (See Table 6) between parent and young adult well-being scores. Researchers also collected baseline data for parents and young adults on their self-reported empathy scores on a 5-item 5-point Likert scale (see Table 7). Scores of the five items were averaged by question and individual participant, not totaled. Parents reported slightly higher average scores of 4.23 compared to young adults ($M=4.09$) for all scores. Researchers found a significant correlation (See Table 7)

between parent and young adult empathy scores. A linear regression (see Table 8) between well-being scores (independent variable) and empathy (dependent variable) found a significant correlation. Finally, the qualitative themes analysis produced a high (95% agreement) inter-rater reliability for emergent concepts.

Discussion

Consistent with external stressors as outlined in the introduction section, parents did slightly better than young adults in terms of well-being and empathy scores. Overall, mean scores of well-being and empathy are above average when self-reporting on a 5-point Likert scale. This may be related to the sample who were mostly comprised of Caucasian, middle-class, college educated, smaller families, and homeowners. Researchers would be interested to compare data from a more nationally representative sample.

Findings support our first hypothesis that well-being and empathy scores would be interdependent between parents and young-adults, suggesting that parents and young-adults share a systemic relationship. This finding is also supported theoretically by family systems theory. Family systems theory implies that family members are naturally interrelated/interconnected, meaning that one person's actions, mood, perceptions can impact the whole family and vice versa (Prest & Protinsky, 1993).

Additionally, findings support our second hypothesis that well-being is predictive of the capacity for empathy. This finding is consistent with our review of literature as well.

Qualitative Themes Analysis

Participants answered the qualitative response question together after taking some time to discuss. After conducting a qualitative themes analysis, researchers found the following emergent themes:

1. Open and Honest
2. Quality Time/Togetherness
3. Laughter
4. No Judgement/Assumptions

One parent/young-adult dyad reported, “more open to talking about our lives and feelings.” Another stated, “Start telling each other how we are feeling.” It appears that families are seeking a genuine connection, are understanding with each other, and being open and honest.

Another emergent theme was that of quality time/togetherness. The word ‘togetherness’ showed up fifty-nine times. One parent/young-adult dyad reported that they wanted to, “Do more activities together to help improve our overall family relationship.” Another family reported that they enjoyed, “Having fun, spending quality time together, and enjoying the aspects of everyday life together.” Concurrently, the word ‘more’ was used forty-six times.

When focused on when families felt the most connected, parent/young-adult dyads focused on ‘laughter’. The word ‘laughing’ showed up thirteen times. One parent/young-adult dyad state, “When our family is most connected, we are laughing and just spending time together.” Another family reported feeling most connected as a family when there was, “A lot of laughter, storytelling, and looking back at memories.”

When focused on what they could do differently, families mostly talked about not judging/criticizing each other and not making assumptions. One dyad reported that the needed to,

“Stop assuming how others are doing and actually ask about their feelings to improve the relationship.” Another dyad said that they could, “Be more understanding.”

Qualitative findings are consistent with our hypothesis that parents and young adults would co-create solution-oriented ideas to promote well-being and empathy within relationships. Overall, it appears that families need more time and flexibility in their lives. This allows parents and young adults to “slow” down, address overall health and become more attune to relationship needs. Attunement in relationship may promote more positive interactions, allowing for patience and to “see” the other person for where they are at emotionally. This attunement should promote a sense of togetherness and in-turn produce healthier/positive interactions leading to improved health outcomes for all parties involved.

Limitations

This study employed a convenience and snowball sample approach to recruitment. While this approach supported recruitment efforts, it did limit the sample. As outlined in the methods section, this sample is not widely generalizable to the American population, but rather it is focused on college-aged young adults and their parents. This is a unique life stage, which does provide some application.

Future Directions

Researchers believe that a longitudinal study needed along with a true experiment design to test the impact of the solution-focused activity. Additionally, a greater sample size could promote statistical power. A stratified sample could increase overall generalizability as well.

Conclusion

Overall, it appears that families are interconnected, and interactions really matter in terms of well-being and capacity for empathy. Although the study did measure baseline scores of well-

being, it would be interesting to find out qualitative findings into how this overall measure of health is promoted (what works, when do you feel the best). Families are seeking genuine, authentic interactions from each other. From the literature review, families may need to focus on the promotion of well-being to cultivate a supportive environment for empathy. Families need more quality time to promote togetherness. However, most families today report a busy lifestyle, which may also adversely impact well-being. One idea is for workplace practices to focus on promoting more family time or a family-friendly workplace. This may be providing opportunities for a shorter work week, working during school hours, and the ability to leave for family illness and/or school activities. When working with families, clinicians may want to consider questions about family structure and work/life balance. These questions may lead to functional discrepancies within the family's daily life. Educators may focus on the impact of a busy lifestyle on family relationships, discussing alternative work-week options such as the 6-hour workday implementation in Nordic countries (Vorontsov, & Belyaeva, 2019).

Laughter appears to be a common goal of families, or a litmus test of sorts to tell if the family relationships are in harmony. Laughter has been found to reduce stress and soften interactions (Akimbekov, & Razzaque, 2021). Furthermore, laughter is free and may serve to promote well-being for individuals and bring families closer together.

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Tables

Table 1

Distribution by Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Parent (<i>n</i> =73)	Young Adult (<i>n</i> =73)
African American	1.3%	1.4%
Latino	3.9%	4.1%
Asian	7.9%	6.8%
Caucasian	81.6%	78.1%
Other	5.3%	9.6%

Table 2

Distribution by Education Level

Education Level	%
Less than HS Diploma	2.6
HS Diploma	5.3
Some College	15.8
Two Year Degree	25.0
Four Year Degree	31.6

Table 3

Distribution by Annual Income

Income	%
Less than \$24k	7.9
\$25k-\$50k	23.7
\$51k-100k	40.8
> than \$100k	27.6

Table 4*Distribution by Housing Status*

Housing Status	%
Rent an Apartment/Condo	3.9
Rent a Townhome	1.3
Rent a House	6.6
Own a Condo	1.3
Own a Townhome	2.6
Own a House	80.3
Other	3.9

Table 5*Distribution by Marital Status*

Marital Status	%
Married	61.8
Divorced	19.7
Single	9.2
Cohabiting	3.9
Remarried	2.6
Other	2.6

Table 6*Descriptive Statistics and Correlation of Parent and Young Adult Well-Being Scores*

Variable	<i>n</i>	Minimum	Maximum	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1
1. Parent Well-Being Score	73	2.00	5.00	4.19	0.76	—
2. Young Adult Well-Being Score	73	2.00	5.00	3.96	0.90	0.38

**p* = .001.

Table 7

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation for Parent and Young Adult Mean Average Empathy Scores

Variable	<i>n</i>	Minimum	Maximum	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1
1.Parent Empathy Score	76	2.20	5.00	4.24	0.68	—
2.Young Adult Empathy Score	76	2.00	5.00	4.09	0.70	0.84

* $p < .001$.

Table 8

Linear Regression Results for Parent and Young Adult Well-Being Scores Predicting Overall Empathy Scores

Variable	<i>p</i>				
Overall Well-Being	.19	.23	.05	2.83	.005