RESEARCH ARTICLE

Differences in mothers' and fathers' parenting styles: a qualitative study

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Aim: To examine parental experiences and investigate differences between mothers' and fathers' parenting practices.

Methods: We used a qualitative methodology in this study. We conducted semi-structured interviews with both mothers and fathers from fifteen families between April and May 2021 in the Makarska Riviera region in southern Croatia. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, mostly in cafés and participants' homes; they lasted 15 minutes on average.

Results: Most fathers were stricter and had more authority over their children, while mothers were more permissive. Although both parents were involved in raising their children, the mothers had a slightly higher level of participation. The parents used their free time to interact with their children. They set boundaries and expected their children to respect them, but also provided affection, warmth, and security. They addressed all parenting dilemmas by mutual agreement. Compared to their own parents, they used a softer approach with their children and preferred the authoritative parenting style.

Conclusions: It appears that parental practices have changed over time – the older, rigid, authoritarian parenting style has been supplanted by authoritative parenting. Nowadays, fathers are becoming increasingly involved in the family sphere and child-rearing, indicating a shift toward modern, equal parenting.

Keywords: authority; children; qualitative study; parenting styles; parenthood

Introduction

Beyond meeting a child's basic needs, such as food and physical safety, parenting – at its core – involves raising a child and requires ample patience, love, and self-control. Feeling love for the child is not enough – a parent must know what their child is going through, provide support, direct their optimal development, and control the whole process (*1*). Aside from parents' character traits, children's personalities and the environment in the parent-child relationship also affect parenting quality. Parents' activities and behavior are alerted by the arrival of a child in the family. Moreover, a new child can bring both positive and negative emotions into the family setting and can change how its parent thinks, feels, and behaves (*2*).

According to Čudina-Obradović and Obradović (*3*), parenting may be observed through four basic concepts – parental experience; parental care; parental actions, activities, and behaviors; and parenting styles. Parental experience encompasses decision-making concerning children; the adoption and acceptance of the parental role; conscious or intuitive setting of the educational goals; and the perception of self-worth based on invested efforts, the emotional connection, and the child's success. Parental care implies the protection and concern for the child's life and development. Parenting actions are specific activities that parents engage in to achieve parental goals and fulfill their role. Lastly, parenting styles refer to the emotional climate of all parent-child interactions (*3*). More specifically, they emerge as a combination of parents' behaviors in various situations, creating a nurturing climate (*4*). They differ based on the level of parental warmth as well as the demands that parents exercise on their children. Different parenting styles, with their varying degrees of emotional warmth and supervision, are known to have diverse effects on child development (*5*).

In this framework, a permissive parent tries to adapt to a child's impulses, desires and actions, rather than punish them. Such parenting is presented to a child as a resource that it can use as it wishes, rather than as an ideal that it can emulate or as an active factor responsible for shaping or changing its current or future behavior. The child is allowed to question their activities as much as possible; it is also permitted to avoid control and is not encouraged to comply with defined standards.

An authoritarian parent, meanwhile, tries to shape, control and evaluate the child's behavior and attitudes per a set standard. This style of parenting values obedience as a virtue and favors punitive, violent measures to curb arbitrariness in cases where the child's actions or beliefs conflict with what is considered proper behavior. The parent assumes that the child should accept their word as the only correct one.

In contrast, the authoritative parent imposes his own perspective as an adult, but recognizes the child's personal interests. Here, the parent is aware of the child's current 'qualities,' but also sets boundaries for future behavior. In doing so, they use reason and power with the help of established regimes to achieve their goals and do not base their ideas on group consensus or the individual wishes of the child (*6*).

Finally, uninvolved parenting, which combines emotional coldness and weak control, fosters hostility and resistance; here, children tend to be lacking both socially and academically (*7*).

Good parenting is often synonymous with the authoritative style, as this approach is high in parental support and generally seen as constructive (*8*). This suggests that optimal parenting features both supervision and warmth. Crucially, children need to feel accepted and loved, but also have to know and understand the rules of good behavior and believe that their parents will adhere to them (*9*).

As the mother's role has traditionally been seen as a biology-based, inseparable part of a woman's identity, parenthood tended to be identified with motherhood; in contrast, fathers fulfilled their parenting role by providing material and psychological support to the mother (*3*). Conventionally, motherhood has been associated with childcare and child-rearing in a socially acceptable atmosphere of unconditional love; conversely, societal expectations have traditionally cast the father as a role model for success in the external world, a view that still holds today to some extent (*10*).

However, the role of the modern-day father has changed significantly in recent times, as research indicates a rising trend of paternal involvement in family life and child care, especially among younger men (*11*). The changes that occurred at the level of paternal practice are not forced, but imply male rational strategies and a certain motivational basis. Here the relationship with the spouse/partner is accentuated, where the risk of partnership creates a framework in which both parties must feel comfortable with their role and that of the other party in order to maintain the relationship and its quality at the appropriate level. In this sense, intimacy can be an important motive for involvement in children's lives. Although this motivation may be important, men's desire to be fathers and to be involved in their children's lives also has its own roots. Most parents do not think of themselves or their children in terms of goals in the (distant) future, but experience their children in the present. These experiences are emotional exchanges, observations and participatory developments that create, at least for a while, a sense of security and stability. This is precisely why the bearers of these changes, in the case of new fatherhood, are men who are most affected by the process of detraditionalization, which is another name for the continuation of the process of change in the late modern era; these men are more urbanized, educated, young, and aware of contemporary risks (*12*).

Therefore, the father, traditionally seen as the 'breadwinner' of the family, becomes involved in child rearing (*13*). Although previous research has shown that most childcare responsibilities still fall to women, we may observe a certain, gradual shift toward the greater involvement of men (*14*). The new fatherhood in the family context can be realized through an individualistic characteristic, in which parenthood is just another identity and a special sphere of fulfillment for men, or through a sacrificial one, in which fathers also take on the traditionalist characteristics of renunciation for the happiness of children and families. In the former case, the equality of gender roles is achieved by valuing individual freedom and choice, while in the latter case, it is realized through the equal importance of relationships and family as a group in terms of quality and value for both sexes. This latter model of neo-paternity may represent a specific expression of fatherhood in southern

European circles, where late modern fatherhood developed in the context of cultural heritage with high social/family values. There, the values of primary/intimate relationships and kinship solidarity serve as a framework for paternal reflexivity. Consequently, new fatherhood is recognized as a practice that includes at least three dimensions: A high level of involvement of fathers in the care and care of children; values and practices of gender equality; and a developed male parental identity (*12*).

As a result, the modern concept of equal parenting eschews traditional societal pressures and stereotypes associated with the mother's and father's respective roles, which entailed gender-based differences in household chores (*15*). Regardless of their roles being based on two almost diametrically opposed gender roles, the mother and father are seen as equally important for the child's development and upbringing. As mothers have been primarily responsible for child-rearing, current research has mostly focused on mothers' parenting styles. The father's involvement in family life (*13*) increased the importance of his role; although the father's role was previously important in traditional society, his involvement in parenting was very low. Consequently, attention should be shifted away from focusing solely on mothers' parenting and towards both parents and their different approaches to children. More specifically, data show that mothers and fathers use different parenting styles (*16*, *17*). Some studies suggest that parents treat their sons and daughters differently in terms of parental control. This calls into question the importance of gender-differentiated parental control as a means of gender socialization and as a mechanism underlying gender differences in child behavior. Therefore, parents' gender stereotypes could explain why some parents behave differently towards their sons and daughters, and others do not (*18*).

Child gender-based differences have also been observed, with some authors ascribing a higher level of paternal influence on the emotional fulfillment of daughters, while mothers may in various situations show preferential treatment to their sons (*19*). A parent may also choose differential parenting styles for their son and daughter, respectively, as observations show that daughters are more often parented using the authoritative style, while authoritarian parenting is preferred for sons (*20*).

Here we aimed to examine parental experiences and investigate parent gender-based differences in parenting practices in south Croatia. We selected this area because it is a smaller environment where we assumed that traditional attitudes and gender differences might still be present in general and therefore visible in parenting styles. We aimed to look at parenting as a social process unfolding within a specific space and time.

Methods

Sample size

The question of the sufficient sample size emerges in all qualitative research. It mainly depends on the criterion of saturation, which is the moment when the inclusion of new participants does not lead to new data. While there is no specific rule for the number of participants whose statements will lead to data saturation, some authors (*21*) consider

nine interviews sufficient to achieve code saturation, i.e., the moment when new codes do not appear in the participants' responses. Other authors (*22*) recommend the inclusion of fifteen participants. We decided to include 30 participants in our research – 15 women and 15 men (i.e., 15 married couples).

Participants

Using convenience sampling, the first author identified fifteen families with mother-father pairs based on personal familiarity, approached them and explained the purpose of the interview. Specifically, she selected individuals whom she knew superficially and with whom she did not establish significantly close relationships. This allowed us to take an objective approach in this study, as we had as little previous shared experience with the potential interviewees. Additionally, the last author led the research and has many years of experience with conducting qualitative research. All of the thirty potential participants (15 male, 15 female) agreed to be interviewed; all interviews were conducted successfully, with the mother and father from the same family interviewed separately. In presenting our findings below, we assigned the same number to the mother and father from the same family. Data saturation was reached after 30 interviews so there was no need for further interviews.

We conducted this study in April and May 2021. All families were from the Makarska Riviera region in southern Croatia (14 from Makarska, one from Brela). All participants were employed, most of them full-time (8 hours). Most of the participants had planned their pregnancies; most had two children (n=12), one had a single child, and two had three children. They had between 4 and 18 years of experience with parenting. Most of the children were teenagers or adolescents at the time of the study.

Semi-structured interview

Semi-structured interviews enable the collection of data related to the researcher's topic of interest, but also leave the participants free to discuss topics that are not pre-planned. Both authors prepared an interview guide, with sub-questions serving as a reminder to the interviewer. However, if the participant wanted to say something more about a topic of conversation outside of this framework, the first author used sub-questions to try to get a better insight into the participant's experience.

The interview guide comprised a socio-demographic questionnaire on gender, age, and employment, which was given to the participants at the beginning of the interview. During the interview, participants were presented with questions regarding their definition of parenthood; parenting practices; joint childcare arrangements; mothers' and fathers' parenting differences; setting and keeping parenting boundaries; reward and punishment; consultation with other parents; parent-child relationships; self-perception of parental role and parenting effects on child behavior; and the effect of work schedule on parenting and time spent with children. They were also asked to compare their own upbringing and their parenting style.

The first author conducted all interviews face-to-face, mostly in cafés or participants' homes, adjusting the specific time of the interview to the participants' commitments and free time. The interviews were scheduled with each participant separately, at which point they were told that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they could cancel or quit the interview at any time without explanation. The aim of the study was explained to each participant prior to their interview.

The interviews lasted around 15 minutes on average. They were audio-recorded with a mobile audio recorder, after which the first author transcribed them directly. We reviewed the transcripts afterwards and analyzed sections relevant to the research questions. As we conducted the interviews in Croatian, we provide the participants' translated verbatim quotations below.

We based our coding approach on topics/subtopics emerging from the transcript analysis stage. In this type of data analysis, each topic is defined by a single concept that is then used as a code. Accordingly, we codified and categorized the participants' statements, paying attention to the correlation between codes, categories, and the research questions. In detail, we analyzed the data using a combination of deductive and inductive approaches. The deductive approach involved asking specific questions based on an existing conceptual framework (e.g., questions about parenting styles, exploring differences between mothers' and fathers' parenting styles, and rule and boundary setting). Meanwhile, we based the data analysis itself on an inductive approach, which involved 'building up' a predetermined category (e.g., participants' statements, opinions, and experiences regarding the reward and punishment system). Therefore, we started our study from the specific and built toward the general, enhancing and evolving preset categories based on the participants' observations and replies. Consequently, we established additional codes that were not foreseen by the initial framework. The final step of the analysis was a written interpretation of the findings.

Ethical approval

We held to all relevant ethical standards while conducting the study and received approval from the Ethics Committee of the University of Split Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (Class: 003-08/22-03/0002). We obtained informed consent from all participants for the audio recording of their interviews and the use of collected data for further analysis. We assured their anonymity by removing personally identifiable information from the transcripts.

Results

Parenting practices

When we analyzed the study participants as couples, we observed that fathers tended to believe that their own parenting styles differed from those of their partners'. Interestingly, their partners also reported that they used different parenting approaches than fathers.

Most men reported being stricter than their partners, having more authority over their children, and believing that their partners were more permissive.

> My husband is the authority and I am more on the friendly side and, well, we'll see how well this works out eventually. (Mother 3)

> For me, parenthood means responsibility. I think that there are parenting differences between me and my partner. I see myself as a strict and fair parent. (Father 11)

> My parenting methods are different from my partner's and I think that he worries and stresses way less about it. (Mother 11)

Although this was the case for most of the participants, some of the interviewed parents (n=6) reported that they and their partners shared similar parenting styles and practiced equal parenting.

> Parenting is raising and caring for children yourself, a very interesting experience, we learn something new every day. My husband and I approach children in the same or similar way. (Mother 7)

> My wife and I are equally strict and at the same time we give enough love to our children, I believe that this is the right formula for them to grow into good people. (Father 10)

Regardless of gender, the participants largely agreed that they were equally involved in parenting; however, fathers in general still reported higher mother involvement, mainly because mothers spent more time with their children, allowing them to form closer attachments and connections. In this context, some fathers stated that mothers spend more time with their children because fathers are stricter parents and that maternal love is more important than paternal love.

> Speaking of closeness, no one is on par with their mother because she spends more time with them. (Father 1)

> I have a pretty close relationship with my children, but I think that they have a closer relationship with their mother. (Father 2)

> The children are closer to their mother because I'm stricter. (Father 6)

> We have a close relationship, but mother's love may play a more important role, in this case. (Father 7)

The participants most frequently shared important parenting decisions (n=29). Some couples found mutual decision-making easier, while some struggled, but they all strived to act with the well-being of their children in mind. Only one father (Father 4) stated that his 'wife is in charge.' However, she gave a different opinion, in which she believes that they make decisions equally.

> We are on the same page when it comes to parenting. (Father 10)

> We understand each other and easily make joint decisions. (Father 2)

> We have a hard time agreeing on things, I'm permissive and their father is strict, but we're both involved in making decisions. (Mother 6)

> I believe that we eventually land on a common solution, but I'm more involved just because I spend more time with them, while the nature of his job makes it impossible for him. (Mother 9)

When faced with parenting dilemmas, most couples sought advice from their friends and acquaintances (but not from their parents and relatives) to help them consider different approaches. However, some also used the Internet (mostly Google) as a source of information on parenting. In contrast, eight parents have never sought advice from others, but

they have not given a reason for this approach. Also, there were no gender differences in willingness to seek advice.

> While chatting over coffee, yes. (Father 5)
>
> Yes, of course, we talk to other people and exchange opinions. (Mother 6)
>
> I often seek advice from the parents of their peers. I like to hear what the other side has to say and then make the most of it in my own parenting. (Mother 9)
>
> Sometimes I seek advice and sometimes I look for answers on Google. (Father 2)

All fathers and mothers in this study were employed, spent their free time with their children, and believed that the number of hours they were setting aside for their children was adequate.

> I spend all my free time with my children. (Father 14)
>
> When I'm not at work, I'm spending time with them. (Father 7)
>
> It depends, on average, six to seven hours. (Mother 10)
>
> I hope it's enough, depending on my and their obligations. (Mother 9)

While some participants reported that their jobs cut into the time they were able to spend with their children, some did not consider them an issue and reported that it did not affect their parenting. Others held that work affected the overall family atmosphere, in the sense that success at work contributed to a better atmosphere in the household. The participants especially pinpointed seasonal work as a major factor in their parenting due to resulting fatigue, which negatively affected their family life and parenting. By contrast, some parents highlighted positive aspects of such arrangements, citing busy work schedules as a factor that helped their children build independence from an early age compared to their peers. We did not observe gender differences in evaluating the impact of professional roles on parenting.

> It does have an effect, for example, during high season, those eight hours are exhausting, I can't be completely ready for the two of them when I come home, I need a little something to recharge so that I'm available to them, but it's okay, it's only for two or three months. (Mother 3)
>
> Yes, to give an example, my children had to become independent earlier than some other children, they started nursery school at the age of two, and they had to heat up their own lunch when they were 12 or 13, but on the other hand, I think that it's normal, my children would learn in much the same way if I stayed home all the time. (Mother 2)
>
> Well, yes, it takes up a lot of time, especially since my wife works on Sundays and I don't. (Father 15)

Setting and maintaining parental boundaries

The participants actively strove to set boundaries for their children. Most parents punished their children when they ignored set boundaries, usually by taking away their cell phones. Of note, the interviewed parents were opposed to corporal punishment and never practiced it. A few did not endorse any form of punishment and felt that conversation was sufficient to find the optimal solution for every problematic situation. We observed no differences between genders here.

> There are some boundaries and, of course, there are also some small punishments when they misbehave, nothing spectacular, but from their, let's say, perspective, it might be a lot – but it's really insignificant. (Father 1)

> Yes, we set limits but, sometimes, we more often give in, I mean, we often give in because we are either tired or sometimes it's easier to give in than to fight, and as for punishments… these are, like, little things, you're not allowed to use your phone, you're not allowed to go see Grandma because you didn't listen, because you didn't do [this or that]… we could be a bit firmer in this respect, as well. (Mother 1)

> I don't punish them physically, but there have to be some boundaries, it should be clear who's the parent and who's the child, there must be some authority, and boundaries have to be respected – for example, taking away their phone, denying them something that's most important to them at that moment for a while. (Mother 2)

Some parents stated that there were differences in the observance of boundaries depending on the child's age. Specifically, parents were more relaxed with the second child and set different boundaries for the older compared to the younger child.

> Yes, and with the first child you don't have a perception of things that are important or unimportant, you can't weigh them enough at all, and with the second you already know, now with this one who is less than a year old you already know if it's nothing, while with the first one already jumped, what's wrong with her, that's basically how you learn. (Father 1)

> Yes, you think you are raising the same two children, the older son did not want to help me when his sister was born, and now that their half-brother was born, the daughter just wants to help me. I teach them the same, there is no difference in men's and women's jobs. (Mother 2)

> Yes, due to experience with another child, I set boundaries more easily. (Father 4)

> They differ, with the first we were timid, and with the second it was different. (Mother 6)

The participants had different stances on punishment, but almost all of them rewarded their children for obedience. Reward strategies differed, with some parents choosing gifts and others preferring verbal praise. However, some participants avoided rewards as they believed that children should obey their parents unconditionally and should not be rewarded for obedience. We saw no gender differences between parents in this context.

> I reward my children's obedience only verbally. (Father 5)

> I don't reward my children in the sense that I'll give them money or something just because they listened to me, but I do tell them 'well done' or something like that. (Mother 2)

> I don't use rewards, obedience is expected. (Mother 7)

Self-perception of the effect of parenting on children

In general, the participants perceived themselves as good parents. Some still struggled to assess the quality of their parenting. This was mostly the case for parents with younger children. Parents of older children had greater awareness and trust in their parenting skills because their children confided in them when they had a problem and they were able to communicate effectively with their children. It should be noted that some parents believed that they were too lenient with their children, which they did not always find ideal. On the other hand, they held that this approach might have a positive effect on the child as it fostered thinking skills and personal attitudes. Ultimately, they all felt that they had a positive influence on their children. We found no differences in their opinions by gender.

I think we're doing well – she's still small, so we don't really know if what we're doing is right or not and, I mean, it's a struggle day in and day out, but I generally feel that we're doing okay. (Mother 1)

I think that both my wife and I are a good influence on them. (Father 13)

I think I'm too tolerant with my eldest and this might not be ideal because there is more of a friendly vibe and less of any sense of parental authority over the child, but on the other hand, the child gets to develop their own way of thinking and attitude and is free to express themselves, which, likely, would not be the case with a strict father. (Father 2)

I believe that I've done a good job so far, there is some feedback, they confide in me when they have a problem, and they didn't "crucify" me for having a child with another man, so we still get along really well and we work, and this sort of tells me that I've done every-thing well so far. (Mother 2)

There are noticeable differences in child-rearing in families with two or more children. All participants were aware of differences in raising the first, second, or subsequent child. Based on their statements, some struggled more with raising the first child, whereas oth-ers found it easier, but they all stressed that every child was his or her own person and parenting approaches differed accordingly.

Yes, with the first child, you don't have any clue about what's important and what isn't, you can't really gauge it at all, and with the second, you already know; now, with our youngest, who is one, we already know that if she's whiney, it's really not a big deal, while with our first, we'd be on pins and needles thinking something was wrong with her – that's basically how you learn. (Father 1)

Yes, because the two have different personalities. (Mother 3)

Of course. Our first and second sons have different personalities, so we adapt. (Father 6)

They are different, with our first, we were scared, but with our second, that wasn't the case. (Mother 6)

Every child is a story for themselves and requires a unique approach. I've always had to motivate and encourage our first daughter because her shyness has held her back a lot; with my son, I had to confront him with reality and explain that his devil-may-care atti-tude won't fly in real life. Teach him diligence and persistence. Correct his high opinion of himself. As a parent, our third daughter is the least demanding, but that's why I have to be careful not to neglect her. So, I always listen and ask about what she's doing and praise her achievements. (Mother 11)

Yes, I have an easier time setting boundaries with our second child due to experience. (Father 4)

Well, I think they are different because the firstborn is the first and everything goes, but with the second, there are slightly stricter rules. (Mother 5)

We were more careful with our first child than with our second. (Father 9)

Comparing the participants' upbringing with their own parenting styles

In terms of instilling correct moral values and value systems, the majority of the partici-pants believed that there was little difference between their upbringing and the parenting methods they use with their own children. However, most of them reported higher per-missiveness compared to their own parents, as well as taking more time to communicate, express love, and build trust-based relationships with their children. The participants re-ported that their own parents used more rigid parenting styles, which they saw as being in line with the 'old times' when more emphasis was placed on traditional and even con-servative social relations. Some of them experienced parent-to-child violence in childhood,

which is a parental discipline technique they never use in their own parenting. We also detected no gender differences here either.

> Well, yes, there are deviations, it's essentially, like, when you're growing up, you think to yourself, I'll never raise my child like this – some things are certainly different, but again, ultimately, I don't believe that it's anything crucial, anything major. I think we are about the same – a very good question. I don't believe that we are much stricter as parents, on the contrary, we might be a bit more permissive than they were. (Father 1)

> Well, yes, essentially it's the same, in the sense that I want them to be brought up the same way we were brought up, with the same kind of proper stances on what's good, what isn't, what's allowed, what isn't, but I think that generally speaking, we're doing a better job in that – I mean, it sounds bad, but we show affection more, for example, I don't remember my parents often or ever telling me they loved me or kissing me when I was a child, it was simply not an option; while we, for instance, hug and kiss them constantly and, like, we tell them that we love them a thousand times a day. And in terms of rewards, we do give some rewards because we can afford it now, and they couldn't; as the times were different, that changed as well, [but] I think that at its core, the way we raise them is the same. (Mother 1)

> The way I raise my children is different from my parents', which I would call quite strict and authoritarian, with clearly defined rules of play. (Father 2)

> My parents were stricter than me. I am a bit more indulgent and affectionate. (Mother 7)

> The difference is that my mother used to beat me and I never hit them, my mother devoted more of her time to the household, cleaning, and washing up, while I pay more attention to my children than the house. (Mother 2)

> I try to raise them as my parents raised me, but then again, these days it's impossible in a way; I try to make sure that they know some rules, as my parents taught me. (Mother 3)

Defining parenthood

Regardless of gender, all interviewed parents agreed that parenthood was one of the most beautiful episodes in their lives and the key to a happy and successful family. For them, the joy of parenthood was spending time with their children and participating in their growth and development. However, they also saw it as a major challenge, with the ultimate goal of raising children to become independent, good people. As parenting challenges, they cited making the right decisions for their children at turning points in their lives. as well as teaching their children the right life values and building mutual trust. According to our findings, the differences between mothers and fathers in the perception of parenting and parenting challenges are very small. The parents agreed that boundaries should be set for the children and that they should try to solve all problems by talking so as to avoid punishment. First of all, they set boundaries for children that they must respect, but simultaneously provide them with love, warmth and security

> The joy of it is that parenthood is actually the best role in life, and the challenge is leading the child on the right path. (Mother 14)

> Parenthood is the best thing that could have happened to me. There is no greater love than a parent's love for their child. (Mother 5)

> Parenting is the key to a successful and happy family. My self-perception as a parent is making sure that my children are well-behaved and devoted to their family throughout their lives. (Father 5)

> Parenting means raising and caring for children, a very interesting experience – we learn something new every day. My husband and I approach parenting in the same or similar way. (Mother 7)

Discussion

We found that both mothers and fathers in south Croatia are involved in parenting, with the former being involved to a somewhat greater extent, considering that they spent more time with their children. They mostly consider that their parenting styles differ, with mothers being more lenient and the fathers being somewhat stricter. They usually make important decisions about children together, but when they cannot do it alone, they ask their friends for advice. They set boundaries for their children, but they differ depending on the age of the child. They also reward their children for obedience, spend a significant amount of time with them, communicate with them, express their love, and build a relationship with them based on trust. All of these would fit an authoritative parenting style which combines firm control and emotional warmth.

Previous research has shown that authoritative parenting may be the optimal parenting style (*2*, *23-26*), as it leads to the most favorable outcome for the child's development. In this way, the study participants wanted their children to feel safe. Parental choices can encourage children to express their thoughts, desires, and feelings, which is extremely important due to their positive effect on the child's socio-emotional and cognitive development.

In the modern world, career and job commitments are increasingly putting a strain on parents, resulting in less time spent with family members. As parenting in the family context revolves around the interactions among family members, especially during free time, the parents' free time and the contents of family time are a major influence on child socialization. The parents in our study had varying perceptions of the impact of employment on parenting and the parent-child relationship. More specifically, the work schedule was seen as a factor that may or may not affect parenting. Although all study participants were working parents, they strove to spend their free time with their children. The length of free time certainly depended on children's obligations and how much time they spent in kindergarten, school, or other extracurricular activities. Additionally, the parents reported that they addressed all parenting dilemmas by talking to their partners, which is in line with earlier research that favors equal parenting (*2*). Similarly, in line with earlier research that looked at parent involvement in children's lives (*13*), both mothers and fathers in our study were very proactive in this regard. However, the participants notably believed that mothers had somewhat closer relationships with their children than fathers, which they mostly attributed to the biological bond between mother and child.

Parenting, *inter alia*, involves supervisory and disciplinary practices geared toward teaching children how to behave and what is or is not allowed. Proper boundary setting and application allow children to understand and learn what we are asking them to do. Both the mothers and the fathers in our study agreed that children need limits and that problems should be addressed through conversation to avoid punishment, which also confirmed their preference for authoritative parenting. Consequently, the parents set boundaries and expected their children to respect them, but also provided affection, warmth, and security. Given that every child is unique, they agreed that children in families with two or more children required customized approaches. Although the participants shared similar parenting styles with their own parents in some respects, especially in terms of instilling

correct moral values, they believed that they were more permissive with their children. They did not espouse corporeal punishment, although some participants experienced it as a disciplinary measure in their childhood.

According to the opinions of both male and female participants, most fathers were stricter than their partners and had more authority over their children, while mothers were more lenient. Importantly, the parents agreed that there were differences in their parenting styles, which is in line with earlier research that showed that mothers and fathers use different parenting styles (*16*, *17*). Some fathers believed mothers to be more involved in parenting because they spent more time with children, made more time for communication, and used communication to establish mutual understanding.

The limitation of this study is its relatively narrow geographical coverage. Throughout the interviews, many of the parents we interviewed in the Makarska Riviera area reported that their parents were relatively more conservative. Fathers have always been stricter and more disciplinarian, while women tended to be more permissive. Recently, fathers in the studied region have been becoming increasingly involved in child-rearing, while parenting practices have been getting more liberal than in the past. Given that this study was set in a narrow local environment, future research should look at parenting styles and practices in larger, urban environments. Similarly, future study designs may also include children and look at their perceptions of parenting practices, which may provide different insights into the research topic.

Conclusions

Although parenthood implies various challenges, our participants seemed to enjoy their parental role. Parents co-operated in their parenting efforts to prepare their children for the challenges of modern society and felt they were a positive influence on their children overall. As the rigid, authoritarian parenting style of the past has been abandoned in favor of authoritative parenting, parenthood – traditionally biased toward motherhood – has acquired a new format. Although mothers still tend to take on the brunt of child-related responsibilities, the father's participation in the family sphere and his parenting involvement indicates a shift toward modern, equal parenting.

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have given their consent to send the paper to the journal and guarantee the authenticity of the data on which the paper is based.

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