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# Association Between Permissive Parenting Style and High-Risk Behaviors Among Undergraduate College Students: An Analytical Cross-Sectional Study

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## Abstract

**Introduction** Young adults have always been considered to be susceptible to high-risk behaviors (HRBs), and parenting style has been theorized to influence a young adult's decision to engage in HRBs. Due to paucity of literature in the local context to ascertain this possible relationship, this study determined the association of permissive parenting style and HRBs among young Filipino adults.

**Methods** An analytical cross-sectional design was employed, and undergraduate students aged 19-24 years were recruited by convenience sampling. The Parental Authority Questionnaire and Youth Risk Behavior Survey were used to determine parenting style and HRB, respectively. Crude prevalence rate ratio (PRR) was determined at 95% confidence level.

**Results** Among mothers with permissive parenting, there was strong positive association with children's HRBs for alcohol and drug use (PRR = 3.44; 95% CI 0.66, 18.03); sexual behavior (PRR = 1.27; 95% CI 0.46, 3.50); and diet/ food intake (PRR = 1.37; 95% CI 0.81, 2.33). Among fathers with permissive parenting, there was strong positive association with children's HRBs for alcohol and drug use (PRR = 3.65; 95% CI 0.70, 19.11); and diet/ food intake (PRR = 1.18; 95% CI 0.70, 2.01). However, none of these association met statistical significance ( $p$ -value > 0.05).

**Conclusion** Permissive parenting style may influence future HRBs of biological children, and this might be an area of concern in terms of counseling interventions to improve on family dynamics and relationship.

**Key words:** High-risk behaviors, permissive parenting style, young adult

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High-risk behaviors (HRBs) may impact on an individual's over-all development and well-being, and may hinder potential success in one's endeavors. Such HRBs may inadvertently increase the risk of suffering from immediate physical injury, other conditions, or illness. In 1990, the Centers for Disease Control launched a monitoring program called the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System under which HRBs were classified under six categories: 1) behaviors that contributed to unintentional injuries

and violence; 2) tobacco use; 3) alcohol and other drug use; 4) sexual behaviors that contributed to unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), which included human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection; 5) unhealthy dietary behaviors; and 6) physical inactivity.<sup>1</sup>

Young adults, in particular, have been considered most susceptible to HRBs, because early adulthood is recognized as a critical period of development where mortality rates may be relatively high, health needs are unique to the age group, and challenges and milestones will distinguish elderly adults from adolescents.<sup>2</sup> In relation to this, parenting has been determined to significantly influence the development of a child. Parenting style, which encompasses wide-ranging patterns of child-rearing practices, values, and behaviors, may affect a young adult's decision to engage in HRBs. The different parenting styles as proposed by Diana Baumrind (i.e., authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive) have been associated with both positive and negative child outcomes.<sup>3,4</sup>

Parenting style, in relation to HRBs among young adults, was the main focus of this study, with particular emphasis on permissive parenting and its association with HRBs. Hence, this epidemiologic investigation also aimed to provide awareness to Filipino parents on the effects of their childrearing practices, values, and behaviors on the psychosocial development of their children. Filipino families, in general, have been described to be closely-knit; the knowledge and information gained from this study would have the potential of establishing stronger harmonious connections within families, on top of potentially preventing HRBs among family-oriented young Filipino adults, leading towards the betterment of society.

## Methods

This research utilized an analytical cross-sectional study design, with young adults aged 19-24 years old studying in selected areas in the Philippines as the study population. Baumrind's parenting style, specifically the permissive style, was the independent variable, and the previously validated Parental Authority Questionnaire was employed to measure this parameter (i.e., PAQ scores of 4-6).<sup>5</sup> Similarly, using a pilot-tested adaptation of the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, pre-determined HRBs were identified as the dependent variables.<sup>6</sup>

The study participants consisted of undergraduate college students who were selected using non-probability convenience sampling, utilizing both in-person and online recruitment. The sample size was determined as 271 study participants, using EpiInfo for cross-sectional studies. To establish association between the variables of interest, the prevalence risk ratio (PRR) was computed, and chi-square tests were used to determine significance of the results. Data were encoded in MS Excel, while data analysis was primarily carried out using IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

The study was approved by the institutional Level 3 Ethics Review Committee, which is duly recognized by Forum for Ethical Review Committees in the Asian and Western Pacific Region (FERCAP) and Strategic Initiative for Developing Capacity in Ethics Review (SIDCER).

## Results

A total of 311 qualified Filipino college students who met the inclusion and exclusion criteria voluntarily participated in the study. Their baseline characteristics are summarized in Table 1. Majority of the participants were 19-year old undergraduate students, mostly females. In terms of gender identity, majority of the respondents were heterosexual. Most of the study participants belonged to nuclear families, were Roman Catholics, and resided in Region IV and the National Capital Region. Most of the respondents had siblings, with almost equal distribution in terms of birth order (i.e., eldest, middle, youngest), and only a minority (10%) was an only child. In terms of social economic strata, there was almost equal distribution among families who had an average monthly income of 1) < PhP 50,000.00; 2) PhP 50,000.00 to 100,000.00; and 3) > PhP 100,000.00.

Among the HRBs, unhealthy diet and food intake (56.10%) was the most common behavior noted. This was closely followed by lack of sufficient physical activity (36.66%). Only one respondent reported unintentional injuries and violence (0.25%), while the rest of the HRBs are summarized in Table 2. Summarized in Table 3 are the measures of association between permissive parenting and selected HRBs. Among mothers with permissive parenting, there was strong positive association with children's HRBs for alcohol and drug use (PRR = 3.44; 95% CI 0.66,

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18.03); sexual behavior (PRR = 1.27; 95% CI 0.46, 3.50); and diet/food intake (PRR = 1.37; 95% CI 0.81, 2.33). Among fathers with permissive parenting, there was strong positive association with children's HRBs for alcohol and drug use (PRR = 3.65; 95% CI 0.70, 19.11); and diet/food intake (PRR = 1.18; 95% CI 0.70, 2.01). However, none of these association met statistical significance ( $p$ -value > 0.05).

**Table 1.** Age, sex, gender identity, family structure, birth order, monthly family income, area of residence, and religion of study subjects (N = 311)..

Characteristic	n (%)
Age (year)	
19	165 (53.1)
20	78 (25.1)
21	36 (11.6)
22	15 (4.8)
23	7 (2.3)
24	10 (3.2)
Sex	
Male	110 (35.4)
Female	201 (64.6)
Gender identity	
Heterosexual	273 (87.7)
Trans-person	11 (3.5)
Homosexual	5 (1.6)
Bisexual	17 (5.5)
Others <sup>1</sup>	5 (1.6)
Family structure	
Nuclear Family	202 (65.0)
Extended Family	98 (31.5)
Blended Family	11 (3.5)
Birth order	
Eldest	104 (33.4)
Middle child	85 (27.3)
Youngest	91 (29.3)
Only child	31 (10.0)
Monthly family income (PhP)	
< 50,000	101 (32.5)
50,000 - 100,000	109 (35.0)
> 100,000	101 (32.5)
Area of residence	
Southern Tagalog	122 (39.2)
National Capital Region	110 (35.4)
Central Luzon	33 (10.6)
Others	46 (14.8)
Religion	
Roman Catholic	228 (73.3)
Born Again Christian	45 (14.5)
Iglesia ni Cristo	12 (3.9)
Others	26 (7.8)

**Table 2.** Frequency and percentage distribution of high-risk behaviors among study participants.

High-risk behaviors	n (%)
Alcohol and drug use	7 (1.75)
Sexual behavior and STDs	18 (4.49)
Physical activity	147 (36.66)
Diet and food intake	225 (56.10)
Unintentional injuries and violence	1 (0.25)
Smoking	3 (0.75)

For respondents with smoking as HRB, the predominant parenting styles of the mother were either permissive or authoritative. For HRBs that included diet and food intake, physical activity, and sexual behavior, the mothers of these study subjects were primarily authoritative. Participants with alcohol and drug use as HRB had predominantly authoritarian and permissive mothers, while unintentional injuries and violence showed equal predominance across the three parenting styles of the mothers. For participants with diet and food intake and sexual behavior as HRBs, the predominant parenting style of the father was authoritarian, while those with physical activity showed predominantly authoritative fathers. Most of the parenting styles among the participants with smoking HRB were authoritative and permissive, while no predominance was seen among the participants with unintentional injuries and violence, and alcohol and drug abuse high risk behavior.

### Discussion

The main parenting styles --- permissive, authoritative, and authoritarian --- often used in pediatric psychology were assessed by asking the respondents several questions pertaining to parental issues of expectations, control, and permissiveness. Each parenting style had been established to have a myriad of effects on the children's behavior, and this could be identified by certain characteristics, as well as degree of responsiveness (i.e., the extent to which parents were generally warm and sensitive to their children's needs) and demandingness (i.e., the degree of control parents imposed on their children in an attempt to influence their behavior). This study focused primarily on the permissive parenting style.

Individuals with permissive parenting style could be characterized to have high responsiveness and low

demandingness.<sup>7</sup> They could communicate freely and openly with their children, and often, would even give their children the liberty to decide for themselves, rather than give specific directions for their children to follow or comply with. In such families with permissive parents, overt rules and stringent expectations would often be non-existent or could be rarely enforced. However, permissive parents would often go through great lengths to keep their children pleased and satisfied, sometimes at the expense of the parents themselves. Permissive parents would often prefer to engage in a friendship role with their children, rather than a parenting role, to avoid conflict. Often, they would acquiesce to their children's pleas at the first sign of distress. Hence, these parents would generally over-indulge their children, and permissive individuals would only offer very limited guidance and direction.

Given this style of upbringing, it would be highly probable for these children to grow into young adults with greater chances of engaging in HRBs. This study revealed a positive association between permissive parenting and use of alcohol and drugs, engaging in risky sexual behavior, and type of diet and food intake, though the relationship was not statistically significant. Results of this study are comparable to other studies which suggest that adults with permissive parents were at risk for mental health issues, relationship difficulties, substance abuse, and poor self-regulation or low self-esteem.<sup>8,9,10</sup> Permissive parenting had been a predictor of several health outcomes, including impulsive behavior and egocentric personality of children who would likewise suffer from poor social skills.

Results of this study revealed that parenting styles may be a combination of the permissive, authoritative and authoritarian styles, which could potentially impact on the behavior of the adult child. Similarly, if both parents had different parenting styles, the lack of recognition of the more dominant parent could complicate the family dynamics that could ultimately influence the future behavior of the child during adulthood. Hence, it would appear that gender of the parent might also have an essential role in the future behavior of children.

A growing body of research evidence indicates that not only do parents play a formative role in determining their children's development, but they also significantly influence their children in terms of future behavior as adults. Other studies

would even suggest inter-generational continuities have been established for both parenting practices and consequent child development outcomes. Typologies which characterized parenting styles as varying along two orthogonal dimensions of responsiveness and demandingness have been particularly influential in research investigating the relationship between parenting and child/ adolescent development.

Permissive parenting was associated with HRBs of young Filipino adults, specifically diet/ food intake, sexual activity and infections, and substance use/abuse, but the relationships were not statistically significant. From the foregoing discussion, the following recommendations may be made: 1) additional investigations to clarify the association between the other parenting styles and other potential HRBs in the local context should be conducted; 2) the parent who exerted greater influence on the development of the child should be considered and closely evaluated; and 3) a different scoring system for the determination of the parenting styles could be adopted in order to prevent overlaps in a single parent.

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