

Parents' Perceptions of Children's Abilities

Janis E. Jacobs

University of Michigan

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Recent investigations have focused on the development of children's beliefs about their competencies in various domains (Harter, 1982). The construction of self beliefs depends on a variety of experiences and information that children receive about themselves and their world. Parents may be important sources of such information for the child. Parents seem to develop their ideas about their children's abilities quite early. If mothers or fathers are asked to describe their children, they may say that "Jeremy is athletically inclined," or that "Sarah is a social butterfly," or that "Jennifer has the brains in the family." What information do parents use to make such judgments? How do they transmit their perceptions and values to their children? An earlier study concerned with the socialization of achievement beliefs (Parsons, Adler, & Kaczala, 1982) showed that parents' perceptions were important influences on children's later estimates of their own math abilities. Although we know that parents' perceptions of their children's abilities are influential, the questions of what determines parents' beliefs and how they differ across domains have remained unexplored. This study investigated the perceptions of parents of middle elementary and late junior high school children in the skill areas of mathematics, sports, and making friends.

Historically, most studies of parental influence have focused on the impact of general patterns of child rearing on children's orientations toward achievement. Although the magnitude of the effects have varied, researchers have found that parental beliefs and practices do impact on children's general orientations toward mastery and global self-esteem (Coleman, et al., 1966; Parsons, 1981). Parents may affect on children's beliefs by the messages they communicate to children about their relative competencies in different skill areas and by the value and importance they place on various activities. Parents may also influence their children's beliefs by the way they structure the home environment, including the toys, activities, and experiences they provide. For example, parents who value intellectual competence become more involved in their children's academic activities (Katkovsky, Crandall, & Preston, 1964). Parents also respond to child characteristics such as gender, social class, and ethnic group by providing different toys and experiences for their children (Stein, in press; Wigfield & Asher, in press). Parents' perceptions of a child's competence at a particular skill may be another characteristic that influences the choice of toys and experiences provided for the child.

Parents' perceptions may develop differently for each skill depending on the available information and the parents' notions about the stability of competence within the area. Current research (Harter, in press) supports the idea that very young children have global beliefs about

themselves which develop into well-differentiated self-systems by early adolescence. This development may be paralleled by the development of parents' beliefs. Particular events like school transitions may mark a shift in perceptions because new and varied information becomes available to both children and parents.

Parents also convey messages to their children regarding their own values and beliefs about different activities. Previous work clearly indicates that parents' beliefs regarding their children's academic abilities may be important predictors of children's self and task beliefs (Parsons, Adler, & Kaczala, 1982; Crandall, 1964; Entwisle & Hayduk, 1978; Entwisle & Baker, 1983). This work has established a relationship between parents' expectations for their children's academic achievement and the children's actual level of achievement. This work, however, has not addressed parents' differentiation of various competencies, abilities, or related socialization practices. information used to determine the child's

The goal of the study described here was to begin to look at parents' perceptions of the ability and effort needed for their children to be successful at making friends, playing sports, and in mathematics. Four questions will be addressed: (1) What are the effects of sex, grade, and skill area on parents' perceptions of middle elementary and junior high school children's abilities? (2) What information do parents use to make their judgments about abilities? (3) What are parents' values in each skill area? and (4) How do parents communicate their beliefs and values to their children?

### Method

Subjects. Subjects were 314 parents of children in middle elementary school or early junior high school. Children came from 14 classrooms: two fourth/fifth split classes, two fifth grade classes, nine seventh grade classes, and one eighth grade class. For ease of presentation, grade comparisons will refer to fifth and seventh grade throughout the paper, although all children were included in the analyses. The sample included 181 mothers and 133 fathers, representing 192 households. Families were primarily middle to upper-middle class and predominantly white (87%). Eighty-six percent were high school graduates and sixty-six percent had received some college training. Parents of 104 girls and 88 boys participated.

Procedure. This study was part of a larger cross-sectional investigation which included children and teachers as well as parents. Parents received letters which explained the study, guaranteed confidentiality, and asked

both parents and child to participate. After agreeing to be in the study, parents received a questionnaire in the mail, completed it on their own, and returned it in the mailing envelope provided. The questionnaire contained predominantly Likert-scaled items on a 7-point scale. A few open-ended questions and items with different response scales were included for variety. In order to shorten the questionnaire, two versions were constructed, each containing a few questions that were not asked on the other one. The questionnaire contained sections concerned with parents' perceptions of the skill areas of mathematics, sports, and making friends. Parents were asked for their general beliefs about each area and for perceptions of their own child's ability in each area, and the effort needed for their child to be successful, and how important it was for their child to succeed in the area. They were also asked about a series of techniques used to motivate children in math, and about their own involvement in the child's activities.

### Results and Discussion

Ability and effort. In order to answer the question, What are the effects of sex, grade and skill area on parents' perceptions of their children's abilities, parents were asked to assess their child's ability and the effort needed for him/her to succeed in math, at making friends, and in sports. To test the effects of skill areas, sex, and grade on parents' perceptions, an ANOVA was conducted with two between subjects factors (grade and child-sex) and one within-subjects factor (skill area). Mothers and fathers responses were analyzed separately.

The results of the ANOVAs indicate that both mothers and fathers make clear distinctions between their children's abilities in different skill areas ( $p < .0001$ ). They believe that their children are better at making friends than in math, but better in math than at sports. For mothers, an interaction between sex and activity was also found ( $p < .001$ ), indicating that mothers of daughters see a different pattern than mothers of sons. Mothers of daughters believe that their girls are much better at making friends than at math or sports and quite a bit better in math than at sports. Mothers of sons feel that their boys are slightly better at making friends than in the other skill areas, but about equal in math and sports. While all parents seem to believe that their sons and daughters have about the same math abilities, mothers of daughters believe that they are significantly ( $p < .05$ ) better at making friends and mothers of sons think that they are significantly better at sports ( $p < .01$ ); Fathers also think that their sons are significantly better at sports than their daughters ( $p < .05$ ). Grade was not significantly related to the ability assessments.

When parents are asked how hard their child has to try to do well in each domain, they make clear distinctions between the amounts of effort needed to do well in different areas ( $p < .001$ ). Both mothers and fathers think that their children need to try harder to succeed in math than in sports and harder to succeed at sports than to make friends. A significant interaction between area and grade was also found for fathers ( $p < .01$ ). Fathers of seventh graders believe that their children must try harder to do well in math than fathers of fifth graders, but that fifth graders need to try harder than seventh graders to be successful at making friends or in sports. The same pattern was also found for mothers' responses although it was not significant. A main effect for sex of child was also found for fathers ( $p < .05$ ). Fathers of daughters seem to believe that their daughters have to try harder to be successful in all domains than fathers of sons. This is particularly true for sports. This pattern was not found in the mothers' responses. They do not believe that to be successful their daughters must always try harder than sons.

Sources of Information. One of the questions raised by these findings about parents' differential perceptions of their children's abilities is: Where do parents get the information used to evaluate their child's abilities? We decided to ask parents this question for the area of mathematics. Parents were asked to rate a list of things that may have helped them to form their opinions about their child's math ability. Overall, parents appear to use grades and evaluations, placement in a math group, and the ease or difficulty the child has learning math concepts most, but do not compare their children to other children as a source of information. Some methods differed by grade because different kinds of information are available in elementary and junior high school. For example, the activities and courses a child chooses are used significantly more in junior high than in elementary school ( $p < .05$ ). This is probably because the child has much more choice by junior high. However, comparison to others and grades are used significantly more in elementary than junior high school ( $p < .05$ ). Grade and sex interact for some sources of information. For example, the ease or difficulty of learning new math concepts is used significantly more by parents of fifth grade boys and seventh grade girls than by parents of seventh grade boys and fifth grade girls ( $p < .05$ ). As we can see, parents may be using slightly different sources to inform their perceptions, depending on sex of child and grade level. Although we only asked parents about what they used to determine math abilities, an even more important source of variation is probably the skill area. Parents may be using different sources of information and weighting them differently in each area.

Values. We hypothesized that another influence on

parents' perceptions of their children's abilities would be their values and general beliefs about the different skill areas. Parents were asked how important it was to them that their children do well at mathematics, making friends, and sports. Again, ANOVAs were conducted using sex and grade as between-subjects factors and skill area as the within-subjects factor. The only difference found was a main effect for activity, indicating that both mothers and fathers feel that the three areas vary significantly in importance, ( $p < .001$ ). All parents felt that math was most important, followed by making friends, and, finally, sports. No sex or grade differences were found.

We also asked parents more general questions regarding the value of each area for males and females (all other questions concerned their own children). In general, parents believed that the ability to get along well with others is equally useful for males and females in their adult lives, while sports and math abilities are slightly more useful for males. Although all parents agreed that math and sports were more useful for males, mothers' responses were significantly less positive than fathers' on that question ( $ps < .05$ ). Parents answers did not differ according to the sex or grade level of their children.

Parent communication. After looking at parents' perceptions, values, and beliefs about their children's abilities in different activities, the final question to be raised is: How do parents communicate their perceptions to their children? In order to begin looking at this area we asked parents three questions to tap parent efficacy. We asked if they let their children know what they think of their math, sports, and social abilities; if their opinions matter to their children; and if they, as parents, can do anything to change their child's performance. Most parents (70 - 95%) said that they let their child know what they think of his/her abilities in each domain. This was especially true for mathematics. When asked how much they can do to see that their child performs at a high level in each area, parents felt most efficacious in the area of mathematics, then sports, and finally friends. When 2 (child sex) x 2 (grade) ANOVAs were conducted separately for mothers and fathers, significant differences were found only in the area of mathematics. Mothers of fifth graders felt that they could do significantly more than mothers of seventh graders to help them achieve at a high level in math ( $p < .05$ ). There was a main effect for sex of child for fathers ( $p < .01$ ), with fathers of daughters believing that they can do more for their girls than fathers of sons. For the question about how much their opinion matters, mothers believe that their opinions about friends matter significantly more if they have daughters than if they have sons ( $p < .05$ ) and fathers believe that their opinions about math performance matter more to their daughters, while their

opinions about sports matter significantly more to their sons ( $p < .05$ ).

Specific family practices aimed at improving children's performance in a particular area may be another method parents use to communicate their perceptions to their children. We asked parents to tell us how often they used a variety of methods to get their children to do better in math. The list included: taking away privileges; comparison to other children; providing home activities; shaming the child; telling the child you have confidence in his/her abilities; discussing math utility; getting outside help; telling the child to try harder; buying math books and games; physical punishment; and more. Parents did not endorse the negative practices such as shaming or physical punishment and rated telling the child to try harder and expressing confidence in his/her abilities as things they did most often. T-tests revealed few differences between mothers' and fathers' answers or between parents of sons and daughters. When family practices were related to the expected math grades for the term and to parents' beliefs about the child's ability, grades and perceptions of ability were negatively related to taking away privileges, comparing with others, shame, getting outside help, and telling the child to try harder ( $p < .001$ ). Parents may only engage in active attempts to communicate their beliefs about a child's abilities when they feel concerned and perceive low abilities.

Another less direct method of communicating values and perceptions of a child's abilities may be the activities a parent engages in with a child or encourages the child to participate in. We asked parents if they had been involved in activities like coaching, leading youth groups; if they had purchased different kinds of toys, games or sports equipment for their child; and if they encouraged their child to join clubs and other activities. Parents varied widely on the amount of time and encouragement spent for various activities. Mothers and fathers were more involved in school activities for the younger children and mothers were more involved in social activities for the younger children. Both parents were more involved with sports activities for boys than for girls. When the amount of parental involvement was correlated with parents' perceptions of their child's abilities and their own values, involvement in school activities was related to perceptions of math abilities for sons only; involvement in social activities was related to perceptions of social abilities for seventh graders only; and involvement in sports was related to importance of sports for males only.

### Conclusions

To conclude, parents' perceptions in each skill area



will be summarized briefly. In sports, both mothers and fathers of sons (across ages) believe that their children have more ability than parents of daughters. However, all parents believe that their children have less ability in sports than the other two areas considered. All parents believe that their children have to try harder at sports than at making friends and fathers think that daughters have to try harder than sons. Sports are also considered least important of the activities asked about for all children, however, when parents are talking about general stereotypes they believe that sports are more useful in the future for males than for females.

The skill of making friends is considered more important than sports, but less important than math by all parents. However, all parents think that their children are better at making friends than anything else. Mothers of daughters particularly believe that their children are good at making friends. However, all parents believe that to be successful at making friends requires less effort than any other activity for their children. Fathers make another distinction. They believe that fifth graders have to try harder than seventh graders to make friends.

Finally, in the area of math achievement, all parents believe that their children have to try harder to succeed than in any other area and that seventh graders have to try harder than fifth graders. They also think that math is more important than the other areas asked about. Parents think that their children have more ability in math than in sports, but less than at making friends. There were no differences between parents of sons and daughters.

The goal of this paper was to give a brief overview of parents' perceptions of their children's abilities in math, sports, and at making friends. The major question concerned the effects of sex of child, grade, and skill area on parents' perceptions and values. The general picture that emerges is that the skill area matters very much. Parents value activities differently and have distinct opinions about their children's abilities in each area by the time the child is in fifth grade. The child's sex and grade level also play important roles, particularly in the sports and social areas. Because we know that parents' perceptions influence the perceptions of their children in mathematics, the same thing may be true in other skill areas. The behaviors resulting from parents' perceptions and beliefs may be important mediators of children's beliefs. Therefore, understanding the ways parents form and communicate their perceptions to their children could be a contribution to our understanding of children's beliefs about their academic, social, and physical competencies.



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Table 1

Ability Perceptions

	Mathematics				Making Friends				Sports			
	Daughters		Sons		Daughters		Sons		Daughters		Sons	
	5th	7th	5th	7th	5th	7th	5th	7th	5th	7th	5th	7th
Mothers	5.2	5.2	5.4	4.9	5.7	5.9	5.3	5.4	4.3	4.6	5.1	5.1
Fathers	5.5	5.3	5.5	5.3	5.2	5.6	5.3	5.7	4.5	4.7	5.3	5.0

Effort Perceptions

	Mathematics				Making Friends				Sports			
	Daughters		Sons		Daughters		Sons		Daughters		Sons	
	5th	7th	5th	7th	5th	7th	5th	7th	5th	7th	5th	7th
Mothers	4.4	4.6	3.9	4.6	3.3	2.9	3.4	3.2	4.6	3.8	3.8	3.7
Fathers	4.3	5.0	4.1	4.7	3.9	3.1	3.6	3.0	5.1	4.7	4.3	4.0

Importance of Doing Well

	Mathematics				Making Friends				Sports			
	Daughters		Sons		Daughters		Sons		Daughters		Sons	
	5th	7th	5th	7th	5th	7th	5th	7th	5th	7th	5th	7th
Mothers	6.0	6.3	6.3	6.4	5.5	5.8	5.4	5.8	3.8	3.7	3.8	3.9
Fathers	6.4	6.3	6.4	6.3	5.4	5.6	5.4	5.5	3.9	3.9	4.4	4.0

<sup>1</sup>All scales: 1=least, 7=most.

