

The Relationship of Family Factors to Self-Esteem
and Teacher-Rated Adjustment Following the
Transition to Junior High School

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of family factors on self-esteem and teachers' ratings of adjustment following the transition to junior high school. We hypothesized that family factors such as amount of conflict, decision-making opportunities, and autonomy would predict changes in self-esteem and adjustment following the transition. Approximately 1000 girls and 860 boys from predominantly white, low-to-middle income communities representing both working and professional classes participated in the study. Approximately 50% of the parents and 95% of the teachers also participated. The study had a two-year, four-wave design. Child and parent variables and teacher ratings of adjustment were assessed by measures for which reliability and validity had been established (Eccles, Midgley, & Wigfield, 1988). Self-esteem was assessed by Harter's (1982) Self-Esteem Scale. Analyses conducted on Wave Two and Three data via multiple regression revealed both protective and risk factors for the transition. Protective factors for self-esteem and teachers' ratings of adjustment include both children's and parents' perceptions of family decision-making, a positive affective relationship between parent and child, and parents' perceptions of child's competencies in academic, social and sports domains. Additional protective factors for teachers' ratings of adjustment to the transition to junior high school include parents' view of child's temperament and pubertal development. Risk factors for self-esteem include both parents' and children's perceptions of a negative affective relationship and children's perception of their parents as authoritarian. Risk factors for teachers' ratings of adjustment include parents' perceptions of a negative affective relationship with their child, parents' perceptions that their child is withdrawn, and parents' belief that their child's involvement in sports interferes with the child's academic achievement.

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Recently, concern has been raised over the transition to junior high school (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). It appears that some children are adversely affected by this transition. Two areas, in particular, that seem to suffer are self-esteem and adjustment to junior high school. Although boys have overall higher levels of self-esteem, a general decline occurs in the transition from sixth grade for both sexes (Eccles et al, 1989). Recent work examining the junior high transition (Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Simmons, Carlton-Ford, & Blyth, 1987) has shown that over and above the level of self-esteem in sixth grade, previous "success" in academic, social, and sport domains is positively related to seventh grade self-esteem. School environment also influences level of self-esteem.

An unexplored area which this paper addresses is the influence of family environment on the transition to junior high school. Child and parent perceptions with regard to decision making-processes, autonomy and conflict were assessed as aspects of the family environment. We hypothesize that families which promote more democratic decision-making processes will promote positive gains in self-esteem and adjustment following the transition from sixth to seventh grade. Developmentally, children at this age are struggling with issues of autonomy, and desire more responsibility and independence. A democratically organized family is more likely to provide opportunities for meaningful autonomy than an authoritarian or uninvolved family. We used data from a larger investigation being conducted at the University of Michigan (the Transitions at Early Adolescence Project) to test these hypotheses. This project assessed adolescents' beliefs, values, motives, and behaviors in several activity domains across the transition to junior high school. Given the findings of Eccles et al (1989) that self-esteem shows within year as well as between year changes, we tested our predictions for measures gathered both in the fall and spring of the students' seventh grade year.

SUBJECTS

Subjects were recruited from twelve school districts located in predominantly white, low- to middle-income communities. Approximately 95% of the teachers agreed to allow students to be recruited into the study. The final sample consisted of approximately 1000 girls and 860 boys. Approximately 50% of their parents also participated.

METHOD

Questionnaires were completed twice each year (fall, spring) over two years. The student questionnaire contained constructs assessing self-perceptions and perceptions of family and school environment. Single items for which reliability and validity had been established were used to assess the children's self- and family- perceptions, and the teachers' rating of each child's adjustment to junior high school (see Table 1 for exact items). Self-esteem was assessed by Harter's (1982) Self-Esteem Scale.

The academic competence rating is a composite of a student's scores on standardized achievement tests in math and English during their sixth grade and their sixth grade teachers' ratings of their relative ability in these domains compared to other students. Math and English were collapsed into a general academic rating since initial descriptive analyses indicated no difference between these domains.

The parent questionnaire contained items assessing the parents' perceptions of family environment as well as of their child's abilities in various domains at school. Parents' perceptions of the child's temperament and pubertal development were also assessed (see Table 2 for exact items).

THE MODEL AND PREDICTIONS

We hypothesized that, above and beyond the child's self-esteem in Wave 2 (the end of grade six) and overall academic competence, the following variables would be protective factors (yielding a positive regression coefficient) for both self-esteem and adjustment at Waves 3 and 4 (fall and spring of the seventh grade):

1. Active involvement in family decision-making
2. Positive affective relationship with parents
3. Parents' perceptions of child's competence in academic, social and sports domains
4. Parents' perception of even temperedness of the child.

(See Tables 1 and 2 for specific items).

The following factors were predicted to be risk factors (yielding a negative regression coefficient) for self-esteem and adjustment (see Tables 1 and 2 for specific items):

1. Authoritarian parenting
2. Negative affective relationship with parents.

Pubertal measures were assessed but no specific predictions were warranted based on the existing literature.

By controlling for self-esteem at Wave 3 we are testing the extent to which the protective factors (risk factors) are associated with a gain (loss) in self-esteem between the end of the sixth grade and the beginning and end of the seventh grade year. The statistical procedure used involved comparing the following two models to assess the significance of the additional amount of variance accounted for by the predictor variable (i.e. the predicted protective and risk factors):

MODEL C: SE2 + ACADEMIC COMPETENCE

MODEL A: SE2 + ACADEMIC COMPETENCE + PREDICTOR

Multiple Regression was used.

RESULTS SELF-ESTEEM

The results supported our hypotheses of both protective and risk factors for self-esteem. Children's perceptions of more democratic family decision-making and of parental trust predict positive gains in self-esteem (see Figures 1 & 3). Parents' perceptions of family decision-making, a positive affective relationship, and of their child's competencies in the academic, social and sports domains all predict positive gains in self-esteem following the transition to junior high school (see Figures 1 & 2).

As predicted, the risk factors for self-esteem include: a) children's perceptions of a negative affective relationship with their parents and feeling that their parents are authoritarian (see Figure 1); and b) parents' perceptions of a negative affective relationship with their children and of their child as being shy and withdrawn (see Figure 1 & 3).

RESULTS ADJUSTMENT

The results supported our predictions for both protective and risk factors for teachers' ratings of adjustment to the junior high school transition. Parents' perceptions of the following variables all predicted better ratings of adjustment: a) democratic family decision-making, b) positive affective relationships with their children, c) their children as being competent in the academic, social, and sports domains, d) their children as having positive temperamental characteristics and having relatively advanced pubertal development (see Figures 4, 5 & 6).

As predicted, the risk factors for teachers' ratings of adjustment include the following parent variables: a) perception of a negative affective relationship with their child, b) feeling that their child is withdrawn, and c) feeling that their child's involvement in sports interferes with the child's academic achievement (see Figures 4, 5 & 6).

OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

Consistent effects across the two dependent measures

1. General results support our hypothesis that participation in democratic family decision-making would facilitate both positive gains in self-esteem and better adjustment following the transition to junior high school.
2. A positive affective and trusting relationship between parent and child also appears to facilitate positive gains in self-esteem and better adjustment following the transition to junior high school.

3. Parents' confidence in their children's academic, athletic, and social competence also appears to facilitate positive gains in self-esteem and better adjustment following the transition to junior high school.

Interesting contrasts in the predictions of the two dependent measures

1. Although children's perceptions of the family environment predicted self-esteem, no such relationship was found for adjustment to junior high school. Only the parents' perception of family environment related to adjustment. A possible explanation for this discrepancy is that parents' decisions to allow their child greater autonomy and independence may be based on their perception of the child's maturity. The child's maturity, in turn, should be positively related to the teachers' ratings of the child's adjustment. Although parents who view their child as mature may think they are providing increased opportunities for the child to participate in family decision-making, the child may not have this same perception and thus the child's perception of family environment would not be related to either the child's maturity or the teachers' ratings of his/her adjustment.

2. Another important difference is that the children's wave 2 self-esteem was not related to 7th grade teachers' ratings of adjustment. Instead, the teachers' perceptions of the children's adjustment to junior high school is most directly influenced by the children's previous academic competence. It appears that self-esteem, an internal, psychological variable, is unrelated to how teachers view the children's adjustment. This finding has important clinical implications. Since teachers are the people in the best position to identify children at risk, it is unfortunate they appear so unaware of the children's psychological state until the problem begins to affect their academic achievement.

3. An interesting result, which contradicts some previous literature, is that advanced pubertal development appears to be a protective factor in this sample for both girls and boys with regard to teachers' ratings of adjustment. Again it appears that for teachers the salient factor in rating adjustment is a physical attribute rather than a psychological variable.

4. The replication of many of the results from Wave 3 in Wave 4 for self-esteem and adjustment strongly suggests that these results reflect the impact of the predictor variables on both self-esteem and adjustment across the transition and that the post-transition effects are stable within the school year. Predictor variables whose effects did not replicate in Wave 4 may be due to either a seasonal effect or a short-term transitional effect. Those results which only came through in Wave 4 suggest a possible delayed transitional effect. These results are illustrated on the figures.

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Parents' Perceptions of Child's Temperament and Pubertal Development

My child is even-tempered and not moody. (1-4 rating)

My child doesn't give up when faced with a difficult problem or situation.
(1-4 rating)

How well is your child adjusting to junior high/middle school? (1-7 rating)

Does your child suffer from allergies/asthma? (No, Yes)

Would you say your child has entered puberty yet? (No, Yes)

Has your child experienced an increase in muscle mass (boys) or breast development (girls)? (No, Yes)

Parent Perceptions: Risk Factors

Affective Relationship (1-4 ratings for each item)

I worry that my child is up to something I won't like.

I do not like my child to disagree with me if my friends are around.

My child often argues with me about my rules and decisions for him/her.

My child keeps to him/herself or tends to withdraw.

Figure 1
THE EFFECTS OF PARENTS' AND CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF
FAMILY ENVIRONMENT ON CHILDREN'S WAVE 3 SELF-ESTEEM

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS

Parents encourage child to give ideas and opinions

How often do you take part in family decisions

How are decisions made in your family?

PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS

Listening to my child helps me reach better decisions

How we arrive at decisions

I trust my child to do what I expect without checking up on him/her

RISK FACTORS

CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS

How strict are your parents?

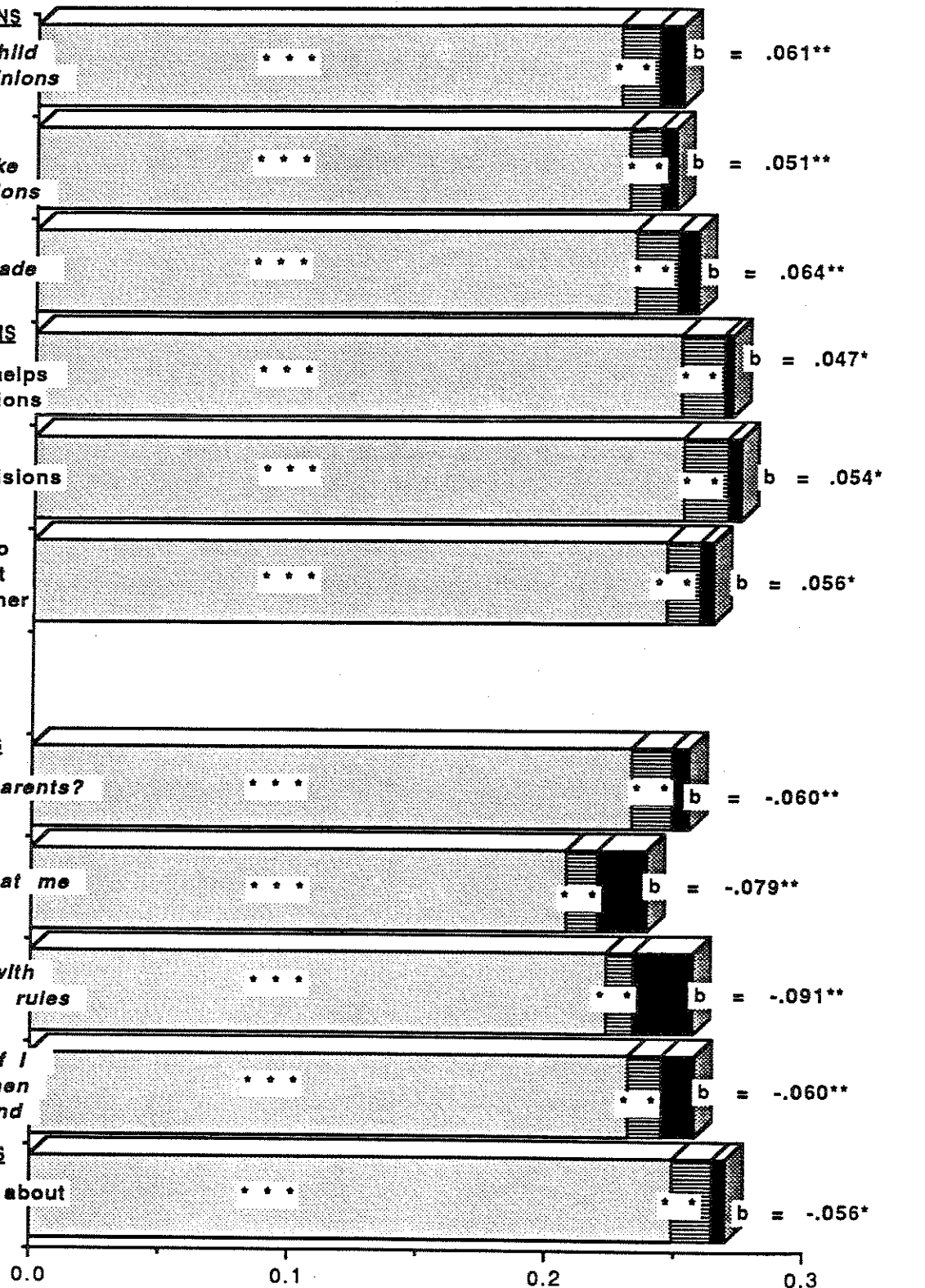
I feel my parents treat me more like a little kid

I have a lot of fights with my parents about their rules and decisions for me

My parents get upset if I disagree with them when their friends are around

PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS

My child often argues about my rules and decisions



Effects for italicized items replicated in Wave 4

VARIANCE EXPLAINED IN POST-TRANSITION SELF-ESTEEM (WAVE 3)

Self-Esteem Wave2
 Academic Competence
 Predictor

TABLE 1

Child's Perceptions: Protective Factors

FAMILY ENVIRONMENT: Decision Making

How are most decisions made in your family?

1. My parents tell me just what to do.
2. My parents ask me how I feel and then they decide.
3. My parents tell me how they feel and then I decide.
4. My parents let me decide.

How often do you take part in making decisions that concern yourself?

1. Never
2. Seldom
3. Often
4. Always

My parents encourage me to give ideas and opinions even if we might disagree.
(1-4 rating)

Child's Perceptions: Risk Factors

FAMILY ENVIRONMENT: Affective Relationship (1-4 rating for each item)

My parents get upset if I disagree with them when their friends are around.
I have a lot of fights with my parents about their rules and decisions for me.
My parents treat me more like a little kid than like an adult.

FAMILY ENVIRONMENT: Authoritarian Parenting

My parents are:

4. Very strict
3. Strict
2. A little strict
1. Not at all strict

TABLE 2

Parent Perceptions: Protective Factors

FAMILY ENVIRONMENT: Decision Making

I find that listening to what my child has to say helps me reach a better decision.
(1-4 rating)

In general, how do you and your child currently arrive at decisions?

- 1) I tell my child just what to do.
- 2) I ask my child how s/he feels and then I decide.
- 3) I tell my child how I feel and then s/he decides.
- 4) I usually let my child decide.

FAMILY ENVIRONMENT: Affective Relationship

I trust my child to do what I expect without checking up on her/him.
(1-4 rating)

I encourage my child to give his/her ideas and opinions even if we might disagree. (1-4 rating)

It is important that children feel free to question their parents' decisions.
(1-7 rating)

Parents' Perceptions of Child's Competencies: (1-7 ratings for each item)

School

In general how good is your child at math?

In general how good is your child at English?

Social

How popular is your child in school?

In general, how good is your child at making friends?

Sports

In general how good is your child in sports?

Sports (risk factor)

How much does participation in sports interfere with your child's achievement in school?

Figure 2

THE EFFECTS OF PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN'S CHARACTERISTICS ON POST-TRANSITION SELF-ESTEEM AT WAVE 3

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

How well is your child adjusting to Jr. High School?

b = .036**

How good is your child in math?

b = .052**

How good is your child in sports?

b = .039**

0.0 0.1 0.2 0.3

VARIANCE EXPLAINED IN POST-TRANSITION SELF-ESTEEM AT WAVE 3

Effects of italicized items replicated in wave 4

- Self-Esteem Wave2
- Academic Competence
- Predictor

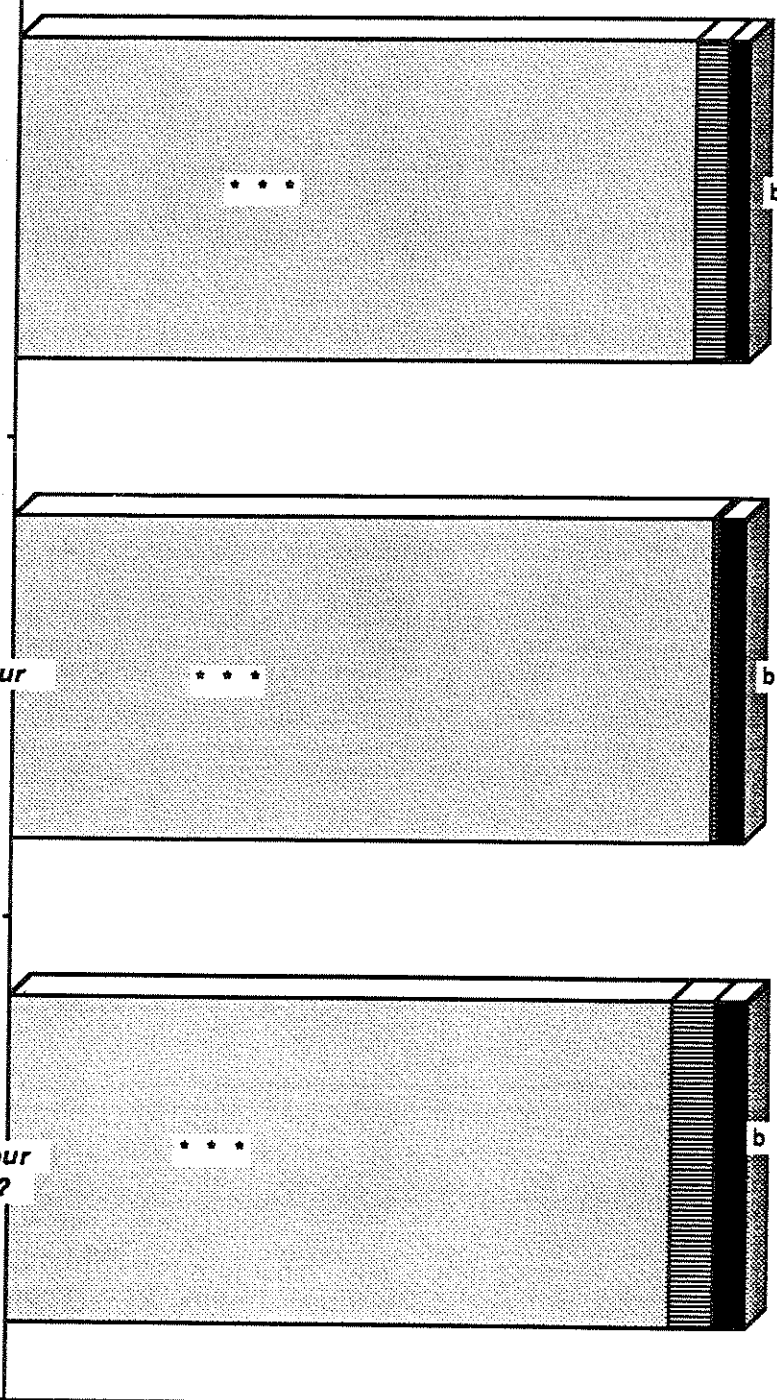


Figure 3
 THE EFFECTS OF PARENTS' AND CHILDREN'S
 PERCEPTION OF CHILDREN'S AND PARENTS'
 CHARACTERISTICS ON POST-TRANSITION
 SELF-ESTEEM AT WAVE 4

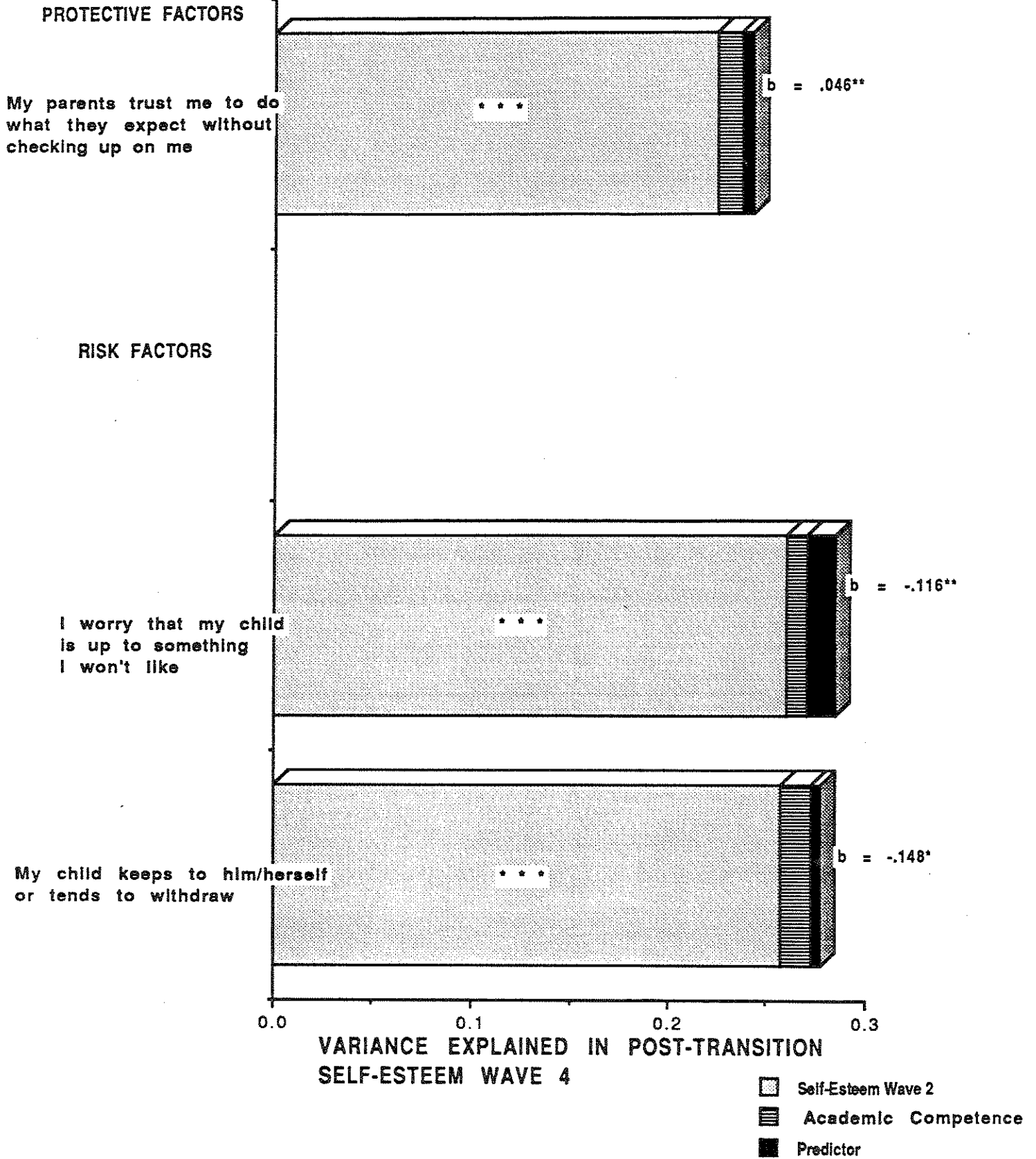


Figure 4

THE EFFECTS OF PARENTS' PERCEPTION OF FAMILY ENVIRONMENT ON TEACHERS' RATINGS OF CHILDREN'S ADJUSTMENT TO JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

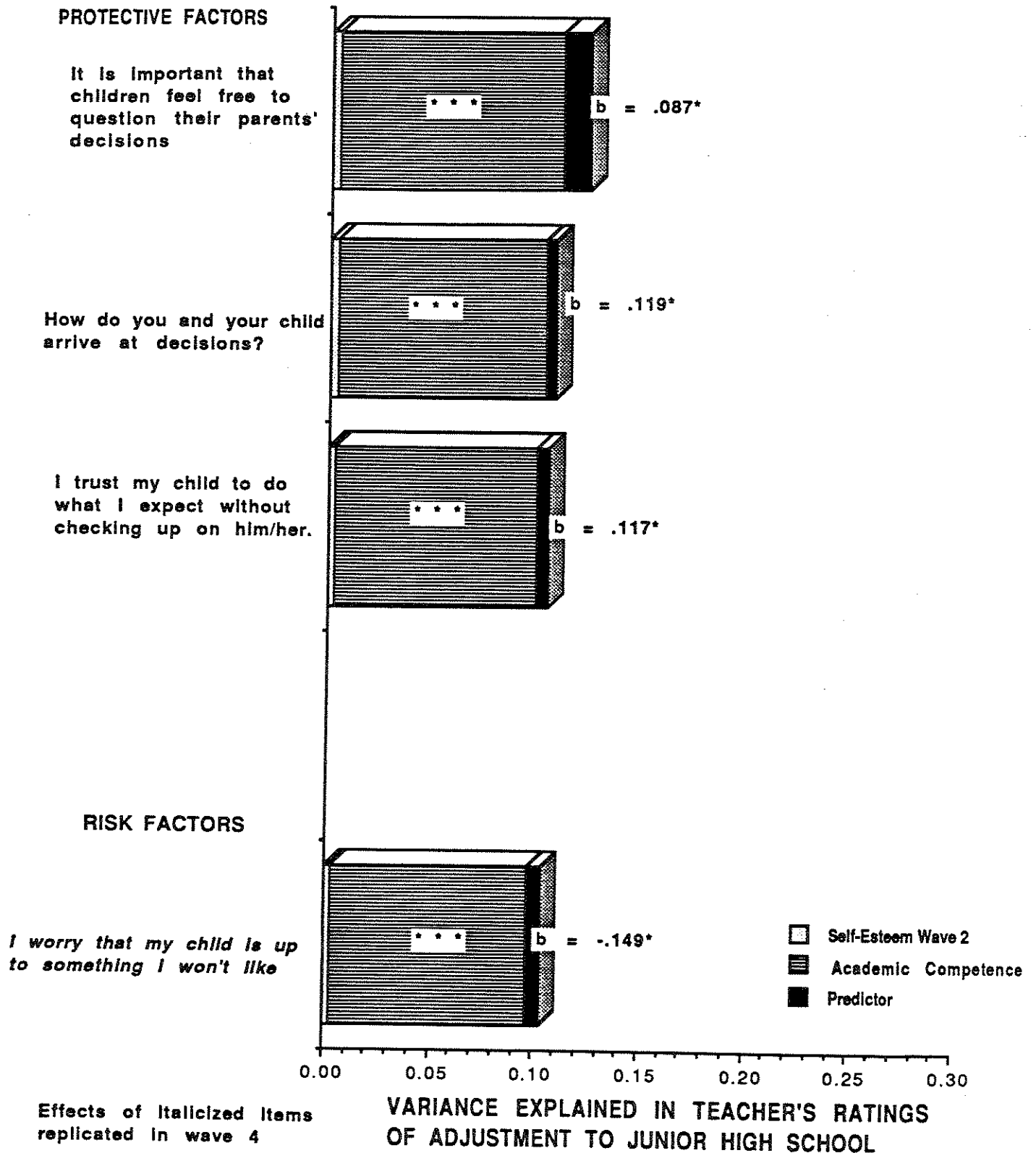
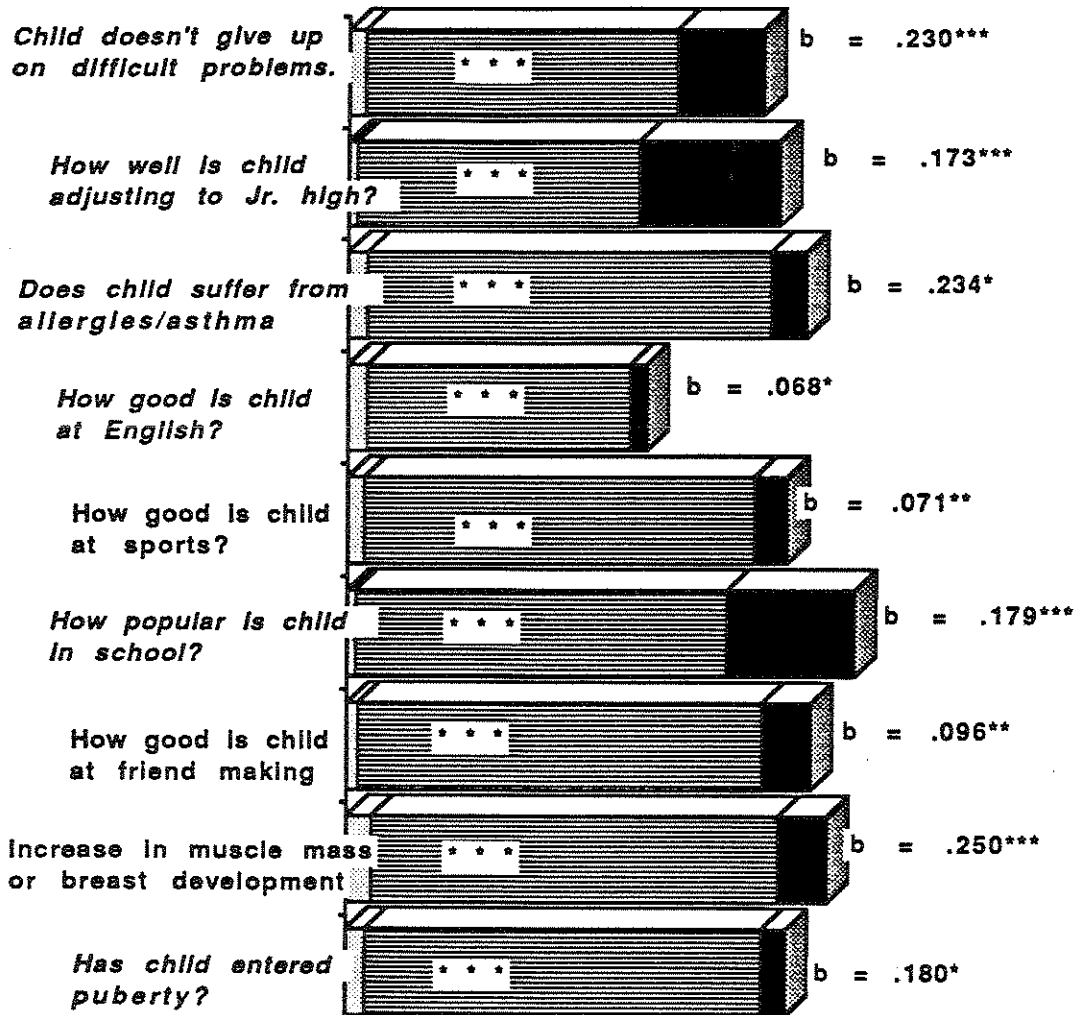
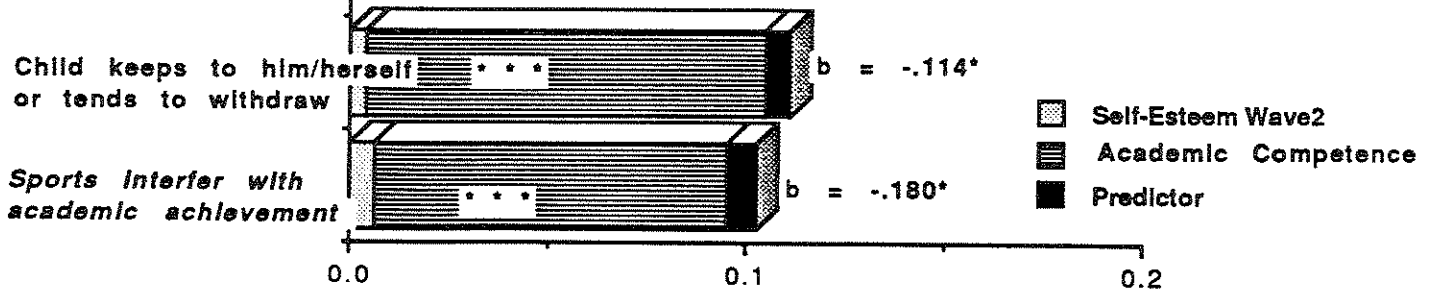


Figure 5
THE EFFECTS OF PARENTS' PERCEPTION OF
CHILDREN'S CHARACTERISTICS ON TEACHERS'
RATINGS OF ADJUSTMENT TO JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL AT WAVE 3

PROTECTIVE FACTORS



RISK FACTORS



VARIANCE EXPLAINED IN TEACHERS' RATINGS
OF ADJUSTMENT TO JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL AT WAVE 3

Effects of italicized items replicated in wave 4

Self-Esteem Wave2
 Academic Competence
 Predictor

Figure 6
THE EFFECTS OF PARENTS' PERCEPTION OF CHILDREN'S CHARACTERISTICS ON TEACHERS' RATINGS OF ADJUSTMENT TO JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL AT WAVE 4

