

Parent - adolescent Perception of child rearing practices in defence officers' families in India

Dr. Jagjiwan Kaur

*Associate Professor, Department of Human Development and Family Relations
Government Home Science College, Punjab University, Chandigarh, India.*

ABSTRACT: *The defence services have a unique culture with various service related strengths and weaknesses which are likely to influence the quality of parenting and its perception by parents and adolescents. The present study was thus carried out on 240 defence officers' families to understand parent adolescent perception of parenting and to find out differences in perception if any. Results indicated that both the parents and adolescents in defence services families in India, had a favourable perception of parenting, but parental perception was better than that of the adolescents. The adolescents' perception of their mothers was better than that of the fathers. Even the mothers' self perception of their parenting was better than that of the fathers'. No significant differences emerged in perception of mothers' parenting in the three wings of defence services but in case of perception of fathers' parenting Navy fathers were perceived significantly poorer. The weakest area of parenting was puberty development, while personality development, academics, recreation and nutrition emerged as strengths in parenting.*

KEYWORDS: *Adolescents, Defence families, discrepant parent adolescent perception, Military stressors, parenting.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Perceptions play a dominant role in parent-adolescent relationship. Significant perceptions related to parenting color adolescents' and parents' feelings about each other and influence their interaction. Demo et al [1], found that adolescents are influenced more by their perception of parenting, than by the actual parental behavior or the one reported by their parents. Parenting can be most effective and produce intended results, only if it is perceived similarly by the adolescents and parents. As children move through the various stages of their life, parents strive to fulfill most of their physical and psychological needs according to their perception. However, the children may not realize or appreciate the parental concern and effort. They may in fact see many drawbacks and lacunae in the parenting they are getting. Often parents may be totally unaware of the adolescent's perception and may think that their children appreciate them for giving the best parenting. These differences in perception may reach their peak during adolescent years, and gradually reduce as the teenager grows [2-3]

Since perceptions act as a dominant force in interaction and communication between parents and adolescents, and are primary contributors to the well being of both, it becomes important to study these in relation to parenting practices especially in defence services, where families experience unique environment and culture.

1.1 Stressors on defence families

The most commonly stated stressors on defence families are mobility, frequent deployments, resultant family separations, and life threatening jobs [4]. These stressors are likely to influence the parenting. If service life is perceived positively, a healthy family environment prevails, which enhances marital satisfaction, increases level of expressiveness of its members and reduces family conflict [5]. In such cases adverse effects of even frequent father absence are not seen. A study done on psychopathology of 1,060 military children under the age of 18, found that father absence per se is not related to the childhood pathology of military children [6]. However dissatisfaction with demands of service life has been related to emotional distress in spouses and internalizing behavior problems in children [7]. Defence service at times restricts the behavior and activities of spouse and children [8-10]. Mental health symptoms such as depression, risk behaviors and school related problems in adolescents have been related to such familial antecedents [11]. Loss of perceived social support by the wives has also been related to increased behavioral adjustment problems and lowered academic performance by children, during absence of the officers due to deployment [12]. However, the coping behavior also emerges in the wives when husbands are away. Mothers in fact play a positive role during father absence [13]

The demands of defence life and defence culture are thus likely to influence parenting practices. How adolescents and parents perceive their parenting, needs to be examined, as hardly any studies in this area are documented on adolescents in Indian defence families.

OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

- 1) To study the parent-adolescent perception of child rearing practices in the three wings of defence services.
- 2) To examine discrepancy in perception of adolescents and parents in relation to child rearing practices.
- 3) To examine differences in self perception of parenting of fathers' and mothers' in defence officers' families

II. METHOD

This study was carried out on 240 defence families, from officers' cadre, with equal numbers, 80 each, from Army, Air Force and Navy. Both mothers' and fathers' perception as well as that of their adolescent children was studied. Equal number of boys and girls from each wing of the defence services were selected randomly. Thus, a sample of 120 girls and 120 boys in the age group of 11 to 18 yrs and their parents were selected.

Psychological Tool Used

To study the perception of child rearing practices, Perception of parent child interaction scale developed by Vidhu Mohan and Jaskiran Kaur (1989), modified by Kaur (1992) was used. This scale consisted of 40 items related to 10 behavioral indices of the interaction of adolescents with their parents. The behavioral indices related to parent adolescent interaction in academic social, economic, recreation, clothes, puberty development, and demonstration of love, personality development and health areas. This scale was preferred over the other tests of child rearing practices as the items of the scale related to the actual behavior of the parents while interacting with their adolescents, rather than merely assessing their attitude towards the important aspects of parenting.

Statistical Analysis

The data was analyzed by computing total scores, means and standard deviation for the total sample as well as different groups i.e. Adolescents, Mothers/fathers, Army/Navy/Air Force. ANOVA was used to see if any significant differences emerged in perception of parenting and family environment in the three wings of defence services. To study parent - adolescent differences in perception, t-test was used. The result was illustrated in graphical form wherever required.

III. RESULTS

3.1 Perception of child rearing practices

To get an insight into the parent-adolescent perceptions of child rearing practices in defence officers' families (N=240), mean scores and standard deviations were computed for the 10 sub-scales and the total of the child rearing practices scale.

ANOVA was used to examine differences in perception of parents and adolescents in the Army, Navy and Air Force families. The mean total scores of parents' self perception as well as adolescents' perception of their mothers' and fathers' parenting in the three wings of services are presented in Table 1 given below.

Table 1 Mean total scores of child rearing practices as perceived by the adolescents, their mothers and fathers in the three services

GROUP		AM	AF	M	F
ARMY	M	145.69	140.91	147.81	141.30
	SD	18.50	20.65	15.34	18.35
AIR FORCE	M	147.00	139.64	148.74	141.94
	SD	19.80	22.52	19.33	19.02
NAVY	M	142.91	130.58	148.55	139.41
	SD	21.55	23.00	19.78	19.40
Total	M	145.20	137.04	148.37	140.88
	SD	19.98	22.46	18.19	18.88

N=240

AM – Adolescents' perception of mothers' parenting AF – Adolescents' perception of fathers' parenting
M – Mothers' self perception of her parenting F – Fathers' self perception of his parenting

Table 2 One-way ANOVA for adolescents' and parents' perception of child rearing practices in the three wings defence services

		Sum of squares	Mean square	F
AM	Between groups	696.82	348.41	.87
	Within groups	94759.57	399.82	
	Total	95456.40		
AF	Between groups	5083.15	2541.57	5.21***
	Within groups	115576.45	487.66	
	Total	120659.58		
M	Between groups	38.25	19.12	.05
	Within groups	79071.47	333.63	
	Total	79109.73		
F	Between groups	275.85	137.92	.38
	Within groups	84944.87	358.41	
	Total	85220.73		

*p< 0.05, **p< 0.01, ***p< 0.001

N =240

df - 2

As seen from Tables 1 and 2, there was no significant difference in the fathers' and mothers' self perception of parenting in the three services. No significant difference in the adolescents' perception of their mothers' parenting emerged in any of the dimensions of child rearing practices in the three services. However, significant difference was noted in the adolescents' perception of their fathers' parenting in the three services.

3.2 Adolescents' perception of their Mothers' parenting in the three wings of defence services.

Mothers were perceived best in the area of nutrition and poorest in puberty development. It can be seen from Table 3 that the trend was similar for Army, Navy and Air Force.

Table 3: Mean scores of adolescents' perception of their mothers' parenting in the three defence services.

	ACA	SOC	REC	ECO	NUT	CLO	PUB	DOL	P D	HEA	TOTAL
ARMY N=80											
M	15.93	13.21	15.42	14.40	16.50	14.87	9.66	15.24	15.77	14.68	145.69
SD	3.07	2.92	2.74	3.12	2.74	2.96	3.94	3.60	2.98	2.76	18.50
AIR FORCE N=80											
M	15.66	14.00	15.54	14.39	16.60	15.25	10.41	14.63	16.08	14.45	147.00
SD	3.17	3.02	3.23	3.08	2.69	2.81	4.71	4.04	2.66	2.92	19.80
NAVY N=80											
M	15.31	13.41	14.86	14.17	16.34	14.38	10.42	14.26	15.84	13.91	142.91
SD	3.37	3.70	2.68	3.07	2.32	3.33	4.58	3.98	2.77	2.67	21.55
TOTAL N=240											
M	15.63	13.54	15.27	14.32	16.48	14.83	10.17	14.71	15.90	14.35	145.20
SD	3.20	3.23	2.90	3.08	2.58	3.05	4.42	3.88	2.80	2.79	19.98

ACA - ACADEMIC	ECO - ECONOMIC	NUT - NUTRITION
SOC - SOCIAL	CLO - CLOTHES	
	PUB - PUBERTY	HEA - HEALTH
REC - RECREATION	DOL - DEMONSTRATION OF LOVE	PD - PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT

3.3 Adolescents’ perception of their fathers’ parenting in the three wings of defence services
 As seen from Table 4, difference in perception of fathers in the Army, Air Force and Navy was noted. A trend of poorer scores was noted in case of Navy fathers

Table 4
 Mean scores of adolescents’ perception of fathers’ parenting in the three wings of defence services

	ACA	SOC	REC	ECO	NUT	CLO	PUB	DOL	P D	HEA	TOTAL
ARMY N = 80											
M	16.10	13.14	15.84	13.98	14.85	14.89	8.02	14.31	15.45	14.34	140.91
SD	3.00	3.16	2.69	3.52	2.64	3.11	3.92	3.89	3.39	2.94	20.65
AIR FORCE N = 80											
M	15.58	13.88	15.66	14.44	14.75	14.90	7.95	13.66	14.88	13.95	139.64
SD	3.26	3.42	3.03	3.55	2.96	3.16	4.26	4.81	3.38	3.15	22.52
NAVY N = 80											
M	14.80	12.83	14.52	13.99	13.65	13.76	7.54	12.29	14.10	13.10	130.57
SD	3.46	3.44	2.84	3.62	3.28	3.40	3.51	3.84	3.13	3.38	23.00
TOTAL N = 240											
M	15.49	13.28	15.34	14.13	14.42	14.52	7.84	13.42	14.81	13.80	137.04
SD	3.28	3.36	2.90	3.55	3.01	3.25	3.90	4.27	3.33	3.19	22.46

3.4 Difference in adolescents’ and parents’ perception of child rearing practices

Comparison of parental self perception of their child rearing practices and perception of their children brought out significant discrepancies as seen from Tables 5 and 6

3.5 Difference in adolescents’ perception and mothers’ self perception of her child rearing practices

As seen in Table 5, the mothers’ scores were significantly higher in areas related to academics, recreation, puberty, demonstration of love, personality development and the total scores. Adolescents perceived their mothers’ parenting better in social and economic aspects as compared to the mothers themselves.

3.6 Difference in adolescents’ perception and fathers’ self perception of his child rearing practices

Significant differences between adolescents’ and fathers’ self perception of his parenting in the Navy families emerged in six dimensions, while for the pooled group of airforce and army, significant differences were noted only in two dimensions as shown in Table 6. The Navy fathers viewed their parenting significantly better than their children in areas of recreation, nutrition, clothes, puberty, and demonstration of love, personality development and total scores while the adolescents perceived their fathers’ parenting in the social area better than the father himself in all the three wings. Significantly better perception of fathers in the pooled group emerged in the area of puberty.

Table 5 Adolescents' and mothers' self perception of parenting (Pooled data for the three services)

Variables	Adolescents perception of mothers' parenting N=240		Mothers' self perception N=240		t-values
	M	SD	M	SD	
ACA	15.63	3.21	16.11	2.74	2.56**
SOC	13.54	3.24	12.39	2.90	5.85***
REC	15.27	2.90	16.24	2.85	5.40***
ECO	14.32	3.09	13.95	3.25	1.73
NUT	16.48	2.59	16.51	2.51	0.15
CLO	14.83	3.06	15.23	2.53	1.89
PUB	10.17	4.43	11.54	4.52	4.83***
DOL	14.71	3.89	15.40	3.48	2.90***
P.D	15.90	2.80	16.43	2.61	2.50*
HEA	14.35	2.80	14.59	2.53	1.25
TOTAL	145.20	19.96	148.40	18.27	2.89***

*p< 0.05, **p< 0.01, ***p< 0.001

Table 6 Adolescents' and fathers' self perception of parenting in defence families

Variables	Adolescents' perception of fathers' parenting				Fathers' self perception N=240		t-values	t-values
	Army & AF (pooled) N=160		Navy N=80		M	SD		
	M	SD	M	SD			NAVY	POOLED
ACA	15.84	3.13	14.80	3.46	15.41	2.71	0.50	1.05
SOC	13.51	3.29	12.83	3.44	12.39	2.81	1.04	3.41***
REC	15.75	2.86	14.52	2.84	16.08	2.51	4.78***	0.38
ECO	14.21	3.54	13.99	3.62	14.02	2.75	0.61	0.82
NUT	14.80	2.80	13.65	3.28	14.88	2.80	3.74***	0.22
CLO	14.89	3.13	13.76	3.40	14.73	2.57	3.46***	0.02
PUB	7.99	4.09	7.54	3.51	9.01	3.90	2.83***	2.61**
DOL	13.98	4.35	12.29	3.84	14.65	3.68	3.95***	0.93
P.D	15.16	3.39	14.10	3.13	15.60	2.60	4.46***	1.07
HEA	14.15	3.04	13.10	3.38	14.12	2.82	1.02	0.80
TOTAL	140.50	21.58	130.57	23.00	140.90	18.90	3.82***	0.37

*p< 0.05, **p< 0.01, ***p< 0.001

3.6 Difference in Mothers' and fathers' self perception of their child rearing practices in defence families

The mothers' and fathers' self perception of their parenting was compared as shown in Table 7. Significant differences emerged in the dimensions of academics, nutrition, clothes, puberty development, demonstration of love, personality development, health and the total scores. Mothers gave themselves higher scores than the fathers in all these dimensions.

Table 7 Difference in mothers' and fathers' self perception of their child rearing practices in defence families

Variables	Father's self perception		Mother's self perception		t-values
	M	SD	M	SD	
ACA	15.41	2.71	16.11	2.74	3.46***
SOC	12.39	2.81	12.39	2.90	0.00
REC	16.08	2.51	16.24	2.85	0.90
ECO	14.02	2.75	13.95	3.25	0.41
NUT	14.88	2.80	16.51	2.51	8.03***

CLO	14.73	2.57	15.23	2.53	2.90***
PUB	9.01	3.90	11.54	4.52	8.20***
DOL	14.65	3.68	15.40	3.48	2.90***
P D	15.60	2.60	16.43	2.61	4.31***
HEA	14.12	2.82	14.59	2.53	2.33**
TOTAL	140.90	18.19	148.40	18.88	6.44***

*p<0.05**p<.01, ***p<.001

N=240

IV. DISCUSSION

Results of the present study show that both parents and adolescents in defence families, have a favourable overall perception of the child rearing practices. The mothers' self perception is the most favourable and adolescents' perception of fathers' parenting the least, in all the three wings of the services. This has also been observed in civilian population [14]. Mothers' as well as fathers' self perception of parenting, shows similarity across the three wings of services, indicating homogeneity in perception of parenting in defence services.

Parental self perception in defence officers' families is comparable to their civilian counterparts [14]. These results thus highlight that despite the normal stressors faced by most of the defence families, the overall self perception of parents regarding their child rearing practices is not influenced negatively. Parents seem to show adaptability and flexibility in perception of parenting practices according to the need of the situation. Research studies show that, social support network of family and friends plays an important role in helping and supporting defence parents to adjust and adapt to challenges of defence lifestyle [15-16]. Parents' positive attitude towards the services, low level of family conflict and stability of marriage also plays an important role [17]. Better coping and low distress as reported in some studies on defence families also seems to help enhance parental self perception [18].

Organizational support and general morale of Indian defence forces too gets reflected by the results of the present study, as it has been reported earlier that these are important components of effective behavior, family adjustment and parental functioning [19].

Comparative observation of the findings of adolescents' perception in defence families and the prior studies on civilian population [15] too shows a trend of better perception of mothers' parenting than the fathers'.

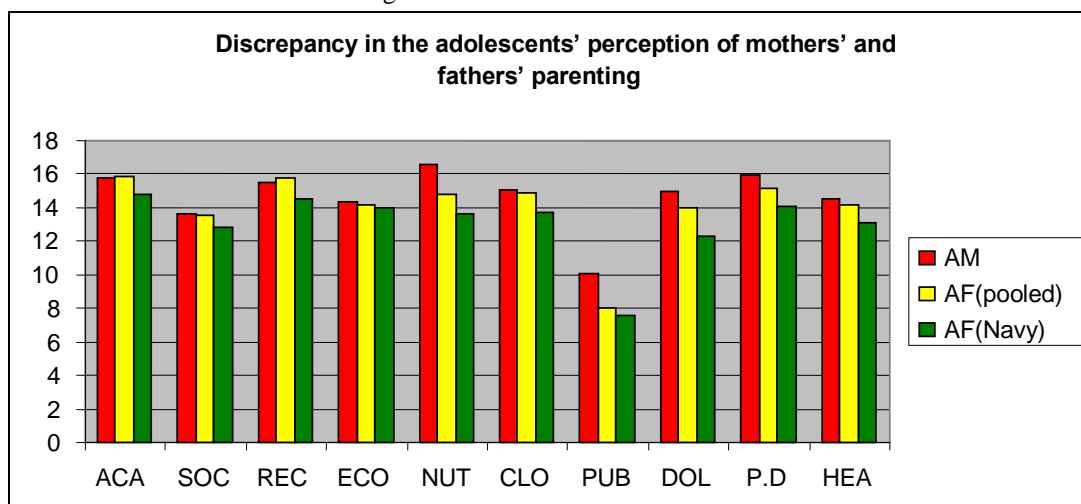
Besides these studies, many other earlier studies have reported better perception of mothers' parenting and related it to mutuality, co-operation, high level of intimacy and sharing in mother-child relationship [20]. Mothers have been found to put in special efforts in catering to physical needs of their children besides psychosocial ones [21-22]. Defence mothers have been reported to generally invest more in their children than the fathers and play a far greater role in meeting their day to day requirements. Perception of mothers' parenting in the defence is thus favourable and comparable to that of their civilian counterparts .

Mothers' parenting shows congruence across the three services, but fathers' perception shows discrepancy. This indicates that mothers in all three defence services are perceived to assume more or less similar roles and responsibilities of childrearing. They are perceived as the primary caretakers of the children.

Fathers in the Navy are perceived to be involved to a lesser extent in childrearing as compared to Army and Air Force, probably due to the nature of their duties which demand extensive sailing and postings away from families. Navy adolescents' perception of their fathers' parenting is closer to that of the deprived adolescents [15], (Mean Navy - 130.57, Mean deprived group - 133), indicating that perhaps the Navy adolescents perceive fathers' deprivation, as when they are sailing they are not even able to communicate with them. Defence families have major adjustment problems when communication with the father is disrupted .The poorer perception of Navy adolescents may also be related to the influence of metropolitan culture and civilian peer group, as most of the Navy adolescents in this study were drawn from Mumbai. Army and Air Force adolescents were taken from various other parts of country as well, residing primarily in cantonments and camp areas. The greater interaction of Navy adolescents with civilian peer group could also perhaps be creating mismatch between defence values and culture and that of civilians, and becoming a source of conflict with the parents. Thus, findings of this study indicate that further probing should be done and research studies carried out to find the underlying causation of this poor perception in the Navy.

The adolescents' perception of mothers in the defence services has emerged significantly better than the fathers in majority of the areas of parenting as seen in Fig 1. The difference is greater and in more number of areas for the Navy adolescents. Better perception of mothers can perhaps be related to the fact that mothers in defence services are perceived to assume greater responsibilities and the adolescents spend more time with them, especially when their fathers are away. Being more available, mothers share the interests, concerns and experiences of the adolescents who are reported to talk more with them than the fathers [23-24]. Even mothers as compared to fathers confide in and talk more with their adolescents, especially daughters. Thus due to higher level of intimacy and sharing, mothers are perceived more favourably [25]. Mothers interact with warmth and affection while acting as advisors and disciplinarians; Communication with them is thus easier and generally more positive [26]. Adolescents are hence likely to have a better perception of her parenting.

Figure 1



AM -Adolescents' perception of mothers' parenting

AF-Adolescents' perception of fathers' parenting

Time spent in active interaction with adolescents could be another reason for difference in perception of mothers' and fathers' parenting. Averaging across studies conducted in 1980s and 1990s, Pleck [27] estimated that, proportional engagement of fathers' was about two fifths of mothers' (43.5%). Some policy analysts suggest uninvolved fatherhood, as the root of a myriad of contemporary social problems and call for strengthening fathers' family role, as a solution.

Comparison of mothers' and fathers' self perception of parenting reveal that mothers' self perception of child rearing practices is better than fathers' self perception in many of the sub variables. The fathers have given themselves comparable scores only in the economic, social and recreational aspects, which show that fathers perceive themselves more favorably in the role of being economic providers and playmates .

Fathers generally experience conflict in fatherhood responsibilities and professional commitments .They spend significantly less time than mothers in caring for children. However, La Rossa [28], reports that due to increased expectation of fathers' involvement in parenting, they are willing to change in their stereotypical roles. Most fathers want to be role models, and wish to be companions, playmates and nurturers. So, fathers in defence services also perceive difference in the extent to which they need to participate in parenting and the extent to which they actually are able to. They seem to honestly admit the difference in their involvement and contribution in child rearing as compared to the mothers and so report a comparatively poorer self perception.

V. Implications of the Study and Recommendations for Futureresearch

The utilitarian aspect of the findings and their applicability in addressing important issues pertaining to the target group is the major goal of any good research. The present study also came out with findings which have important implications for defence families as discussed below;

- 1) Based on the findings of the present work, it is felt that awareness needs to be generated among the public about *the strengths of the defence families*, as there is general feeling that defence adolescents suffer due to

father absence, frequent postings or tough conditions. More youth may opt for defence services if this myth is dispelled.

- 2) Results show that adolescents' perception of *fathers' parenting* as well as fathers' self perception of child rearing is poorer than that of the mothers especially in the Navy. Although fathers in the pooled group seem more realistic in their self perception, yet, all of them *need to be encouraged and oriented to build up their parenting skills and involvement in their adolescent's life, so that their contribution is perceived more favorably by the family members and themselves.*
- 3) *Future research* also needs to focus on identifying the causes of Navy adolescents' poorer perception of their fathers' child rearing.
- 4) *Service policies* need to give attention to above aspect so as to ensure that the fathers of adolescents do not remain away from their families for very long durations and communication with the family members is maintained.
- 5) *Professional experts and counsellors* are still not a part of majority of the medical centres or schools in the camp areas. They need to be involved in *conducting orientation programmes for the defence parents as well as adolescents regarding the physiological and psychological changes in adolescence* and the way these changes need to be dealt with. It was found that puberty development, social development, and independence were the weakest areas of parenting. *Sex education* was perceived poorly by all the groups. Parents and adolescents need to be made aware of the need and importance of sex education. Help of medical authorities and teachers can be taken for this.
- 6) Defence families are often faced with novel and challenging situations. *Workshops and programs* need to be conducted regularly, for providing assistance in *understanding and solution of any emotional and behavioral problems* faced by the families. These workshops can also *enhance parental self-efficacy* and help *parents view the behaviour of their children within a developmental context and counter distorted parental expectations* based on lack of understanding of developmental needs of adolescents.
- 7) Organizations such as AWWA, NAWWA, and AFWWA, can play an active role in organising these workshops and the welfare meetings of the families can be utilized for this purpose.
- 8) The defence families experience situations and a culture which is different from the rest of the population. Their needs, problems, and life experiences demand that *research inputs be made available for assisting in interventions and policies*, which give maximum benefit to the defence families.

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