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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### META-PARENTING, A NEW CONCEPT IN THE INDIA CONTEXT

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#### Abstract

**Introduction:** Parental cognition leads to parental behaviour which in turn affects the child. Meta-parenting, a type of parental cognition is being researched widely in the last 5 years. The association of meta-parenting and children outcome has never been made especially in adolescent population.

**Aim:** The study aims to assess difference between Meta-Parenting of mothers and fathers and assess adolescents correlated to meta-parenting.

**Material & Method:** A cross-sectional, correlational design was used. Sample consisted of 425 parents of adolescents aged 13-17 years (from class 8-12) from various schools and private tuition centres in Delhi. Tools used were Meta-parenting questionnaire (MPQ).

**Results & Discussion:** Results suggested no difference between males and females on the meta-parenting scale. Adolescent age, class, and birth order correlated to meta-parenting subscales. Conclusions: Meta-parenting is not dependent on parents' gender.

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#### Introduction:-

A parent-child relationship is a first and most important relationship in a child's life. A large amount of literature has attempted to understand parenting and parent-child relationship. However, the exact effect is difficult to tract and is still under investigation.

Whenever parents interact with their child, they enter this interaction with their own set of cognitions known as parental-cognitions. Research has attempted to learn about parental cognition, however, there remain gaps and a lot remains to be determined about the impact of parental cognitions on a child's life [1]

Parental cognitions or child-rearing cognitions are what drives parent's behaviour. Parental cognitions are categorized into 'automatic' and 'deliberate' [2]. The 'automatic' cognitions are scripted schemas that operate with little awareness. 'Deliberate' parental cognitions are more effortful and event-dependent, such as problem-solving in which parents deliberately think about how to solve a problem with their children[3].

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It is this parental cognition that makes the parents act either positively or negatively towards their children. Such cognitions have been known to be good predictors of parenting behaviour. Thus it is easy to assume that parents observe their child through a colored lens of their conscious and unconscious cognitions. The cognitions being good or bad may direct the parent positively or negatively towards their child. The negative cognitions distract parents from urgent work and leads to negative emotions that eventually impair effective parenting [4].

Literature has now begun to focus on parent's cognition about this relationship, when it comes to child-rearing practices. Research suggests that parental cognition is known to have an impact on a child, and his cognition, child's development [4]and parent-child communication [5].

The child adds to this interaction based on his understanding and perception of parental attitudes. Research has come to focus on the bi-directionality of this interaction pattern that influences this important bond [6].

Change or transformation in child-rearing practice is also influenced by various parent, child and context variables such as parent's personality, thinking, work, age, etc., child's temperament, birth-order, gender, behaviour, culture, religion, neighbour, etc.[7].

Based on previous literature on parenting cognition, Hawk and Holden gave the concept of Meta-Parenting. They defined Meta-Parenting as *"a class of evaluative parental thought concerning the child-rearing domain that typically occurs before or after parent-child interaction"*[6]. Meta-Parenting which happens to be a parental cognition belonging to "deliberate" category of parental cognition, indicating that parents deliberately evaluate their thoughts regarding their parenting and children [6],[8]. These thoughts usually take place before or after the parent-child interaction, point towards higher level of awareness on childrearing practices [3]. This thinking brings about a change in parental thinking and behaviour, which in turn brings a change in parent-child interaction.

They gave four components of meta-parenting namely Anticipation (defined as *"imagining or consideration of something related to the child before it happens"*). Example, how will my child react if I do/say "x", "). Second component is Assessing (defined as *"being cognizant and informed about what is happening in the child-rearing domain"*). Example, why did my child do this behaviour). Third is Reflection defined as *"parents reassessing their behaviour, child's behaviour, and the parent-child interaction"*. Reflection included a longer time as it has, less direct effect on parental practices. Example, parents before the child's birth reflect on what type of child do they want and what would they do when the child comes. The next component is problem-solving, defined as *"how parent assesses, solves, and evaluate the solutions"*. These four components combined encompass meta-parenting [8].

Holden and Hawk postulated that there are two dangers to meta-parenting; *"too much meta-parenting"* (which may hamper the spontaneous parent-child interaction. And the second danger is *"adulteration"* (wherein parent just focuses on their thinking without keeping in mind their child). Too much meta-parenting makes the parent ruminate about unfruitful things. Constant reflection on their parenting style may make the parent meddle with the child[6]. While describing these four components, Holden later suggested that a fifth component called Rumination as present in depression patients refers to *passively and repetitively focusing on one's symptoms and their related circumstances, in meta-parenting, parents may passively and repetitively focus on their child's symptoms which may ultimately lead to becoming counter-productive, lead to anxiety and could result in child-rearing excesses as being over-protective, over-controlling and unnecessarily intrusive for the child*[9].

Meta-Parenting being a new concept is currently under research. Most studies on Meta-Parenting so far have majorly focused on mothers of young children. In a Korean study,by Han, 161 mothers whose children went to child care centres in Seoul were assessed on Meta-parenting. Results revealed that mothers scored high on meta-parenting [10].Studies also reveal that meta-parenting is linked with authoritative parenting and less abuse potential when studies in fathers [11]; parent's education, child gender, child's temperament [12], child gender, lower levels of reactivity and laxness [8].

Meta-parenting as a concept still needs evidence to back up the and further research the concept to explain how parental cognition affects the child. So far there is no Indian study.

**Method:-**

**Objectives:**

1. To ascertain difference between male and female adolescents on Meta-Parenting
2. To ascertain relationship between socio-demographic profile of adolescents and Meta-Parenting

**Research Design:**

Correlational study design.

**Ethical Approval:**

This study was approved by Amity University Ethics Committee and Amity Institute of Behavioural (Health) & Allied Sciences Research Committee.

**Sample size:**

425 parents (calculated using sample calculator formula)[13]

**Sampling technique:**

Purposive sampling.

**Inclusion Criterion for parents:**

1. Parents of adolescents aged 13-17 years of both male and females
2. Gender- Both Male and Female parents
3. Residence- New Delhi and National Capital Region (NCR)
4. Parents fluent in English.

**Exclusion Criteria (parents):**

Parents already diagnosed with psychiatric, medical, or neurological illness.

**Measures:**

Meta-Parenting Questionnaire (MPQ) (Short) by Holden and Hawk (2006)[8]

Assesses use of cognition such as assessing, anticipating, reflecting, problem-solving, and rumination. MPQ has 24 items divided into 6 subscales, i.e., anticipating, assessing, reflecting, and problem-solving, rumination, total score, and objective scale. It is on a 5 pointlikert scale ranging from never/rarely (1) to occasionally (5) to be filled by parents. Higher scores indicate more frequent cognition in each domain

The reliability of subscales has been assessed using internal consistency and test-retest reliability. Cronbach's alpha for the subscales ranged from 0.64 to 0.77. The test-retest correlations ranged from 0.80 for acceptable, assessing 0.70 for reflection, 0.68 for problem-solving, and 0.61 for anticipating.

**Procedure:**

Permission was taken from school principals/class teachers and directors of private tuition centres in Delhi and NCR. Out of the 450 targeted parents, 20 parents refused to participate and 8 parents were excluded due to the exclusion criterion. The voluntary nature of parent's participation was ensured and were told that they could withdraw at any point of time during the study. The consent was taken from parents for data collection, they were asked to fill in basic information (Personal information sheet). Parents then filled the MPQ. The session took approximately 20-25 minutes. During this time researcher was available to assist with any queries concerning items of the questionnaires or the study. Upon completion, participants were thanked for their cooperation. They were also informed that they could contact the researcher, should they wished to know the findings of the study. The participants were assured of the confidentiality of study-specific information. The mode of data collected was shifted from offline to online mode due to the prevailing COVID-19 situation in the country.

The data was entered into Microsoft Excel and analysed using the SPSS version 20.0. Descriptive (Mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (Correlation and T-test) were used.

## Results and Discussion: -

There has been some research on how mothers and fathers differ in their parental cognitions. But there is a dearth of research on how a father's cognitions affect the child. What remains to be seen is the extent to which these differences affect adolescent's outcomes. Also, meta-parenting has never been studied on parents of adolescents before. This study is an initial step in that direction.

As can be seen from Table 1, There was the presence of females (Mothers) in the study  $n=242$  make up 56% percent of the parent's sample with mean age=43.30 (S.D. = 4.538). Population age ranged from 30 to 55 years ( $M = 43.80$ ,  $SD = 4.558$ ). Where-as father made up 46% (Mean age=42.44, S.D. = 4.444) of the population with a Mean age=42.79, S.D. = 4.444. 35% mothers were salaried professionals (54%) ( $86+46= 132$ ;  $35\%+19\%$ ) including holding jobs such as doctors, lawyers, teachers, etc. as opposed to 54.6% fathers being salaried holding jobs such as lecturers, doctors, lawyers lecturer, etc. 60.3% mothers have 2 children Whereas 74.5% fathers had 2 children (Table 1).

When parents were compared on the subscales of the Meta-parenting questionnaire, there was no significant difference between the mothers and fathers though it can be seen from Table 2 that mothers have scored slightly higher on the subscales assessing, anticipation, reflection, rumination, and total score whereas the fathers have scored slightly higher on the subscale problem solving of MPQ.

Mean scores of parent population on MPQ subscales are as follows- assessing ( $M=17.45$ ,  $SD= 3.531$ ), anticipation ( $M=10.88$ ,  $SD= 2.303$ ), reflection ( $M=9.82$ ,  $SD= 2.655$ ), rumination ( $M=8.82$ ,  $SD= 2.536$ ) and total score ( $M=64.41$ ,  $SD= 10.938$ ). Scores reported by Holden Hawk & Smith et al, [14] study of mothers of various racial and ethnic groups such as European-American, African American and Mexican-American with children aged 2 years to 12 years were assessed on meta-parenting and their mean scores are as follows- assessing mean score of  $M=41.47$ ,  $SD=7.17$ , anticipation mean score of  $M=32.98$ ,  $SD=4.99$ , Reflection mean score of  $M=25.18$ ,  $SD=6.29$ , the problem-solving mean score of  $M=36.05$ ,  $SD=3.01$ ) and total mean scores of  $M=135.86$ ,  $SD=19.07$ [14]. It is important to note that scores of the Indian parent population are notably less as compared to the above-mentioned population which may be indicating that Indian parents are engaging in meta-parenting a lot less as compared to Western parents.

One reason for low score can be that in Indian culture, it is an implied norm for parents to maintain a sense of control and order around their child's life without giving it much thought. This approach towards their own their own child is at times insensitive Thiscreates a dependency within the child which carries on into adulthood. Parents who reject change parenting with changing times, tend to put a hold on their child's growth. Every desire thus becomes a rebellion and every dream, an enemy of "customs and society" for the child. Indian parents use a common phrase "Maar padegi" (you will get a beating). But, this doesn't stop here. Elders in India tend to say that, "I used to get hit by my parents when I was young". However it is not true. Not every child takes such a statement lightly and it may leave a scar for life in some children. Children in today's day and age have a logical thinking, a lot more than their parents had. They get exposed to a lot of events, issues and topics a lot sooner and it is this exposure that helps them to hold opinions. Thus it would be foolish to expect them to simply follow the rules laid out for them, blindly. Like in any relationship, parent-child relationship, also needs to have a level of respect and independence, which needs to be bi-directional. Too much protection and control by the parents can cut ties, as it may hinder peace and growth. A child's personality begins to form from the age of 8-10 years. A danger to their choices and opinions leaves them questioning their identity and self-concept. Every time parents shoot their children, children tend to push their parents further away. A better way for parents would be to move forward and talk to the child whenever they disapprove of something.

According to Holden's description of Rumination, over-protective, over-controlling and unnecessarily intrusion into child's life is concerned, it may be true as it can be seen that in the MPQ subscale Objective, parents have scored a mean of 15.56, S.D=5.73) out of a possible maximum score of 20 indicating that they get stuck thinking about their child, problems with their child, about how they are parenting at least daily which may not be fruitful for the child, parent and the parent-child relationship[9].

This study has a unique finding opposing the literature as this study has a much larger sample size and takes both mothers and along with mother an almost equivalent representation fathers into account.

Contrary to the current study, there have been several studies in which there has been a comparison between mothers and fathers on MPQ. Most studies showed a significant difference between mothers and fathers on the MPQ. E.g., in a study on MPQ among Greek, Cypriot and Turkish Fathers and Mothers where children's age ranged from 30-72 months. In this study, there were 30 mothers from Cyprus, 37 from Greece 33 from Turkey, and 30 fathers from Cyprus, 37 from Greece, and 33 from Turkey. Study results revealed a significant difference between parents on the MPQ from Cyprus, Greece, and Turkey with mothers scoring high on MPQ as compared to fathers [15]. Study by Nicholson et al. also found similar results [11].

When it comes to the Indian culture, adolescent age goes hand in hand with the advances in adolescent's academics. Considering the fact that Indian education system takes a nationwide board exam in two separate years during schooling reflects that Indian adolescents tend to feel pressurized during those two specific years (age 15, i.e. corresponding to class 10 and age 17, i.e. corresponding to class 12). Class 10-Class 12, i.e., age 15-17 years also serve as a turning point for adolescents in India as they begin to choose streams and career options which again has been linked to high levels of stress. This educational stress has been linked to specifically Hindu religion, & number of siblings [16].

The results of the correlation between Adolescent variables (adolescent's age, gender, class and birth order) and MPQ are presented in Table 3.

Findings such as assessing negatively correlated with adolescent's class 11 ( $r = -0.098, p < 0.05$ ), firstborn adolescents ( $r = -0.096, p < 0.05$ ), adolescent's aged 15 ( $r = -0.107, p < 0.05$ ) are in sync with the ones reported by Holden & Hawk (2003), wherein they hypothesized that the lower the child age, the better it will predict overall meta-parenting, anticipating, and assessing. The reason given was that as young children lack the vocabulary to verbalize their needs thus, it becomes more challenging for parents to understand them. Therefore they indulge in more assessing and anticipation [6].

According to Holden & Hawk, the mother of a younger child will have less experience in child-rearing practices as compared to mothers of older children [6]. Thus assessing has negatively correlated with class 11, firstborn adolescent and adolescent aged 15 as the adolescent is now grown up. Reason for the MPQ subscale assessing positively correlating with adolescent's class, 12 may be that by this academic stage adolescent has to decide a direction for his career which may require parents' help. Thus this may lead to parents having the cognition- what and why will my child do in such a situation indicating high assessing.

MPQ subscale anticipation correlated with adolescent's gender ( $r = 0.101, p < 0.05$ ). Though Holden & Hawk reported that mothers of male children reported more anticipation, this finding is contrary to the current study wherein on t-test there was not significant between male and female adolescents on MPQ subscale anticipation ( $t = -0.196, p > 0.845$ ) and scores indicated equality between male ( $M = 10.85, SD = 2.252$ ) and female ( $M = 10.90, SD = 2.349$ ) adolescents [6].

MPQ subscale objective correlated positively with single adolescents ( $r = 0.114, p < 0.05$ ). This finding is in sync with that reported by Holden & Hawk [6]. They pointed out that the mother of a younger child will have less experience in child-rearing practices thus also indulging in spending more time. In the current study as well, scores revealed that parents spent more time with adolescents, thinking about them if they had one child as opposed to having 2 or 3 children. (Single child ( $M = 16.67, SD = 5.634$ ); Firstborn ( $M = 15.53, SD = 5.267$ ); Second-born ( $M = 15.91, SD = 5.454$ ); Third born ( $M = 13.42, SD = 4.580$ ).

MPQ subscale rumination negatively correlated with Adolescent's class 10 ( $r = -0.113, p < 0.05$ ), Adolescents aged 15 ( $r = -0.121, p < 0.05$ ) and it also correlated positively with Adolescent's class 12 ( $r = 0.132, p < 0.05$ ), and Adolescents aged 17 ( $r = -0.161, p < 0.001$ ). At a crucial stage of class 12, i.e., age 17 when adolescents begin to choose career paths parents are bound to care more and will try to protect them from all possible negative outcomes thus at this stage parents are more likely to ruminate than parents of younger adolescents.

MPQ subscale total score negatively correlated with Adolescent aged 15 ( $r=-0.117$ ,  $p<0.016$ ). These findings are comparable to those reported by Holden and Hawk, who reported that mothers with younger children had a higher score on the total meta-parenting scale. Holden & Hawk (2003) reported that mothers with more children would have more experience of child-rearing which should make them an expert in problem-solving. They also postulated that when mothers become more experienced in problem-solving, this process begins to come to them more readily [6].

The findings in this section have been compared to a study done by Holden & Hawk on 116 mothers aged 26-47 years with children aged 1.8 years to 12.9 years wherein mothers were primarily European American with a college education [6].

**Table-1:-** Socio-demographic profile of the parent (N=425).

Gender (N)	Age			Education					Occupation				Number of children			
	N	Mean	Std. dev.	10 <sup>th</sup> stand	12 <sup>th</sup> stand	Diploma	Graduate	Post-graduate and above	Homemaker	Business	Salaried	Professionals	1	2	3	4
Mothers	242	43.30	4.638	5	18	7	127	85	73	37	86	46	64	14	32	1
Fathers	183	42.79	4.444	4	26	5	88	60	0	62	100	22	38	13	12	0

**Table 2:-** Depicting Gender difference in the Meta-Parenting questionnaire (N=425).

Group Statistics						
	Parent gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	"p"
Assessing	Fathers	183	17.40	3.462	-0.282	0.778
	Mothers	242	17.50	3.630		
Anticipation	Fathers	183	10.81	2.259	-0.739	0.460
	Mothers	242	10.97	2.364		
Reflection	Fathers	183	9.81	2.697	-0.043	0.966
	Mothers	242	9.83	2.606		
Problem-solving	Fathers	183	17.45	3.723	0.032	0.974
	Mothers	242	17.44	3.875		
Rumination	Fathers	183	8.77	2.487	-0.491	0.624
	Mothers	242	8.89	2.604		
Objective	Fathers	183	16.07	5.323	1.691	0.092
	Mothers	242	16.18	5.410		
Total score	Fathers	183	64.25	10.724	0.360	0.719
	Mothers	242	64.63	11.240		

**Table 3:-** Correlation between Adolescent variables (adolescent's age, adolescent's gender, adolescent's class, and adolescent's birth order) and MPQ and its subscales (N=425).

MPQ Child variables	Assessing	Anticipation	Reflection	Problem-solving	Rumination	Objective scale	Total Score
Class8	.011	.094	.034	.023	.004	.011	.040
Class9	-.010	-.064	-.003	.021	-.068	.036	-.026
Class10	-.083	-.024	-.032	.023	<b>-0.113*</b>	-.037	-.058
Class11	<b>-0.098*</b>	-.036	-.077	-.055	.006	-.021	-.075

Class12	<b><u>0.118*</u></b>	.030	.048	-.018	<b><u>0.132**</u></b>	.000	.081
BirthOrdersingle	.019	.035	.047	.073	.061	<b><u>0.114*</u></b>	.064
BirthOrderfirstborn	<b><u>-0.096*</u></b>	-.086	-.046	-.027	-.085	-.071	-.089
BirthOrdersecond	.061	.073	.031	-.053	.043	-.012	.034
BirthOrderthird	.044	-.024	-.040	.048	-.008	-.007	.014
Age13	-.011	.063	.008	.041	-.045	-.018	.015
Age14	.000	-.025	.018	.026	-.038	.018	-.001
Age15	<b><u>-0.107*</u></b>	-.079	-.078	-.054	<b><u>-0.121*</u></b>	-.085	<b><u>-0.117*</u></b>
Age16	.081	.022	.009	.026	.011	.038	.045
Age17	.018	.005	.029	-.046	<b><u>0.161**</u></b>	-.020	.035
Child gender	-.024	<b><u>0.101*</u></b>	.047	.047	.028	.046	.048
Number of children	-0.021	-.038	-.016	<b><u>-0.102*</u></b>	.034	-.035	-.046

\*\* . p< 0.01; \* . p< 0.05

Significant findings are bold and underlined

### Conclusion:-

It is interesting to note that, this a first of its kind study, examined the difference between mothers and fathers on Meta-parenting in India and distinctively brings out how parental cognition may affect adolescents in India. Though it is important to note that even though correlation, was significant, correlation coefficients were weak. Parental cognition i.e. meta-parenting, can depend on multiple other factors such as external interactions, culture, temperament of adolescents, etc. which were not accounted for this study.

These findings can add to the existing literature towards finding more evidence that negative parental cognition has a direct effect on adolescent's behaviour and outcomes especially when adolescents are a crucial doorway into adulthood that entails a lot of transitions. With wrong guidance from parents can lead the adolescent into having negative outcomes. With this understanding, other adolescent related outcomes can be studied. This study can also provide avenues for improving parent training modules for better parent-child interactions.

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### Conflict of interest:-

None.

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