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**The influence of parenting goals on adolescent psychosocial
adjustment**

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Table of Contents

	page
Statement	iii
Acknowledgements	vi
List of Figures	xiii
List of Tables	xv
Abstract	xx
Chapter 1: Project aims	1
1.1 General Introduction	1
1.2 The rationale of parenting goal research	3
1.3 Main objectives	8
1.4 Structure of thesis	9
SECTION A: LITERATURE REVIEW	13
Chapter 2: Adolescent Psychosocial Adjustment and the Quality of the Parent-Adolescent Relationship	15
2.1 Overview	15
2.2 The parental role	15
2.2.1 The parenting role during adolescence	16
2.3 Traditional parenting theories	18
2.3.1 Limitations of traditional parenting theories	22
2.4 Adolescent psychosocial adjustment	24
2.5 The dynamics of the parent-adolescent relationship	28
2.6 The quality of the parent-adolescent relationship	31

2.6.1	Overview	31
2.6.2	Adolescent attachment	32
2.6.3	Family functioning	35
2.6.4	Limitations of research on the parent-adolescent relationship and adolescent adjustment	36
Chapter 3: Parenting Cognitions, Behaviours and Emotions		38
3.1	Overview	38
3.2	Social cognition: Parental cognitions	38
3.2.1	Parenting-cognition theories and models	39
3.2.2	Social cognition and family research	42
3.3	Parenting goals	43
3.3.1	Parental trust: A relationship-centred goal?	46
3.3.2	Studies on parental goals	50
3.3.3	Adolescents' perceptions of parental goals	58
3.3.4	Summary	60
3.4	Parental attributions	61
3.4.1	Attributions: Definitions and theories	61
3.4.2	Parenting and attribution biases	63
3.4.3	Dix and colleagues: Parental attribution studies	65
3.4.4	Other studies on parental attributions	74
3.5	Parenting behaviours	78
3.5.1	Overview	78
3.5.2	Parental control	79

3.5.3	Rejection-Acceptance	85
3.6	Parental moods and emotions and parenting effectiveness	87
3.6.1	Mothers' negative affect and parenting effectiveness	88
3.6.2	Mothers' emotions and parenting effectiveness	89
3.6.3	The reciprocal effects of affective states	92
3.6.4	Emotions and parenting goals	94
SECTION B: EMPIRICAL STUDIES ON PARENTING GOALS		97
Chapter 4: Mothers' Beliefs, Values and Affective Responses in Relation to Parenting a Teenager		99
4.1	Introduction	99
4.2	Objectives and Aims	104
4.3	Method	105
4.3.1	Participants	105
4.3.2	Procedure	106
4.3.3	Psychometric measures	108
4.3.4	Reliability analysis	111
4.3.5	The interviews	112
4.3.6	Analysis of qualitative and quantitative data	117
4.4	Results	117
4.4.1	Overview	118
4.4.2	Demographic characteristics of the sample	118
4.4.3	Psychological adjustment and demographic differences	120

4.4.4	Adolescent adjustment and perceptions of parent-adolescent relationships	122
4.4.5	Mothers' reports on global parenting goals (Aim 1)	124
4.4.6	Mothers' beliefs about the importance of affection (Aim 2)	126
4.4.7	Maternal affection, parent-adolescent relationships and adolescent adjustment (Aim 3)	134
4.4.8	Mothers' responses to teenagers when they are angry (Aim 4)	135
4.4.9	Mothers' anger responses, adolescent adjustment and parent-adolescent relationships? (Aim 5)	138
4.4.10	Mothers' observations of adolescent disposition (Aim 6)	139
4.4.11	Mothers' affective responses to teenage dispositions (Aim 7)	142
4.4.12	Teenagers' dispositions and parent-adolescent relationships (Aim 8)	142
4.5	Discussion	146
Chapter 5: Parenting Goals and Adolescent Well-being		155
5.1	Introduction	155
5.2	Aims and hypotheses	159
5.3	Method	161
5.3.1	Participants	161
5.3.2	Procedure	161
5.3.3	Questionnaires	162
5.3.4	Vignettes	165
5.3.5	Mothers' affective responses to vignettes	167

5.3.6	Mothers' attributions for teenagers' behaviours	167
5.3.7	Psychometric measures	168
5.3.8	Reliability analysis	171
5.4	Results	171
5.4.1	The demographic characteristics of the sample (Section 1)	171
5.4.2	Psychological measures: Descriptive statistics	174
5.4.3	A survey of mothers' parenting goals (Section 2)	176
5.4.4	Parenting goals based on mothers' reports and adolescents' perceptions of mothers' goals (Aim 1)	177
5.4.5	The consistency of parenting goals across different scenarios (Aim 2)	185
5.4.6	Contextually-bound parenting goals, the parent-adolescent relationship and adolescent adjustment (Section 3)	188
5.4.7	Exploring the relationship between contextually-bound parenting goals and adolescent outcomes (Aim 3)	191
5.4.8	Exploratory analysis: The mediating or moderating role of the parent-adolescent relationship	195
5.4.9	Summary	200
5.5	Discussion	201
Chapter 6: The Relationships between Contextually- Bound Parenting Goals and other Parenting Processes		214
6.1	Introduction	214
6.2	Aims and hypotheses	223
6.3	Method	225
6.4	Results	225

6.4.1	Descriptive findings	225
6.4.2	Preliminary analysis: Parenting goals and maternal behaviours	226
6.4.3	Parenting goals and maternal behaviours (Aim 1)	227
6.4.4	Parenting goals as antecedents to maternal behaviours	229
6.4.5	Parenting goals, maternal behaviours and adolescent outcomes (Aim 2)	231
6.4.6	Preliminary analysis: Parenting goals and maternal attributions	238
6.4.7	Parenting goals and maternal attributions (Aim 3)	241
6.4.8	Parenting goals as antecedents to attributional tendencies	244
6.4.9	Parenting goals, maternal attributions and adolescent outcomes (Aim 4)	248
6.4.10	Preliminary analysis: Parenting goals and mothers' emotions	252
6.4.11	Parenting goals and maternal emotions (Aim 5)	257
6.4.12	Parenting goals as antecedents to maternal emotions	259
6.4.13	Parenting goals, maternal emotions and adolescent outcomes (Aim 6)	261
6.5	Discussion	270
Chapter 7: Maternal Trust: A Relationship-Centred Goal?		282
7.1	Introduction	282
7.2	Aims and hypotheses	288
7.3	Method	291
7.3.1	Participants	291
7.3.2	Procedure	292

7.3.3	Measures	293
7.3.4	Reliability analysis	300
7.4	Results	301
7.4.1	Preliminary Analysis	301
7.4.2	Maternal trust and relationship-centred goals (Aim 1)	305
7.4.3	Maternal trust and adolescent outcomes (Aim 2)	306
7.4.4	Maternal trust and adolescent problem behaviours, self-disclosure, gender and age (Aim 3)	312
7.4.5	Mothers' affective states, cognitions and maternal trust (Aim 4)	314
7.4.6	Exploratory analysis	319
7.4.7	Mothers' moods, emotions or cognitions as mediators of the relationships between maternal trust and adolescent outcomes (Aim 5)	322
7.4.8	Mothers' moods, emotions and cognitions as moderators of the relationships between maternal trust and adolescent outcomes (Aim 6)	324
7.4.9	Exploratory analysis: The parent-adolescent relationship as mediator of the relationships between maternal trust and adolescent wellbeing	324
7.5	Discussion	326
Chapter 8: Summary and Conclusions		335
8.1	Overview	335
8.2	Parenting goals and adolescent adjustment	339
8.3	Maternal trust	342
8.4	Adolescent individuation	344

8.5	Parenting goals and the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship	345
8.6	Contributing role of other parenting mechanisms	347
8.7	Multiple informants	351
8.8	Limitations and future research	352
	References	359
	Appendix 1: Study 1 Questionnaire	387
	Appendix 2: Study 2 Questionnaire	391
	Appendix 3: Study 3 Questionnaire	401

Abstract

This project, conducted in South Australia, draws upon the theoretical frameworks provided in the parenting, social cognition and relationships literatures. The principal hypothesis governing the research was that variations in parenting goals would give rise to how parents responded to their children, both cognitively and behaviourally (e.g., in terms of parenting behaviour, attributions for behaviour and emotional responses). These factors would then influence the nature of family functioning and ultimately young people's level of psychosocial functioning. A series of three studies was therefore conducted to explore the influence that mothers' beliefs and values, operationalised in terms of parenting goals, have on family functioning and adolescent wellbeing as mediated or moderated by how parents interacted with their adolescents and interpreted their behaviour.

The purpose of the first study (Study 1) was to understand the nature of mothers' parenting goals (i.e., what do they feel to be important when parenting teenagers) and how these beliefs influenced their affective responses to teenagers. This section also asked parents to identify which situations were most likely to require specific parenting responses, so that vignettes used subsequently in the project were based on real-life and relevant examples of parent-adolescent conflict. A second part of this study examined the relationship between mothers' endorsement of these parental goals and adolescent well-being.

The findings were based on a qualitative and exploratory study of 37 mother-adolescent dyads as well as a series of self-report psychometric measures. In the semi-structured interview mothers' were asked to respond to broad questions on relationship-centred goals, parent-centred goals and child-centred empathic and socialisation goals. Consistent with other recent research which has questioned the primacy afforded to the goal of parental compliance, the results showed that most mothers were not solely focused on parental needs or adolescent compliance. On the contrary, child-centred goals, including considering the child's needs and showing physical affection were strongly endorsed by many parents. The study also highlighted the degree of variability in parental goals. The results, however, found some support for a direct association between specific parenting goals and family functioning, and parenting goals and adolescent psychosocial functioning.

Study 2 was a quantitative study which assessed the main and indirect effects that mothers' parenting goals had on maternal attributions, behaviours and emotional responses, and how each of these factors ultimately influenced adolescent adjustment and family functioning (i.e., whether they moderated or mediated the effects of parenting goals on family and adolescent functioning). The participants in this study comprised 103 mother-adolescent pairs. Mothers were asked to consider the importance of eight pre-generated parenting goals within four specific situations. They were also asked to rate their emotional and attributional response to the four situations. Teenagers' perceptions of mothers' parenting goals, emotional responses and attributions within the four situations

were also measured. In addition, teenagers' were asked to complete the Child Reports of Parents Behavioural Inventory (Schludermann & Schludermann, 1970) which measured parenting behaviours. An initial series of analyses examined the importance of the different types of parenting goal (parent, child and relationship centred) across the different scenarios identified in Study 1. The results confirmed the prediction that mothers' goals would not be static from one situation to another and that context therefore influenced parenting goals. For example, when parents were faced with situations involving public perceptions, parent-centered concerns were more likely to be emphasised. Child and relationship concerns were more likely to be emphasised in more private contexts. Similar results were obtained using both parental and adolescent reports, and the findings highlighted the important similarities and differences between parental and adolescent perceptions of parenting goals.

A second series of analyses examined the direct relationship between parenting goals and adolescent functioning, as well as the extent to which this relationship was mediated or moderated by family functioning, parenting behaviours and attributions, or parental emotional responses (as rated independently by both mothers and teenagers). In terms of the direct relationship, the results showed the more teenagers perceived mothers to be interested in relationship-centred goals, the more well-adjusted teenagers seemed to be. When taken as a whole, the results generally found limited support for the predictions that attributions, affective responses, or parental behaviours would mediate the relationship between parenting goals and

adolescent wellbeing. However, some evidence for moderation was found, and particularly in relation to the role of parental emotional responses. In particular, it was found that relationship-centred goals appeared to be associated with poorer outcomes depending upon the mothers' emotional responses. In particular, if mothers expressed excessive anger during altercations with teenagers, outcomes tended to be poorer despite the high endorsement of relationship-centred goals. Indeed, even when there were high expectations of compliance, this was beneficial for adolescent well-being as long as mothers did not react aggressively when teenagers failed to comply. In addition, relationship-centred goals were not as strongly associated to teenagers' positive moods and attachment to mother when teenagers perceived mothers to worry too much about challenging altercations with them. In other words, there was some evidence that mothers' emotional responses played a more important role in maintaining family functioning and good adolescent functioning than attributions and parental other parental behaviours. Such effects were more likely to be observed when the results were based on teenage perceptions rather than just mothers' self-reports.

The objective of Study 3 was to assess whether mothers' cognitions (parenting goals, attributions) and affective states (emotions, moods) interacted with maternal trust or was directly related to adolescent adjustment. The participants in this study comprised 123 mother-adolescent pairs. Self-report measures of maternal trust were collected using Kerr, Stattin and Trost's (1999) Parental Trust scale. In this study mothers' general parenting goals were

assessed rather than their parenting goals in specific situations. Maternal trust was positively associated with healthy adolescent adjustment, although there were differential effects according to the gender of the teenager. The findings suggest that sons were more greatly affected by mothers' level of trust in them than daughters. As anticipated, more relationship-centered goals were positively associated with mothers' level of trust in both sons and daughters. When mothers believed more strongly in the goal of providing love and care for their children, and this was combined with trust, this appeared to be associated with stronger attachments with parents, particular amongst boys. Maternal attributions were shown to have a negative influence on maternal trust. It appeared that mothers who were prone to making strong personality and intentionality attributions for teenagers' challenging behaviours were less likely to be trustful of their teenagers. Mothers' emotions did not appear to affect the trust they placed in their teenagers. Nor did they influence the conditions in which trust might be associated with adolescent outcomes. Mothers' negative moods, on the other hand, were more strongly related to the extent to which mothers were able to trust their teenagers.