

What Can Parents do to Minimize Adolescent Failure Anticipation?

Gianna Ahring

Radboud University Nijmegen

Gianna Ahring

s4546164

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Supervisor: William J. Burk

Faculty of Social Sciences, Psychology

Radboud University Nijmegen

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Abstract

In this study it was investigated if self-esteem has a mediating role between positively associated parenting behaviors like parents' trust, parental warmth, and constructive problem solving, and failure anticipation. Longitudinal data from "The 10 to 18 Study" was used, participants were students attending public schools in a city in central Sweden. Data from 225 Swedish children (45.3% boys and 54.7% girls) between the age of 12 to 15 years ($M = 13.01$, $SD = .21$) were analyzed. The results showed that the parenting measures parents' trust, parental warmth, and constructive problem solving are significantly positive related to self-esteem and significantly negative related to failure anticipation. All three mediation models showed significant negative indirect effects on failure anticipation via self-esteem. This indicates that self-esteem has a mediating role between parents' trust, parental warmth, and constructive problem and the outcome failure anticipation. For example, more parents' trust is related to more self-esteem, which in turn, is related to less failure anticipation. Strengths, limitations, and implications of the study, as well as suggestions for further research are discussed.

Key words: parents' trust, parental warmth, constructive problem solving, self-esteem failure anticipation

The role of negative parenting behaviors on children's and adolescent's failure anticipation has been widely examined. While direct effects of negative parenting behaviors like being unsupportive, hypercritical and cold (Sagar & Lavalley, 2010; Elliot and Thrash, 2004) have been well established, less is known about which positive parenting behaviors and which underlying mechanisms might affect failure anticipation of children and adolescents. A little body of research has found that self-esteem is negatively associated to failure anticipation (McFarlin, Baumeister, & Blascovich, 1984) and current interventions on lowering levels of failure anticipation have been targeting to increase self-esteem of children and adolescents. In 2001, Conroy has stated that the prevalence of problems caused by high fear of failure among children and adolescents makes it a social concern. Up until today, no research has focused on what positive parenting behaviors might minimize failure anticipation in adolescent and if self-esteem might be an underlying mechanism between the relation.

Origins of failure anticipations seem to be complex, however research suggests that the family environment is one of the most potential contributors on how an individual might adapt to expectation of failure. Failure anticipation is a dysfunctional belief of an individual that failure might happen while facing a difficult task. Adolescents with high failure

anticipation tend to operate unrelated and “off task” behavior (van Zalk, Kerr, Branje, Stattin, & Meeus, 2010). Because of engaging too much on these off-task behaviors, it is more likely that failure will happen. A constant fearful expectation of failure or belief of failing on future tasks enhances pessimism and self-deprecating thoughts and is found to be associated with self-protective behaviors like self-handicapping, defensive pessimism, and learned helplessness (Nurmi, Onatsu, & Haavisto, 1995).

These self-protecting behaviors may lead to negative life outcomes, like poor mental health and adjustment and low academic or work performances (van Zalk, Kerr, Branje, Stattin, & Meeus, 2010). Research has found that when the quality of the parent-child relationship is low, children show more failure anticipation. For example, Sagar and Lavalley (2010) found that having unsupportive and hyper-critical parents can lead to a rise in the child’s belief that they will fail on future tasks when facing a difficult task. A research by Elliot and Thrash (2004) has found that high failure anticipation can be linked to parents that used love withdrawal and communication that implies disapproval and disappointment in the child’s achievements.

These findings are in line with the cognitive-interpersonal theories that state that personality and emotion traits, as well as cognitive schemas are formed during earliest interaction with others (Bowlby, 1969; Young, Klosko, & Weishaar, 2003;). Since parents form these social interactions for most children, the relationship between parents and the child is especially important for forming schemas about others and self, predicting future schemas. When children in these parent-child interactions are routinely undermined and humiliated after not competing or the children do not get enough support or encouragement, children form negative assumptions about their own worthiness and carry those feelings about their own capabilities into adolescence (Conroy, 2003; McCormick & Kennedy, 1994).

What is known is that negative parenting behaviors have negative outcomes on failure anticipation. Preexisting research indicated that self-worthiness and self-esteem might play a role in how an individual might adapt to failure. However, these interactions can also be positive, and research has indicated positive outcomes multiple times. In 1986, Walker and Green stated that stable and high-quality parent-child relationships that show high levels of parental warmth and trust between parents and their children are positively related with the child’s own perception of worthiness and self-esteem. Moreover, research has found that the self-esteem of the child evolves through the parent-child relationship quality because children’s’ assumption about how loveable and worthiness they are, are based on these relationships (Wolff, 2000). He found that the aspects of acceptance and encouragement are

most important for the development of healthy self-esteem in a child. These studies indicate that a high-quality parent-child relationship can lead to a child or adolescent having a healthy self-esteem.

In addition, research has suggested that high levels of self-esteem might reduce levels of failure anticipation. McFarlin, Baumeister, and Blascovich (1984) found that individuals with high self-esteem are more persistent in the face of failure and show less self-handicapping behaviors. Additionally, Conroy and Coatsworth (2007) found the vice versa effect, they found that low self-esteem was linked to higher levels of fear of failure and engaging in possible failure. This indicates that the parent-child relationship is positively related to developing a healthy self-esteem in the adolescent and in addition to that the healthy self-esteem is associated with less anticipation in failure.

Since research has till now only indicated direct effects between positive associated parenting behaviors on self-esteem as well as failure anticipation. This study would like to explore if the positive effects of positive parenting behaviors on failure anticipation is through self-esteem. In this thesis, it was chosen to focus on the positive behavior's parents' trust, parental warmth and constructive problem solving and how they affect self-esteem as well as failure anticipation. It was chosen for these constructs, because literature has widely explored positive outcomes of these aspects on the quality of the parent child relationship. For example, Papini and Roggman (1992) suggested that parental trust and the quality of communication may serve as buffers against stressors of adolescence. Further, Gullone and Robinson (2005) found that trust is a measure for the understanding and respect in the relationship between the parent and child. Furthermore, Juang and Silbereisen (2002) have found that parental warmth is positively related to adolescents' beliefs about achievement capabilities.

Until today no research has attempted to examine which positive aspects of the parent-child relationship might minimize failure anticipation. Further it is not known if there is an underlying mechanism between positive aspects of parent-child relationship and failure anticipation. One possible mechanism between the parent-child relationship and failure anticipation might be the amount of self-esteem of the adolescent. The goal of the study is to widen literature by providing evidence that positively associated parenting behaviors, like parents' trust, parental warmth and constructive problem-solving behavior can minimize failure anticipation through an indirect effect of self-esteem. This might be helpful to inform, prevent and develop interventions targeting on minimizing failure anticipation. Therefore, three mediation models will be used to examine if there is a mediating effect of self-esteem

between parents' trust, parental warmth, constructive problem solving and failure anticipation of the adolescents. Three main research questions (RQ) will be addressed in the present thesis.

(RQ 1) Is there a mediation of self-esteem between the relation of parents' trust and failure anticipation? It is expected that adolescents who report high levels of parents' trust will engage less in failure anticipation than adolescents who report lower levels of parents' trust (Juang & Silbereisen, 2002). Also, adolescents who report higher parents' trust will report more self-esteem than individuals who report lower levels of parents' trust (Walker & Green, 1986). Further, high levels of self-esteem go hand in hand with lower levels of failure anticipation (McFarlin, Baumeister and Blascovich, 1984; Conroy & Caotsworth, 2007). Lastly, it is expected that there will be a statistically significant indirect effect of high parents' trust on failure anticipation through self-esteem.

(RQ 2) Is there a mediation of self-esteem between the relation of parental warmth and failure anticipation? It is expected that adolescents who report high amounts of parental warmth engage less in failure anticipation than individuals who report low levels of trust from parents. Additionally, it is expected that adolescents, who experience high levels of parental warmth will report more self-esteem than adolescents who experience lower levels of parental warmth (Walker & Green, 1986). Lastly, because these constructs all might interrelate it is expected that there is a positive indirect effect of parental warmth on failure anticipation through self-esteem.

(RQ 3) Is there a mediation of self-esteem between the relation of constructive problem solving and failure anticipation? It is expected that adolescents who report higher levels of constructive problem solving will engage less in failure anticipation than adolescents who report lower levels of constructive problem solving. Also, adolescents who report higher amounts of constructive problem solving will report more self-esteem than adolescents who report lower levels of constructive problem solving. Lastly, it is expected that there will be a positive indirect effect of constructive problem solving on failure anticipation through self-esteem.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

The sample was drawn from a large longitudinal research project called "The 10 to 18 Study" (Kerr et al., 2007). This project included annual assessments of all students in public schools in a city in central Sweden (roughly 4500 students). For this thesis, 225 participants were selected who completed assessments in grade 7, 8 and 9. This analytic sample included

102 boys (45.3%) and 123 girls (54.7%), who ranged from 12.06 to 15.03 years ($M = 13.01$, $SD = .21$). In this sample 89.8% of the participating children were Swedish.

Each year, trained research assistants administered paper-and-pencil surveys for students during regular school hours. The participation in the study was voluntarily and students were informed that the data was kept confidential. Parents were informed via mail and community meetings. Teachers were not present during the data collection.

Materials

Parents' trust. Parents' trust was measured with six items reported by the youth. The items describe the amount of trust the parents show to their adolescent. The items describe how much trust their parents show. Response categories for each item included a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*yes, completely/yes fully*) to 5 (*no, absolutely not*). One example of an item was "Do your parents trust that you will not hang out with bad people?". The scores were reversed prior to calculating a mean score. Cronbach's alpha for this questionnaire was $\alpha = .83$.

Parental warmth. Parental warmth was measured with five items referring to the mother and five referring to the father and were completed by the adolescents. The items describe how often the parents show warmth to their child. The response categories for each item consisted of a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*most often*). One example of an item was "Praises you for no special reason". Scores for mother and father were combined to one mean score representing parental warmth. The Cronbach's alpha for this questionnaire was $\alpha = .84$.

Constructive problem solving. Constructive problem solving was measured with seven items for each parent completed by the adolescents. The items describe if constructive problem solving was operated by the parents and measured the attempted understanding by the mother or the father. The response categories for each item consisted of a 3-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 3 (*most often*). One example item was "Honestly wants to understand why you did what you did". Scores for mother and father were combined to one mean score representing constructive problem solving of the parents. The Cronbach's alpha was $\alpha = .88$.

Self-esteem. Self-esteem was measured with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1979). The questionnaire includes five negative statements and five positive statements concerning the self and was completed by the adolescents. One example for a positive statement used is "You think that you have many good characteristics" and one negative statement is "You think that you do not have a lot to be proud of". The response

categories for each item consisted of a 4-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (*don't agree at all*) to 4 (*agree totally*). The negative statements were reverse coded prior to calculation of a mean score. Cronbach's alpha for this questionnaire was $\alpha = .90$.

Failure anticipation. Failure anticipation was measured with the Strategy and Attribution Questionnaire (Nurmi, Salmela-Aro & Haavisto, 1995) and included four items reported by the children. The items describe the expectation of failure on difficult tasks. Response categories for each item consisted of a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*does not apply at all*) to 4 (*applies exactly*). One example for the adolescents' statement was "I don't really have faith in my ability to cope with hard task" and one example for the parent statements was "He/she doesn't have faith in his/her ability to cope with difficult tasks". A mean score was calculated. The Cronbach's alpha of this questionnaire was $\alpha = .70$.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics as well as the correlations among all study variables (i.e., parents' trust, parental warmth, constructive problem solving, self-esteem and failure anticipation) will be initially assessed. To investigate whether self-esteem has a mediating effect between positive aspects of the parent-adolescent relationship and failure anticipation three mediation analysis in SPSS-Macro PROCESS will be performed (Hayes, 2013). The first mediation model will use parents' trust as predictor, failure anticipation as outcome and self-esteem as the mediator. The second mediation model will use parental warmth as predictor, failure anticipation as outcome and self-esteem as mediator. The last mediation model will use constructive problem solving as predictor, failure anticipation as outcome and self-esteem as mediator. This SPSS-Macro uses bootstrapping methods to account for the non-normal distribution of the indirect effects and calculates robust standard errors to account for potential heteroscedasticity. To verify if there is a statistically significant indirect effect (mediation), the 95% confidence intervals of the indirect effect must not contain 0 (Preacher & Hayes, 2004).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

In Table 1 the correlations in the current sample can be found. The correlations show that parents' trust significantly negatively correlates with failure anticipation and significantly positively correlates with self-esteem, which indicates that high parents' trust lead to less failure anticipation and more self-esteem. Further the table shows that parental warmth significantly negatively correlates with failure anticipation and significantly positively with

self-esteem, this indicates that the more parental warmth is received less failure anticipation is reported and more self-esteem. Moreover, constructive problem solving significantly negatively correlates with failure anticipation and significantly positively with self-esteem, these correlations indicate that the more constructive problem solving is related to less failure anticipation and more self-esteem. Lastly self-esteem correlates significantly negatively with failure anticipation, this indicates that high levels of self-esteem are associated with lower levels of failure anticipation.

Table 1

Summary of Correlations for Parents' Trust, Parental Warmth, Constructive Problem Solving, Self-Esteem and Failure Anticipation

	Parents' Trust	Parental Warmth	Constructive Problem-solving	Self-Esteem	Failure Anticipation
Parents' Trust	-	.28**	.49**	.39**	-.34**
Parental Warmth		-	.46**	.24**	-.21**
Constructive Problem-solving			-	.36**	-.30**
Self-Esteem				-	-.33**
Failure Anticipation					-

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Mediation models

Parents' trust, self-esteem, and failure anticipation. In Figure 1 the results of the first mediation analysis are displayed. Unstandardized coefficients and bootstrapped confidence intervals are reported for regression model parameters. This model explained 15.10% of variance on self-esteem and 16.30% of variance on failure anticipation. First, the results showed that parents' trust was a significant positive predictor for self-esteem, $b = .38$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.26, 0.49]. This means that more trust from parents predicts for more self-esteem. Moreover, self-esteem was significantly negatively associated with failure anticipation, $b = -.23$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.36, -0.10]. The negative regression

coefficient for self-esteem indicates that higher levels of self-esteem predict less failure anticipation. The total effect of self-esteem was significant, $b = -.33$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.45, -0.21]. Further it was shown that there is a direct effect of parents' trust on failure anticipation, $b = -.25$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.38, -0.12]. Meaning that parents' trust does significantly negatively predict failure anticipation. The analysis also confirmed a statistically significant negative indirect effect of parents' trust on failure anticipation through self-esteem, $b = -.09$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI [-0.15, -0.03]. These results indicate that the relationship between parents' trust and failure anticipation is mediated by self-esteem, with higher trust predicting more self-esteem, which in return predicts less failure anticipation.



Figure 1. Unstandardized regression coefficients for the model examining self-esteem as a mediator of the association between parents' trust and failure anticipation. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Parental warmth, self-esteem, and failure anticipation. In Figure 2 the results of the second mediation analysis are displayed. Unstandardized coefficients and bootstrapped confidence intervals are reported for regression model parameters. This model explained 6.0% of variance on self-esteem and 12.7% of variance on failure anticipation. First, the results showed that parental warmth was a significant positive predictor for self-esteem, $b = .36$, $SE = .10$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.17, 0.55]. This means that more warmth from parents predicts more self-esteem. Moreover, self-esteem was significantly negatively associated with failure anticipation, $b = -.30$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.43, -0.17]. The negative regression coefficient for self-esteem indicates that higher levels of self-esteem predict less failure anticipation. The total effect of self-esteem was significant, $b = -.32$, $SE = .10$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [-0.51, -0.13]. Further, the results showed that there is a direct effect of parental warmth on failure anticipation, $b = -.21$, $SE = .10$, $p = .031$, 95% CI [-0.40, -0.02]. Meaning that parental warmth does significantly negatively predict failure anticipation. The analysis also confirmed a statistically significant negative indirect effect of parental warmth on failure anticipation through self-esteem, $b = -.11$, $SE = .04$, $p = .031$, 95% CI [-0.20, -0.04]. These results indicate

that the relationship between parental warmth and failure anticipation is mediated by self-esteem, with more parental warmth predicting more self-esteem, which in return predicts less failure anticipation.

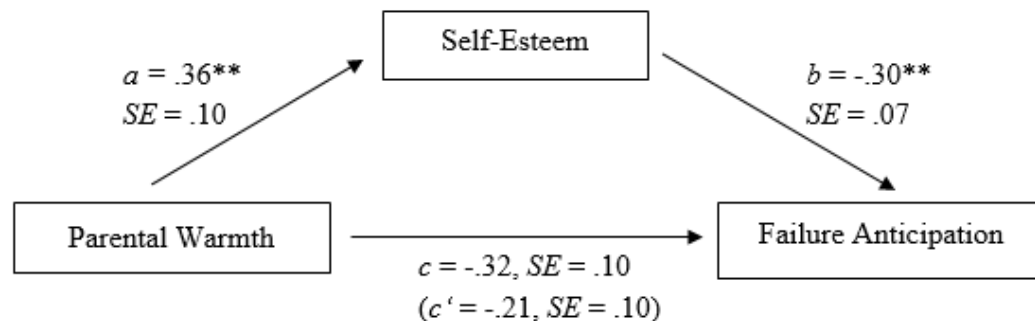


Figure 2. Unstandardized regression coefficients for the model examining self-esteem as a mediator of the association between parental warmth and failure anticipation. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Constructive problem solving, self-esteem and failure anticipation. In Figure 3 the results of the third mediation analysis are displayed. Unstandardized coefficients and bootstrapped confidence intervals are reported for regression model parameters. This model explains 12.6% of variance on self-esteem and 14.7% of variance on failure anticipation. First, the results showed that constructive problem solving was a significant positive predictor for self-esteem, $b = .54$, $SE = .10$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.35, 0.73]. This means that more constructive problem solving predicts more self-esteem. Moreover, self-esteem was significant negatively associated with failure anticipation, $b = -.25$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.38, -0.12]. The negative regression coefficient for self-esteem indicates that higher levels of self-esteem predict for less failure anticipation. The total effect of self-esteem was significant, $b = -.47$, $SE = .10$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.66, -0.27]. Moreover, the results showed that there is a direct effect of parental warmth on failure anticipation, $b = -.33$, $SE = .10$, $p < .05$, 95% CI [-0.53, -0.13]. Meaning that constructive problem solving does significant negatively predict failure anticipation. The analysis also confirmed a statistically significant negative indirect effect of constructive problem solving on failure anticipation through self-esteem, $b = -.14$, $SE = .05$, 95% CI [-0.24, -0.06]. These results indicate that the relationship between constructive problem solving and failure anticipation is mediated by self-esteem, with more constructive problem solving predicting more self-esteem, which in return predicts less failure anticipation.



Figure 3. Unstandardized regression coefficients for the model examining self-esteem as a mediator of the association between constructive problem solving and failure anticipation. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between positive parenting behaviours like parents' trust, parental warmth and constructive problem solving and failure anticipation, whilst taking self-esteem as a mediator into account. To be more precise, it was investigated if self-esteem explains the link between parents' trust and failure anticipation, between parental warmth and failure anticipation and last, between constructive problem solving and failure anticipation.

The first research question asked whether there is a mediation of self-esteem between parents' trust and failure anticipation. The results of the current study indicate that there is in fact a mediation of self-esteem between parent's trust and failure anticipation. The more parents' trust is received, the more self-esteem and less failure anticipation is reported. All hypotheses regarding this research's question are verified. This is in line with the existing research that indicated that the constructs all might interrelate. It replicated the direct effects found in previous studies (Juang & Silberstein, 2002; McFarlin, Baumeister and Blascovich, 1984; Conroy & Caotsworth, 2007) and also expended knowledge by also identifying self-esteem as an explanatory mechanism of why trust is linked to failure anticipation.

The second research question asked if there is a mediation of self-esteem between parental warmth and failure anticipation. The results show that there is a mediation of self-esteem between parental warmth and failure anticipation. The more parental warmth is received, the more self-esteem and less failure anticipation is reported. Here again, pre-existing findings from other studies are replicated (Walker & Green, 1986). Moreover, self-esteem was tackled down to explain a mechanism why parental warmth is linked to failure anticipation.

Lastly, the third research question asked if there is a mediation of self-esteem between constructive problem solving and failure anticipation. The results indicate that there is mediation of self-esteem between constructive problem solving and failure anticipation. The more constructive problem solving is operated, the more self-esteem and less failure anticipation is reported. For this research question all hypothesis can be verified as well and are in line with previous research. The study adds information by identifying self-esteem as an explanatory mechanism between constructive problem solving and failure anticipation.

This current study entails a few limitations that are important to mention. First, the results of the current study are based on an ethnically homogeneous sample (90% Swedish, same city, same school). Future research should examine whether these findings generalize to more diverse samples, especially investigating if the results hold up to a more diverse sample when it comes to ethnicity, age and living environment. Further, it was only focused on self-esteem mediating positive parenting behaviors. Additional research could investigate if this is also the case when investigating negative parenting skills. Even though literature widely explored effects of negative parenting behaviors, literature that takes mediators into account while investigating negatively associated parenting behaviors are missing.

Moreover, this study only considered self-esteem as mediator, the low variance on self-esteem indicated that there are other possible mechanism that explain the link between the positive parenting behaviors and failure anticipation. Future research can enrich knowledge by using other or multiple mediators. Last, the sample was a normative sample, with low levels of failure anticipation and high levels of self-esteem. Therefore, it is questionable if the results hold up to more at-risk samples. Additional research could focus on if the results also verify on at-risk samples, with high levels of failure anticipation and low levels of self-esteem.

However, despite the limitation of the study, the study provides some strengths which underline the meaningfulness of the results that were found. The data was taken from a longitudinal research. Furthermore, this study only used validated instruments, resulting in high internal reliabilities, that showed a high amount of interrelatedness of the items. Further the study used a proper method of testing mediation, which included bootstrapping.

The results of the current study strengthen existing literature regarding positive associated parenting behaviours and the positive outcomes for self-esteem and failure anticipation. It backs up pre-existing scientific knowledge and adds new information by indicating that the positives outcomes of the positive parenting behaviours on failure anticipation are via an indirect effect of self-esteem. It is to say that parents and their

parenting behaviours play a huge role in how children adapt to a possible failure. The evidence in this sample is clear, that parent's trust, parental warmth, and constructive problem solving has an important, even when small, effect on children engaging in failure anticipation. Self-esteem has been proven to be a mediator on what underlying mechanisms of positive associated parenting skills play a role in this. This finding is crucial when it comes to the implication of this study.

The study gives implications to focus on interventions that help and prevent negative outcomes, like school or work failure and poor mental health resulting from failure anticipation. Intervention should focus on parenting behaviours, e.g. parents training, in which parents are informed on how important it is to be warm to children and build a solid foundation of trust where problems can be discussed in a constructive manner. Further interventions can focus on increasing self-esteem because it has a positive effect on failure anticipation as well. To conclude, the current study investigated if there is a mediating role of self-esteem between positive related parenting behaviours, like parents' trust, warmth and constructive problem solving and failure anticipation. The results indicated a positive indirect effect of self-esteem for all these parenting behaviours. Preventions and interventions to avoid high levels of failure anticipation are highly relevant and this study forms a foundation to build further research on the subject and gives some potential help to develop prevention and intervention programs.

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