

PARENTING STYLES AND PARENTAL SELF-EFFICACY AS PREDICTORS OF ATTITUDES TOWARD SEXUAL EDUCATION AND INCLUSIVENESS

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Abstract

While parents' attitudes toward sexual education have been widely examined, parents' attitudes toward the inclusion of sexual and gender diversity in the school curriculum is insufficiently explored, particularly in Romania. The present study examined the role of parenting styles and parental self-efficacy in shaping parents' attitudes toward sexual education and inclusiveness. A sample of 228 parents, predominantly mothers (79.8%; *Age* = 29.70, *SD* = 8.90) completed self-report measures assessing parenting styles, parental self-efficacy, and attitudes toward sexual education and inclusiveness. The results indicated that authoritarian parenting style was the only significant negative predictor toward both sexual education and inclusiveness. These findings highlight the importance of identifying the determinants of parental attitudes and support efforts to promote more inclusive educational environments.

Keywords: Parenting styles; Parental self-efficacy; sexual education; inclusiveness; parental attitudes.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual education remains a controversial topic worldwide, with opinions divided between those who consider it inappropriate or risky for children and adolescents and those who view it as essential for healthy development and informed decision-making regarding sexuality (Robinson, 2013, 2016). Previous literature has consistently shown that sexual education is associated with important benefits, including increased sexual health knowledge, prevention of sexually transmitted infections and early pregnancies, and promotion of healthy intimate relationships (Kirby *et al.*, 2007; McKee *et al.*, 2010).

In Romania, sexuality-related topics are partially included within biology and health education curricula. However, these topics remain insufficiently addressed (Diaconescu *et al.*, 2015). At the same time, discussions regarding sexual and

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gender diversity have become increasingly visible within educational context, including in relation to school curricula and inclusion practices (Cristea *et al.*, 2024). Previous findings from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2020) further indicated that schools frequently represent contexts in which LGBTQ+ students experience harassment and discrimination across European Union countries, including Romania.

Despite growing international interest in sexuality education and diversity-inclusive curricula, little is known about parents' attitudes toward the inclusion of sexuality education and sexual and gender diversity topics within the Romanian educational context. Given the important role parents play in shaping educational acceptance and support, the present study aimed to investigate the relationship between parenting styles, parental self-efficacy, and attitudes toward the inclusion of sexuality education and sexual and gender diversity in school curricula.

SCIENTIFIC PREMISES

PARENTING STYLES AND COMMUNICATION ABOUT SEXUALITY

Parental factors examined in the present study included parenting styles and parental self-efficacy, as these variables reflect both parents' behavioral orientations toward parenting practices and their perceived effectiveness in fulfilling parental roles. Baumrind's (1971) theory of parenting styles distinguished between authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive styles, which differ in their levels of responsiveness and demandingness.

Authoritarian parenting style is characterized by low warmth, strict discipline, high parental expectations, and one-way communication from parent to child (Berger, 2001). In contrast, authoritative parenting involves high warmth, moderate discipline, and reciprocal communication between parent and child. Permissive parenting style, also referred to as negligent or uninvolved, is characterized by high warmth, low levels of discipline, limited parent-child communication, and low parental expectations (Rezai Niaraki & Rahimi, 2013).

Previous research suggested that parenting styles influence adolescents' experiences and perceptions regarding sexuality-related communication. For example, Matejevic and Petkovic (2015) found that adolescents whose parents adopted authoritarian parenting practices reported greater feelings of shame when discussing sexuality and contraception. In contrast, adolescents whose parents adopt authoritative or permissive styles tend to engage in more open communication with their parents regarding sexual education in general.

PARENTAL SELF-EFFICACY

Parental self-efficacy refers to the sense of competence individuals experience in their parenting role (Wittkowski *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, it encompasses beliefs about one's ability to manage parenting challenges and to guide and educate children in ways that promote optimal development across

multiple domains of life (Jones & Prinz, 2005). Previous research suggested that levels of parental self-efficacy vary depending on the child's age. For example, previous findings highlighted that parents of adolescents reported lower parental self-efficacy compared to parents of young children (Ballenski & Cook, 1982).

However, while parenting styles and parental self-efficacy shape parents' general approaches (Glatz *et al.*, 2024), research suggested that these factors interact with a variety of personal and situational barriers that can limit effective communication. For example, it was found that parents with lower self-efficacy or more authoritarian tendencies may experience feelings of shame, fear or concern about compromising child's innocence (Morawska *et al.*, 2015). Additionally, limited knowledge about sexual matters, lack of confidence, and discomfort regarding their own sexuality can further reduce the likelihood of open discussions (Morawska *et al.*, 2015).

ATTITUDES TOWARD SEXUAL AND GENDER DIVERSITY IN SCHOOL CURRICULUM

While parents' attitudes toward sex education have been widely examined in prior research, parents' attitudes toward the inclusion of sexual and gender diversity in the school curriculum remain insufficiently explored. Existing studies on this topic have been conducted primarily in the United States, Canada, and Australia. For example, Eisenberg and their colleagues (2008) found that many parents supported the inclusion of sexual diversity in the school curriculum, while more recent evidence has highlighted that parents agree with the inclusion of both sexual and gender diversity (Wood *et al.*, 2021). A substantial proportion of studies on this topic have been conducted in Australia. Ullman and their colleagues (2022) reported that 90% of parents supported the inclusion of comprehensive sex education in schools, and that 82% also expressed support for the inclusion of sexual and gender diversity in the curriculum. However, divergent perspectives have also been documented. Based on thematic analysis, Ferfolja and their colleagues (2023) found that some parents perceived education on sexual and gender diversity as potentially confusing for children. Moreover, the findings suggested that parents' perspectives on inclusivity were associated with concerns about influencing children's gender identity and sexual orientation before they are sufficiently mature to understand these topics.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESES

The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between parenting styles, parental self-efficacy, attitudes toward sexual education, and support for inclusiveness regarding gender and sexual diversity in the school curriculum. More specifically, the study explored whether parenting styles and parental self-efficacy predict attitudes toward sexual education and inclusiveness.

Based on previous literature, our assumptions were the following:

H1. Parenting styles and parental self-efficacy would be significantly related to attitudes toward sexual education.

H2. Parenting styles and parental self-efficacy would be significantly related to support for inclusiveness.

H3. Parenting styles and parental self-efficacy would significantly predict attitudes toward sexual education.

H4. Parenting styles and parental self-efficacy would significantly predict support for inclusiveness.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

The study included a total of 228 participants, aged between 20 and 50 years ($M = 29.70$, $SD = 8.90$). The sample consisted predominantly of women (79.8%), with 88 participants reported being married.

Participants were recruited through social media platforms and private groups (*i.e.*, Facebook, WhatsApp). Before participating, all individuals were informed about the study conditions, the estimated time required (approximately 15 minutes), the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses, as well as their right to withdraw from the study at any time. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki (2013) and received approval from the Ethics Committee of the authors affiliated institution.

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. Descriptives statistics, Pearson correlation analyses, and multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between variables and the predictive role of parenting styles and parental self-efficacy.

MEASURES

Parenting styles. We used Parenting Practices Questionnaire (Robinson *et al.*, 1995) to assess parenting styles. Items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). Parenting Practices Questionnaire contains three subscales, *i.e.*, authoritative style, authoritarian style, and permissive style. Example items included “I explain the consequences of the child’s behavior.” (authoritative styles), “I punish my child by taking privileges away with little if any explanations.” (authoritarian style), and “I found it difficult to discipline my child.” (permissive style). In the present study, Cronbach’s alpha was .79 for the authoritative style, .74 for the authoritarian style, and .75 for the permissive style. A higher score on a given parenting style subscale represents a stronger expression of that style in parental approach.

Parental self-efficacy. We used The Brief Parental Self Efficacy Scale (Woolgar *et al.*, 2023) to measure participants’ parental self-efficacy. Participants

answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Example items included “Even though I may not always manage it, I know what I need to do with my child.”, and “I am able to do the things that will improve my child’s behavior.” Cronbach’s alpha was .95, which means a good internal consistency. A higher score indicates higher level of parental self-efficacy.

Attitudes toward sexual education. To measure participants’ attitudes towards inclusion of sexual education in the school curriculum, we used Attitudes towards Relationships and Sexual Education (Ullman *et al.*, 2022). Items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The RSE contains four items (“In addition to covering biology and reproduction, relationship and sexual education should teach that sexuality is a positive part of life, and focus on empowerment, choice, consent, and acceptance of diversity.”). Higher scores indicated positive attitudes toward sexual education in school. Cronbach’s alpha was .74.

Attitudes towards inclusiveness. We used Parental Attitudes towards Inclusiveness (Hobby *et al.*, 2021) to measure participants’ attitudes toward inclusion of sexual and gender diversity in the school curriculum. Items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The scale contains two subscales, *i.e.*, support (“I would support a national, GSD-inclusive curriculum because it would lower the rates of violence experienced by GSD young people.”) and oppression (“I would not support a GSD-inclusive curriculum because such topics are too confusing for younger students.”). For the present study, we used the thirty items that measured support. Cronbach’s alpha was .87. Higher scores indicate higher levels of support of inclusion of sexual and gender diversity in the school curriculum.

RESULTS

First, descriptives statistics (*i.e.*, means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum scores) were run for all variables (see Table 1). Data were normally distributed, as indicated by Skewness and Kurtosis values ranging between -3 and +3 (Hahs-Vaughn & Lomax, 2020).

Table 1

Descriptives statistics for the primary variables (N = 228)

	M	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
1. Authoritarian parenting style	79.34	7.89	61	95	-.11	-.60
2. Authoritative parenting style	61.86	6.74	44	87	.35	1.71
3. Permissive parenting style	45.53	4.55	27	60	-.65	2.81
4. Parental self-efficacy	19.85	4.23	5	25	-.82	.56
5. Support inclusiveness	105.86	13.67	68	150	.04	.29
6. Attitudes toward sexual education	15.09	3.05	5	20	-.41	.30

H1. Parenting styles and parental self-efficacy would be significantly related to attitudes toward sexual education.

H2. Parenting styles and parental self-efficacy would be significantly related to support for inclusiveness.

To examine the proposed relationships, Pearson correlation analyses were conducted.

Pearson correlation analyses indicated significant negative relationship between authoritarian parenting style and support of inclusiveness ($r = -.15, p < .05$). Moreover, results suggested a significant negative correlation between authoritarian parenting style and attitudes toward sexual education ($r = -.18, p < .01$). Thus, the higher authoritarian parenting style, the negative attitudes toward sexual education and inclusiveness.

However, results indicated no significant relationships between authoritative or permissive parenting styles and attitudes toward sexual education or inclusiveness. Additionally, parental self-efficacy was not significantly associated with either attitudes toward sexual education or support for inclusiveness. Results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Zero-order correlations among the primary variables (N = 228)

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Authoritarian parenting style	-					
2. Authoritative parenting style	.54**	-				
3. Permissive parenting style	.46**	.50**	-			
4. Parental self-efficacy	-.03	.18**	.10	-		
5. Attitudes toward sexual education	-.18**	-.07	-.06	.11	-	
6. Support inclusiveness	-.15*	.05	.00	.05	.42**	-

Note: ** $p < .001$; * $p < .05$

H3. Parenting styles and parental self-efficacy would significantly predict attitudes toward sexual education.

H4. Parenting styles and parental self-efficacy would significantly predict support for inclusiveness.

To examine the predictive role of parenting styles and parental self-efficacy, multiple regression analyses were conducted for each dependent variable (*i.e.*, attitudes toward sexual education and attitudes toward inclusiveness).

Results suggested that authoritarian parenting style ($\beta = -.18, p < .05$) was the only significant predictor of attitudes toward sexual education. All independent variables that were included in the regression model explained 4.5 % of the variation in attitudes toward sexual education, $F(4; 223) = 2.61, p < .05$ (see Table 3).

Table 3

Summary of linear regression analysis for the attitude toward sexual education (N = 228)

Variables	<i>B</i>	<i>SE (B)</i>	β
Authoritarian parenting style	-.07*	.03	-.18
Authoritative parenting style	.00	.03	.00
Permissive parenting style	.00	.05	.01
Parental self-efficacy	.07	.04	.10
<i>R</i> ²		.045*	

Note: * $p < .05$

Additionally, the same predictive model explained 5.2% of the variation in attitudes toward inclusiveness, $F(4; 223) = 3.07$, $p < .05$. The most significant predictor was authoritarian parenting style ($\beta = -.27$, $p < .01$). Results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Summary of linear regression analysis for the attitude toward inclusiveness (N = 228)

Variables	<i>B</i>	<i>SE (B)</i>	β
Authoritarian parenting style	-.46**	.14	-.27
Authoritative parenting style	.37*	.17	.18
Permissive parenting style	.11	.23	.03
Parental self-efficacy	.01	.21	.00
<i>R</i> ²		.052*	

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$

DISCUSSION

The current research aimed to examine the relationships between parenting styles, parental self-efficacy, and attitudes toward sexual education and the inclusion of sexual and gender diversity in the school curriculum, as well as to examine the predictive role of parental factors in shaping these attitudes.

The results of the present study indicated that authoritarian parenting style was a significant negative predictor of attitudes toward sexual education. In addition, authoritarian parenting style also significantly predicted more negative attitudes toward inclusiveness. Conversely, authoritative parenting style emerged as a positive predictor of inclusiveness. Parental self-efficacy, however, did not significantly predict either attitudes toward sexual education or support for inclusiveness.

These findings suggest that parenting styles, particularly authoritarian practices, may play an important role in shaping parents' value-based attitudes toward sexual education and inclusive curriculum, whereas perceived parenting competence appears less relevant in this context.

These results can be interpreted in light of previous research. Although empirical evidence directly examining the relationship between parenting styles

and attitudes toward the inclusion of sexual and gender diversity in school curriculum is limited, existing literature provides partial support for these findings. For instance, authoritarian parenting has been associated with adolescents' embarrassment and avoidance in discussions about sexuality and contraception (Matejevic & Petkovic, 2015). Furthermore, prior findings highlighted that parents with authoritarian parenting style perceive sex education as taboo (Nasution *et al.*, 2019) and believe that strict sex education serves as protective function (Merghati-Khoei *et al.*, 2014).

Regarding parental self-efficacy, the absence of significant associations suggests that perceived competence in the parenting role may not strongly influence parents' ideological or value-based attitudes toward sexual education and inclusive curriculum.

The present study has several limitations. These include a relatively small and non-representative sample, as well as the use of self-report measures, which may increase the risk of social desirability bias. Furthermore, the sample was characterized by an unequal gender distribution, with a substantially higher proportion of mothers than fathers. Consequently, the present findings may predominantly reflect maternal attitudes toward sexual education and inclusiveness. Future research should employ larger and more diverse samples to improve generalizability and consider multi-method approaches, such as qualitative interviews, to reduce potential bias. Additionally, the present study design was cross-sectional, which limits causal relationships. Thus, future studies might design a longitudinal approach to better understand the directionality of the associations between parenting styles and attitudes toward sexual education and inclusive curriculum. Furthermore, future studies could examine additional contextual factors, such as cultural norms, religiosity, or educational background, which may further shape parents' attitudes toward sexual education and the inclusion of sexual and gender diversity.

The present findings may also have several practical implications. Specifically, the results suggest that parenting styles, particularly authoritarian parenting, may influence parental openness toward sexual education and inclusive school curriculum. Therefore, parent-focused educational programs and psychoeducational interventions could promote more open communication regarding sexuality-related topics and increased awareness regarding the potential benefits of inclusive educational environments.

Moreover, school psychologists, counselors, and educators may benefit from understanding how parental attitudes are shaped by family dynamics and parenting practices when implementing sexuality education programs or diversity-inclusive curriculum. The present findings also highlight the importance of developing collaborative partnerships between schools and parents in order to reduce resistance toward inclusive educational initiatives.

Given the exploratory nature of the present study, future research could further investigate how parenting interventions, parental education programs, or

communication-based approaches may contribute to more positive parental attitudes toward sexual education and inclusiveness.

Despite its limitations and preliminary nature, we consider that the present study offers an initial contribution to the exploration of parents' attitudes toward sexual, sexuality, and gender diversity education in mainstream schools, highlighting the need for further research to clarify the determinants of parental attitudes and support the development of more inclusive educational environments.

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