Parental Warmth and Affection

Most mothers and fathers report that they hug their children and tell their children that they love them every day, with daily hugs as high as 90 percent or more for the youngest children. (See Figure 1) (See Figure 2)

Importance

Many studies have shown that warmth in the parent-child relationship is related to positive outcomes for children. Higher self-esteem, better parent-child communication, and fewer psychological and behavior problems have been linked to warmth and affection between parent and child.¹ Parental warmth and affection is also positively related to adolescent academic competence and negatively related to teen pregnancy and associations with deviant peers.² Parental warmth is even found to encourage children's use of social support and proactive, problem-focused coping styles.³ Conversely, receiving insufficient levels of parental support can foster feelings of alienation, expressions of hostility and aggression, diminished self-esteem, and antisocial and risk behaviors.⁴

Trends

Estimates available for 1997 (the only year for which data are available) show that 87 percent of mothers and 73 percent of fathers hug or show physical affection to their child (under age 13) at least once a day. Eighty-five percent of mothers and 62 percent of fathers tell their child that they love him or her at least once a day. Though the percentage of mothers and fathers who tell their child that they appreciate something he or she did is lower than the other two behaviors, the difference between mothers and fathers is found here as well (55 percent and 37 percent, respectively). (See Figure 1)
Differences by Race and Hispanic Origin

Ninety-three percent of white, non-Hispanic mothers report hugging their child at least once a day, compared to 81 percent of Hispanic mothers and 75 percent of black, non-Hispanic mothers. Among fathers, more white, non-Hispanics and Hispanics report daily hugging (76 percent and 73 percent, respectively) than do black, non-Hispanic fathers (56 percent). White, non-Hispanic and Hispanic fathers are also more likely than black, non-Hispanic fathers to tell their child he or she is loved (65 and 63 percent compared to 45 percent). (See Table 1)

Differences by Parental Education Level

For all three behaviors, mothers with less than a high school education are less likely to show their child warmth than are parents with higher levels of educational attainment. For example, 75 percent of mothers with less than a high school education hug or show physical affection to their child at least once a day, compared to 87 percent of mothers with a high school diploma, 91 percent of mothers with some college, and 94 percent of mothers with college degrees. Similarly, more college-educated fathers (77 percent) report hugging their child daily than do fathers with less than a high school education (68 percent) or fathers with a high school diploma (70 percent) (See Table 1). However, educational attainment of fathers was not associated with the other two measures of warmth and affection.
Differences by Age of Child

Overall, displays of warmth by both mothers and fathers decrease as children get older. For example, over 90 percent of mothers and fathers report hugging their children ages three and under on a daily basis, compared to 74 percent of mothers and 50 percent of fathers hugging children ages 10 to 12. (See Figure 2)

Related Indicators

None

State and Local Estimates

None

International Estimates

None

National Goals

None
What Works: Programs and Interventions that May Influence this Indicator

None

Research References


Definition

To assess the amount of warmth and affection parents show their children, three questions from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics - Child Development Supplement (PSID-CDS) are examined. Parents of children ages 12 and younger who are living with their children were asked to report how often, in the past month, they: 1) hugged or showed physical affection to their child; 2) told their child that they loved him/her; and 3) told their child that they appreciated something he/she did.

Data Source

Raw Data Source


Approximate Date of Next Update

None

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