

# Parental Support for Female IT Career Interest and Choice

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## INTRODUCTION

Although adolescents become progressively independent from their parents in the high-school years, they continue to depend heavily on parents in the area of career development (Peterson, Stivers, & Peters, 1986; Sebald, 1989). The role of parental support in children's career choice has been demonstrated empirically in the career-development literature (Altman, 1997; Fisher & Griggs, 1994; Ketterson & Blustein, 1997; Kracke, 1997; Way & Rossman, 1996). Researchers have found that parents impact career choice more than counselors, teachers, friends, other relatives, or people working in the field of interest (Kotrlík & Harrison, 1989), but are not adequately informed about how to help (Young, Friesen, & Borycki, 1994). Although parents hold a powerful role in the career advising of both their male and female children, most of the reported studies use a male model and focus. Researchers are beginning to develop a knowledge base for the career development of girls and the unique issues they face in deciding on a career. Greater understanding of these issues is urgent, especially as females are recruited into nontraditional fields like information technology. This article will review research on parental support for female career choice, including the research findings from the Women and

Information Technology (WIT, 2002-2005) project funded by the National Science Foundation.

## BACKGROUND

### Early Research Findings of Parental Support for Females

Schulenberg, Vondracek, and Crouter (1984) provided the only existing review of the early published literature as they examined how families influence the vocational development of both females and males using family variables (e.g., demographic variables of the family, family configurations, and process-oriented features of the family) that have been shown to influence different aspects of vocational development. This review, covering studies conducted before the 1980s, found that the early parental-support research for both females and males demonstrated links between career development and socioeconomic status, parents' educational and occupational attainment, and cultural background.

More specifically, this review of early findings identified a substantial number of studies conducted in the 1970s regarding possible associations between family process variables and women's career development. Much of this research focused on

identifying family characteristics of women who had entered nontraditional careers and suggested that women who pursued nontraditional paths tended to perceive themselves as being similar to their fathers (Tangri, 1972), felt supported by their mothers (Standley & Soule, 1974), and came from families that valued educational and occupational pursuits (Standley & Soule; Trigg & Perlman, 1976).

When examining the early research, Schulenberg et al. (1984) found that except for the work of Roe (1956), who studied parenting styles and career orientation, family interaction-pattern influences on career development had virtually been ignored. Newer research was needed that investigated family interactions such as attachment, psychological separation, conflict, and enmeshment with more sophisticated research methodologies. Given the changes in the world of work, the increased participation of females in the workforce, and changes in the family, families likely influence the career development of females in different ways than in earlier generations.

A different body of research that considers the effects of family functioning is now emerging. Family functioning, a broader concept that encompasses parenting style, parental support and guidance, positive or negative environmental influences, and family members' interaction styles, has been found to exert a greater influence on career development than earlier research that examined family structure or parents' education and occupational status (Fisher & Griggs, 1994; Trusty, Watts, & Erdman, 1997). This newer approach to parental support for career development also includes the effects of parent-child attachment (Ketterson & Blustein, 1997), parent-child communication (Middleton & Loughhead, 1993), parental support, guidance, positive and negative environmental influences, and family members' interaction styles (Altman, 1997).

### **New Studies of Parental Support for Females**

A comprehensive review (Whiston & Keller, 2004) of research published since 1980 is related to family support influences on career development and occupational choice. It gives us a picture of family influences on children, adolescents, college students, and adults over the life course. While few

studies of childhood and female careers were found, several findings related to communication and perceived family power were cited. Birk and Brimline (1984) studied children enrolled in kindergarten, third grade, and fifth grade and found that parents who talked to their children about their occupational goals had children who aspired toward more gender-traditional occupations. Lavine (1982) asked children aged 7 to 11 years what they wanted to be when they grew up; whether boys, girls, or both could have certain jobs; and which parent made the decisions in their homes. Findings revealed that girls who viewed their mother as having significant power within the family perceived more careers as being open to both men and women and aspired to less feminine-stereotyped careers compared with girls who viewed their mother as having little power.

In the Whiston and Keller 2004 review of research, a theme of mothers and daughters emerged, and studies related to adolescent females found that freshmen and sophomore girls were more likely than boys to report that their mothers provided positive feedback, supported their autonomy, and were open to discussions about their career decisions (Paa & McWhirter, 2000). Continuing the mother-daughter bond of influence, Fassinger's (1990) model of females' career development proposed that a complex set of relationships among agency, ability, and gender-role attitudes influence women's career orientation and choice. O'Brien and Fassinger (1993) found that the relationship with the mother contributed to the model, and their model reflected that a combination of an attachment to the mother and a healthy movement toward individuation contributes to adolescent girls' career orientation. Rainey and Borders (1997) concluded that the career orientation of adolescent females is influenced by a complex interplay of their abilities, agenting characteristics, gender-role attitudes, and relationships with their mothers. The mother-daughter relationship may be significant in adolescent girls developing a career orientation and may play a pertinent role in their feeling efficacious about career decision making.

At the college level, researchers have also found that parental attachment is positively associated with vocational exploration (Ketterson & Blustein, 1997). Felsman and Blustein (1999), and Ryan, Solberg, and Brown (1996), however, found that maternal attachment was more salient than paternal

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