International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)
ISSN: 2319-7064
Impact Factor 2025: 7.089

Parents in the Age of Anxiety: Intergenerational Reliance, Parental Self-Efficacy, and Developmental Priorities for Children

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Abstract: ***Contemporary parents have unprecedented access to information, yet many report self-doubt about whether they are doing enough for their children. This study examined the sources parents rely on for parenting decisions, their self-reported parenting efficacy, their fears about their child's long-term development, and their five-year developmental aspirations for their child. A cross-sectional mixed-methods survey was administered to 43 parents of children aged 2–15 years enrolled in private educational programmes; responses were analysed using descriptive frequencies and percentages, and open-ended aspirations were thematically coded. Most parents (81.4%) reported relying primarily on their own childhood experience or on family members when making parenting decisions. Self-doubt was the most frequent efficacy state (48.8%), followed by confidence (37.2%) and feeling overwhelmed by advice (14.0%). Parents' five-year aspirations were concentrated on emotional strength and resilience (41.9%) and enjoyment of learning (34.9%), with a good decision maker/autonomous thinker (23.3%) the third category. The pattern is descriptive and cross-sectional and does not establish causation; the small convenience sample limits generalisation. The findings suggest that schools and early-childhood programmes may usefully offer parent-support activities that address parental efficacy and emotional development.***

Keywords: Parental Self-Efficacy; Intergenerational Transmission; Parenting Anxiety; Emotional Resilience

1. Introduction

Parental self-efficacy (PSE), a parent's belief in their capability to carry out the parental role successfully, is regarded as an important psychological resource for both child development and parental well-being [1], [2]. Historically, parenting practices were transmitted largely through intergenerational inheritance: family customs and lived childhood experiences shaped discipline, routines, and child-rearing strategies. Contemporary parents, however, face challenges such as pervasive screen exposure, early academic pressure, social isolation, and rapid cultural change that were largely absent from their own childhoods. At the same time, parents have access to more developmental research, expert advice, and online resources than any earlier generation, yet many report persistent doubt about whether they are "doing enough" for their children.

Low parenting self-efficacy has been linked to inconsistent discipline, over-protective control, and difficulties in parenting practice, which may in turn affect children's emotional regulation [3]. Understanding where parents look for guidance, and how this relates to their confidence and priorities, is therefore relevant to educators, counsellors, and developmental specialists. This study explores what we call an "efficacy gap": the possibility that parents who rely mainly on inherited, intergenerational frameworks feel less certain when facing newer developmental concerns. The study is exploratory and descriptive in nature.

2. Literature and Research Gap

The study draws on two frameworks. Social Cognitive Theory proposes that behaviour is regulated by efficacy expectations [4]; in parenting, higher efficacy is associated with persistence and adaptive problem-solving, whereas lower efficacy is associated with avoidance and reactive parenting. Intergenerational transmission research proposes that internal working models of caregiving formed in childhood tend to be carried into adult parenting; a meta-analytic review reported continuity across generations in attachment and caregiving patterns [5].

Belsky's process model holds that parenting is determined jointly by the parent's psychological resources, the child's characteristics, and the wider social context [6]. Johnston and Mash developed the Parenting Sense of Competence scale and showed that parenting efficacy and parenting satisfaction are distinct constructs [7]. A review by Jones and Prinz concluded that parental self-efficacy is linked to parent and child functioning, including child adjustment [2]. Work on parenting and digital media indicates that family dynamics, parental mediation practices, and parents' own media use all shape how media figure in children's lives, and highlights gaps in knowledge about best practices for parents [8].

Existing research documents the benefits of parental self-efficacy and the continuity of parenting across generations, but relatively little work links the *source* of parenting influence (for example, childhood experience and family versus expert advice) with parents' reported self-doubt and with their longer-term priorities for their children. This study addresses that gap descriptively.

3. Objectives and Hypotheses

The objectives were: (i) to identify the primary influences on parents' decision-making (own childhood experience, family, experts, social media/school); (ii) to describe the relationship between these influences and reported parental self-doubt; (iii) to describe parents' anxieties about their child's long-term

development; and (iv) to describe parents' developmental aspirations for their children over a five-year horizon.

Two hypotheses were stated. H1: parents relying primarily on intergenerational sources (own childhood experience and family) will report higher decision-making anxiety ("wondering if I am doing enough") than parents using structured expert guidance. H2: parents' future goals for their children will emphasise emotional resilience and self-regulation over academic performance.

4. Methodology

4.1 Design and Participants

A cross-sectional mixed-methods survey design was used. The sample comprised 43 parents (mothers and fathers) of children aged 2–15 years enrolled in early childhood, nursery, primary, and secondary programmes at private educational institutions. Participants were recruited through convenience and purposive sampling during institutional enrolment intake. Parents or primary caregivers who completed all sections of the survey were included; incomplete responses, non-consent, and parents of children receiving specialised clinical neurodevelopmental therapy outside general educational cohorts were excluded.

4.2 Measures

Data were collected with a 20-item parent intake and assessment survey covering demographics, sources of parenting decisions, self-efficacy indicators, children's behavioural coping patterns, and five-year developmental aspirations. The independent variable was the primary source of parenting influence (own childhood experience, family, experts, social media/school). Dependent variables were parental efficacy/decision anxiety (confident; wondering if doing enough; overwhelmed by advice), primary parental fears, and desired five-year child outcomes. All were measured as categorical or thematically coded responses.

Operational definitions: parental self-efficacy/decision anxiety was the parent's self-reported belief in their parenting adequacy, captured through the intake categories "confident", "wondering if doing enough", and "overwhelmed by advice"; the intergenerational paradigm was reliance on personal childhood upbringing and family advice as the main benchmarks for parenting decisions; and emotional resilience was defined as a child's capacity to self-regulate, adapt to routine disruptions, and recover from failure without prolonged meltdowns or withdrawal.

4.3 Procedure, Analysis and Ethics

The survey was administered digitally during the enrolment window of the 2026–27 academic term. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was embedded at the start of the survey, responses were anonymous, and identifying markers were removed during data coding. Data were stored securely and used only for academic purposes. Analysis consisted of descriptive frequencies and percentages for all variables, with open-ended aspirations thematically coded.

5. Results

Table 1 presents parents' efficacy states and primary decision influences (N = 43). Self-doubt ("I often wonder if I am doing enough") was the most common efficacy state (21 parents, 48.8%), compared with 16 parents (37.2%) who felt confident and 6 (14.0%) who felt overwhelmed by advice or worried about wrong decisions; together, 62.8% reported self-doubt or feeling overwhelmed. Regarding decision influences, 20 parents (46.5%) relied mainly on their own childhood experience and 15 (34.9%) on family members or relatives, so 81.4% relied primarily on intergenerational sources, whereas 5 (11.6%) relied on experts or professional guidance and 3 (7.0%) on social media, school, or were uncertain.

Table 1: Parental efficacy state and primary decision influence (N = 43)

Response	n	%
Parental efficacy state		
I often wonder if I am doing enough	21	48.8
I feel confident about my parenting	16	37.2
Overwhelmed by advice / worried about wrong decisions	6	14
Primary decision influence		
My own childhood experience	20	46.5
Family members / relatives' advice	15	34.9
Experts / professional guidance	5	11.6
Social media / school / uncertain	3	7

Percentages are calculated from frequencies out of N = 43 and rounded to one decimal place.

Table 2 shows parents' main fears about their child's long-term development. The largest category was a fear that the child may become emotionally weak or lose confidence (15 parents, 34.9%), followed by fear that the child may not reach full potential or may struggle socially (14, 32.6%), and concern about emotional weakness or screen dependency (9, 20.9%). Five parents (11.6%) reported uncertainty about how to prepare their child for the future. Concerns centred on emotional and social vulnerability rather than on immediate academic failure.

Table 2: Primary parental fears about the child's long-term development (N = 43)

Fear category	n	%
Child may become emotionally weak / lose confidence	15	34.9
Child may not reach full potential / struggle socially	14	32.6
Emotional weakness / screen dependency	9	20.9
Uncertainty about how to prepare child for the future	5	11.6

Table 3 presents parents' five-year aspirations. Emotional strength and resilience was the most frequent aspiration (18 parents, 41.9%), followed by enjoying learning or intrinsic motivation (15, 34.9%) and being a good decision maker or autonomous thinker (10, 23.3%). No category was framed in terms of academic or career achievement, which is consistent with H2. Regarding H1, the descriptive pattern is that most parents relied on intergenerational sources and that self-doubt was the most frequent efficacy state; however, no inferential test comparing self-doubt across decision-source groups is reported here, so H1 is treated as descriptively consistent rather than formally tested.

Table 3: Parental five-year aspirations for child development (N = 43)

Aspirational category	n	%
Emotionally strong / resilient	18	41.9
Enjoys learning (intrinsic motivation)	15	34.9
Good decision maker / autonomous thinker	10	23.3

Percentages are calculated from frequencies out of N = 43 and rounded to one decimal place.

6. Discussion

Most parents in this sample reported relying mainly on their own childhood experience or on family members when making parenting decisions, and nearly half reported frequently wondering whether they were doing enough. Taken together with the 14.0% who felt overwhelmed by advice, almost two-thirds of the sample reported some form of decision-making uncertainty. This is consistent with the idea of an "efficacy gap", in which reliance on inherited frameworks coexists with uncertainty about newer concerns such as screen use and emotional regulation. The design, however, cannot show that reliance on intergenerational sources causes self-doubt; both may be associated with other factors not measured.

The results fit the self-efficacy framework [1], [4] and the literature on intergenerational continuity in parenting [5], [6]. They also echo the observation that parenting in a digital-media environment raises questions on which parents seek guidance [8]. The finding that parenting efficacy and satisfaction are distinct constructs [7] suggests that self-doubt need not imply lack of effort; the present data do not measure effort or satisfaction, and this interpretation should be tested directly. Parents' fears and aspirations emphasised emotional strength, confidence, and enjoyment of learning, which suggests a priority on emotional development alongside academic outcomes.

7. Limitations and Implications

The sample was small (N = 43), recruited by convenience and purposive sampling from private educational institutions, and so may not represent parents from other socio-economic or institutional contexts. The data are self-reported, categorical, and cross-sectional; no inferential statistics are reported here, and child emotional resilience was not directly measured. Findings should therefore be read as exploratory.

Within these limits, the results suggest that schools and early-childhood programmes could consider parent-support activities that strengthen parental confidence and address emotional development, and that counsellors and child psychologists may wish to attend to parental efficacy when working with families. Future research should use larger and more diverse samples, validated efficacy measures, inferential testing of associations, and longitudinal designs to examine whether parent-coaching programmes change parental efficacy and child emotional regulation over time.

8. Conclusion

In this small descriptive study, most parents relied primarily on their own childhood experience or family when making parenting decisions, self-doubt was the most frequently reported efficacy state, and parents' aspirations centred on children's emotional strength and enjoyment of learning. These findings point to a possible need for parent-support provision in educational settings, and they warrant confirmation in larger studies that use inferential and longitudinal methods.

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