

Parenting as a Preventive Strategy: The Role of Parents in Protecting Children from Online Grooming

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Alarming statistics from organizations like Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (OCSEA) indicate a significant prevalence of children being approached by strangers online, a precursor to Online Child Sexual Abuse (OCSA). Recognizing the urgent need for preventative measures, this study investigated the influence of parenting styles on children's vulnerability to online grooming by predators on social media platforms. A quantitative analysis was conducted among 386 school children aged 10-19 years from diverse schools and syllabi in Bangalore. Data were collected using the Parental Authority Questionnaire and the Multidimensional Online Grooming Questionnaire. Both correlation and regression analysis revealed authoritarian parenting as a significant predictor in increasing the children's susceptibility to online grooming. Therefore, a key strategy for preventing OCSA involves enhancing parental awareness regarding positive parenting styles and equipping them with effective strategies to navigate the challenges their children face in online media.

Keywords: OCSA, Parenting Styles, Online grooming, Cyber-crimes

The internet has become a major part of our lives; it is important to address the problems that arise with the easy access to the internet. It is not only a form of entertainment or information source, but the internet today has become a part of our lives that is hard to avoid even for children. Especially with the social media, where meeting new people online has never been easier [Newman et al., 2011], and with most of the content aiming at attracting kids into social media. With the involvement of lots of kids on the internet, this has attracted lots of predators to online platforms [Wolak et al., 2010]. Children are highly vulnerable to these predators online due to their innocence and their lack of awareness, which makes them an easy target; this has led to the rise of online child sexual abuse (OCSA) (Özçalýk & Atakođlu, 2021). This process of predators in online establishing trust with the children and exploiting them sexually is known as online grooming (De Santisteban, et al., 2018).

Parents play a major role in children's online behavior and how they interact to these online predators; also, it is the responsibility of the parent to set boundaries, so that their children don't get victimized. Despite this, many parents do not understand how their parenting style affects their child's susceptibility to online grooming, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation. Due to this, there is more research in progress on the psychological impact of OCSA, but there is very limited understanding of how different parenting styles contribute to children's risks of falling victim to these online predators. This study aims to identify the relationship between parenting styles and the risk of children being groomed by online predators. This study is significant to understand as it helps us to know how the different parenting styles- authoritative, authoritarian, or permissive parenting- can impact the child's involvement in online media.

Diana Baumrind (1966), a clinical and developmental psychologist, proposed three parenting styles that cover almost all parents: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive. Uninvolved (Neglectful) parenting style was introduced by Maccoby and Martin (1983) with low responsiveness and demandingness. Here in this study, Baumrind's initially developed theory is considered. Each of these parenting styles has a unique influence on the child's psychological development. Firstly, let's discuss on the Authoritative parenting style- This refers to the parents who are supportive and show interest in their child's activities but are not overbearing and allow children to make constructive mistakes. This "tender teacher" approach is deemed the most optimal parenting style to use in Western cultures. Children whose parents are authoritative are generally happy, capable, and successful. These children tend to develop great competence and self-confidence when parents have high-but-reasonable and consistent expectations for children's behavior, communicate well with them, are warm and responsive, and use reasoning rather than coercion to guide children's behaviors (Baumrind, 2013). Secondly, the authoritarian parenting style approach is low in support and high in demand. Parents with this style demand obedience as they are "in charge, and they do not provide any explanations for their orders. Authoritarian parenting is otherwise called "rigid ruler" as wooden rulers were often used for capital punishment. Children grown in environments using the authoritarian approach are more likely to be obedient and proficient but score lower in happiness, social competence, and self-esteem. Finally, the Permissive parenting style is providing low support and low demands on children. Parents using this approach are carefree and do not expect their children to adhere to boundaries or rules and avoid confrontation (Sanchez,

2024). Their children tend to rank low in happiness and self-regulation and are more likely to have problems with authorities (Rezaei, et al., 2019). Studies by Kuppens and Ceulemans (2019) have shown that authoritarian parenting increases the likelihood of children experiencing internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, while permissive parenting leads to a lack of self-regulation which makes them more susceptible to online grooming and finally authoritative parenting fosters emotional resilience and reduces vulnerability to risky behaviors (Tur Porcar, 2017). These findings suggest that parenting styles significantly shape children's developmental trajectories, influencing how they navigate social and digital environments.

Online grooming is a technologically facilitated process of befriending young and vulnerable children by an adult with an intention of sexual abuse and exploitation. Which traditionally used to take place offline, physical presence has drastically changed with the introduction of the internet and social media in this digital era, which enables these predators (groomers) to entrench themselves fully into the victim's life by maintaining consistent contact via multiple channels (Dando et al., 2023). Technology has become a routine in daily life, enabling easy access to the internet for the young generation, and with the post-pandemic situation, it has made it in many places essential to stay active on the internet, even as part of the education curriculum. Although grooming can occur online and offline, perpetrators often establish initial contact online before moving their relationships offline to commit sexual offenses (Lewis, 2020). Studies have stated the psychological and emotional toll on the children who were previously groomed by online predators; being a victim and experiencing online grooming increased their

anxiety, depression, and feelings of shame (Merry & Whitfield, 2024). Molok et al. (2023) mentioned the role of parental cyber safety awareness in mitigating risks but noted a lack of detailed studies exploring the intersection of parenting styles and online grooming. Most previous studies mainly focus on empowering children to mitigate online grooming rather than addressing the effects of parental style and its possibility to mitigate OCSA. While children of parents with a permissive parenting style show impulsive digital behavior such as oversharing personal information, which increases their vulnerability to predators, children with authoritative parents seem to have critical thinking and enough digital knowledge to help them to recognize and resist grooming tactics. Kuppens and Ceulemans (2019) have stated the correlations between parenting style and children's behavior on online platforms. As a study by Weingraber (2020) shows that the risk of being a victim in cybercrime is directly proportional to the time children spend in online media; adolescents are characterized as a sample with high affinity to social media, where 7/10 adolescents report that their parents barely control their screen time. The results of this study can be used by the policymakers, educators, and psychologists to make interventions aiming at reducing online grooming risks and ensuring safer online experiences for children.

Objective

To find if there is a significant relationship between the parenting styles and risks for the children to get groomed online and to understand the influence of parenting styles on grooming.

Hypotheses

1. There is a significant relationship between the parenting styles and the risks for the children to get groomed online.

2. There is a significant influence of parenting styles on the risks of the children to get groomed in online media.

Method

Study design

Quantitative research design is used due to the need for measurable, statistically analysable data to identify patterns and relationships within the studied population and identify the relationship between parenting styles and children's risk of getting groomed online. Two standardized tools- Parental Authority Questionnaire, which helps to categorize parenting styles into authoritative, permissive, or authoritarian types and Multidimensional Online Grooming Questionnaire (MOGQ), which helps to measure the extent of children's exposure to online grooming behaviors, including psychological manipulation and coercion are used for a detailed analysis of parental influence. Both of these validated tools are widely used in psychological studies and behavioral studies, which ensures the reliability and validity of the data collected. This study is conducted on school children of various educational institutes aged 10-19 in Bangalore, India. Convenience sampling was done to ensure diverse representation while maintaining feasibility in data collection. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS software; regression analysis is applied to determine the influence of different parenting styles and their influence on the risks of online grooming; and correlational tests were done to understand the relationship between the variables under study. Thus, this will allow us to examine the relationships between the independent variables (parenting styles) and the dependent variable (risk of online grooming).

Participants

The participants of this study are school children of ages around 10-19 from various

educational institutions and three different syllabi. This age group is chosen as children and adolescents are most vulnerable to online grooming due to their frequent use of digital platforms with developing mental and emotional capabilities, making them an easy target. For the collection of data, convenience sampling is used. Thus, participants who are readily accessible and willing to participate can be reached efficiently, even though this method limits the generalized samples. Convenience sampling provides a broad and varied sample necessary to explore relationships between parenting styles and online grooming risks. The participants were drawn from a number of schools, including government, private, and international institutions, to ensure diversity in socio-economic backgrounds and educational contexts. Prior to the participation of the students, well-informed consent was obtained from parents or guardians, emphasizing the voluntary nature of the study and the confidentiality of the data collected. These voluntary students are tasked with completing both the Parental Authority Questionnaire—Short Version, which expressed their perceptions of their parent's parenting styles, and the Multidimensional Online Grooming Questionnaire, which measured their exposure to online grooming risks. Both of these were conducted in a controlled environment, ensuring clarity of instructions and privacy for respondents.

Questionnaires

The study uses two main questionnaires to collect data: the Parental Authority Questionnaire—Short Version (PAQ) and the Multidimensional Online Grooming Questionnaire (MOGQ). Both tools were chosen for their established validity and reliability in measuring the contents relevant to the study.

Parental Authority Questionnaire (Short Version)

Developed by Alkharusi et al. (2011), the Parental Authority Questionnaire was created for the measuring of Baumrind's parental authority prototypes. This questionnaire contains 30 items for both mother and father, which gives a score for both; each of these scores is derived from the phenomenological appraisals of the parents' authority by their son or daughter. The Parental Authority Questionnaire is considered as a psychometrically sound and valid measure of Baumrind's parental authority prototypes by many other studies. Also, this questionnaire has considerable potential as a valuable tool in the investigation of correlates of parental styles (Buri, 1991).

- Authoritative: High responsiveness and reasonable demandingness.
- Permissive: High responsiveness but low demandingness.
- Authoritarian: High demandingness but low responsiveness.

This version includes items that is suitable for adolescents while it also ensures accuracy in identifying the parenting styles. Participants rate each item using a Likert scale, which displays to which extent they agree or disagree with specific statements about their parent's behavior and attitudes.

Multidimensional Online Grooming Questionnaire

Developed by Gamez-Guadix et al. (2021), is a 20-item measure of the prevalence of specific strategies of online grooming commonly used against minors (Gámez-Guadix, 2021). Items in this tool covers 5 types/ levels of grooming:

1. Use of deception
2. Gift giving
3. Interest in the victim's environment

4. Sexualization

5. Aggression

This questionnaire enables us to assess the level of risk children face in online environments and their exposure to grooming behaviors. Participants responded to the items on a Likert scale, indicating the frequency or likelihood of certain online interactions. Its multidimensional nature allows for understanding of grooming risks among the sample population.

Results

To understand the results of the statistical analysis, let us first understand the data set. We can clearly see that authoritative parenting for both father and mother is the highest, with means of 26.07 and 25.78, respectively. This indicates that authoritative parenting is the most used style among the samples. While authoritarian parenting

displays the widest variability, with the highest standard deviation of 6.36 for mothers and 6.24 for fathers, suggesting significant differences among participants. On the other hand, permissive parenting scores are the lowest overall. From the Multidimensional Online Grooming Questionnaire, the mean score is found to be 5.34, which reflects relatively low grooming risk across participants and standard deviation of 7.21, which indicates that while some participants report no risk, others experience significant vulnerability to online grooming. From the means and standard deviations, we can infer that participants of this study experienced a balanced parenting approach. However, the wide range and high standard deviation of authoritarian parenting indicate significant variability in how this style is practiced. Here, we must also notice that some participants are at high risk while most of the participants escape from such risk factors.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Metric	Father Authoritative	Father Authoritarian	Father Permissive	Mother Authoritative	Mother Authoritarian	Mother Permissive	Tot MOGQ (Grooming Risk)
Mean	26.07	19.30	16.71	25.78	19.16	16.03	5.34
Standard Deviation	4.03	6.24	3.57	4.82	6.36	3.63	7.21

Influence of Demographic Details

Demographic variables, such as age and gender, were also analyzed to determine their relationship with grooming risks:

Age: Older children (16-19 years) reported slightly higher grooming risk scores compared to younger children (10-15 years), with a significant difference ($t = 2.45, p < 0.05$).

Gender: No significant differences in grooming risk scores were observed between male and female participants ($p > 0.05$).

Correlation Analysis

Major correlation between parenting styles and the Multidimensional Online Grooming Questionnaire is analysed and stated in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlation Analysis between the parenting styles and MOGQ

Variable	n	M	SD	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Father's Authoritative(1)	386	26.07	4.03	1						
Father's Authoritarian(2)	386	19.30	6.24	-0.12*	1					

Father's Permissive(3)	386	16.71	3.57	0.08	-0.13	1				
Mother's Authoritative(4)	386	25.78	4.82	0.52**	-0.06	0.09	1			
Mother's Authoritarian(5)	386	19.16	6.36	0.01	0.03	0.43**	-0.06	1		
Mother's Permissive(6)	386	16.03	3.63	-0.15**	0.22**	-0.08	-0.54**	0.11*	1	
MOGQ(7)	386	5.34	7.21	-0.01	0.17**	0.02	-0.09	0.16**	0.16**	1

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

According to the correlational analysis, we can see that father's authoritarian, mother's authoritarian and mother's permissive styles of parenting are positively correlated with MOGQ with $r = 0.17, p < .01$; $r = .16, p < .01$ and $r = .16, p < .01$ respectively. This indicates that higher values of authoritarian and permissive parenting from the mothers have a significant increase in the child's risks to get groomed in online media. In addition, we can see that there is a positive relationship between father's authoritarian parenting style with mother's authoritative ($r = .52, p < .01$) and a negative relationship

between father's authoritarian parenting style and mother's permissive parenting style ($r = -.15, p < .01$) which implies that both the parents are trying to balance their parenting style to safeguard their children.

Regression analysis

The primary objective of this study was to discover the effect of parenting styles on online grooming risks among children. Regression analysis was conducted with Tot MOGQ (online grooming risk score) as the dependent variable and parenting styles as the independent variables. The results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Regression Analysis between Parenting Styles and MOGQ

Independent Variable (Parenting Styles)	Dependent Variable	Unstandardized Coefficient (B)		Beta	t Value	p Value	Model Summary
		B	SE				
Father's Authoritative	MOGQ	-0.019	0.091	-0.011	-0.207	0.836	F = 0.043, R = 0.011 ^a , R ² = 0.000
Father's Authoritarian		0.193	0.058	0.167	3.329	0.001**	F = 11.079, R = 0.167 ^a , R ² = 0.028
Father's Permissive		0.086	0.103	0.042	0.832	0.406	F = 0.691, R = 0.042 ^a , R ² = 0.002
Mother's Authoritative		-0.139	0.076	-0.093	-1.830	0.068	F = 3.348, R = 0.093 ^a , R ² = 0.009
Mother's Authoritarian		0.259	0.056	0.228	4.587	0.000***	F = 21.040, R = 0.228 ^a , R ² = 0.052
Mother's Permissive		0.309	0.100	0.156	3.086	0.002**	F = 9.523, R = 0.156 ^a , R ² = 0.024

Note. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$

The series of simple linear analysis between various parenting styles and MOGQ concluded the following findings of the statistical analysis. Father's authoritarian ($F(1, N-2) = 11.079, p = .001, \text{with } R^2 = .028$), mother's authoritarian ($F(1, N-2) = 21.040, p < .001, R^2 = .052$) and mother's permissive ($F(1, N-2) = 9.523, p = .002, R^2 = .024$) parenting styles were observed to be significant positive predictors of MOGQ. Among these, mother's authoritarian parenting style is seen as a stronger predictor ($B = 0.259, p < .001$) with 5% of variance while father's authoritarian and mother's permissive styles are with 2% of variance each. These were significant but not stronger to predict the dependent variable MOGQ. While father's authoritative, father's permissive and mother's authoritative parenting styles do not have a significant effect on MOGQ.

Discussion

With the increasing disturbances of internet usage in mind, we must understand that grooming is a high potential risk factor (Elena et al., 2010) and therefore, it is important to march towards the prevention strategies at this moment. Parenting has a major impact on the child's psychological balance (Dwairy and Achoui, 2009), emotional development (Stack et al., 2010), and behavioural responses (Alizadeh et al., 2011), especially in situations like online grooming (Kamar et al., 2022), where the external threat is a huge concern. The results of this study show a significant pattern in parenting styles and their association with online grooming risks, which provides details on protective and risk factors that are associated with different parenting styles.

Though parenting is a shared responsibility of the married couple, mothers seemed to have closer emotional proximity with the children and be more behaviourally

controlling, demanding and autonomy granting to their children than fathers (Yaffe, 2020). In line with this, the regression analysis from our study reveals that mother's authoritarian parenting ($F(1, N-2) = 21.040, p < .001, R^2 = .052$) is comparatively a stronger predictor than father's authoritarian parenting. Also, our study reveals that only father's authoritarian parenting among the three parenting styles has emerged as a significant predictor of online grooming risks. It is because of differential responsibilities shared by both mother and father when it comes to upbringing of the child.

The correlational analysis discovers a significant positive correlation between a mother's authoritarian parenting style and online grooming risk ($r = 0.2062, p = 0.009$), which indicates a direct relationship between these two variables. This is because, authoritarian parenting is associated with high demands and low responsiveness (Darling, 1999) which makes the environment more fearful and intimidating for the children to confront and seek help from their parents regarding their online behaviors. In the case of the father's authoritarian parenting and online grooming risk, a moderate positive correlation is found ($r = 0.167, p < .01$). This does suggest that a father's authoritarian parenting leads to online grooming risk to some extent. These reflect that authoritarian parenting style adopted by the parents leads to internalizing and externalizing behavior problems in the children as suggested by Kuppens and Ceulemans (2019). Children brought up with this parenting style may possess feelings of fear, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Yahya Aktu, 2024) which makes them more vulnerable to the online grooming, and it is less likely that these children seek help or confide in their parents about their difficult situations due to the harsh punishments. Children who are victimised to online sexual grooming require more

emotional support and nurturing environment from their parents as discussed by Whittle et al. (2013) which is widely seen in the authoritative parenting- which involves high demands and high responsiveness (Darling, 1999). These parents provide unconditional trust and allow their children to have open communication with them with ultimate comfort as suggested by Khanum et al. (2023) while expressing such online experiences. Though there are no significant evidence to show that authoritative parenting can decrease the risks in children to get groomed in online media, the result of our study shows a non-significant relationship between the father's and mother's authoritative parenting styles and online grooming risks, we can see that there is a small non-significant negative relationship (Father's $\beta = -0.01$ and Mother's $r = -0.09$) which indicates that authoritative parenting can be one of the protective factors of online grooming in children as found by Serna et al. (2023). This can be strengthened with a larger and wider sample size to establish the significant results in further studies.

On the other hand, the finding of this study shows that there is a significant positive relationship between mother's permissive parenting and online grooming risks ($r = .16$, $p < .01$), which means permissive parenting like the authoritarian parenting is one of the risk factors when it comes to online grooming risks (Serna et al., 2023). The results indicate that as permissive parenting- which involves high responsiveness and low demandingness (Darling, 1999)- increases, risks in children for online grooming also increases, which is because, permissive parenting leaves children with lack of essential skills- self-regulation, impulse control and decision-making- that are very important to stay safe from online grooming. The regression analysis results also suggest that one of the risks for children to get

groomed in online media depends on permissive parenting ($F(1, N-2) = 9.523$, $p = .002$, $R^2 = .024$).

On a final note, though parenting is a potential predictor of online grooming risks, there are other factors like the quality of the parent-child relationship, the overall family environment, socioeconomic status, and the child's individual characteristics, can also significantly influence their vulnerability to online grooming.

Conclusion

In the different parenting styles, authoritarian parenting emerged as a potential threat to the children to get groomed in online media, however, there are no significant evidence to prove that authoritative parenting can be the protective factor to children. While permissive parenting style may also affect the children to become vulnerable to online grooming. Thus, providing information on how the balance of warmth, communication, and boundaries can either shield children from or expose them to potential online threats. According to the results of this study, authoritarian parenting is identified as the probable threat to the children in becoming vulnerable to online grooming. Educators and community organizations also play a vital role in promoting awareness of parenting styles and their impact on children's online safety. We can observe that there is a lack of awareness among parents about the influences they have on their children's online behavior. Empowering parents with the right knowledge to avoid authoritarian and permissive parenting and adopt authoritative parenting practices is an important step toward safeguarding children in the digital world. However, there are limitations in the study that open ways to address the research gaps in the future. This study can be extended to a larger population to understand the

situations of the reality. The fourth parenting style (Neglectful Parenting Style) introduced by Maccoby and Martin (1983) can also be considered for the analysis. By combining parenting interventions with systemic efforts, it is possible to create a safer and more supportive online environment for children while strengthening parent-child relationships. These efforts can help bridge the gap for parents and children in maintaining the digital hygiene, a step towards protecting the children from online grooming.

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