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PARENTS IN MIDDLE ADULTHOOD:
EXPOSURE AND REACTIVITY TO DAILY CHILD-RELATED EXPERIENCES

by

Amy Louise Wiles Chandler

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the
SCHOOL OF FAMILY AND CONSUMER SCIENCES
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
In the Graduate College
THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

2001
As members of the Final Examination Committee, we certify that we have read the dissertation prepared by Amy Louise Wiles Chandler entitled Parents in Middle Adulthood: Exposure and Reactivity to Child-Related Experiences and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Final approval and acceptance of this dissertation is contingent upon the candidate's submission of the final copy of the dissertation to the Graduate College.

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Dissertation Director David M. Almeida
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SIGNED: Amy Louise Wilco Chandler
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people who have helped me in this endeavor who are deserving of acknowledgement. I would like to thank my dissertation advisor, Dr. David Almeida for bringing his exciting research on daily stressful experiences to the University of Arizona six years ago, and for being my patient mentor as I began working on my own research. My friends in graduate school also deserve acknowledgement; Dan McDonald, Melanie Horn, Michelle Neiss, Christine Lee, Joyce Serido and the rest of the National Study of Daily Experiences research team. They have supported me in times of difficulty as well as celebration, and I am so grateful for their contributions and compassion. I also thank the rest of my dissertation committee for being more than a dissertation committee. All of the members—Donna Christensen, Sue Silverberg Koerner, Mari Wilhelm, and Keith Meredith have given me their enduring support over many years and many different circumstances, and I couldn’t have chosen a better group of people to be my friends and my guides through graduate school. I must also acknowledge the wonderful staff, my friends, in the School of Family and Consumer Sciences; Mary Miller, Cinda Baughn, Julie Longstaff, Mary Helen Scott and Joan Weber. Their sincerity, kindness and expertise helped keep me going so many times.

Finally, I’d like to thank my incredible family on both the Chandler side and the Wiles side. Their light-hearted approach to life, and their serious-hearted approach to love helped me to believe I could accomplish my goals without losing my joy of life in the process.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents and siblings, my husband and my children. My mom and dad, Barbara and Arthur Wiles, and my brother and sister, John Wiles and Peggy Neil, taught me to believe that I am worthy and that my efforts are worthwhile. My husband, Rocky Chandler, issued the challenge for me to return to school, and then took on many loads of laundry and the preparation of many creative sandwiches. My children, Matthew, Alyssa and Jeanna tolerated my physical and sometimes mental absence while I was studying, and then grew up and became empathetic supporters of my quest to finish school. I thank each one of you from the bottom of my heart, and I love you more than any dissertation can express.
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was twofold; it examined midlife parents’ exposure to daily child-related events as well as the daily emotional reactivity that parents experience in association with these events. The premise of the study is that children can influence the well-being of their parents and that both daily exposure and reactivity to child-related experiences differ with the age of child as well as parental gender. Two conceptual frameworks, generativity and stress theory are used to explain how children influence parents’ development and well-being. The study variables included daily child-related stressful events of high and low severity, daily emotional support parents provided their children, and parents’ negative mood.

Data for these analyses are from the National Study of Daily Experiences. The sample for the present study consisted of parents of minor children, ages 1 to 21 (n = 214; 107 mothers, 107 fathers), and parents of adult children, ages 22 and above (n = 287; 107 mothers, 180 fathers).

The findings indicated that there were no significant parent gender or child age differences in exposure to high severity stressors, but there were parent gender and child age differences in low severity stressors and emotional support. Mothers of children of all ages experience more frequent low severity daily stressors and provide more emotional support than do fathers. Parents of minor children also experience more frequent daily low severity stressors and provide more emotional support than do parents of adult children. However, parents of minor children do not experience more severe events than parents of adult children. For parents of adult children, the proportion of severe stressors
to all stressors was much greater than for parents of minor children. In other words, when a parent of an adult child experiences a child-related stressor, it is more likely to be very serious than when a parent of a minor child experiences a child-related stressor. Last, in relation to parental well-being, this daily stressor study showed that low severity stressors are associated with parents' negative mood. Parent gender nor child age moderated the effects of stressors on negative mood. What this might indicate is that it is truly the persistent, mundane child-related stressors that wear a parent down. Implications of this study show that child-related stressors can also enhance parental development and well-being through opportunity for generativity.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Importance of Midlife Research

Developmental researchers have begun to increase their study of middle adulthood for varied reasons. One is that the Baby Boomers, the largest birth cohort ever to occur, have reached middle age. Due to the sheer numbers of people in this group, their health as well as the behaviors they manifest are likely to have tremendous impact on the present and future of all facets of humanity. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Baby Boomers in middle adulthood should have an impact on current research. At the same time, many social scientists are embracing a concept of studying human development with more of a lifespan perspective rather than a childcentric one (Baltes, 1987; Featherman & Lerner, 1985; Lachman & Baltes, 1994; Lerner, 1976). One explanation for this shift may be the result of increasing longevity, which makes adulthood an extended portion of the life span. Even so, much interest in adult development has been directed towards the later years of life cycle, with the middle years often overlooked.

There are various explanations for the lack of research on middle adulthood. One complication in conducting midlife research is that definitions of midlife vary. For instance, one point of view is that midlife should not be defined chronologically, but rather by key events—such as a child leaving home, the birth of a grandchild, or the onset of menopause (Lachman & James, 1998). Yet the sequential variability of these events makes midlife difficult to study with a life event framework. Another hindrance to studying midlife is that people in midlife are typically at the peak of their careers, which
when combined with their family responsibilities can create too much of a time constraint for them to participate in research. Regardless, the importance of investigation has been recognized as forward-thinking researchers pick up the challenge that "midlife is the last uncharted territory of the life course" (Brim, 1992, p. 171).

The Importance of Midlife Parents to the Well-Being of Others

People in midlife tend to occupy multiple roles and are influential to the well-being of many people around them (Antonnuci, 1986). For example, those midlife adults who are parents are often situated between the younger and the older generations, sometimes with responsibilities for both children and parents—thus the term "sandwich generation" (Lang & Brody, 1983). Note, however, that changing trends may call for changes in the way we characterize middle adulthood. With an increase in unwed teenagers' pregnancies, as well as the increased lifespan of parents and grandparents, some adults in middle adulthood are finding themselves responsible for grandchildren or even grandparents as well. Perhaps a new term for this group should be the "club sandwich generation", which more aptly reflects the many "layers" of generations on either side of those in the middle (Genovese, 1997). That adults in middle adulthood are important to the well-being of others may be true not just in the family but also in the workplace (MacDermid, Heilbrun, & Dettaan, 1998). A midlife adult may not only be an employee, but is likely to become a mentor at work as well as a boss or supervisor. Thus, midlife adults may occupy diverse roles that are capable of influencing the well-being of those around them. Intuitively, however, we can assume that the one group of people most influenced by midlife adults is their children.
There is abundant literature on the role of parents in the development and well-being of their children (e.g., Ainsworth 1979; Baumrind 1971; Belsky, 1984). Providing adequate nurturing, protection and guidance are among the basic responsibilities of parents to ensure the present and future well-being of their children. As such, parents can have positive or negative influence on their children. They can provide inspiration for their children to become successful productive adults while providing the warmth and love needed to build their children's self esteem, or they can be responsible for contributing to their children's lack of ambition, disregard for others, and low self image (e.g., Loevinger 1959; Patterson, Dishion, & Chamberlain, 1993). While social scientists have amply addressed issues of parenthood, much of the knowledge they have acquired focuses on early years, such as transition to parenthood, as well as later years, when an aging parent has an adult child. The period of midlife parenting, however, when parents may have minor children as well as adult children, “has received surprisingly little scientific attention, although it is the longest period of parental experience” (Ryff & Seltzer, 1986, p. 3).

The Importance of Children to the Well-Being of Midlife Parents

**Generativity**

There is growing recognition of the influence that children exert on their midlife parents' development and well-being (e.g., Rossi, 1980; Ryff, Lee, Essex & Schmutte, 1994; Silverberg, 1996). One major conceptual framework that can help to explain this phenomenon is Erikson’s (1950, 1968) midlife developmental task of ‘generativity versus stagnation’. This concept revolves around a consciousness of others in the world, and a
need to be productive for the benefit of future generations. Although Erikson stressed that parenthood is not a prerequisite for the accomplishment of generativity, raising children has often been considered an important manifestation of this task. The link between parental well-being and the ability to be generative is explained in that generativity affects self-evaluation and how adults feel about their lives. A primary way of displaying generativity that has been widely acknowledged is the provision of emotional support and guidance (e.g., Keyes & Ryff, 1998). Thus, parental well-being may be affected in the degree to which parents are able to provide their children with support and guidance. It follows that being able to provide children with support in times when the need is severe or frequent results in a greater sense of fulfillment of parental generativity. Thus the beneficial effect on psychological well-being may be even greater.

Stress

Another framework that can add to the understanding of how children influence parent’s psychological well-being is stress theory viewed in the context of families. Many social scientists agree that the “…family is central in people’s lives because it is the place where crucial needs are both created and satisfied” (Pearlin & Turner, 1987, p. 143). Consequently, because of the value individuals place on family, they are likely to be distressed by things that go badly in the family arena. Stressful child-related experiences that affect parents can occur in various ways. For instance, both normative and non-normative experiences in the daily lives of children can create stress for parents. It is also possible that children may engage in conflict with parents or bring home stressful experiences, thus affecting other members of the family.
Parental Well-Being and Daily Child-Related Experiences

**Parental Well-being**

A recent interest of developmental psychologists is that of parental well-being (Ryff et al., 1994; Silverberg, 1996). In our culture, it is a widespread belief that having children brings joy and provides meaning to life. The mechanisms behind this prominently supported view of the importance of parenting are varied. On the most basic level, reproduction is instinctual—necessary to the survival of our species. The evolutionary basis for this drive then gives rise to a cultural or social pressure to bear children (Perkin, 1989). Becoming a parent may also be significant on a more individual level, such as the experience of joy or companionship to be gained from the relationship with one's children or even grandchildren. People often take pride in having a child who represents their own image in personality or physical appearance, and it is of paramount importance for some individuals to have a child to carry on the family name. Others may feel parenthood helps to provide meaning in life by providing a broader range of life experiences, which then may lead to an enhanced life perspective (Hoffman, McManus, & Brackbill, 1987). Later in life, parents of children entering adulthood have the opportunity to experience a sense of pride and fulfillment in reflecting on their parental 'job' well-done (Ryff et al., 1994).

Frequency of positive and negative mood as well as life satisfaction are both widely affirmed general conceptions of psychological well-being. Further definition of well-being as developed by Ryff and Keyes (1995) encompasses self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal
growth. In her study on the well-being of parents at their children's transition to adolescence, Silverberg (1996) assessed multiple dimensions of parental well-being: self-esteem; midlife identity concerns; general life satisfaction; and psychological symptoms. Parents' daily psychological symptoms can be affected by such things as conflict with their children, stressful experiences that involve their children or the extent to which they are able to provide emotional support and guidance to their children. This daily mood, in turn, may contribute to an overall sense of well-being.

**Daily Child-Related Experiences**

Most research of midlife parents has focused either on psychological health related to major life events or on overall assessments of the parenting experience rather than day-to-day issues of parenting. Research on the overall assessments of the parenting experience has typically looked at the quality of parent-child relationships, conflict, satisfaction with the relationship, frequency of contact, provision of social support and guidance, and so forth (Bengtson, Mangen, & Landry, 1984; Brubaker, 1990; Mancini & Bliezer, 1989; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Spitze, Logan, Joseph & Lee, 1994). Major life events involving midlife parents and their children include occurrences such as children moving out of the parental home, seeing children get married, or experiencing the birth of grandchildren. It is widely understood that these developmental transitions can have a pronounced effect on parental mood and well-being (Brown & Harris, 1989; Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1974; Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Hultsch & Plemons, 1979). Less research has been conducted on the smaller day to day events that may comprise a major life event, or that do not necessarily involve a major life event. For example, the marriage of
a daughter is a major life event that can be stressful. But the day-to-day experiences that accompany the wedding, such as hiring a caterer, buying the bridal gown, or having a disagreement with the daughter about the guest list are also stressful for parents. Daily interactions with children that do not involve major life events can also impact the daily well-being of parents. For example, consider a child who left home years ago, but continues to have daily money problems that burden the financial and emotional resources of the parents. All of these daily experiences can include child-related stressors and conflicts, as well as opportunities for parents to provide emotional support. Such daily experiences along with their more proximal effects on parents’ mood (for a review see Stone, 1992) then contribute to a daily sense of well-being.

Modifiers of Exposure and Reactivity to Child-Related Experiences

Exposure to child-related daily stressors and opportunities to provide support to children along with the accompanying emotional reactivity may differ with various factors, such as the age of child and parental gender (Mirowsky & Ross, 1989). Exposure refers to the likelihood that an individual will encounter a particular experience, and reactivity refers to the individual’s emotional response in the presence of the experience (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995).

Child Age Differences

The age of the child may affect the frequency and variety of experiences of parents, but also how parents react to those experiences. It is possible for midlife parents to have minor children and/or adult children, and the daily experiences of children of these age groups can be extremely different. Umberson (1996) interviewed 1,858 midlife
parents with minor children as well as parents of adult children, thus allowing for the rough distinction of those parents who are involved in active daily parenting and those who have more equal and independent relationships with adult children. In this study of the association between parents’ well-being and their relationships with their children, Umberson (1996) found that parents’ emotional reactivity associated with child-related experiences of these two groups of children differed significantly. Differences in parents’ reactivity to the experiences of these two age groups could be explained a number of ways. For instance, it could be that parents expect to be responsible for their minor children, so frequent stressors or need for emotional support may not be distressful for parents because they just seem a part of normal parenting. On the other hand, parents of healthy adult children may not expect to be responsible for their adult children. As a result, frequent adult-child related stressors or frequent need of emotional support may be distressful to parents because they are interpreted as a sign of an adult child’s poor adjustment (Keyes & Ryff, 1998). It may also be that child-related stressors of parents of adult children are more severe in nature, and therefore able to cause greater distress in parents. Or, perhaps parents of adult children wish to stay connected with them, so they welcome the opportunity to provide them with emotional support and guidance. The present study also explores other ways in which child age affects parents’ exposure and reactivity to child-related experiences.

**Parent Gender Differences**

Past research has also shown that mothers and fathers may differ in their exposure and reactivity to child-related experiences (Almeida & Kessler, 1998; Mirowsky & Ross,
There are various explanations in the research for these parent differences. For example, one that is frequently explored is the difference in the amount of time mothers and fathers spend with their children. Mothers, more than fathers, spend a greater amount of time with younger children in caregiving tasks which exposes them to a wider range of experiences with their children (Hochschild, 1989; Rubin, 1995). An illustration of the gender difference in reactivity to child-related experiences found in another study indicates that fathers of older children who are moving away from home are significantly emotionally affected by the experience more than mothers are (Baruch & Brooks-Gunn, 1984). Also, for women especially, expressing more nurturing behaviors exposes them to more stressors (Kessler & McLeod, 1984). The present study further explores the various ways in which mothers and fathers differ in exposure and reactivity to child experiences.

The Synergy of Generativity and Stressful Events

The exposure to child-related stressors has been linked to negative mood for parents (e.g., Mirowsky & Ross, 1986) and the generative act of providing advice or emotional support to one's child has been linked to feelings of positive mood (Keyes & Ryff, 1998). Conversely, a number of studies on social support also uphold the notion that there are emotional costs of providing support (e.g., LaGaipa, 1990). Nonetheless, aside from these main effects on parental well-being, it is conceivable that a synergistic effect of providing support and experiencing stressors might also occur. Emotional reactivity to concurrent provision of emotional support and stressful events can be more negative than emotional reactivity to stressful events alone. The added burden of providing emotional support in the presence of a stressor may make it far more
devastating. Or, in the setting of a child-related stressful event, the parent may feel his or her efforts to support the child are of even more value. Umberson & Gove (1989) found that the positive mood associated with fulfilling a "need to be needed" may be then enhanced by providing support to one's child in light of a stressful event. Therefore, the effect may be one of counterbalance—the positive mood associated with providing support is counteracted by the reaction of negative mood experienced in the exposure to stressors.

Thus, the purpose of the study is to examine daily child-related experiences of mothers and fathers of minor and adult children and to determine what influence these experiences have on daily parental mood. By following these parents on a daily basis, it is possible to observe the differential child-related daily experiences and parental daily mood between groups—thus establishing the short-term effects of concrete daily experiences. To this end, the current study addresses daily child-related experiences and daily mood of midlife parents with the following questions:

A. To what extent are exposure to daily child-related stressful events, provision of emotional support as well as the average level of negative mood associated with child age and parent gender?

B. To what extent do child age and parent gender moderate the effects of daily child-related stressful events and emotional support on parental mood?

C. Does providing children with emotional support moderate the effect of daily child-related stressors on parental mood?
CHAPTER 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter is divided into two main sections examining the theoretical frameworks and relevant literature regarding daily parenting experiences and their contribution to parents’ daily well-being. The first section focuses on three perspectives for understanding parents’ child-related experiences. First, generativity theory is presented as a framework for the study of midlife parents’ provision of emotional support to their children, and implications for parental well-being. Next, this section discusses stress theory as a framework for the investigation of midlife parents’ daily child-related stressors and the resulting consequences for parental well-being. Finally, in section one, generativity and stress theories are framed in a daily experience paradigm. The second section describes previous research on parent gender and child age differences in parental exposure to opportunities to provide emotional support as well as exposure to experiences of child-related stressors. This section also examines prior studies on parent gender and child age differences in parental reactivity to child-related experiences.

Theoretical Framework

Generativity Theory

In Erik Erikson's (1950, 1968) psychosocial theory of human development, the description of the most significant task of middle adulthood is the achievement of generativity versus stagnation. The concept of generativity revolves around "a preoccupation with caring for others, productivity, and an inner awareness of one's need to be needed" (Stewart, Franz, & Layton, 1988, p. 50). Generativity enables adults to feel socially instrumental. By being beneficial to others, individuals benefit from seeing
themselves as significant to the quality of society (e.g., Adler, 1979, Bakan, 1966; McAdams, 1996; Stewart et al., 1988). Thus, performing generatively leads adults to evaluate their contributions to society and affects how they feel about their lives. In their study of behavioral, normative obligation, and self-construed generativity (e.g., concern for quality of contribution) in 3,032 adults living in the 48 contiguous United States, Keyes & Ryff (1998) found that nearly all of their measures of generativity predicted psychological well-being. The measures included supporting more people emotionally, feeling more obligated to civic society, having more generative concern for others' welfare and well-being, seeing oneself as more of a generative resource, and possessing more generative personal qualities.

Parents' Well-Being and Generativity

For parents, generativity associated with providing and caring for one's own children may have the potential for the greatest personal fulfillment. "Many adults find their most rewarding, as well as most frustrating, expressions of generativity in their efforts to conceive children to begin with and to feed, clothe, protect, provide for, nurture, guide, discipline, educate, advise, and eventually 'let go of' their own children."(McAdams & St. Aubin, 1998, p. xx). As postulated in an earlier century by Plato, the benefits of these parental generative behaviors are not isolated solely to parent and child—they indirectly impact the maintenance of the society.

What is the cause, Socrates, of love and the attendant desire? See you not how all animals, birds as well as beasts, in their desire of procreation are in agony when they take the infection of love, which begins with the
desire of union; whereto is added the care of the offspring, on whose behalf the weakest are ready to battle against the strongest even to the uttermost, and to die for them, and will let themselves be tormented with hunger or suffer anything in order to maintain their young. Man may be supposed to act thus from reason; but why should animals have these passionate feelings?...The mortal nature is seeking as far as possible to be everlasting and immortal; and this is only to be attained by generation because generation always leaves behind a new existence in the place of the old...Marvel not then at the love which men have of their offspring; for that universal love and interest is for the sake of immortality. (Jowett, 1956, pp. 48-49)

Plato's efforts to explain to Socrates why parents care so deeply for their offspring gives one a sense that it is beyond individual choice—rather it may be that all species feel a force stronger than self-will that drives them to generativity for the sake of perpetuation (Wakefield, 1998). Although Erikson's (1950, 1963) adult developmental theory emphasizes that the parental role is not necessary for successful growth, generativity may be expressed in bearing and raising children. One of the most salient relationships of adults is the one with their children (Rossi & Rossi, 1991). Thus it is the parental role that allows children to have a significant effect on their parents' functioning, development, and well-being. This may begin to explain the reciprocity of influence between children and their parents in that not only are parents integral in the development and well-being of their children, but children also significantly impact the lives of their parents. Active
parental care of children that increases children's well-being simultaneously serves to increase the parents' growth and well-being (Snarey, 1993). Conversely, it follows that the inability of parents to fulfill their generative parental duty would interfere with their sense of well-being.

Parental generativity encompasses many aspects of caring for the next generation. One expression of generativity in the daily lives of parents is providing emotional support to their children. When a midlife parent has minor children, provision of daily emotional support might consist of comforting a teething baby, encouraging a toddler to explore, or having long discussions with an adolescent about friends or school. When a midlife parent has adult children, he or she might provide emotional support in the form of consoling a divorced daughter, or by giving advice. While these generative experiences may contribute to parents' well-being, teaching and leading a child in a direction to which they may object can also lead to frustrations and arguments.

**Stress Theory**

The present study employs the environmental tradition of stress theory stating that stress is a "...process in which environmental demands tax or exceed the adaptive capacity of an organism, resulting in psychological and biological changes that may place persons at risk for disease" (Cohen, Kessler & Gordon, 1995, p. 3). An environmental demand may be a major life change (e.g., death in the family), a minor discrete event (e.g., having an argument) as well as ongoing life circumstances (e.g., having a chronically ill child). Events associated with emotional arousal can cause changes in physiological processes. The human body continually strives to attain a homeostasis, or
balance in functions. Thus, life events that upset the body's balanced state call for a readjustment. Too many changes in life tax the body's ability to readjust. The result is distress—the body's physiological and psychological reaction to a multitude of demands for readjustment.

Studies measuring stress on a daily basis have become increasingly prevalent. For stress researchers, the study of daily events addresses methodological problems such as recall bias that is associated with long term retrospective reports. Additionally, the recording of everyday events, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors affords the researcher the ability to assess links between minor daily stressors and physical or psychological health-related outcomes (DeLongis, Coyne, Dakof, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1982; DeLongis, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1988). Analyses at the daily level can examine temporal relationships between daily stressors and daily outcomes while still allowing the researcher to examine individual and between-person differences in these processes. Other considerations for the measurement of daily events include: a) the study of the interrelationships between events over time, assessing the 'cascading' effect of multiple daily stressors, b) the study of the extent to which daily events make up the elements of chronically stressful experiences, c) the use of daily event measures to assess the extent to which they mediate the effects of major life events, and d) the extent to which daily events mediate the effects of personality and social variables on disease.

Parents' Well-Being and Family Stressors

In their study, Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Schilling (1989) found that difficulties in interpersonal relationships are the most common form of stress. Thus, it
follows that the family is a prime domain for exposure to stressors. Also, because family relationships hold powerful emotional stakes for its members, people are also likely to be distressed by things that go badly in the family. Family members can directly affect each other or they can experience secondary stress out of concern for another family member. Family members may also encounter situations outside the family that are stressful and these outside stressors, in turn, may find their way into the family domain. Thus, the family may act as a conduit for stressors as well as a primary source of stress (Pearlin & Turner, 1987).

The parent-child relationship has the potential to be an arena for stress to a great extent because of the value that parents place on their children. Many researchers have found that children do not always improve the psychological well-being of parents. Indeed, there are many instances in which parents are more psychologically distressed than non-parents (McLanahan & Adams, 1987; Mirowsky & Ross, 1989). Factors responsible for this association include economic strain—originating from increased expenses of more dependents, and marital strain—originating from less time available to spend together, increased household tasks, or disagreements about raising the child. Types of stressors experienced by parents may vary with the family’s developmental stage. Stressful experiences that new parents report include loss of sleep, disruption of daily routines, financial worries, feelings of inadequacy as a parent, and feelings of being tied down (Leifer, 1979). The stressful experiences related to raising young children may have the potential to be severe, such as when a child develops a serious illness. Nonetheless, it may be that the child-related stressful experiences of parents of adult
children have greater potential to be severe. Severity in the present study is viewed in the implications the situation has for the parent's future plans, concerns and purposes, as well as to the degree of unpleasantness involved in the situation. For example, day-to-day issues such as minor arguments with friends may be more likely to be reported to parents of minor children, while adult children cope themselves. These occurrences are unlikely to be severely unpleasant for parents and are unlikely to affect their future. On the other hand, the daily lives of adult children involve potentially serious issues, such as marriage problems, job difficulties, or more threatening conflict between parent and child. The significance of acknowledging not only the occurrence of child-related stressors but also the severity of the stressors is in the notion that the amount of resulting emotional arousal is likely to be greater with more severe events. Therefore it is important to emphasize that the potential impact children have on parents' well-being changes in relation to the stage of the life course of the family (Umberson, 1996).

**Generativity and Family Stress in Experiences of Midlife Parents: The Daily Experiences Paradigm**

Events that parents experience as a result of their children developing and moving through the various transitions of life can provide different opportunities for experiencing stressors or providing emotional support. In turn, these experiences can contribute to a parent's sense of well-being. Previous studies involving parents and children have focused on the major events such as the transition to parenthood, subsequent births, and transition into and out of adolescence. Along with these major events of a physical nature are those of a social nature, such as high school graduations, children leaving the
family home, and weddings. Whereas all of these events allow parents an opportunity to provide emotional support and guidance to their children, they may still be a source of stressors as well. Past research has recognized two main categories of stressors that originate within the boundaries of the family. One is represented by expected or unexpected life event changes as well as the consequent demands for adjustment (Dohrenwend & Pearlin, 1982) and the other by the more persistent, chronic strains (Pearlin, 1983). Chronic strains affecting the whole family can be problems such as alcoholism, physical disabilities and poverty. Life events are those events that either arise out of normative, scheduled transitions or those that are unscheduled, which are often more disruptive (Pearlin, 1980). Prior studies have demonstrated that major life events can affect psychological and physical health (Brown & Harris, 1989; Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1974; Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Hultsch & Plemons, 1979). However, many individuals, even those in high-risk contexts report few major life stressors (Crinic & Greenberg, 1990; DeLongis et al., 1982). Thus, one may question the adequacy of using only a life-events approach to studying stress. Rather, the study of minor stressors, or daily hassles may be a particularly meaningful and more relevant context for conceptualizing stress in the family (DeLongis et al. 1982).

It has become apparent that day-to-day experiences (such as provision of support, and stressful events such as arguments, work-family conflict, and minor frustrating incidents) also influence the role of stress in psychological and physical health adjustment (for a review see Stone, 1992). Previous research on daily stress has found that daily hassles (DeLongis et al., 1988) have potentially even more debilitating and
powerful effects than life events. Daily parenting hassles fall into two broad categories; family demands, such as the effort required to rear children—continually cleaning up messes, changing family plans, running errands to meet children's needs; and interpersonal tensions, such as the challenge of dealing with irritating behaviors like whining, sibling fights, or challenging parental authority (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Minor daily hassles with children contribute to parents' negative moods that, in turn, affect parenting and children's behavior (Patterson, 1983). For example, Crnic and Greenberg (1990) reported that in a sample of 74 mothers, perceptions of daily hassles with their five-year-old children were predictive of mothers' satisfaction with their parenting role, psychological well-being, family functioning, and various aspects of the mother-child relationship. Further, Crnic and Greenberg (1990) reported that daily hassles were more powerful predictors of these familial outcomes than were mothers' reported major life stressors.

The study of daily stressors is also significant because in addition to having direct effects on emotional and physical functioning on the day they occur, they also pile up over a series of days, possibly resulting in more serious stress reactions such as anxiety and depression (Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & DeLongis, 1983; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman, & Mullan, 1981; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). To use midlife parents as an illustration, consider the event of a teenage son getting in a minor car accident. The immediate effect upon hearing the news would no doubt be extremely stressful, even if the boy were unharmed. However, the days following could present multiple stressful events related to the accident—perhaps a heated discussion on driving
techniques on one day, followed by receiving the bill for damages the next. The effect each of these experiences has on daily mood can in turn influence parents’ sense of daily well-being.

The daily experience paradigm is also useful when studying generative behaviors. Previous studies have shown that variation in generativity is a function of the seasonal social cycle (Havens & Schervish, 1996) and weekly cycle (Almeida, Wethington & McDonald, in press). Temporal fluctuation of supportive behaviors was found to be related to the amount of involvement individuals were able to have with others. In this same regard, parents’ day-to-day expression of support is likely to vary in frequency and type depending according to the age of the child and the child’s activities. Thus, it is likely that daily involvement with younger children is more likely than daily involvement with adult children, which creates greater opportunities to provide emotional support to younger children. Also, similar to the pile up concept of daily stressors, providing excessive daily emotional support and guidance to children, especially adult children can have a negative emotional impact for parents (LaGaipa, 1990). Studying supportive behaviors on a daily basis provides a clear insight into the ebb and flow of their frequency and the corresponding daily reactivity.

Literature Review

Exposure to Day-to-Day Child-Related Experiences

The study of exposure refers to the likelihood that certain individuals will encounter a particular experience (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995). The present study investigates factors associated with parental exposure in child-related stressful
experiences, and opportunities to provide emotional support to children. Differences in parents’ exposure will be explored in association with child age as well as parent gender.

**Exposure: Child Age Differences**

Clearly, the nature and frequency of daily parent-child interactions is likely to change with the age of the child (Pearlin & Turner, 1988). That is, the activities and experiences associated with particular levels of a child's development may differ in how much parents can be involved as well as in the types and intensity of the experiences.

It is possible for parents in middle adulthood to have both minor and adult children (Umberson, 1996). The potential for experiencing child-related stressors, and the opportunity to provide emotional support will differ with these two groups of children in that minor children are still considered to be dependent on parents, typically living at home and adult children typically are not. Because of frequency of contact, parenting of minor children exposes mothers and fathers to frequent opportunities to be generative through the provision of emotional support. Although some studies show that parental generativity may increase as the child grows (Snarey & Clark, 1998) others suggest that the opportunities to act on feelings of generativity by providing children with emotional support seem to decrease as the child grows (Snarey, 1993). Child-related stressors are also more frequent when children are young, but the majority are not severe. Indeed, the serious nature of the stressors and tensions seems to begin to intensify as children become young adults (Newcomb, McCarthy & Bentler, 1989).

**Stressors.** Over the life course, the indirect or direct stressors parents experience in association with their children may remain stable or may change in frequency or type.
Some research indicates constancy in the types of indirect stressors experienced by parents of children of different age groups. In their study on the advantages and disadvantages of having children, Hoffman et al. (1987) found that parents of adult children and parents of young children did not differ in their reports of the marital or emotional disadvantages of having children. Younger parents did indicate an economic disadvantage of having children more frequently than did elderly parents, but the difference was not pronounced. Indeed, children of all ages may increase economic strains in ways such as the need for parents to buy more food and clothes, provide medical care, a larger place to live or to give essential financial assistance to older children. Other studies have indicated that marital strain may result from the presence of young children, often originating from less time available for parents to spend together, increased household tasks, or disagreements about raising the child (e.g., Cowan & Cowan 1988). Yet additional research challenges the previous conclusions that marital quality declines with the arrival of the first child. This research indicates that mothers may differ from fathers in change of marital satisfaction (Belsky, Spanier, & Rovine, 1983), or that such changes in a marriage are inevitable but childbirth accelerates them (Belsky & Pensky, 1988).

Child-related stressors having a more direct effect on parents can also vary with the development of the child. It is possible to assume these experiences are likely to be more serious or intense in nature as the child ages. For example, in their study assessing the daily hassles of parenting in mothers and fathers of young children, Crnic and Booth (1991) found that reported hassles were significantly greater in intensity with increasing
child age. However, the relationship between frequency of stressors and age is an inverse one even in this young age group; more frequent and persistent stressors occur in the lives of parents of younger rather than older children.

In a study of 2300 adults that explored the stressors of daily life, Pearlin and colleagues (1976) discovered that the persistent problems of child rearing are primarily confronted by parents of younger children. They found that parents of school-aged children encounter a variety of circumstances that are potentially stressful—being treated disrespectfully, ignored as sources of guidance and advice, being disobeyed, and failure on the part of the child to perform household chores. Similarly, Smetana (1989) found that conflicts between parents and school-aged children often center on children's interpersonal behavior with others (fighting, teasing), and regulating activities like TV watching, chores, bedtime, and curfews. In a sample of 74 mothers of 5 year old children, Crnic and Greenberg (1990) similarly found that mothers reported frequent everyday hassles of parenting. On a 20-item measure of typical everyday events in parenting and parent-child interactions, mothers indicated that continually cleaning up kids' messes, being nagged, being interrupted, monitoring children, coping with children's demands, and struggling over bedtimes occurred frequently.

However, this research and Pearlin's inquiry into parental stressors didn't involve a sample of children younger than 5 years of age, and so cannot address stressors parents may experience between the time their children are born and the start of their schooling. Crnic and Booth (1991) assessed daily hassles of parenting in 79 pairs of mothers and fathers of only children between the ages of 9 and 36 months. Parents were divided into
three groups on the basis of their child's age, 9-12 months (n = 26 mother-father pairs), 18-24 months (n = 26 mother-father pairs) and 30-36 months (n = 24 mother-father pairs). The choice of the age divisions was based on an interest in assessing periods of rapid developmental change during the transition from infancy to early childhood. Results indicated that the intensity of perceived hassles across the three age groups was linear in effect, with parents of the 30-36 month age group reporting greater intensity, but not frequency, of hassles. The authors postulated that as children develop and acquire more abilities, they may also present a greater range of behaviors and situations that parents find stressful.

This assumption regarding the transitions in child development and parental exposure to stressors may further be applied to older minor children, such as adolescents. As adolescents pursue an understanding of themselves, many may question parents' authority, rebel against restrictions, and argue their own point of view (Montemayor, 1986). Thus, the transition to adolescence may be not only a time of normative biological and social changes in children, but also a period of change in the elevation of conflict, where most parents and adolescents report quarreling on a regular basis (Montemayor, 1986). This conflict may be due to parents forming new power distributions with their adolescent children while maintaining their roles as authorities (Galinksy, 1981).

Although conflict and arguments are the primary complaints of parents about relations with their adolescents (Montemayor, 1986), both parents and teens agree they are about the mundane, routine behaviors. According to her study of 102 fifth through twelfth graders, Smetana (1989) also found that parents and children agree it is the
everyday details of family life, such as doing the chores, getting along with others, regulating activities and interpersonal relationships, appearances, and doing homework, that cause conflicts. Schoolwork and grades become a more frequent topic as early adolescents move into junior high school. Increased conflicts over homework and achievement at this age may reflect difficulties in transitioning into the new school setting. When teens move into high school, chores become a focus and remain a major topic during later adolescence (Smetana, 1989). This result is consistent with reports that children are expected to assume more responsibilities around the household as they grow older (Goodnow, 1988).

As children experience the physical and psychological changes that launch them into adulthood, both they and their parents encounter even greater challenges (Steinberg, 1980). The adolescent may face temptations of sex, alcohol, and drugs and deal with problems such as choice of friends, peer approval, and dating (e.g., Newcomb et al., 1989). Also, Pearlin and colleagues (1976) found that among parents of older children, beginning when children are approximately 15 or 16 years old and continuing into young adulthood, parents judged whether their children’s behavior aligned with their long-range goals and aspirations. Issues such as a loss of interest in religion, the excessive consumption of alcohol, the use of illegal drugs, and an indifference to such virtues as hard work caused parents to judge their children’s performance in relation to parental goals. (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978; Pearlin & Turner, 1987). Pearlin’s research indicates that although child-related stressors of parents of younger children may be more frequent, there is also a relationship between child age and parental exposure to intense child-
related stressors.

Recently it has come into question whether mothers and fathers ever reach the "parent emeritus" status (Huyuck, 1989). Instead, for most adults it may be that parenting is a lifelong role, albeit one that changes in accordance with the relationship with one's maturing children (Pearlin, 1983). Thus, parents of adult children still experience daily stressors related to their adult children, but the frequency and intensity is much different than in those stressors related to minor children. There are not many studies available on the on the day-to-day experiences of parents of adult children, however. Much of the existing research is of global reports of conflict, and distress, as well as quality of parent-adult child relations (e.g., Aquilino, 1999; Rossi & Rossi, 1990) and does not address the persistent daily problems that researchers such as Pearlin (1976) felt were important.

Typically, parents' lack of geographic proximity to their adult child leads to less frequent exposure to the day-to-day child-related experiences. In a longitudinal study of 1507 midlife parents (average age 47.5 years) designed to explore continuity and change in parent-child relations as children transition into adulthood, Aquilino (1997) found that parents of adult children report a diminishing of conflict and power issues with offspring who live independently. Unfortunately, shared leisure time also declines after children are gone. Aquilino found that geographic distance and the competing demands of the child's new lifestyle account for most of this change. In contrast, in his study of 2300 adults that explored the relationships between persistent stressors of daily life and psychological distress, Pearlin and colleagues (1987) discovered that among those
parents whose children are launched from the nest— in many instances having their own families—a breakdown in contact and communication can in itself be a source of strain. Thus, it appears that when parent and adult child tension does occur, it may stem from difficulties that individuals who are at discrepant points in development confront when trying to maintain an intimate relationship (Fingerman, 1996).

Young adults face the formidable tasks of having to establish themselves in their occupations, having to accommodate to marital relations, and having to take responsibility for young children. While these tasks of young adults may pull them away from the daily lives of parents, they may also create stressors that in turn are experienced by the parents. Adult offspring are thought to have acquired identities and to have matured to a point where they no longer need to struggle against their parents (Baruch & Barnett, 1983; Blenkner, 1963). However, the establishment of identity does not preclude tension. Clark, Preston, Raskin, and Bengston’s (1999) Longitudinal Study of Generations looked at parents’ reports about friction with adult children—the type most frequently mentioned was differences over personal habits and lifestyle choices (38%). This was followed by concerns about communication and interaction (25%) and child-rearing practices and values (14%). Variations among adult children themselves can result in differences in parental child-related experiences. Aquilino (1997) found that the experiences of parents of adult children vary with the status of the adult child. For example, having a child who is enrolled in college or who is married is related to lower levels of conflict between parents and their adult offspring. However, parents whose adult children have become new parents reported higher levels of conflict. It is possible the
introduction of the grandchild into the family may give the grandparents and their adult
offspring more things to disagree on.

When problems occur in the lives of some children, such as those adult children
whose marriages break up, often a burden on parental resources is the result. It has been
suggested that children's marital problems may be a predictor of parents' psychological
distress (Greenberg and Becker, 1988; Hagestad, Smyer, & Stierman, 1984; Johnson &
Binick, 1982). These findings suggest that these stressors in the lives of adult children
become stressors for their parents also. The strains of parenthood, then, certainly do not
end when children reach a particular age; parental strains have a persistency that can
extend across the entire life cycle (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978; Pearlin & Turner, 1987).

**Emotional support.** Generativity changes over time and varies across
circumstances or roles (MacDermid, Franz, & DeReus, 1998). For example, the
generative behavior of nurturing older children versus minor children changes with the
developmental needs of the child. Perhaps supporting an adult child becomes more
intellectual—a sharing of advice, ideals, and philosophies, rather than the simple
provision of health, safety and encouragement that a young dependent child needs.

The responsibilities of parenting in the first years of life expose parents to
multiple unique opportunities to provide supportive behavior and guidance. In the first
years of life when children develop a sense of trust and a feeling of hope about life,
parental warmth and availability for emotional support are essential to this process
(Erikson, 1950, 1963). In the toddler and preschool years, children have opportunities for
self-direction, the ability to act independently, and the ability to act with self-control.
During this stage of their child’s life, parents first experience the struggle with the child by placing limits on behavior, while guiding the child toward age-appropriate social norms (e.g., Clarke & Dawson, 1989). Beginning school allows a child opportunity to increase his or her competence. Parents' roles change dramatically as they encourage independence, continue to guide the child's behavior, and at the same time, take on the task of interpreting the outside influences the child is confronting (Maccoby, 1984).

Although parents' attention and sensitivity to children's needs continue to be major strengths in helping children become responsible, competent, happy individuals throughout childhood, an important factor in the amount of emotional support and guidance parents can provide to young children is related to the amount of time they spend with them. In a study of 1465 fathers, Marsiglio (1991) found that 76% of those with children under 5 reported playing with their children daily, but only 17% fathers of school age children reported playing with their children or working on projects with them almost every day. Additionally, fathers in this study who worked fewer hours during the time frame when children would most likely be at home tended to report higher levels of paternal involvement than fathers who were working at that time.

Several studies suggest that some midlife parents may initiate or intensify the developmental task of generativity as a result of their children becoming adolescents (Colarusso & Nemiroff, 1982; Farrell & Rosenberg,). It is possible that this is due to the adolescent becoming more 'adult-like'. Parents may feel that supporting their adolescent children in their efforts to become adults in turn provides productive, caring human beings who will further the goals and survival of society. For example, as an adolescent
child begins to sort through his/her interests in order to begin to focus on a career, a parent plays an important role in their attitudes about work and career choices (Jacobsen, 1971; Smith, 1981). Snarey and Clark (1998) presented a longitudinal case study illustrating changes in a father’s generative behavior as his son grew. The father in the study reported providing emotional support to his son during the elementary school years in ways such as playing guitar for a sing-along with the son’s neighborhood friends, and coaching the football team in such a way as to not embarrass any individual player. In the boy’s adolescent years, the father reported providing emotional support in ways such as allowing his son to bring his girlfriend on a family trip, and empathizing with his son’s rebellious nature while not compromising his own values. This father reported providing greater emotional support during his son’s adolescence rather than childhood. However, this was the report of just one father, and in a previous study (Snarey, 1993) found that total father supportive participation was higher during the childhood decade than during the adolescent decade. It is possible these competing findings are due to the participants’ concepts of support. The father in the case study may have felt the support he provided his son at a later age was more valuable than the support given in the early years, therefore it stood out in his mind as being of greater importance.

Lack of opportunity to spend with adolescent children may be a factor in how supportive a parent is able to be. In general, the frequency of interaction between adolescents and their parents is lower than in earlier life periods (Hill & Stafford, 1980). Also, the frequency of interaction during adolescence declines between early (grades 6-7) and middle (grades 8-12) adolescence (Montemayor & Brownlee, 1987). Aside from time
available for interaction, older children may be rejecting parents' efforts in order to maintain their position of independence. Thus, regardless of the generative concern and desires of parents, the type of generative acts and the ability to provide them for their children may be driven by changes in the child's needs.

Parental exposure to the opportunities to provide support to children does not stop just because they become adults. Mothers and fathers maintain closeness with their adult children and are willing to come to their aid, emotionally or instrumentally (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Especially in times of need, parents of adult children are available to their adult children. For example, Aquilino (1996) investigated the parental experience of young adult children who return to the parental home after moving away. This study involved parents of 242 adult children, aged 19-34, who had left home at least once. Although some parents reported some disagreements with the returned child over the past year, nearly all parents (96%) reported at least one especially close time with the child over the past thirty days. Most parents also reported high levels of shared activities with these adult children. About 60 percent had private talks with the child at least once a week, and about a third went out together once a week or more. Johnson (1988) also found that parents of adult children are available for support in times of need. In his study of parents and their divorced children, parents played a significant role in easing the strains created by their son’s or daughter’s divorce. Almost two-thirds maintained weekly contact, 89 percent were assisting with babysitting and other services, and 75 percent were providing economic assistance.
Exposure: Parent Gender Differences

Parental gender differences exist in how parents experience parenthood during all stages of their children's lives. Several studies suggest that compared to fathers, mothers' higher levels of involvement and responsibility for daily childcare probably exposes them to greater potential for disagreements and tensions with their children (Hochschild, 1989; Rubin, 1995), as well as opportunity to provide emotional support (Umberson, 1989). At the same time, this increased exposure can create greater stressors and demands that lead to distress (Almeida & Kessler, 1998). For fathers, spending less time with children limits the sources and opportunities for providing emotional support or engaging in conflict.

Past research has shown that spending more time with children increases the likelihood of father-child conflict (Almeida & Galambos, 1991; Almeida & Wethington, 1995). However, time is not the only issue determining gender differences in exposure to child-related experiences. Some research suggests that differences such as emotional investment in the family, responsibilities for certain tasks, and status in the family are related to the frequency and types of parents' child-related experiences.

Stressors. Parent gender differences in exposure to child-related stressors has frequently been explained in terms of time spent with the child (Hochschild, 1989; Rubin, 1995). However, gender role theory provides another explanation that has been proposed by researchers. The view of this perspective is that women are more sensitive than men to events that are related to other people in their lives. Therefore women more often report stressors of the home and family, whereas men report stressors related to work, finances, or topics outside the family. In a sample of 166 married couples who completed
a short daily diary questionnaire on each of 42 consecutive days, Almeida & Kessler (1998) found that women experienced more home overloads, family demands, and child arguments than husbands did. Men reported stressors pertaining to work overloads, and arguments with people other than their spouses or children. In another study, Hagestad (1984,1987) examined sources of intergenerational conflict among 148 three-generation families in Chicago and found relatives reported that family matters were principal causes of trouble reported by daughters, mothers, and grandmothers. Political and social issues tended to underlie difficulties with male relations. Understandably, these reports could involve a cohort effect, wherein the roles of the men and women in the earlier generations may have been more stereotypical. However in a recent study, Almeida, Wethington, and Chandler (1999) also found that mothers reported more parent-child tensions than fathers even on the weekends when it is presumed fathers would have as much opportunity to spend with their children as mothers do.

In some situations, however, it is clear that as daily primary caretakers of children, mothers are more exposed to stressors. Children may especially put constant demands on mothers who are home all day with them (Mirowsky & Ross, 1989). Additionally, mothers who stay at home are isolated from others, yet at the same time have decreased privacy and time alone (Gove & Geerken, 1977). In a study on women and work, Mirowsky and Ross (1989) interviewed 680 couples and found that employed mothers of young children face yet another problem related to children in the home. The majority of employed mothers of young children are still largely responsible for childcare, thus they are the ones in the marriage who face difficulties finding childcare
arrangements.

At a time when exposure to child-related stressors is intensified, such as when children have disabilities, mothers and fathers also tend to differ in their perception of stressors. Pruchno & Patrick (1999) studied parents’ stressors in families where children have lifelong disabilities. In their study, 251 couples ages 50-86 had children in age from twelve to fifty-five. Fathers, more than mothers, reported higher levels of both noncompliance and violence in their children while mothers reported more caregiving burden than fathers. Similarly, Bailey, Blasco, and Simeonsson (1992) found that mothers of young children with developmental disabilities report more problems and greater needs than do fathers.

In the realm of parent-child conflict, many studies of adolescents also concur on greater mother involvement. Steinberg (1987) surveyed 204 families with children aged 10-15 years. He found that during the time a child is in puberty, conflict in the family is more likely to surface between the adolescents and their mothers than between adolescents and their fathers. One explanation offered was that children may perceive status difference between parents, and find it easier to act out autonomy at the expense of the mother, considered the lower-status parent. Montemayor and Hanson (1985) also found that in 64 families with adolescents, the children are more likely to report having conflicts with mothers than fathers and, in turn, mothers report having more conflicts with their adolescent than do fathers. In this study, it is suggested that because mothers interact more frequently with their adolescents, they are more likely to discuss topics that lead to conflict. Further, mothers more than fathers appear more likely to reprimand their
adolescents for what they consider to be an inappropriate interpersonal behavior. This does not happen as frequently with fathers perhaps because adolescents spend less time with them and because fathers are less involved in socialization.

**Emotional Support.** Parents’ gender may be associated with the opportunity for expression of generativity, such as in providing emotional support. In a previously described study, Keyes and Ryff (1998) found that women report higher levels than do men on nearly all aspects of generativity and they see themselves as greater generative resources than do men. In particular, they found that compared with men, women extend their emotional support to more people. Gender differences in the extensiveness of emotional support parallels research showing that mothers, compared with fathers, provide more types of help to their children (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). In a more recent study, Rossi (1999) also found that women report giving greater number of hours to social support of family members, caregiving and volunteer work. One explanation for this difference may be that as primary caregivers, women spend more time with children and have more opportunity to provide supportive acts directed toward their children. However, Rossi & Rossi (1990) found these differences between mothers and fathers continue to remain even after the children have grown and left the parental home. Similarly, Umberson (1989) found that mothers visit and talk with their adult children more often than do fathers, children provide more social support to their mothers than their fathers, and mothers report less overall dissatisfaction with their older children. Also, in a survey of 3,002 parents of adult children, Marks (1995) found that the proportion of mothers who report both giving and receiving emotional support was
double or more the proportion of fathers.

While it may be true that an explanation for mothers providing more emotional support to children is related to time available, another reason may be that mothers are more sought out for comfort than are fathers (Umberson, 1989). Almeida et al. (in press) found that children are more likely to seek out fathers who are competent in providing emotional support than those who are not. However, Sarason & Sarason (1985) found that women are more adept than are men in the support process, thus children prefer to rely on them in times of need.

Available time to spend with children was also not at issue in a study of fathers support to their children. In a sample of 1465 males living with a partner and one or more children aged 18 or younger, Marsiglio (1991) found that those fathers who were unemployed were not more involved in engagement activities with their children than were employed fathers. However, one explanation for this effect was that unemployed fathers were depressed about their work status, and therefore could not engage with their children.

Yet another explanation for the findings of gender differences in provision of support may be differences in how emotional support is defined. Nock and Kingston (1988) found the amount of time fathers had to engage in supportive activity with their children was related to the type of activity. The number of hours fathers spent at work, especially evening hours, was negatively related to the amount of time fathers spent with their children in activities such as visiting, or chatting. However, work scheduling was not related to father's time spent with children in activities such as indoor and outdoor
Parents' Emotional Reactivity to Day-to-Day Child-Related Experiences

Emotional reactivity to child-related experiences refers to the individual’s emotional response in the presence of the experience (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995). The present study investigates parental reactivity to child-related stressful experiences, as well as reactivity to providing emotional support to children. Differences in parents’ reactivity may be moderated by whether the parent has a child who is a minor or an adult, as well as by the gender of the parent.

Reactivity: Child Age Differences

The quality of parent-child relationships is associated with parent’s well-being throughout the life course—even after children become adults and leave the parental home (Murtran and Reitzes 1984; Quinn 1983; Umberson 1992). As it is possible for parents in middle adulthood to have both minor and adult children, the tasks of parenting in middle age may present distinct opportunities for affecting parental well-being (Umberson, 1996). The age of the child can affect parental well-being associated with child-related stressors as well as parental provision of support. It may be that reactivity is affected by the frequency of which these experiences arise, as well as the intensity of the particular situation.

Stressors. A few studies suggest that having minor children may benefit parents’ health behaviors (Umberson 1987) and reduce parents’ mortality rates (Kobrin and Hendershot 1977). However, a majority of studies emphasize that parenting young children is characterized by demands and strains that are conducive to dissatisfaction,
unhappiness, and psychological distress (Belsky & Rovine, 1990). Mirowsky and Ross (1989) surveyed 680 parents throughout the United States. They examined depression levels of parents according to whether or not there are young children (under the age of 12) in the home. Findings suggested that parents did report more psychological distress than people who did not have children.

Pasley and Gecas (1984) compared parents’ reactions to child age differences in child-related experiences. They asked 136 fathers and 149 mothers questions concerning what were the best and most difficult stages of being a parent. Parenting younger children (0-1) was reported as the best stage, and adolescence was clearly found to be the most difficult stage of parenting. Montemayor (1986) found that approximately 20 percent of parents and adolescents had serious and continual difficulty with each other, while another 20 percent had intermittent relational problems.

Reasons given for parents’ difficulties associated with their adolescents fit mainly into the categories of “issues of independence” and “lack of control”. Many parents in middle age have adolescent children who are in the process of becoming physically and cognitively mature, are searching for identity and are testing their independence. Although the task of these parents is to help their adolescents strive for autonomy and identity, their children are spending less time at home and more time with their peers which may decrease the opportunity for parent’s interaction, but increase the opportunity to worry for the child’s safety. As the adolescent grows older, they decrease their reliance on parental advice or sometimes reject advice in order to equalize social power in relationship with parents (Kumar & Tripathi, 1986). They are becoming more influenced
by peers in areas such as dress, appearance and some types of antisocial behavior. This decreased influence parents experience over their children can also be associated with parents' stress, decreased self-esteem and depression in that they feel as if they are becoming powerless in their role as a parent. (Perlmutter and Monty, 1979; Seligman, 1975). Papini and Sebby (1987) had similar findings in a study in which 51 families responded to an assessment designed to measure affective relations between parents and their adolescent children. The results indicated that affective differences among mothers and adolescents arise as mothers perceive themselves exercising less control over the behavior of the adolescent during pubertal maturation.

Silverberg and Steinberg (1990) found that parents' reactivity to their adolescent's behaviors was related to other aspects of the parent's life. In 129 families of adolescents between the ages of 10 and 15, Silverberg and Steinberg found that higher levels of children's' dating behavior and involvement in mixed-sex peer group activities are associated with parents midlife concerns, lower life satisfaction, or more frequent psychological symptoms. However, these effects were found only among parents who were not strongly invested in a paid-work role. Thus, lack of a strong sense of worth outside of the family may cause parents more concern at the prospect of losing their adolescent child.

Parents' reactivity to experiences involving their adult children has been difficult to ascertain from the majority of past research. This is due in part to the limited number of studies on the parent's perspective of the parent-adult child relationship. However, many of those studies that do focus on the parents' perspective have only provided global
reports of parents’ satisfaction with their relationship with their adult children. Previous research on later life families with adult children has been criticized for failing to consider the potentially negative aspects of parent-child relationships (Mancini & Bleizner, 1989). The results of the relatively few studies that have been conducted on this stage of parenting generally reveal positive feelings parents have about the adult child-parent relationship. Even in clinical settings where frank disclosure is necessary for therapy, there seems to be considerable reluctance from parents to report areas of conflict with their adult children (Mancini & Bleiszner, 1989). Generational stake theory (Acock & Bengston, 1980; Bengston & Kuypers, 1971) helps us to understand why the reports of parents and young adult children differ. This theory emphasizes that parents are motivated to present a picture of strong intergenerational ties in order to maintain intergenerational continuity. Nonetheless, some research suggests that intimacy between midlife parents and adult children increases over the adult years (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Fathers talk about the gain of friendship with their grown children (Baruch & Brooks-Gunn, 1984) and the mother-child relationship seems to be at its best during the child’s adult years, when both mother’s and child’s autonomy is unthreatened and both are capable of reciprocating care and assistance (Fingerman, 1996).

Some studies attempting to explain the relationship between parental well-being and adult child experiences have investigated parents’ assessment of how their adult children “turned out” (Ryff et al., 1994). Erikson wrote “it is through reconsidering their children’s adulthood successes and failures that they [parents] seek retroactively to validate the responsible caring they themselves provided in their years of active
parenting” (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986). These parents may not only have uncertainty about their child’s future achievement but they may also have to confront the likelihood or current reality of the children’s ‘failure’. These assessments lead to an evaluation of themselves as parents, thus affecting their well-being. In a study of 215 midlife parents conducted by Ryff et al., (1994), it was found that self-reports of parental depression, personal growth, and positive relations with others were significantly linked to evaluations of children’s adjustment. Parents who judged their children to be happy and have successful marriages also had higher levels of psychological well-being themselves. In their study of 609 parents of adult children, Aquilino and Supple (1991) also found that parent’s satisfaction with adult children is related to what the children have done with their lives. For example, having a child who is enrolled in college is positively related to parents’ expression of relationship quality. Parents of college students describe closer relations with their children as well as lower levels of conflict. Also, parents with married adult children reported higher levels of emotional closeness and shared activities and lower levels of conflict and fewer control issues than parents of never-married adult children. In the same vein, it has also been suggested that children’s marital problems may be a predictor of parents’ psychological distress (Greenberg and Becker, 1988; Hagestad, Smyer, & Stierman, 1984; Johnson & Binick, 1982).

Interestingly, some research on adult children who return to the parental home indicate that relationships between parents and their coresidential adult children are not generally problematic. For example, in a longitudinal study of 1507 midlife parents (average age 47.5 years) designed to explore continuity and change in parent-child
relations as children make the transition to adulthood, Aquilino (1997) found that parents of co-resident adult children reported higher levels of emotional closeness and shared activities, but also greater conflict issues. Aquilino also found again that the experiences of parents of adult children vary with the status of the adult child. For example, adult children whose marriages break up often place a burden on parental resources, with needs for instrumental and emotional support. Also, parents whose adult children have become new parents reported lower levels of emotional closeness, and higher levels of conflict. Umberson, (1992) compared parents of coresidential adult children with parents whose children did not live with them. In face-to-face interviews Umberson found that parents who share a residence with a child over age eighteen report more strained relationships with their adult children and more dissatisfaction with the parental role than do parents of like-aged adult children who did not live with a child. One explanation for the difference between these results and those found by Aquilino (1991) may be that in Umberson’s study, it is not specified whether the adult child returned home or never left home. If a child has not yet left home, parents may not have granted them adult status, thus issues of parental authority and their children’s right to make their own choices play a greater role during co-residence.

When adult children have problematic situations, they can be of much greater severity than when minor children experience problems, and thus can be especially distressing for parents. Pillemer and Suitor (1991) conducted a national telephone survey, in which 1420 elderly Canadians, aged 65-100 years, reported whether their child had problems during the past year. They found that parents whose adult children had mental,
physical, or substance abuse or stress-related problems experienced greater depression than did parents whose children did not have these problems. Other studies of mentally ill adults have also found that parents experience both substantial psychological distress and reduced marital quality resulting from problems associated with their children's bizarre and threatening behaviors (Cook, 1988; Cook & Cohler, 1986). Although these studies offer compelling information, it is important to note the direction of effect remains unclear. For one, a cross-sectional study does not allow for the identification of initial triggers—such as marital unhappiness leading to children's behaviors or vice versa. Another interesting factor to investigate in these studies would have been testing for genetic similarities between parents and children in areas such as depression.

**Emotional support.** It is suggested that expressing generativity through providing emotional support contributes to parent's well-being (e.g., Keyes & Ryff, 1998). However, research on parents' reactivity associated with emotional support provided to their young children is in short supply. In one study found, it seems there are differences in the type of parental reactivity that is being measured. For example, MacDermid et al., (1998) studied reactions to generative expressions in 181 employed mothers of children over 6 years. While expressing emotional support to children was significantly and positively related to satisfaction in the parental role, it was not significantly related to psychological well-being. It may be that parents of minor children are not displaying reactivity to providing their children with emotional support because to them it is an expected part of parenting young children.

On the other hand, parents of adult children may be more reactive to providing
emotional support. Generational stake theory would suggest parents of adult children would respond favorably to being able to provide emotional support as a means of ensuring intergenerational harmony. For example, although demands from adult children may be conducive to psychological distress, at the same time they may contribute to a parent’s sense of being needed and having purpose in life (Umberson and Gove, 1989). However, in that excess need for support may suggest unhealthy dependence, parents of adult children may find excess need for emotional support more distressing than would parents of minor children. Thus, it may be the increased quantity of support to an adult child that turns the parent’s emotional reaction from one that is positive to one that is negative. Morale can suffer if adult children’s problems require parents to continue to provide them with care and support. For example, Mutran & Reitzes (1984) reported that widows’ provision of support to their adult children was associated with greater negative feelings. Similarly, Mancini and Bleizner (1986) found greater support to adult children to be associated with increased life stress. Pillemer and Suitor (1991, p.587) suggest that "... these negative effects may be the result of stress experienced when children’s problems necessitate parents’ provision of support, rather than stress resulting from the direct ‘costs’ of providing support”. Thus, to the extent that problems experienced by adult children lead to their increased dependency on parents, the quality of the relationship tends to decline, and decrements in parents’ psychological well-being can result.

Reactivity: Parent Gender Differences

Stressors. It appears that the significance of the family as a source of stress is not
the same for men and women. In a previously described study, Kessler and McLeod (1984) found that women were more likely to become distressed over events that occurred to their significant others whereas men became more distressed over financial events and income loss. Almeida and Kessler's (1998) findings on gender differences in distress were consistent with this research in that women become more upset by interpersonal arguments and by giving support to others whereas men become more upset by work and financial problems. Similarly, Conger and colleagues (1993) showed that women were more distressed over events in the family while men were more responsive to work events. This may be because women are more inclined to base identity and self concept in relationships (Gilligan, 1982). Thus, mothers in particular are at greater risk for distress when they experience ongoing strains or stressors in their relationships with their children (Scott and Alwin, 1989).

Or, it may be that the gender difference in reactivity to family stressors is because women may have greater involvement in family affairs. Their active engagement in family relationships and the accompanying emotional stake that evolves means that they are unlikely to remain unabsorbed by the life problems of family members. Women seem more likely to feel a personal responsibility to either solve the problem or share the burden of experiencing the problem than men are. As problems develop for any of their significant others, such as husband, parents, and children, even coworkers and friends, women often report being more affected by these problems (Kessler, McLeod, & Wethington, 1985; Walker, Martin, & Jones, 1992). Pruchno, Peters and Burant (1996) also found that mother's well-being varies as a function of father-child disagreement,
child negative events, as well as mother-child disagreement.

Crnic and Booth (1991) found that both mothers and fathers of young children are also differently affected by minor stress. During the infancy and toddler periods, mothers' perceived hassles with parenting were not frequently or strongly related to parenting or life satisfaction. By early preschool age, however, both the frequency and intensity of parenting hassles were related to lower parenting and life satisfaction. The opposite was true for fathers, as both the frequency and intensity of hassles was most strongly related to parenting and life satisfaction during the infancy period. Hassles, however, continued to be somewhat related to parenting satisfaction across each age period. These findings may reflect a more difficult transition to parenthood for fathers.

Adolescence also seems to be a more difficult time for mothers than for fathers. One explanation has been that mothers may be more attached to and emotionally invested in their children, thus more distressed when there is a struggle for independence, which is so characteristic of adolescence. The child's desire for autonomy is a significant predictor of distress for mothers but not fathers (Small, Eastman & Cornelius, 1988). It may be that the effect of children striving for autonomy is felt in the more day-to-day child-rearing tasks such as setting limits, negotiating rules, and administering discipline, which are typically handled by mothers. Particular manifestations of adolescent autonomy have been shown to be stressful to parents (Silverberg, 1996; Small et al. 1988). Adolescent engagement in deviant activities was significantly related to distress for both parents, but somewhat more for mothers than fathers (Small et al. 1988). On the other hand, non-adherence to parental advice was the strongest predictor of parental distress for fathers,
but also holds some importance for mothers (Small et al. 1988). In a longitudinal study, Silverberg (1996) found that mothers, but not fathers, seem to be adversely affected by the intensity of conflict they experience with their adolescents regarding day-to-day issues such as curfew, chores, free time, and style of clothes. As a consequence of their central role in childrearing and in the daily running of the household, they may simply have more opportunities for engaging in conflictual discussions with their youngsters (Montemayor, 1986). Thus, the number of these discussions as well as their intensity begin to take their toll on the mothers.

Another study did not find parent gender differences in psychological distress related to the child-related experiences of their adolescents. In their study of 122 adolescents (ages 11-14) and their parents, Wierson, Armistead, Forehand, Thomas and Fauber (1990) also found that mothers and fathers did not differ on depression, marital adjustment or perceived parenting competency although mothers reported a greater number of conflicts, and more intense discussions of conflict with their adolescents. These results are different from the previously mentioned studies finding parent gender differences in well-being associated with child-related experiences. Perhaps this is because parental well-being was not measured in this study as an effect of child-related stressors, but rather as an effect of being parents of adolescent children.

Parents of children with psychological or physical disabilities are at an even greater risk of distress. Studies of middle-aged parents show that children's psychological problems create more anxiety, depression, and emotional drain for mothers than fathers (Cook, 1988; Cook & Cohler, 1986). Researchers have found that among parents with
physically or emotionally disabled young children (Schilling, Shinkle, & Kirkham, 1985), mothers experience more stress and greater reductions in psychological well-being than do fathers. Another study found that in families of young children with developmental disabilities, mothers report more problems but fathers experience more distress (Cummings, 1976). The difference in these studies may lie in which aspect of the child or the child’s life that is being investigated. While the well-being of fathers seems to be affected by the child’s level of disability, communication abilities and temperament, the well-being of mothers is more strongly associated with the number of additional or unusual caregiving requirements.

As children become adults, there is a psychological boost for many parents, especially mothers, once children leave the parental home and daily strains and psychological effects of parenting are reduced (e.g., Pearlin, 1987). With that premise, Aquilino and Supple (1991) presumed that the presence of young adult children (19-34) in the parent’s household would be a source of stress for parents, but found this was not the case. Although parent-child relations were not dominated by conflict, conflict remained the strongest single predictor of parents’ satisfaction with having their adult child living at home. For mothers, frequency of disagreements was less important than their intensity whereas for fathers, the occurrence of disagreements exerted a strong negative effect on satisfaction, regardless of intensity.

Problems and strains in the lives of adult children may also affect parents’ emotional well-being differently. In her study of parents of adult children, Greenberg (1991) found that for mothers, but not fathers, there was a significant relationship
between problems in the lives of their adult children and the mother’s emotional well-being. This result should be viewed with caution, however, and may be a methodological artifact. During the qualitative part in the same study, fathers who were interviewed face-to-face spoke of experiencing considerable personal distress from their children’s problems.

Parents of disabled adults also experience substantial psychological distress. Parents of mentally ill adults experience both distress and reduced marital quality resulting from problems associated with their children’s bizarre and threatening behaviors (Cook & Cohler, 1986). However, mothers in particular experienced high levels of anxiety, depression, and emotional strain. Pruchno, Peters and Burant (1996) investigated parents of adult children with lifelong disabilities. Fathers reported more negative relationships with their children than did mothers. Mothers reported more caregiving burden than did fathers, but mothers also reported more caregiving satisfaction than did fathers. There were no significant differences between mothers and fathers on levels of depression or life satisfaction. In this study, the experiences of mothers and fathers were investigated using different methods. The women in this study participated in face-to-face interviews and their husbands responded using a self-administered mail-back survey. For this reason, one may consider the possibility of social desirability bias in mother’s reporting less negative reactions associated with their children versus fathers’ reports using a survey.

**Emotional Support.** Evidence exists that women have more demands for support made on them by their networks than do men (Fischer, 1982; Gove and Hughes, 1984).
Also, as problems develop for any of women's significant others, such as husbands, parents, and children, women often report being more affected by these problems (Kessler, McLeod, & Wethington, 1985; Walker, Martin, & Jones, 1992). Women seem more likely to feel a personal responsibility to solve the problem or share the burden of experiencing the problem than men are. Sometimes coincident with this sense of responsibility is psychological distress. Various explanations may provide an understanding of the women's negative reactivity to these demands. It may be that providing support leads to distress only when the provider is already overloaded with so many demands for nurturance that her capacities break down. (Kessler & McLeod, 1984). Conversely, support relationships also positively affect the psychological well-being of midlife mothers more than fathers. In a previously mentioned survey of midlife parents (aged 35-64) of adult children, Marks (1995) found that support relationships were related to the psychological well-being of midlife mothers more than fathers. In general, giving to adult children was associated with greater psychological well-being for mothers. In his (1996) study of parents whose children aged 19-34 had returned home, Aquilino measured the satisfaction with having a child at home. He found only one significant sex-of-parent effect was evident: mothers reported a higher frequency of enjoyable time with returned adult children than did fathers. In that children who return home are likely to be in need of emotional support from parents, it seems that mothers enjoyment of their coresident children reflects a reactivity to providing support that benefits their well-being.

Parents' well-being associated with providing support to their children is also
affected by the child’s rejection of that support. Silverberg (1996) found that mothers who perceive their adolescent daughters as more disagreeable, less willing to come for or accept emotional support, or less willing to come for or accept guidance and advice report more intense midlife identity concerns, lower life satisfaction, and more psychological symptoms. Similarly, those fathers who also reported increased ‘challenge or distance’ in the guidance and emotional support domains with their sons seemed to experience more intense midlife identity concerns and lower general life satisfaction.

Another indication of father’s reactivity to the inability to provide support for their children is when children have grown and are leaving home. Sullivan & Sullivan (1980) found that fathers more than mothers have difficulty adjusting to an adolescent son leaving home for college. It is possible this gender difference is related to mother’s being closer to their children and able to provide emotional support to them all their lives. Therefore they will not have the regrets of missing the chance to fulfill their generative need of giving support to their children, as fathers might.

Indeed, even if mothers choose to remain uninvolved with the problems of their children, it still may be difficult to achieve, for mothers are more likely than men to be sought out as social supports. Women are more responsive than men in meeting the life crises of network members, and the emotional costs of caring for those in one’s network account for a substantial part of the pervasive mental-health disadvantage of women (Kessler and McLeod, 1985).
Synergistic Effects of Stress and Generativity

The term synergy applies to "...situations involving the action of two or more agents in effecting an outcome" (von Eye, Schuster, & Rogers, 1998, p. 1). Two possible outcomes for the synergistic effects of experiencing stressors and expressing generativity are 1) an exacerbating effect and 2) a buffering effect. First, it has been suggested that it can be distressing to provide emotional support to an individual whose own stressful situation also affects the provider. Previous research suggests that the negative aspects of parent-adult child relationships have more impact on the well-being of parents than do the positive aspects (Umberson 1992; Rook 1984). Additionally, the argument against the benefit of generative support for parental well-being is that there may be high costs associated with caring (La Gaipa, 1990). For example, Mutran & Reitzes (1984) reported that widows' provision of support to their adult children was associated with negative feelings. Furthermore, it has been suggested that this synergistic effect is related to the quantity of these two agents. For example, Mancini and Bleizner (1986) found that greater support to children is associated with increased life stress. This, accompanied by the distress resulting from a child-related stressor would result in exacerbating a negative psychological outcome.

Secondly, it may be that providing emotional support at a time when someone is experiencing a stressor buffers the psychological distress associated with the stressor. It has been suggested that concern with others provides meaning in life, and as a result, helping someone in need may be one of the most influential factors contributing to psychological well-being (e.g., Antonucci, 1989; Hirsch, 1981). For example, demands
from children may be conducive to psychological distress but at the same time contribute to a parent’s sense of being needed and having purpose in life (Umberson and Gove, 1989). In other words, demands from children may have some negative and positive effect for parents’ well-being. Brody’s (1985) identification of the negative effects of caregiver burden, such as depression, anxiety, frustration, helplessness, etc. may also apply to the effects of helping one’s a child in need. However it could be that generativity, as in providing support and guidance for children counterbalances those effects.
Hypotheses

The present study considered three general questions regarding parents' child-related experiences focusing on child-age differences and parent gender as an indicator of the variations of parental experiences. The first question will ascertain descriptive information of midlife parents' child-related experiences, the second will focus on parents' negative mood, and the third will consider the synergistic effect of experiencing stressors and providing emotional support. Based on an examination of the relevant literature, these questions resulted in the postulation of the following hypotheses.

A. To what extent are child-related stressful events, provision of emotional support, as well as the average level of negative mood associated with child age and parent gender?

1) Parents of minor children will experience more frequent low severity daily child-related stressors than parents of adult children.

2) Parents of minor children will experience more frequent high severity daily child-related stressors than parents of adult children.

3) Parents of minor children will provide emotional support more frequently than will parents of adult children.

4) Parents of minor children will report more negative mood than will parents of adult children.

5) Mothers will experience more frequent low severity daily child-related stressors than will fathers.
6) Mothers will experience more frequent high severity daily child-related stressors than will fathers.

7) Mothers will provide emotional support more frequently than will fathers.

8) Mothers will report more negative mood than will fathers.

B. To what extent do child age and parent gender moderate the effects of child-related stressful events and emotional support on parental negative mood?

9) The relationship between low severity child-related stressors and negative mood will be greater for parents of adult children compared to parents of minor children.

10) The relationship between high severity child-related stressors and negative mood will be greater for parents of adult children compared to parents of minor children.

11) The relationship between emotional support and distress will be greater for parents of adult children compared to parents of minor children.

12) The relationship between low severity child-related stressors and negative mood will be greater for mothers compared to fathers.

13) The relationship between high severity child-related stressors and negative mood will be greater for mothers compared to fathers.

14) The relationship between emotional support and negative mood will be greater for mothers compared to fathers.
C. Does providing children with emotional support moderate the effect of daily child-related stressors on daily parental distress?

11) Providing children with emotional support will increase the effect of both low and high severity daily child-related stressors on daily parental negative mood.
CHAPTER 3: METHOD

Participants

The MacArthur MIDUS Survey

The respondents were part of the National Study of Daily Experiences (NSDE), all of whom had previously participated in the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) Survey, a nationally representative telephone-mail survey of 6,106 people in the age range 25-74. The MIDUS was carried out in 1995-1996 under the auspices of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Midlife (Orville Gilbert Brim, Director). The MIDUS survey was designed by an interdisciplinary team of 28 researchers to study patterns and correlates of midlife development in the United States with special emphasis on physical health, psychological well-being, and social responsibility.

The MIDUS was fielded in January 1996 and was comprised of three subsamples. The main component consists of a representative subsample of 3032 respondents who were obtained through random digit dialing (RDD) of telephone numbers. Another subsample consisted of a national sample of 987 twin pairs, and yet another subsample consisted of 1800 siblings of the RDD respondents. The NSDE sample was recruited from the RDD and twin pair components of the MIDUS. For the RDD subsample, contact persons were informed that the survey was designed to study health and well-being during the middle years of life and that participation would entail completing a telephone interview and two mail questionnaires. After explaining the study to the informant, a household listing was generated of people in the age range of 25-74 and a random
respondent was selected. No other person in the household was selected if the selected respondent did not complete the interview. Once it was determined that the respondent would be included in the survey, an attempt was made to talk with this person and recruit them to be a participant. A brochure was mailed to respondents who asked for more information and a recontact telephone appointment was made after the time they received the brochure. Senior study staff was also made available to respondents requesting information not contained in the brochure before deciding to participate. Once respondents decided to participate, they completed a telephone interview that lasted an average of thirty minutes, as well as mailed questionnaires that were estimated to take an average of an additional two hours to complete. The questionnaire mailing also included a boxed pen and a check for $20. A reminder postcard was mailed to all respondents three days after the initial questionnaire. A second questionnaire with a cover letter urging respondents to return the first questionnaire was mailed two weeks later to all respondents who had not returned the questionnaire by that time. Reminder telephone calls were made two weeks later to all respondents who had still not returned the questionnaire.

**The National Study of Daily Experiences**

The NSDE sample was obtained through random selection from the MIDUS RDD subsample. Of the 1242 respondents contacted, 1031 people agreed to participate, yielding a response rate of 83%. The total sample of the NSDE is comprised of 562 women and 469 men. Respondents who agreed to participate in the NSDE study received
a twenty dollar check and a letter explaining that the purpose of the project was to study
how day-to-day stress and lifestyle affect health.

Participants for the present study were selected from the NSDE sample in two steps. Only those participants who identified themselves as parents between the ages of 35 and 65 were selected. This resulted in a sample of 501 midlife parents. From this group, two parent groupings were established by categories of minor and adult children. Adult children were those children aged 22 and above. Minor children were those children aged 1 to 21. Children up to the age of 22 were chosen conceptually to include children who may still be in college, and therefore may still be dependent on their parents. The second step involved selecting parents who had either minor or adult children, but not both. Thus, parents were included in a category only if they did not have children in the other category. The categories consist of the following: parents of minor children, ages 1 to 21 (n = 214; 107 mothers, 107 fathers), and parents of adult children, ages 22 and above (n = 287; 107 mothers, 180 fathers).

Table 1 compares characteristics of the parent subsample, the total NSDE sample, and the MIDUS sample from which it was drawn. The samples had somewhat similar distributions for age, race, marital status, and education. The parent sample had slightly more females (42% are males), as well as more married respondents (72%) than the MIDUS and NSDE sample. At the time of the study, sixty-five percent of the mothers were married, compared to eighty-two percent of the fathers. The average family income was slightly over $63,000. Men had slightly higher levels of education than women did (65% men had at least some higher education). Respondents were mostly Caucasian.
(92%), and were an average of 49 years of age. Children ranged in age from 1 to 56 years, and could be related to their parents' biologically or non-biologically.

Procedure

Over the course of the eight consecutive evenings, respondents in the NSDE completed short telephone interviews about their daily experiences. Data were recorded via the Computer Aided Telephone Interviewing (CATI) program that incorporated skip patterns, open-ended probe questions as well as the ability to keypunch the data during the interview. The phone interview was audio taped if the participants consented. These taped narratives were then transcribed and coded for a variety of characteristics at a later date. The beginning of the interview consisted of demographic information about the respondent and characteristics about the day of the interview (e.g., study day, day of week). This information determined the question time frame for the rest of the interview. For example on the first day of interviewing, the time frame for the questions referred to the past 24 hours ("since this time yesterday"). On subsequent days the time frame was "since we spoke yesterday". This helped to prevent overlapping information across the days of interviewing. On the final evening of interviewing, respondents also answered several questions about their previous week. Most of these questions about the week parallel the daily questions. Interviews were typically scheduled in the evenings to insure the participant would be home. However, at the end of each interview, the participant was allowed to designate a preferred time for the next interview. If the participant could not be reached at the agreed upon time, the interviewer attempted further callbacks. In the
event a participant knew he/she would not be home the following day, the interviewers provided a toll free number where they could be reached to conduct the interview.

Data collection spanned an entire year (March 1996 to April 1997) and consisted of 40 separate ‘flights’ of interviews with each flight representing the eight-day sequence of interviews from approximately 38 respondents. Respondents completed an average of 7 of the 8 interviews resulting in an approximate total of 3507 daily interviews. The initiation of interview flights was staggered across the day of the week to control for the possible confounding between day of study and day of week.

The risks to the rights and welfare of the subjects are confined exclusively to the risks involved in obtaining personal self-report data and information about daily events that might have happened to them. These risks are possible breaches of confidentially and embarrassment due to the raising of sensitive issues to the individual. Confidentiality is maintained by the identification of each respondent with a code number. All data have been stored in locked file cabinets. Respondents were informed that responses are completely confidential and will not be communicated to anyone. Attempts were made to safeguard participants from adverse reactions to sensitive topics. As part of the diary interview, respondents were instructed that they had the choice of not answering questions with which they felt uncomfortable.

Measures

Measures of child-related daily emotional support, child-related stressful experiences, and parental mood were collected every day for a period of 8 consecutive days. The present study uses only those reported stressors and emotional support that
involved respondents' children (determined by asking the respondent 'who was involved in the event?'). The two following measures assessed these daily experiences of parents: parent's provision of emotional support to children; and the occurrence of child-related stressors. The third measure assessed parent's level of daily negative mood.

**Child-related Experiences**

**Daily Emotional Support: An Indicator of Generativity**

Daily emotional support was assessed by asking respondents whether or not in the last 24 hours they had spent "any time giving emotional support to anyone, like (a) listening to their problems, (b) giving advice, or (c) comforting them". Respondents were given a score of "1" if they reported emotionally supportive interactions on that day and a "0" if they did not. If they responded affirmatively, they were asked, "whom did you give emotional support to?" The data used for this study included only those responses that involved a child. For purposes of analysis, the child-related supportive events that parents experienced are calculated by aggregating the reported occurrences across the week, resulting in a percentage of days of the diary week parents responded affirmatively.

**Child-Related Stressors**

Child-related stressors were assessed through a semi-structured Daily Inventory of Stressful Experiences (DISE, Almeida, 1998). The DISE consists of a series of stem questions asking whether certain types of events have occurred in the past 24 hours along with a set of interviewer guidelines for probing affirmative responses and a series of structured questions that measured respondents' appraisal of the stressors (see Appendix A). The aim of the interviewing technique is to acquire a short narrative of each event
that includes descriptive information (e.g., topic or content of the stress, who was involved, how long the stressor lasted) as well as what was at stake for the respondent. Open-ended information for each reported stressor was tape recorded then transcribed and coded for several characteristics. This investigator-based approach allowed the distinction between a stressful event (e.g., conflict with child) and the affective response to the stressor (e.g., crying or feeling sad). Another benefit of this approach was the ability to identify overlapping reports of stressors. In the present study, approximately 5% of the reported stressors were discarded because they were either solely affective responses or they were identical to a stressor that was previously described on that day.

For each stressor, coders rated: (a) content classification (e.g., work overload, argument with child, traffic problem); (b) who was involved in the event; (c) dimensions of appraised threat (loss, danger, disappointment, frustration, opportunity); and (d) severity of stress. In addition, respondents provided reports of (e) degree of severity and (f) stake domains (i.e., areas of life that were at risk because of the stressor).

Stressful events were categorized into one of eight broad classifications: Interpersonal tensions; Work/Education; Home; Finances; Health/Accident; Network; and Miscellaneous. Next they were placed into one of 54 specific classifications. Interpersonal tensions included stressors involving disagreements and verbal arguments, as well as non-conflictual but tense interactions with others. Network stressors were events that happened to close relatives (e.g., respondent’s child) that were stressful for the respondent. Focus of involvement assessed whether other individuals were involved in the stressors and, if so, what their relation was to the respondent (Brown & Harris, 1978).
For *child-related stressors*, respondents were given a score of ‘1’ if they reported a child experience (i.e., a verbal disagreement, a non-verbal tension, an other child-related stressor) on that day and a ‘0’ if there was no reported experience. For example, they were asked “Did anything happen at home in the last 24 hours (or at work, or to someone else, etc.) that most people would consider stressful?” For purposes of this study the child-related stressors that parents experienced are calculated by aggregating the reported occurrences across the week, resulting in a percentage of days of the diary week in which each variable was coded as ‘1’.

Severity of child-related stressors was based upon the degree of disruptiveness and unpleasantness associated with the stressor (Brown & Harris, 1978). Coders provided objective ratings of the stressful events. Ratings range from ‘1’—a minor or trivial annoyance, to ‘4’—a severely disruptive event. For the purposes of this study, the severity score of stressful experiences is transformed into two variables by placing events of low (1) and medium (2) severity together into a ‘low’ severity variable, and events of high (3) and extreme (4) severity into a ‘high’ severity variable. Respondents were given a score of “1” if they reported a child-related stressor on that day and a “0” if they did not, permitting a total to be calculated of all high or low severity events a participant experienced during the week. Thus, both the low and high severity events that parents experienced are calculated by the percentage of days in the diary week in which each type of event was recorded by the parents in the study. The documentation and guidelines for all of these ratings is provided in an interview and coding manual (Almeida, 1998). In addition, all of the transcribed descriptions of daily stressors and their corresponding
ratings are contained in an “electronic dictionary” stored on a computer spreadsheet. This dictionary consists of over 4000 rated daily stressors and can be searched and cross-referenced by any of the DISE measures.

**Parent Daily Mood**

The telephone diary included an inventory of 10 emotions from the negative affect scale designed specifically for the MIDUS survey (Mroczek & Kolarz, 1998). This scale was developed from the following well-known and valid instruments: The Affect Balance Scale (Bradburn, 1969), the University of Michigan’s Composite International Diagnostic Interview (Kessler et al. 1994), the Manifest Anxiety Scale (Taylor, 1953) and the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977). Examples of items include sad, hopeless, anxious, and restless (see Appendix B for complete scale). Each day the respondents indicated how much of the time they experienced each emotion over the past 24 hours on a 5-point scale from none of the time to all of the time. Mean scores across the 10 items were computed. Obtaining an overall mean for the week then assesses parental mood. Thus the resulting score represents the average level of daily mood across the study days. (Cronbach’s alpha = .94).
General Analytic Strategy

The first step of the analysis is to aggregate the data across the diary days according to the technique specified in the section describing the study measures. Table 2 provides an example of a respondent’s reports as well as her aggregated data across the study days. On the first day of the interview this respondent reported having a high severity stressor with her child. Her negative mood score for that day was 1.2. On Day 4 of the study, this respondent reported that she experienced a low severity stressor involving her child and she also offered emotional support to her child on that day. On Day 7, she reported that she had both a low and a high severity stressor with her child, offered emotional support, and had a higher negative mood score of 3. The last two rows of the table show the respondent’s aggregated data. For example, this respondent reported having a low severity child-related stressor on 5 of the 8 days, or 63% of the study days, provided emotional support to her child on 50% of the study days, experienced a highly severe stressor related to her child on 25% of the days, and had an average negative mood score for the week of 1.64.

Next, descriptions of the variables will be obtained including their means, standard deviations and intercorrelations. The descriptive statistics for occurrence of low and high severity child-related stressors, as well as support provided to children will represent the percentage of days participants experienced any of the above during the week. The week’s average level of negative mood, as well as the descriptive statistics for the other variables will be categorized by child age groups and parent gender. The next step of the analysis for the study will proceed corresponding to each research question. The
following is the analytic plan for each question.

Research Questions

Question 1. To what extent is exposure to daily child-related stressful events, provision of emotional support, as well as the average level of negative mood associated with child age and parent gender? This phase of the analysis will examine child age and parent gender differences in how often parents displayed daily emotional supportive behaviors toward their children, as well as how often they experienced child-related stressful events and negative mood symptoms. A MANOVA followed by a series of univariate ANOVAs will be employed to examine parent gender and child age differences in occurrence of child-related experiences and negative mood.

Question 2. To what extent do child age and parent gender moderate the effects of daily child-related stressful events and emotional support on parental reactivity? First, multiple regression will be employed to investigate the effects of child experiences on parents' daily mood as follows

Step 1: \( PM = b_0 + b_1(LST) + b_2(HST) + b_3(ES) + e \)

The first step of the regression will include the three types of child-related experiences alone, where LST is the percentage of days in the week the respondent experienced low severity child-related stressors, HST is the percentage of days in the week the respondent experienced high severity child-related stressors, ES is the percentage of days the respondent provided support to their child, and PM is the average level of negative mood for the parent across the week.

Step 2: \( PM = b_0 + b_1(LST) + b_2(HST) + b_3(ES) + b_4(CA) + b_5(PG) + e \)
Child age and parent gender are added in Step 2 to determine the extent to which the demographic variables add to the explanation of variance in parent mood above the effects of child-related stressors and provision of support. The additional variables are coded as CA (Child Age; Minor Child = 1, Adult Child = 2) and PG (Parent Gender; Fathers = 1, Mothers = 2).

Third, the interactions of parent gender, child age, daily stressors and the provision of support will be explored to determine if there are conditions under which the relationship between child experiences and negative mood is moderated or amplified. The single predictor variables will be centered to counteract multicollinearity, and multiplying together the two centered predictors will form the interaction term. To determine whether the variables as well as their interaction with daily child experiences contribute to the prediction of parental negative mood, a full model will be compared to a reduced model that eliminates those variables and their interaction terms.

Step 3: \[ PM = b_0 + b_1(LST) + b_2(HST) + b_3(CA) + b_4(PG) + b_5(CA \times LST) + b_6(CA \times HST) + b_7(CA \times ES) + b_8(PG \times LST) + b_9(PG \times HST) + b_{10}(PG \times ES) + e \]

**Question 3.** Does providing children with emotional support moderate the effect of daily child-related stressors on parental negative mood? The next step is to determine if there is a synergistic effect of providing emotional support while experiencing either low or high severity child-related stressors. Hierarchical regression will be used as in the question above to determine if the variables interact in such a way as to affect parental reactivity to daily child-related stressors. The first set of regressions examined the
predictor variables of low severity stressors and emotional support on parental negative mood. The single predictor variables will be centered to counteract multicollinearity, and multiplying together the two centered predictors will form the interaction term.

Step 1:  \( PM = b_0 + b_1(LST) + b_2(ES) + e \)

Step 2:  \( PM = b_0 + b_1(LST) + b_2(ES) + b_3(LST \times ES) + e \)

The next analysis will examine the predictor variables of high severity stressors and emotional support and their interaction on parental negative mood. Again, the single predictor variables will be centered to counteract multicollinearity, and multiplying together the two centered predictors will form the interaction term.

Step 1:  \( PM = b_0 + b_1(HST) + b_2(ES) + e \)

Step 2:  \( PM = b_0 + b_1(HST) + b_2(ES) + b_3(HST \times ES) + e \)
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Description of the Variables

The initial set of analyses provides a general description of the study variables; low severity child-related stressors, high severity child-related stressors, parents’ provision of emotional support, and parents’ negative mood. Table 3 displays the means, standard deviations, as well as minimum and maximum ranges of parents’ child-related experiences and negative mood. The last four columns of Table 3 also display the intercorrelations among the study variables.

Insert Table 3 about here

Low and High Severity Child-Related Stressors

Severity of child-related stressors was based upon the degree of disruption and unpleasantness associated with the stressor (Brown & Harris, 1978). Both the low and high severity events that parents experienced are calculated by the percentage of days in the diary week in which each type of event was recorded by the parents in the study. As might be expected, parents report that they experience daily child-related stressors of lower intensity much more frequently than they experience serious (i.e. high severity) child-related stressors. The first column in Table 3 shows that on average, parents experienced a highly severe child-related stressor on approximately two percent of the days, which is once every two months. However, parents experienced at least one child-related stressor of relatively low severity almost twice a month, or seven percent of the
days. There was wide variability across parents' occurrences of low severity stressors indicated by a standard deviation score of thirteen percent. Over eighty-seven percent of parents experienced a low severity child-related stressor on approximately fourteen percent of the study days or less. The positive skew of this distribution shows that several parents reported that they did not experience many low severity stressors with their children. However, a few reported a higher frequency of stressful child-related experiences of up to seventy percent of the days, or approximately five days of the week.

In contrast, the standard deviation for reports of high severity stressor days was only six percent, with a maximum report of fifty percent, or approximately three and a half days of the week. This sample distribution, also positively skewed, included ninety percent of the parents reporting no highly severe child-related stressors at all, and only five percent of the parents reporting highly severe child-related stressors at least once a week.

Intercorrelations among parents' child-related experiences indicate that child-related stressors low in severity are positively correlated with occurrences of high severity stressors. Thus, parents who experience more frequent low severity stressors in a week are also more likely to experience high severity stressors that same week.

Parents provide emotional support to their children more frequently than they experience either low or high severity child stressors. Parents reported that they provided emotional support to their children on an average of ten percent of the study days or almost once a week. However, the standard deviation of 17.9 percent indicates a wide variability in parents' reports of emotional support; sixty-five percent of parents provided no emotional support to their children whatsoever. The intercorrelations among parents’
child-related experiences indicate that child-related stressors of both low and high severity are positively correlated with parents' provision of emotional support. Thus, parents who experience more child-related stressors are also more likely to provide emotional support to their children than parents who experience fewer child-related stressors are.

Negative mood is assessed by respondents' reports of how much of the time they experienced a negative emotion over the past 24 hours. On average, parents reported that they felt relatively low levels of negative mood, as indicated by the average level of negative mood of 1.17 across the week. Twenty percent of the parents experienced no negative mood symptoms at all, and seventy percent reported negative mood scores at or below the mean. Nonetheless, parents' mood became worse when they experienced frequent low severity child-related stressors. The intercorrelations among the study variables indicate that parents' negative mood was positively associated with low severity child-related stressors, but not with high severity stressors.

Insert Table 4 about here

Parent Gender and Child Age Differences

The first research question explores the extent to which exposure to child-related stressful events, provision of emotional support, and the average level of negative mood is associated with the gender of the parent and age of the child. To answer this question, this phase of the analysis examined parent gender and child age differences in how often
parents displayed daily emotional supportive behaviors toward their children, experienced child-related stressful events, as well as negative mood. Table 4 displays the general descriptions of child-related variables and negative mood for mothers and fathers as well as a description of these study variables for parents of minor and adult children.

MANOVAs examined parent gender and child age differences in the occurrences of child-related experiences and negative mood. The results showed a significant main effect for parent gender, Pillai’s $= .03$, $\hat{F} (4, 495) = 4.87$, $p < .001$. The results also showed a significant main effect for child age, Pillai’s $= .08$, $\hat{F} (4, 495) = 10.90$, $p < .001$. The results of a series of 2 X 2 Parent Gender X Child Age ANOVAs are shown in Table 5. No interactions between parent gender and child age were found for the child-related variables.

Insert Table 5 about here

**Parent Gender Differences**

The day-to-day exposure to child-related low severity stressors differs for mothers and fathers. Mothers experienced these less intense stressors on eight percent of the study days, whereas fathers experienced them on four percent of the study days. Table 5 shows that mothers in the sample reported experiencing low severity child-related stressors more than fathers do. Mothers also reported providing their children with emotional support on a significantly more frequent basis than did fathers. Mothers provided emotional support to their children on twelve percent of the days
Whereas fathers reported providing emotional support eight percent of the days.

Child Age Differences

For the purpose of this study, two parent groupings were established by mutually exclusive categories of minor and adult children. Adult children were those children aged 22 and above. Minor children were those children up through age 21. For all child-related variables except stressors of high severity, parents of minor children experienced significantly more frequent events than did parents of adult children. As shown in Table 4, parents of minor children experienced child-related stressors of low severity on an average of ten percent of the study days, more than twice as often as parents of adult children. Parents of adult children reported these low severity stressors on approximately four percent of the study days.

The fact that there were no significant child-age differences in the occurrence of high severity stressors is in itself interesting. It appears that although parents of adult children do not have extremely frequent occurrences of either low or high severity stressors, they experience high severity stressors at a somewhat similar rate as parents of minor children. This suggests that the ratio of high severity stressors to all stressors is higher for parents of adult children than for parents of minor children. The average for parents of minor children experiencing high severity child-related events was two percent of study days, and the average percent of days for parents of adult children was one percent.

Significant differences were found between parents of minor children and parents of adult children in the frequency of providing emotional support to their children. Parents reported providing emotional support to their minor children almost twelve percent of the
days, and parents of adult children provided emotional support to their children approximately once every other week, or an average of eight percent of the days.

On average, parents of minor children reported higher levels of negative mood compared to parents of adult children. Average level of negative mood reported by parents of minor children was 1.21, compared to that reported by parents of adult children at a mean score of 1.15.

Moderators of Child-Related Experiences on Negative Mood

The next step in the analysis was to examine the second research question: To what extent does child age and parent gender moderate the effects of child-related stressful events and emotional support on parental negative mood? Hierarchical regression was conducted in three steps to examine the unique contributions of each of the child-related variables, parent gender and child age predicting parents' negative mood. Table 6 presents these results. The first step of the regression included the three types of child-related experiences alone.

Insert Table 6 about here

The only significant predictor of parental negative mood was child-related stressors of low severity. Moving to the next step of the regression, the lack of a significant change in $R^2$ indicates that age of child or gender of parent does not add to the effect child-related stressors have on parental negative mood.
Although the addition of child age and parent gender in the next step of the regression did not significantly add to the amount of variance predicting negative mood, child-related stressors of low severity remained as a significant unique contribution. Thus, the effect of child-related experiences on parental negative mood is not due to child age or parent gender. This finding is somewhat surprising in light of the results of the ANOVAs in Table 5 which showed that parents of minors reported significantly greater occurrence of negative mood than did parents of adult children. Thus, in the regression, the lack of additional contribution to parental negative mood made by child age implies that the effect of child age on negative mood is mediated by child-related experiences. In other words, it is not that being a parent of a minor child versus an adult child results in parents being in a negative mood, but living through the experiences associated with having a younger child is related to parents' negative mood.

The third step of the regression examined the interactions of the child-related variables with the parent gender and child age variables. The single predictor variables were centered to counteract multicollinearity and multiplying together the two centered predictors formed the interaction term. None of the variables or their interactions were significant predictors of parental negative mood.

The Synergy of Child-Related Experiences

The next step of the analysis was to determine if there is a synergistic effect of providing emotional support while experiencing child-related stressors. Research Question 3 is stated “Does providing children with emotional support moderate the effect of daily child-related stressors on parental reactivity?” Two separate regressions, each in
two steps, were used to determine if experiencing either low severity stressors and providing emotional support or experiencing high severity stressors and providing emotional support interact in such a way as to affect parental reactivity (i.e., negative mood) to daily child-related stressors. The first set of regressions examined the predictor variables of low severity stressors and emotional support on parental negative mood. The single predictor variables were centered to counteract multicollinearity and multiplying together the two centered predictors formed the interaction term.

Table 7 shows the results of this analysis. For parents, the experience of low severity child-related stressors was predictive of negative mood. However, this effect was not increased synergistically by also providing emotional support to children as indicated by the non-significance of the interaction between low severity stressors and emotional support. The interpretation is that parents are not more likely to be in a negative mood if they experience a child stressor and put in the effort of providing emotional support to the child.

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Insert Table 7 about here
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The next analysis first examined the predictor variables of high severity stressors and emotional support and then their interactions on parental negative mood. The experience of high severity stressors was not predictive of parents’ negative mood—nor was there an interaction between providing emotional support and experiencing a high severity stressor. To conclude, the relationship between high or low severity stressors and parents'
negative mood does not depend on parents’ provision of emotional support to their children.

**Exploratory Analyses**

The results, thus far, focused on the general description of the variables and the predictors of parental negative mood. In conducting the analyses, another interesting question developed: Do child-related stressors, child age or parent gender predict parents’ provision of emotional support to their children? Looking at predictors of parent’s emotional support is not addressing a psychological outcome such as the previous analyses did, but it still addresses parental well-being in that the time and care middle-aged parents invest in their children has been related to parental well-being. Hierarchical regression was performed in three steps to investigate this question. The first step was to enter the two severity levels of child-related stressors into the equation to predict parents’ emotional support to their children.

$$\text{Step 1: } ES = b_0 + b_1(LST) + b_2(HST) + e$$

LST is the percentage of days in the week the respondent experienced low severity child-related stressors, HST is the percentage of days in the week the respondent experienced high severity child-related stressors, and ES is the percentage of days the respondent provided support to their child. This model including child-related stressor variables was significant in predicting parent’s emotional support. Table 8 displays the results of these analyses.

Insert Table 8 about here
Parents who experienced more frequent child-related stressors of low severity stressors were more likely to provide emotional support to their child compared to parents who experienced high severity child-related stressors.

Next, to determine the added effects of child age and parent gender, these two variables were added, resulting in no significant additional contribution to the model.

Step 2: \[ ES = b_0 + b_1(LST) + b_2(HST) + b_3(CA) + b_4(PG) + e \]

The additional variables are coded as CA (Child Age; Minor Child = 1, Adult Child = 2) and PG (Parent Gender; Fathers = 1, Mothers = 2). Child age and parent gender did not contribute to the likelihood of providing emotional support as main effects, although child-related stressors of low severity remained significant at this step of the analysis. The change in \( R^2 \) was not significant with the addition of the child age and parent gender variables.

The final step of the hierarchical regression analysis was to include the four interaction terms created by child age with low and high severity stressors as well as parent gender with low and high severity stressors. The single predictor variables were centered to counteract multicollinearity, and multiplying together the two centered predictors formed the interaction term.

Step 3: \[ ES = b_0 + b_1(LST) + b_2(HST) + b_3(CA) + b_4(PG) + b_5(CA \times LST) + b_6(CA \times HST) + b_7(PG \times LST) + b_8(PG \times HST) + e \]

The addition of the interaction terms resulted in a significant \( R^2 \) change (\( p < .001 \)). The interaction between child age and stressors of low severity was significant, as well as the interactions involving parent gender with stressors of low severity and parent gender
with stressors of high severity. In order to explore the nature of these interaction effects, a low score consisting of a value one standard deviation below the mean and a high score consisting of a value one standard deviation above the mean of the child-related stressor variable were placed into each regression equation. These results were then plotted to illustrate the interactions.

**Child Age**

Figure 1 shows the plotted interaction effects of Child Age X Low Severity Stressors on parents’ provision of Emotional Support. Contrasting with the anticipated result, although parents of adult children provide less emotional support to their children than parents of minor children do during infrequent occurrences of low severity stressors, they tend to provide more emotional support to their adult children in the face of frequent exposure to child-related stressors of low severity. This same degree of effect was not present with the occurrence of child-related stressors of high severity.

**Parent Gender**

The result of an interaction between parent gender and high severity child-related stressors predicting parents' emotional support is displayed in Figure 2. The plot reveals that mothers were much more likely than fathers to increase their emotional support when they experienced more of these types of severe stressors. Fathers, on the other hand, showed almost no change in their level of emotional support when faced with increased low severity stressors.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of the study was twofold. First, the intent was to explore midlife parents' exposure to child-related daily stressors and the opportunities to provide support to their children. Exposure refers to the likelihood that an individual will encounter a particular experience (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995). The next objective of the study was to investigate the accompanying daily emotional reactivity that parents' experience in association with day-to-day child-related experiences. Reactivity refers to the individual's emotional response in the presence of the experience (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995).

Midlife parents were chosen for the study because people in midlife tend to occupy multiple roles and are influential to the well-being of many people around them (Antonnuci, 1986). Thus it follows that their own well-being is important in order to continue to fulfill those roles. Stress theory was used as a framework to guide the investigation of parents' child-related experiences as well as how children influence parent's psychological well-being. Research has found that difficulties in interpersonal relationships are the most common forms of stress (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Schilling, 1989; Pearlin & Turner, 1987). Thus, it follows that the family is a prime domain for exposure to stressors.

The study of parents in middle adulthood is also interesting because developmentalists have proposed this is a time when the task of generativity comes to fruition (e.g., Erikson, 1950; 1968). Although Erikson stressed that parenthood is not a prerequisite for the accomplishment of generativity, raising children has often been
considered an important manifestation of this task. Provision of emotional support and guidance has been acknowledged as a primary way of displaying generativity (Keyes & Ryff, 1998). Thus, parental well-being may be affected in the degree to which parents are able to provide their children with support and guidance.

Most research of midlife parents has focused either on psychological health related to major life events or on overall assessments of the parenting experience rather than day-to-day issues of parenting. However, research on daily stress has found that daily hassles (DeLongis, Folkman and Lazarus, 1988) have potentially even more debilitating and powerful effects than life events. It was possible to follow a daily experience paradigm through the use of the NSDE, a daily diary design. Following the experiences of these parents on a daily basis revealed experiences only observable using a daily data collection. Studying parents' experiences on a daily basis also made it possible to establish the short-term effects of daily events.

The present study postulated that both daily exposure and reactivity would differ with the age of child and parental gender (e.g., Mirowsky & Ross, 1989). As children grow from minors to adults, mothers and fathers encounter new daily child-related experiences, and thus alter their responses accordingly. There are changes in the daily supportive acts parents provide their children and in child-related stressful events parents experience on a day-to-day basis. These changes in parents' responses to their children may have a differential impact on the parents' sense of well-being, due in some part to a contrariety of developmental tasks of family members. This chapter is a discussion of the
findings of the present study as they relate to these issues. Limitations of the study as well as suggestions for future research in this area will be presented.

Exposure to Child-Related Experiences

The first research question asked the extent to which exposure to daily child-related stressful events, provision of emotional support, and the average level of negative mood is associated with the gender of the parent and age of the child.

Parent Gender Differences

Because of the inherent difference between the roles of mother and father, parent gender differences were predicted to occur in exposure to child-related experiences. The results of the descriptive analyses and ANOVAs indicated that, as hypothesized, mothers experienced more frequent low severity daily child-related stressors and provided children with more emotional support than did fathers. Mothers experienced these less intense stressors on eight percent of the study days or approximately once every two weeks, whereas fathers experienced them on four percent of the study days or once a month. Mothers provided emotional support to their children on twelve percent of the days, almost once a week, whereas fathers reported providing emotional support eight percent of the days.

There are various explanations for these results—such as time spent with children, gender role salience, gender reporting differences, and children's differential treatment of their parents. Although these aspects were not investigated in the present study, it is possible to infer their influence in the results. Previous research has found that when mothers are compared to fathers, mothers' higher levels of involvement and
responsibility for daily childcare probably exposes them to a greater potential for
disagreements and tensions with their children (Rubin, 1995; Hochschild, 1989;
Mirowsky & Ross, 1989) as well as opportunity to provide emotional support
(Umberson, 1989). Although previous research indicates that mothers spend more time
with children and therefore have more exposure to child-related experiences, studies on
fathers have also found that spending time with children can increase the likelihood of
father-child conflict (Galambos & Almeida, 1992; Almeida & Galambos, 1991) as well
as opportunity to engage in emotionally supportive behaviors (Almeida et al., in press).
Thus, it is possible that if most fathers spent the same amount of time with children as
mothers do on a day-to-day basis, the hypotheses of gender differences in child-related
experience would not be supported.

Gender role theory is another perspective that helps to elucidate the present
study's finding of mothers' greater exposure to child-related experiences. This
perspective posits that there are gender differences in the salience of types of stressful
events. Thus men and women may be more apt to report events as stressful if they affect
the areas of their lives for which they feel the most responsible. Women more often
report stressors of the home and family, whereas men report stressors related to work,
finances, or topics outside the family (Almeida & Kessler, 1998; Hagestad, 1984, 1987).
Almeida et al. (1999) found that even during time periods when fathers spent the same
amount of time with children as mothers did, mothers still reported more parent-child
tensions. Additionally, when there is infrequent opportunity for child contact for both
fathers and mothers, such as when a child has grown and left the parental home, mothers
still report providing more emotional support to their children than fathers do (Rossi & Rossi, 1990).

Another explanation is that children may react differentially to their parents. For example, some studies have found that adolescents report having more conflict with their mothers than their fathers, perhaps because it is easier to exert their autonomy with mothers (Bailey, Blasco, & Simeonsson, 1992; Steinberg, 1987; Montemayor & Hanson, 1985). Children also seek out their mothers more for comfort than they do their fathers (Umberson, 1989). Sarason & Sarason (1985) found that women are more adept than are men in the support process, thus children prefer to rely on them in times of need.

A notable advantage of the NSDE design lies in the participants' open-ended responses. The daily telephone interviews were tape recorded, and then transcribed using the participants' exact words, allowing for a rich resource of parents' actual daily child-related experiences. The following transcript is an example of a mother's low severity stressor with her young child.

"She woke up in the middle of the night, about two in the morning. She wears those pajamas with the feet and said she was hot so I took them off and she got angry. She was so mad, I guess because she was tired, I couldn't figure out what she wanted. She had socks on and those came off and she got upset. She was just sitting there screaming and screaming so I told her to scream until she figured out what she wanted and then to come talk to me. She was so angry, tired, and I couldn't figure out what she wanted and neighbors were pounding on the walls. My fiancé wishes I would be a better disciplinarian."
The hypothesis that mothers will experience more high severity daily child-related stressors than fathers was not supported, however. This finding is inconsistent with the studies previously mentioned regarding stressors in general. However, thus far, stress research has not identified gender differences in exposure to daily stressors of various levels of severity. Nevertheless there are probable explanations for the lack of a gender difference. One possibility is that mothers are typically the 'kin keepers' (Troll & Bengston, 1992) who are also the information transmitters, so it could be that they filter out which news is important to relay to the father. Then, when mothers receive the initial news of a high severity stressor they share it with the father so they both may act upon it as a family matter. For example, the following transcript is an example of a high severity stressor involving an adult daughter. The mother is speaking, but the father is also experiencing the event.

"We (Respondent and her husband) went over there for emotional support. She was carrying twins and lost one of them. Carrying the burden of comforting and trying to be strong for her. They're both pretty devastated about it. Very stressful. Spending time talking to her. Trying to be emotionally supportive. We help pay for some of the bills. She's just very emotional. The anxiety and stress she puts on herself and the guilt. This isn't her first time of miscarrying. This was going to be a happy event with the twins. It's not to be, but we are praying for the other one to survive."

The hypothesis that mothers will report more negative mood than will fathers was also not supported. These findings refute research that show women experience and report more negative mood than men do. For example, studies in the past indicate that
mothers (more than fathers) are more distressed than adults who do not have children (e.g., Mirowsky & Ross, 1989; McLanahan & Adams, 1987) and that women's increased exposure to child-related stressors can lead to distress (Almeida & Kessler, 1998).

Another possible explanation may be that previous studies indicating gender differences in psychological distress have asked for reports of distress spanning a longer period of time, such as over the past month or year. The NSDE yields different data in the daily reports of psychological distress as opposed to longer recall intervals. With data from the NSDE, Almeida (1999) found that at shorter intervals of recall, men and women differ less in their reports of psychological distress than at longer intervals. Thus, the gender differences of psychological distress may be less for this sample in the present study using a relatively short interval of reporting (such as 24 hours).

**Child Age Differences**

The results of the ANOVAs predicting child age differences in parents' exposure to child-related experiences and experience of negative mood indicated that, as hypothesized, parents of minor children experienced more frequent exposure to low severity child-related stressors, provided more emotional support to their children and reported greater negative mood than did parents of adult children. Parents of minor children experienced child-related stressors of low severity on an average of ten percent of the study days, more than twice as often as parents of adult children. Parents reported providing emotional support to their minor children slightly less than once a week whereas parents of adult children provided emotional support to their children approximately once every two weeks. Average level of negative mood reported by
parents of minor children was 1.21 (on a scale of 1 to 5), compared to that reported by parents of adult children at a mean score of 1.15.

These findings associated with child-related experiences are consistent with the view that parents have more opportunity for day-to-day experiences with young children than with adult children who are likely to have moved away from the parental home. Explanations similar to those for gender differences in child-related experiences can also hold for child age differences—time spent with children, parental role salience resulting in reporting differences and children's differential treatment of their parents. Again, although these aspects were not investigated in the present study, the case has been made that it is possible to infer their influence in the results. As mentioned before, research indicates that amount of time spent with children is related to increased exposure to child-related stressors and ability to provide support. Clearly, parents of minor children spend much more time with them than parents of adult children who are less likely to see them every day. Indeed, previous studies have shown that young and adolescent children as well as their parents report it is the everyday details of family life that are the source of conflicts (Smetana, 1989; Montemayor, 1986; Pearlin, 1976).

Research has also indicated that there are differences in the way parents report on stressful events related to their children of different ages (e.g., Mancini, 1989). For example, prior research has concluded that occurrence of tension and stressors between parents and adult children appears minimal because parents often report that they have no problems in their relationship with their adult children (Streib & Beck, 1980)—an outcome that has been related to their 'stake' in intergenerational relations (Bengston,
Mangen, & Landry 1984). Also, much of the existing research of adult child-parent relations relies on global reports (Aquilino, 1999; Rossi & Rossi, 1990) and does not address the persistent daily problems that surface in studies of young children and parenting (Crnic & Greenberg, 1990; Smetana, 1989).

Another reason parents of adult children don't experience as many low severity child-related stressors as parents of minor children may have to do with the way children of different ages relate to their parents. Young children may come to their parents for support for any small stressor in their lives, whereas adult children handle the small problems on their own. The following is a transcript example of a mother describing that her daughter feels a relatively small stressor in her life requires the full attention of her mother.

"Sounds stupid but she couldn't find one of her shoes and we needed to go somewhere and she didn't have a pair of shoes. She's seven and was constantly crying about it and I would tell her to go look for it and she would just stand there and cry. It's one of those things where you tell them to keep their rooms clean and it was irritating because she wanted me to go look for it. Lasted for about a half hour. I finally just told her to go do it, and when she realized I wasn't going to go do it for her, she went and looked for it herself and found it. Most stressful was that she assumed I would do it for her."

Based on the premise that parents of minor children rather than parents of adult children experience more child-related stressors in general, the next hypothesis was that parents of minor children would encounter greater frequency of high severity child-
related stressors. However, no differences in child age were found for child-related stressors of high severity. The occurrence of severe stressors is infrequent for both age groups. But the interesting fact here is that there is no significant difference in occurrence of severe stressors of the two groups of parents. Thus, parents of adult children experience child-related stressors at approximately the same rate as parents of minor children. This result may be due to the daily diary design of the present study. The daily design is more capable of capturing data on adult children than are those studies that do not address daily issues. Past stress studies tended to assess occurrences of major life events which are by nature severe and do not occur frequently. Prior research has not directly examined the day-to-day nature of child-related experiences of parents of adult children, and thus has not addressed those highly severe events that are not categorized as major life events. The following is a transcript involving an adult child experiencing a high severity stressor that is not a major life event.

"Told me she's being stalked. I'm trying to tell myself it's not serious but I'm worried." It is someone that the daughter knows. "It's the boy who lives in the apartment below her. It's just someone she met because he's a tenant downstairs. He's always there and he just walked into her apartment. That's just not normal. She just told me about it today. It's been going on for a week that it's noticeable."

The next hypothesis that parents of minor children will report more negative mood than parents of adult children was supported. Past research indicates parents of minor children experience psychological distress for reasons other than child-related stressors. For example, the child-related effect on parental negative mood can be from
marital strain resulting from simply the presence of children in the home, rather than child-related experiences. Research has found that this strain may originate from less time to spend together, increased household tasks, or disagreements about raising the child (McLanahan & Adams, 1987). Although the presence of adult children living in the home is infrequent, research has shown a similar effect on parents’ well-being when they are co-residing. Umberson (1992) found that parents who share a residence with an adult child report more strained relationships and more dissatisfaction with the parental role than do parents of like-aged adult children who did not live with a child.

Reactivity to Child-Related Experiences

The second research question asked the extent to which parent gender and child age moderate the effects of child-related stressful events and emotional support on parental negative mood. Hierarchical regression was conducted in three steps to examine the unique contributions of each of the child-related variables, parent gender, and child age as well as their interactions predicting parents’ negative mood.

Parent Gender Differences

The hypotheses stated that mothers, but not fathers, would experience greater distress with more occurrence of low and high child-related stressors as well as provision of emotional support. The postulation was made with reference to the literature on gender differences in the emotional stake parents have in their close relationships. For example, Kessler and McLeod (1984) found that women were more likely to become distressed over events that occurred to their significant others whereas men became more distressed over financial events and income loss. Almeida and Kessler also (1998) found
that women become more upset by interpersonal arguments and by giving support to others whereas men become more upset by work and financial problems.

Surprisingly, the hypotheses were not supported. The results indicated parents’ gender does not moderate the effect of child-related stressors on negative mood. One explanation could be that the studies finding gender differences in parents’ reactivity to child-related stressors focus on a particular type of event—such as arguments or misbehaviors. Thus, when all types of stressors are pooled together as they were in this study, the gender differences in reactivity would disappear. For example, Small and colleagues (1988) found mothers and fathers of adolescents become distressed with different types of their child’s activities. Mothers become more distressed when their child engages in deviant activities, and fathers become more distressed when their child does not adhere to parental advice. Thus, with reference to Almeida & Kessler's (1988) study to illustrate, mothers may be experiencing distress in relation to an argument with their child, while fathers are experiencing distress because their child is in debt and without a job. Such gender differences in reactivity to particular types of child-related events would then be washed out in results that combine all types of stressors. The hypothesis that the relationship between emotional support and negative mood would be greater for mothers was also not supported. This finding is inconsistent with the research that indicates women are also more responsive than men in meeting the life crises of network members, and thus the emotional costs of caring for those in one’s network account for a substantial part of the pervasive mental-health disadvantage of women (Kessler & McLeod, 1985). Rather, it may be that women are more responsive than men
in providing emotional support because it is something that comes easily for them, and thus is just something that they are willing to do because it 'needs doing'. In a study conducted by Pruchno et al. (1996) investigating parents of adult children with lifelong disabilities, mothers reported more caregiving burden than did fathers, but mothers also reported more caregiving satisfaction than did fathers. Thus, it could be mothers’ reactivity to providing emotional support to their children is one that includes a combination of emotions, and not just one of negative mood.

**Child Age Differences**

The expectation for child age differences in parents’ reactivity was that the relationship between negative mood and emotional support as well as low and high severity child-related stressors would be greater for parents of adult children compared to parents of minor children. These hypotheses were advanced with the view that when children reach adulthood, their relationships with their parents have transformed from parent-child to more of a peer level. Thus, when adult children need parents to continue to provide them with care and support, it may seem they have a prolonged dependency on their parents. Similarly, when adult children continue to have problems in their lives, it may seem they have not ‘turned out’ as successfully as parents may have hoped (Ryff, Lee, Essex, & Schmutte, 1994; Aquilino & Supple, 1991; Mutran & Reitzes, 1984) thus parents would become distressed. In the same vein, it was presumed that parents expect minor children to encounter challenges as they develop. Parents also expect to be responsible for their minor children so frequent stressors or need for emotional support may not be distressful because they just seem part of normal parenting.
These hypotheses stating that the relationship between negative mood and emotional support as well as low and high severity child-related stressors would be greater for parents of adult children compared to parents of minor children were not supported. The interactions between child age and child-related experiences were also not significant. Therefore, there is no moderation effect on parental negative mood, and only low severity child-related stressors significantly predict parents’ negative mood. This lack of a moderation effect adds interest to the previous discussion on child age differences in parental exposure to low severity child-related stressors and emotional support. It is now clear that although parents of minor children experience much more exposure to these events, only the occurrence of low severity stressors related to children results in parental psychological distress. In other words, parents of minor children have higher negative mood because of exposure, but not reactivity, to low severity stressors. What this might indicate is that it is truly the persistent, mundane child-related stressors that wear a parent down, regardless of the age of the child. This result is consistent with the research on daily stress that has found daily hassles (low severity stressors) to be even more debilitating than life events (DeLongis, Folkman & Lazarus, 1988).

Finally, the lack of support for the hypothesis that parents of adult children may experience more negative mood with the provision of emotional support to their children indicates that providing emotional support to an adult child is not distressing. Rather, as generational stake theory would suggest, parents may feel being able to provide emotional support to their adult child is important to their future relationship (Umberson
& Gove, 1989). Nonetheless, it appears that parents of children of any age are not more distressed by providing emotional support to their children.

The Synergy of Emotional Support and Stressful Events

The third research question examines the extent to which providing children with emotional support moderates the effect of daily child-related stressors on daily parental distress. Providing emotional support to a child when a stressor is present can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, research has shown that providing support in itself can increase distress, especially in the presence of a problem (Pillemer & Suitor, 1991). Thus, it can have an exacerbating effect. It has been suggested that it can be distressing to provide emotional support to an individual whose own stressful situation also affects the provider. Furthermore, it has been suggested that this synergistic effect is related to the quantity of these two agents (Mancini & Bleizner, 1986). On the other hand, it may be that being able to provide support fulfills a parent’s sense of being needed, and therefore is a satisfying feeling (Umberson & Gove, 1989). Therefore, it may be that providing emotional support at a time when someone is experiencing a stressor buffers the psychological distress associated with the stressor (e.g., Antonucci, 1989; Hirsch, 1981).

Two separate regressions, each in two steps, were used to determine if experiencing either low severity stressors and providing emotional support or experiencing high severity stressors and providing emotional support interact in such a way as to affect parental reactivity (i.e., negative mood) to daily child-related stressors. The hypothesis that providing children with emotional support in the presence of low or high severity child-related stressors would increase parents’ negative mood was not
supported. The results indicated that for parents, the experience of low severity child-
related stressors was predictive of negative mood. Yet, this effect was not increased
synergistically by also providing emotional support to children. Also as a main effect,
emotional support was not predictive of negative mood for parents. These results
indicate that providing emotional support at a time when someone is experiencing a
stressor does not increase or decrease the psychological distress associated with the
stressor. Contrary to studies that indicate there is an emotional cost of providing support
(LaGaipa, 1990), it may be that when parents are providing emotional support to their
children as opposed to other individuals, it is not usually distressing to them.

Exploratory Analyses

In conducting the analyses, another interesting question developed: Do child-
related stressors, child age or parent gender predict parents' provision of emotional
support to their children? Looking at predictors of parent's emotional support is not
addressing a psychological outcome such as the previous analyses did, but it still
addresses parental well-being in that the time and care middle-aged parents invest in their
children has been related to parental well-being (e.g., Umberson & Gove, 1989).

Previously the argument was made that being able to provide emotional support to their
children is important to parents' fulfillment of their generative need. Erikson posited that
expressing generativity is essential to successful midlife development. The question that
arises then, if this behavior is important to parents, what is the model that best describes
the frequency of parents' emotional support to their children? Are parents more likely to
provide emotional support concurrent with a low severity stressor or a high severity
stressor? Does a parent provide more support if the child is a minor or an adult? Are mothers or fathers more likely to provide support in the experience of either severity stressor? Hierarchical regression was performed in three steps to investigate this question. At all phases of the analyses, low severity child-related stressors predicted parents’ provision of emotional support. Parent gender moderated the effect of high severity stressors in predicting emotional support and child age moderated the effect of the experience of low severity stressors.

**Parent Gender Differences**

As a main effect, high severity stressors did not predict emotional support provided by parents, but the interaction between parent gender and high severity stressors was significant. With increasing frequency of high severity child-related stressors, fathers did not increase the amount of emotional support they provided to their children, whereas mothers increased their support significantly. This explanation is consistent with Hochschild’s (1979) description of gender differences in “emotion work”. Social guidelines direct how individuals should feel in certain social roles, and the women’s role in the family carries with it the set of social shared rules of nurturer and caregiver. Thus, the possible explanation for this could be that fathers are aware that mothers are accomplishing the task of providing emotional support to their children, and therefore do not feel the need to contribute beyond her efforts.

**Child Age Differences**

The plotted interaction between child age and low severity stressors indicates that parents of adult children provide more emotional support to their children than parents of
minor children do during frequent occurrences of low severity stressors. This same
degree of effect was not present with the occurrence of child-related stressors of high
severity. The lack of a child age by high severity stressor interaction implies that when a
situation is dire, parents are aware that children of both ages need help.

One explanation for the interaction between child age and low severity stressors may
be related to lower frequency of low severity stressors for parents of adult children
compared to minor children. Whereas minor children are likely to feel many of the small
stressful things that happen to them are important enough to share with their parents,
adult children are not in contact with their parents to share many of the trivial details of
their lives. Thus, reacting to adult children with emotional support is not a routine,
tiresome effort. Indeed, parents may welcome the opportunity to provide emotional
support to their adult children in a situation that is not as taxing as it would be to help
with high severity stressors. This is one way to stay connected to their adult children
(Umberson & Gove, 1989). It is also possible that parents can identify with their adult
children's daily hassles more than they can identify with those of the younger children
and therefore are more likely to provide emotional support. The following is a transcript
of a father who can identify with his adult daughter's situation.

"She has a problem with the local university. She just got her master's degree in
anthropology and she owed them some fees or something she had to pay before they
would give her the diploma, and she sent them a check and cashed it and yet they are
saying they didn't get the money. It upset me. It's a common thing with this university. I
am not being disloyal when I say they've got some idiots there because all seven of my children, my wife and me all went there."

In contrast, the transcript of this mother of a toddler indicates she does not plan to provide emotional support.

"A problem with my daughter this morning. I have a two-year-old I watch also. And my daughter was needing attention because she didn't feel good, and the two-year-old needed attention because she was jealous... they were both whining and complaining... in a different mood. It could have been stressful to have two kids tugging at you and wanting you... the two-year-old was on the floor having a tantrum. I'm good at ignoring the tantrums until they pass."

In summary, many of the hypotheses focusing on exposure to child-related experiences were supported. Consistent with the literature on parents and child-related experiences, parents of minor children as well as mothers of children of any age experience more frequent daily child-related events for the most part. In light of that, a result of the study that was particularly interesting was that parents of minor children do not experience more severe events than parents of adult children. Indeed, the proportion of severe stressors to all stressors was much higher for parents of adult children. Thus, when a parent of an adult child experiences a child-related stressor, it is more likely to be very serious than when a parent of a minor child experiences a child-related stressor. Another interesting finding of the study is that overall, child-related experiences, with the exception of low severity stressors are not associated with parents' negative mood. Thus, it appears that it is indeed the persistent daily hassles that are distressing for parents.
Limitations and Future Directions

The present study examined midlife parents’ daily exposure and reactivity to child-related experiences. There are limitations of the study and caveats that should be briefly addressed regarding results. Recommendations for future research are provided throughout this section. First, given the nature of the sample, caution should be used in generalizing the results to all populations. While the respondents were randomly selected from a national sample, it is not a nationally representative sample due to the low participation rates of minorities. Thus, the ethnicity of the sample was somewhat homogeneous, with over ninety percent Caucasian parents whom were primarily well educated. Cultural differences may exist in parents’ exposure and reactivity to daily child-related experiences. Whether this is true or not is a compelling question that future studies should address. Additionally, the education and income level of the sample is greater than that of the population majority. In their examination of social causes of distress, Mirowsky and Ross (1986), found that families of lower socio-economic status (SES) are exposed to more stressors and react with greater distress than do parents of higher levels of education and income. Future research would benefit by incorporating families from diverse ethnic and SES backgrounds to study daily child-related experiences.

Additionally, almost three-quarters of the participants were married at the time of the interviews. Single parenting brings with it a unique variety of child-related experiences—both stressful and satisfying. An examination of daily child-related experiences of single parents of young children as well as single parents (even widowed)
of adult children may yield interesting results that differ from the present study. It is conceivable that single parents have less resources, such as money or time to give to their children, and therefore may experience greater distress. For example, Murtran & Reitzes (1984) reported that widows’ provision of support to their adult children was associated with distress. Similarly, single parents with custody of their children may not have someone to share the burden of providing emotional support to their children and therefore would be providing more support than a married parent would—resulting in greater distress. Such a result would be consistent with the research of Mancini and Bleizner (1986) who found greater support to children to be associated with increased life stress.

Another limitation regarding the sample is the lack of a ‘target’ child to assess parents’ experiences with their children. Parents of minor children may have been referring to any child in their household from age one through adolescence. It is recognized in the present study that child-related experiences will vary significantly within the minor child age grouping, however the distinction is still valid that daily experiences are different for parents of minor children versus parents of adult children. Nonetheless, the inclusion of the exact age of the child to which parents are referring would be useful to further elucidate the discussion on parents’ child-related experiences. Gender of child is also missing from the present study. Aside from the fact that child-related experiences of sons and daughters vary, future research could investigate a child age by child gender interaction to predict the effect of child-related experiences on either parental mood or parental provision of emotional support. Lastly, the number of children
a parent has is likely to affect a parent’s reactivity to child-related stressors. Prior research has shown that parents’ provision of emotional support decreases with the number of children in the family—whether the children are minors or adults (Mirowsky & Ross, 1986). Future research could include a variable of the number of children a parent has to see if it moderates parents’ reactivity to child-related stressors.

In addition to limitations of the sample, the telephone interviewing technique may have resulted in participant’s omission of potentially embarrassing answers about them or their children. The ‘social desirability’ effect is possible with any methodology of data collection, but possibly much more so when face-to-face with an interviewer, or speaking on the telephone. The possibility of gender differences in under-reporting child-related stressors may also exist. The present study found that women reported more stressors than did men. This may be due to the possibility that men downplay the significance of stressors. However, it may also be that, consistent with other studies, men report more self-focused stressors involving financial and work-related problems whereas women’s stressors were more likely to be focused on concerns for their network of close friends and relatives (Almeida, et al., 1999).

Additionally, when participants anticipated answering questions about stress for eight days in a row, they may have hoped to not disappoint the interviewer. Thus, they may have begun thinking about whether each experience they had in the day was stressful, and how they would respond to the interviewer regarding it.

Finally, although the concept of time spent with children was brought up in the present study as an explanation for greater exposure to child-related experiences, time
with children was not measured. Thus, it is crucial for future research to include a time variable to assess this rationale.

One of the major strengths of the study was the collection of eight consecutive days of responses from parents. The present study took advantage of many of the benefits of daily collection including less retrospective recall bias and obtaining reports of the day-to-day stressors in parents’ lives as well as their daily negative mood. However, in addition to the recommendations noted above, it is very important to point out that future studies of parents’ daily child-related experiences would be enhanced by a within-person analysis. Results from this strategy will allow us to assess day-to-day links between child-related stressors and parents' emotional reactivity, thus observing change in the individuals' experience as well as controlling for extraneous factors such as parental role salience, parenting styles, etc. Also, the present study found that the minor daily stressors were associated with parents' negative mood. It has been found that minor daily stressors exert their influence not only by having separate direct effects on emotional functioning on the day they occur, but also by piling up over a series of days to create persistent irritations, frustrations and overloads that result in more serious stress reactions such as anxiety and depression (e.g., Lazarus & Delongis, 1983; Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman, & Mullan, 1981). Within-person statistical techniques will allow the researcher to assess pileup of stressors. And finally, by studying within-person through-time covariation between parents’ daily child-related events and distress, it is possible to establish much more precisely the short-term effects of their concrete daily experiences.
The present study contributes to our understanding of midlife parents’ well-being associated with their children by shifting from a focus on parents’ major life events to the day-to-day issues of parenting. The results of this research have implications for parental well-being even as their children grow into adults. Parents experience events involving children of all ages that have the potential to be both troublesome and joyful. Although the present study assessed parental well-being only through the construct of negative mood, future directions for similar research should include outcome measures of such constructs as positive mood, parental satisfaction, purpose in life, and personal growth. Thus, steps for future research should include a closer look at the daily child-related experiences in the lives of parents in middle adulthood and later life as well as a broader range of the potential impacts they may have on parents’ mental and physical health outcomes.

Implications

There are consequential implications of the present study. First, parents of minor children, especially mothers, experienced more child-related stressors. Although we may not regulate the amount of stressors these groups are exposed to, we may recognize that in some way relieving the burden on these groups can be helpful in their daily lives. At the same time, mothers provided more emotional support to their children than did fathers. It may be that providing emotional support is a very fulfilling experience, and that mothers are reaping the benefits of the task. In later life when fathers are not as involved in work as they were when they were younger, they may have time to reflect
and regret not having the connection to their children that providing emotional support provides.

Also, the present study renders implications for parents of adult children. Except for studies of caregiving, research has been somewhat scant on the relationship between elder parents’ child-related experiences and their well-being. This study show that parents of adult children do not experience frequent child-related stressors, but when they do, they are likely to be severe in nature. The toll these experiences have on an older parent may eventually be significantly detrimental. At the same time, however, parents’ ability to continue to provide emotional support to their adult children may provide them with a purpose in life, and a fulfillment of the need to be needed.
APPENDICES

Appendix A

DISE Stem Questions

An affirmative response to the stem question prompts the interviewer to probe for a detailed description of the event including who was involved in the event.

a.) Did you have an argument or disagreement with anyone since this time yesterday?

b.) Since (this time/we spoke) yesterday, did anything happen that you could have argued about but you decided to let pass in order to avoid a disagreement?

c.) Since (this time/we spoke) yesterday, did anything happen at work or school (other than what you’ve already mentioned), that most people would consider stressful?

d.) Since (this time/we spoke) yesterday, did anything happen at home (other than what you’ve already mentioned), that most people would consider stressful?

e.) Many people experience discrimination on the basis of such things as race, sex, or age. Did anything like this happen to you since (this time/we spoke) yesterday?

f.) Since (this time/we spoke) yesterday, did anything happen to a close friend or relative (other than what you’ve already mentioned), that turned out to be stressful for you?

g.) Did anything else happen to you since (this time/we spoke) yesterday that most people would consider stressful?

Examples of Probing Questions:

a.) Think of the most stressful disagreement or argument you had since (this time/we spoke) yesterday. Who was that with?
b.) Think of the most stressful incident of this sort. Who was the person you decided not to argue with?

c.) What happened and why did you decide not to get into an argument?

d.) Think of the most stressful incident of this sort. Who did it happen to?

e.) What happened and what about it would most people consider stressful?
Appendix B

Negative Affect Scale

The next questions are about your mood today:

1. How much of the time today did you feel **depressed** – all of the time, most, some, a little, or none of the time?

2. How much of the time today did you feel **restless or fidgety** – all of the time, most, some, a little, or none of the time?

3. How much of the time today did you feel **nervous** – all of the time, most, some, a little, or none of the time?

4. How much of the time today did you feel **worthless** – all of the time, most, some, a little, or none of the time?

5. How much of the time today were you so **sad** that nothing could cheer you up – all of the time, most, some, a little, or none of the time?

6. How much of the time today did you feel **tired out for no good reason** – all of the time, most, some, a little, or none of the time?

7. How much of the time today did you feel that **everything was an effort** – all of the time, most, some, a little, or none of the time?

8. How much of the time today did you feel **hopeless** – all of the time, most, some, a little, or none of the time?

9. How much of the time today did you feel **angry or irritable** – all of the time, most, some, a little, or none of the time?
Table 1

Demographic Comparison of the MIDUS Sample, the NSDE Sample, and the Parent subsample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Variable</th>
<th>Breakdown</th>
<th>MIDUS(^a)</th>
<th>NSDE(^b)</th>
<th>Parents(^c)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Males</td>
<td>48.5</td>
<td>45.5</td>
<td>42.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Females</td>
<td>51.5</td>
<td>54.5</td>
<td>57.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>12 Years or Less</td>
<td>39.2</td>
<td>37.7</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13 Years or More</td>
<td>60.8</td>
<td>62.3</td>
<td>62.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>64.1</td>
<td>65.4</td>
<td>72.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All Others</td>
<td>35.9</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>26.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>87.8</td>
<td>90.3</td>
<td>92.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All Other Races</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)Respondents in the MIDUS survey who participated in the initial telephone interview and returned the two self-administered questionnaire booklets following the interview (N = 3032).

\(^b\)Respondents in the NSDE study all of whom had previously participated in the MIDUS initial telephone interview and returned the two self-administered questionnaire booklets following the interview (N = 1031).

\(^c\)Respondents in the parent subsample of the NSDE study (N = 501).
Table 2

Example of Variable Calculation: Aggregating Across the Days of the Diary Week

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day of Interview</th>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Low Severity</th>
<th>High Severity</th>
<th>Negative mood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day 1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# Days  4   5   2   1.64*

% Days  50% 63% 25%

* Represents average level of negative mood over the study days
Table 3

Prevalence and Intercorrelations of Parents' Child-Related Experiences and Level of Parents' Negative Mood

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Child Stressor: Low Severity</td>
<td>6.50</td>
<td>13.10</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>70.10</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Child Stressor: High Severity</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>5.60</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>.37*</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Emotional Support</td>
<td>9.80</td>
<td>17.90</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>.33*</td>
<td>.30*</td>
<td></td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Negative Mood</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>.13*</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 501 *p < .01

* Percentage of days in a week parents reported child-related experiences.

**Negative mood is average level of negative mood for the week. Higher scores indicate more negative mood (possible range = 1 – 5).
Table 4

Prevalence of Parents' Child-Related Experiences and Level of Parents' Negative Mood by Parent Gender and Child Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Parent Gender</th>
<th>Child Age</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fathers</td>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>Minor</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Stressor: Low Severity a</td>
<td>4.81</td>
<td>10.68</td>
<td>8.01</td>
<td>15.30</td>
<td>10.36</td>
<td>16.22</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>9.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Stressor: High Severity a</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>5.85</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>6.20</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>6.79</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>4.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Support a</td>
<td>8.01</td>
<td>14.90</td>
<td>12.95</td>
<td>20.73</td>
<td>11.78</td>
<td>20.15</td>
<td>8.45</td>
<td>15.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Mood b</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** a Percentage of days in a week parents reported child-related experiences.

b Negative mood is average level of negative mood for the week.
Table 5

Summary of 2 X 2 Analysis of Variance: Parent Gender and Child Age Effects on Parents' Child-Related Experiences and Psychological Distress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Parent Gender</th>
<th>Child Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child Stressor: Low Severity</td>
<td>18.98**</td>
<td>37.63**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Mothers&gt;Fathers]</td>
<td>[Minors&gt;Adults]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Stressor: High Severity</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>3.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Support</td>
<td>7.82**</td>
<td>5.08*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Mothers&gt;Fathers]</td>
<td>[Minors&gt;Adults]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Mood</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>5.17*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Minors&gt;Adults]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 501. *p < .05 **p < .01
Table 6

Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Child-Related Experience Variables and Parent Gender and Child Age Predicting Parental Negative Mood

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>Step 2</th>
<th>Step 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B (SE)</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>B (SE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Stressor: Low</td>
<td>.27* (.11)</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.23* (.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Stressor: High</td>
<td>-.06 (.25)</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.05 (.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Support</td>
<td>.08 (.08)</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.07 (.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Age</td>
<td>-.04 (.03)</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.04 (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Gender</td>
<td>-.00 (.03)</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>.00 (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Age X Low</td>
<td></td>
<td>.09 (.24)</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Age X High</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.02 (.54)</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Age X Support</td>
<td></td>
<td>.24 (.16)</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Gender X Low</td>
<td></td>
<td>.14 (.26)</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Gender X High</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.08 (.54)</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Gender X Support</td>
<td></td>
<td>.22 (.17)</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ R^2 \]
\[ .02* \]
\[ .02* \]
\[ .03 \]
\[ R^2 \text{ Change} \]
\[ .006 \]
\[ .013 \]

Note. N = 501. *p < .05.
Table 7

**Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Child-Related Stressors and Emotional Support**

**Predicting Negative Mood**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>Step 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F (SE)</td>
<td>β</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low Severity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Stressor: Low Severity</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Support</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Severity X Support</td>
<td>-.23</td>
<td>(.45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R²</strong></td>
<td>.02**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R² Change</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High Severity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Stressor: High Severity</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Support</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Severity X Support</td>
<td>-.47</td>
<td>(.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R²</strong></td>
<td>.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R² Change</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N = 500. *p < .05, **p < .01.*
Table 8

**Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Child-Related Experience Variables Predicting Emotional Support**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th></th>
<th>Step 2</th>
<th></th>
<th>Step 3</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>(SE)</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>(SE)</td>
<td>β</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Stressor: Low Severity</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>(.06)</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>(.06)</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.66**</td>
<td>(.14)</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.66**</td>
<td>(.14)</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Stressor: High Severity</td>
<td>.66**</td>
<td>(.14)</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.66**</td>
<td>(.14)</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Age</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>(.03)</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.009</td>
<td>(.02)</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Gender</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>(.12)</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>(.02)</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Age X Low Severity</td>
<td>.28*</td>
<td>(.13)</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Age X High Severity</td>
<td>-.22</td>
<td>(.30)</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Gender X Low</td>
<td>-.41**</td>
<td>(.14)</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Gender X High</td>
<td>1.06**</td>
<td>(.30)</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| R²                             | .15**  |        | .15**  |        | .18**  |        |
| R² Change                     | .004   |        | .03**  |        |        |        |

**Note.** N = 500. *p < .05, **p < .01.
REFERENCES


B. R. Sarason (Eds.), *Social support: Theory, research and applications* (pp. 49-55). The Hague: Nijhoff.


