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## Parents' Interests and Abilities as Sources of Young Children's Everyday Learning Opportunities

Carl J. J. Dunst 4320065

Orelena Hawks Puckett Institute, [cjd@puckett.org](mailto:cjd@puckett.org)

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The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, content, or publication of this manuscript. This manuscript is original work and has not been published or submitted for consideration elsewhere. The study described in the manuscript is part of a line of research and practice by the author and his colleagues investigating the sources of and factors associated with young children's participation and learning in informal everyday activities as part of routine family and community life. Appreciation is extended to the parents and other primary caregivers who completed the survey of parents' personal interests and individual abilities and how these were sources of young children's learning opportunities. The research was supported, in part, by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. The opinions expressed by the author are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department or Office.

## **Parents' Interests and Abilities as Sources of Young Children's Everyday Learning Opportunities**

### **Introduction**

Everyday family and community life (Ronka & Korvela, 2009; Taylor, Bogdan, & Lutfiyya, 1995) is made up of different kinds of activity settings (Gallimore, Goldenberg, & Weisner, 1993), routines (Fiese et al., 2002), rituals (Fiese, 1995), and other activities of daily living (Hasselkus, 2006). Everyday activities include things like household chores, preparing meals, exercising, reading, listening to music, food shopping, visiting friends and family, parent and child outings, and attending sporting events. These types of activities are the context for participation in everyday experiences that are the foundation for strengthening contextually and culturally meaningful behavior (Gallimore & Lopez, 2002; Maynard & Martini, 2005).

The beliefs, attitudes, and other factors that motivate people to participate in desired activities or activities that need to be performed out of necessity are multiply determined (Heine, 2007). The person and situational factors that are related to participation in both types of activities include child age, socio-economic status, geographic proximity, educational status, and race/ethnicity. These factors are related to variations in adult (Barnett, 2006), youth (e.g., Akiva, Schunn, & Louw, 2017), and child (e.g., Trivette, Dunst, & Hamby, 2004) participation in informal, everyday activities.

Two factors that are related to participation in desired activities are personal interests and individual abilities (Elliott & Dweck, 2005; Renninger, 2000). Personal interests include predispositions to engage in desired or preferred activity (Renninger & Su, 2019). Individual abilities include the skills and competencies needed to engage in an activity in a proficient manner (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2003).

A positive psychology perspective of human strengths considers personal interests and individual abilities as factors motivating people to engage in positive experiences and events (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; Lopez, Pedrotti, & Snyder, 2018). Biswas-Diener (2011), for example, noted that "positive psychology concepts such as strengths can best be understood in the context of individual interests" (p. 25). Zumeta, Basabe,

Wlodarczyk, Bobowik, and Paez (2016) noted that shared experiences such as family gatherings that involve the expression of different family member interests and abilities are likely to strengthen family functioning. Sanborn, Giardino, Flores, and Lloyd (2015) and Sheridan and Burt (2009) among others noted that two or more family members engaged in the same activities that are mutually beneficial by definition are strength-based experiences (DeFrain & Asay, 2007).

### **Everyday Child Learning**

Infants, toddlers, and older preschoolers participate in everyday activities as part of parent and family daily living. Young children's participation has been studied extensively in families throughout the world (e.g., Crowley & Jacobs, 2002; Rogoff, Moore, Cirrea-Chávez, & Dexter, 2015; Tudge et al., 2006; Tudge, Putnam, & Sidden, 1994). Findings from a national study of everyday child learning in all 50 states and several jurisdictions indicated that on average, infants, toddlers, and preschoolers participate in about 50 different family activities and 50 different community activities (Dunst, Hamby, Trivette, Raab, & Bruder, 2000, 2002).

As is the case with parents and other adults, many factors influence child participation in everyday activities (Göncü, 1999; Trivette et al., 2004; Wachs, 2000). Young children's interests and abilities are two factors that influence the types of activities that young children experience (Deckner, 2002; Dunst & Raab, 2012; Hidi, 2006; Neitzel, Alexander, & Johnson, 2008; Rosenberg, Jarus, Bart, & Ratzon, 2011). Neitzel et al. (2008), for example, found that interest-based child participation in family activities influenced later interest in similar kinds of school-related activities.

Findings from intervention studies indicate that interest-based and ability-based child participation in everyday activities are associated with a host of positive child and parent benefits (Ainley & Hidi, 2014; Fenton, Walsh, Wong, & Cumming, 2015; Neitzel et al., 2008). These types of strengths-based approaches to promoting child competence have proven especially effective for having value-added benefits in terms of influencing child learning and development (Petrenchik & King, 2011; Swanson, Raab, & Dunst, 2011; Swanson, Raab, Roper, & Dunst, 2006).

### **Parent Strengths and Child Learning**

Less is known about how parents' interests and abilities influence child participation in strengths-based parent and family activities. Searches for studies of which types of parent interests and abilities are sources of young children's learning opportunities yielded only a few relevant studies.

Research and practice, however, suggest that young children participate in interest-based and ability-based parent activities as a routine part of everyday life (Dunst, 2008; Finn & Vandermass-Peeler, 2013; Iari, 2005; Ring, 2006; Vandermaas-Peeler, Way, & Umpleby, 2003; Waugh, Brownell, & Pollock, 2015; Young & Gilen, 2007). Ring (2006), for example, noted that the interactions between young children and "knowledgeable others" during everyday activities provide children opportunities to become "encultured and knowledgeable" about the social practices of parent and family life (p. 78). Finn and Vandermass-Peeler (2013) also noted that child participation in everyday activities provides young children opportunities to learn from more experienced adults or siblings.

One can glean from observational studies that parents' interests, preferences, and abilities often engage young children in everyday activities (Lancy, 1996; Radziszewski & Rogoff, 1991; Rogoff et al., 2015). Rogoff, Dahl, and Callanan (2018), for example, reviewed available evidence on children's participation in everyday activities and noted that children frequently become involved in adult-preferred activities that become contexts for child learning and development.

Dunst (2008) conducted a field-based intervention study that focused specifically on the use of parent and community member interests and abilities as the sources of young children's learning opportunities. The participants were primarily parents of young children residing in four different public housing neighborhoods in one urban setting. The parents were interviewed to identify individual strengths (interests and abilities) where participants used their strengths to provide young children in their neighborhoods with different kinds of learning experiences and opportunities. Findings showed that both the children and the parents experienced a host of positive benefits and outcomes. Findings from the study were the basis for the analyses described in this paper to ascertain if

the same relationships between parent strengths and child learning opportunities could be replicated with families throughout the United States.

### **Purpose of the Present Study**

The purpose of the study was to determine which of the parents' personal interests and individual abilities were used as contexts for providing young children everyday learning opportunities. The study involved a national sample of parents and other primary caregivers of young children where participants were asked about their interests and abilities and whether their preschool-aged children (a) were involved in interest-based and ability-based activities, and (b) learned new behavior or skills from participation in the activities. The everyday activities that were the focus of investigation were identified from the existing literature on everyday routines, rituals, and activity settings that make up the fabric of parent, family, and community life (e.g., Dunst, 2020; Dunst et al., 2002; Fiese, 2002; Fiese et al., 2002; Hasselkus, 2006; Ireson & Blay, 1999; Israel, Roderick, & Ivanova, 2002; Ronka & Korvela, 2009). The results were expected to shed light on which kinds of parent interests and abilities were sources of child learning opportunities.

### **A Note About Child Participation in Parent Activities**

Child participation in everyday parent activities is best understood by recognizing the fact that everyday activities are contexts for enculturation, social engagement, and guided participation (Rogoff, Mistry, Göncü, & Mosier, 1993) and not activities where children are expected to engage in an activity in an adult manner. For example, Finn and Vandermass-Peeler (2013) noted that young children's participation in a cooking activity was not a context for mastering meal preparation but rather an activity where "parents use a cooking activity as an opportunity for teaching children about literacy via recipe cards and as a means of helping [children] practice basic mathematical activities such as counting, measuring, and identifying shapes" (p. 11). Young and Gilen (2007) also noted that everyday musical activities are not contexts for becoming proficient in playing a musical instrument but rather are contexts for engaging in activities such as movement (e.g., twirling and swaying about) and repeating the lyrics to songs or rhymes.

Rogoff (2016) and her colleagues (Rogoff et al., 2018; Rogoff et al., 2015; Rogoff, Paradise, Arauz, Correa-Chávez, & Angelillo, 2003) have extensively investigated how young children become involved in parent, family, and community activities and the role expectations of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. For example, Rogoff (2014) noted that young children participate in everyday activities with “expectations and opportunities to *contribute according to their interests and skills, like everyone else*” (p. 74, emphasis added). Young children’s participation in everyday parent and other family member activities often results in serendipitous learning opportunities (Dunst, Bruder, Trivette, Raab, & McLean, 2001). For example, an infant or toddler may accompany a parent to a sporting event (e.g., attending an older sibling’s baseball game) where the child is afforded learning opportunities that do not involve child participation in the sport itself (e.g., interacting with other children and adults).

## Method

### Participants

A direct mailing list company was used to obtain the addresses of a national sample of families with young children between birth and age 6. The company was asked to use a sampling method to ensure the selection procedure included families in all 50 states, families from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, and families from different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

A mailing list of 1000 families was obtained where each family was sent a letter describing the purpose of the study and a postage-paid postcard to indicate interest in participating in the study. Respondents returning a postcard were sent a survey (described below), an informed consent letter, and a postage-paid envelope to return the completed forms to the investigator. The study methodology, research materials, and informed consent letter were approved by the investigator’s institutional review board.

The families returned 368 surveys. This represents an estimated return rate of 37%. This is a conservative estimate because it could not be determined how many letters initially sent to the families were not deliverable or delivered to a family with a child older than 6 years of age.

Surveys were returned from families in 49 states. Table 1 shows the background characteristics of the participants. Most of the participants (83%) were the mothers of preschool-aged children. The children who were the focus of participation in everyday parent activities were primarily infants and toddlers between birth and 36 months of age (94%). (Participants who were parents or primary caregivers of more than one child under the age of 6 were asked to complete the survey on the youngest child in the household.) The children were almost equally divided between girls (52%) and boys (48%).

Table 1.

*Background Characteristics of the Study Participants*

| Background characteristics               | Number | Percent |
|--|--------|---------|
| <i>Participant relationship to child</i> |        |         |
| Mother/stepmother                        | 304    | 82.5    |
| Father                                   | 52     | 14.2    |
| Grandparent                              | 8      | 2.2     |
| Other (e.g., foster parent, aunt)        | 4      | 1.0     |
| <i>Participant race/ethnicity</i>        |        |         |
| African American                         | 30     | 8.1     |
| Asian American                           | 16     | 4.4     |
| American Indian                          | 11     | 3.1     |
| Caucasian                                | 269    | 73.1    |
| Latino or Hispanic                       | 21     | 5.6     |
| Multiracial                              | 14     | 3.9     |
| Other                                    | 7      | 1.9     |
| <i>Participant education</i>             |        |         |
| Less than high school                    | 17     | 4.7     |
| High school degree                       | 62     | 16.9    |
| Some post high school education          | 37     | 9.9     |
| Community college degree                 | 88     | 24.0    |
| Undergraduate degree                     | 117    | 31.8    |
| Graduate degree                          | 47     | 12.7    |
| <i>Child gender</i>                      |        |         |
| Female                                   | 193    | 52.4    |
| Male                                     | 175    | 47.6    |
| <i>Child age (months)</i>                |        |         |
| Birth-12                                 | 127    | 34.6    |
| 13-24                                    | 144    | 39.1    |
| 24-36                                    | 74     | 20.1    |
| 37-48                                    | 17     | 4.5     |
| 49-60                                    | 4      | 1.1     |
| 61-72                                    | 2      | 0.6     |

The participants' race/ethnicity and years of formal education were quite varied. The distributions of the participants for these two demographic variables are similar to those in the general population, although Caucasian family members and participants with undergraduate and graduate degrees



are somewhat overrepresented in the study sample (United States Census Bureau, 2017).

### **Survey**

A pool of more than 150 activities was identified from the literature review described above. Activities that had similar features or characteristics were combined to have a more manageable number of everyday routines, rituals, activity settings, and so on. This process resulted in a final list of 70 activities that were used to assess parent interest-based and ability-based participation in the activities. The activities included a mix of those occurring in the home (e.g., household chores) and outside the home (e.g., food shopping), those that were person-specific (e.g., journaling) or family-focused (e.g., family mealtimes), and those that were either mundane practices (e.g., caring for a family pet), or special occasions (e.g., visiting a zoo or animal farm).

Participants were asked to indicate for each activity whether the activity was something that they enjoyed doing (personal interest) or was something that they were good at doing (individual ability). Respondents could also indicate that an everyday activity was neither an interest nor an ability.

For each activity that was either a personal interest or individual ability, participants were asked to indicate if their youngest child in the household was typically involved in the activity with them. If the child was involved in an activity, the parents were asked to indicate whether the child learned new behavior or skills as a result of participation in the activity with the parent.

### **Methods of Analysis**

The methods of analysis were guided by “a cultural paradigm based on fostering children’s participation in family and community endeavors [where] child development is viewed as a process that involves active, interrelated roles and their social, cultural worlds” (Rogoff, 2016, p.184). The analyses permitted a determination of which types of parent strengths are related to child participation in which kinds of activities and whether child learning was associated with involvement in the activities.

The focus of analysis was the 50 everyday activities identified most often as personal interests and individual abilities. Several different methods of analysis were used to discern (a) parent engagement in interest-based and ability-based everyday activities, (b) whether parent engagement differed as a function of type participation in the activities (interest-based vs. ability-based), (c) child participation in interest-based and ability-based parent activities, and (d) child learning in those particular everyday parent activities.

Parent engagement in everyday activities was determined by computing the percentage of parents who indicated each of the 50 activities was either a personal interest or an individual ability. The proportion of activities identified as either an interest or an ability was compared using paired-proportion tests to determine whether participation differed as a function of the type of involvement (Schoonjans, 2017).

Parent and child involvement in interest-based and activity-based activities was assessed by computing the average number of activities identified as interest-based or ability-based parent activities, the average number of interest-based and ability-based activities that the children were involved in, and the average number of interest-based and ability-based activities where parents' reported child learning. Paired *t*-tests between the interest-based and ability-based averages were used to determine if parent and child participation and child learning differed as a function of the type of parent activity (IBM Corp, 2016). Cohen's *d* effect sizes for the between type of activity comparisons were used to determine the magnitude of the differences between the interest-based vs. ability-based averages (Thompson, 2008).

The extent to which children participated in parents' interest-based and ability-based everyday activities and parents' reported child learning in the activities was used to compute several measures. First, for each activity identified as a personal interest and an individual ability, the percentages of children participating in the activities were determined. Second, for those children participating in the activities, the percent of children who learned new behavior or skills while engaged in the activities was computed. These data were used to identify patterns of child participation and child learning

in those activities identified by the parents as personal interests or individual abilities.

## Results

### Everyday Parent Activities

Table 2 shows the percentage of parents who indicated which of the 50 most frequently occurring activities were personal interests and individual abilities. Forty-six (46) of the 50 activities identified as personal interests were the same activities identified most often as individual abilities. The percentage of parents who indicated that the activities were personal interests differed from the percentage of parents who indicated the activities were individual abilities as evidenced by the between the type of activity chi-square comparisons. In all but two cases (cooking/preparing family meals and doing household chores), more participants identified the activities as personal interests rather than individual abilities.

Several patterns can be gleaned from the results in Table 2. First, many of the activities identified most often as personal interests involve primarily family outings (visiting zoos, wildlife parks, or animal farms; visiting neighborhood or local parks; family and community celebrations or festivals; going on picnics; eating out; visiting beaches or lakes). Second, listening to music and watching movies, two other family-oriented activities, were also identified as personal interests by a majority of parents. Third, the activities identified most often as individual abilities are ones that are more skill-oriented (doing household chores; personal care of children; cooking or preparing meals; baking cakes or cookies). Fourth, and perhaps most important, only a handful of activities were identified as personal interests by 75% of the parents, and none of the activities were identified as individual abilities by more than 56% of the parents.

### Interest-Based vs. Ability-Based Activity Participation

The average number of activities identified as parents' interests and abilities, the average number of interest-based and ability-based activities in which the parents' children were participants, and the average number of activities in which child learning occurred, are shown in Table 3. There were between types of engagement differences for all three measures as evidenced by statistically significant *t*-test results and medium to very large mean difference Cohen's *d* effect sizes.

Table 2.

*Number and Percent of Everyday Activities Identified as Personal Interest and Individual Abilities*

| Parent and Family Activities                 | Interests |      | Abilities |      | $\chi^2$ | p-value |
|--|-----------|------|-----------|------|----------|---------|
|  | No.       | %    | No.       | %    |          |         |
| Arts/craft activities/projects               | 212       | 57.6 | 126       | 34.2 | 20.23    | .000    |
| Baking cookies/cakes                         | 224       | 60.9 | 171       | 46.5 | 7.65     | .006    |
| Biking                                       | 185       | 50.3 | 70        | 19.0 | 39.70    | .000    |
| Boating/canoeing                             | 121       | 32.9 | 41        | 11.1 | 25.41    | .000    |
| Bowling                                      | 161       | 43.8 | 37        | 10.1 | 52.93    | .000    |
| Camping                                      | 191       | 51.9 | 78        | 21.2 | 37.29    | .000    |
| Computer activities                          | 244       | 66.3 | 109       | 29.6 | 49.51    | .000    |
| Cooking/preparing family meals               | 211       | 57.3 | 196       | 53.3 | 0.59     | .441    |
| Dancing                                      | 188       | 51.1 | 79        | 21.5 | 34.76    | .000    |
| Doing household chores                       | 179       | 48.6 | 205       | 55.7 | 1.85     | .173    |
| Eating out                                   | 275       | 74.7 | 117       | 31.8 | 67.83    | .000    |
| Exercising/aerobics                          | 210       | 57.1 | 94        | 25.5 | 37.79    | .000    |
| Family mealtimes                             | 257       | 69.8 | 183       | 49.7 | 15.41    | .000    |
| Family visits/gatherings                     | 263       | 71.5 | 159       | 43.2 | 30.04    | .000    |
| Festivals/fairs/community events             | 265       | 72.0 | 109       | 29.6 | 65.99    | .000    |
| Fishing                                      | 128       | 34.8 | 52        | 14.1 | 21.28    | .000    |
| Fixing things/carpentry                      | 120       | 32.6 | 59        | 16.0 | 13.74    | .000    |
| Flower/vegetable gardening                   | 194       | 52.7 | 81        | 22.0 | 36.96    | .000    |
| Flying kites                                 | 149       | 40.5 | 45        | 12.2 | 37.86    | .000    |
| Giving/going to parties                      | 225       | 61.1 | 126       | 34.2 | 26.62    | .000    |
| Going on picnics/family outings              | 260       | 70.7 | 138       | 37.5 | 40.73    | .000    |
| Going to concerts/theater/ballet             | 206       | 56.0 | 34        | 9.2  | 91.46    | .000    |
| Haircare/styling                             | 121       | 32.9 | 53        | 14.4 | 17.39    | .000    |
| Hiking/taking walks/jogging                  | 235       | 63.9 | 116       | 31.5 | 38.61    | .000    |
| Holiday celebrations/activities              | 266       | 72.3 | 169       | 45.9 | 26.46    | .000    |
| Home decorating                              | 200       | 54.4 | 98        | 26.6 | 29.43    | .000    |
| Journaling/writing                           | 119       | 32.3 | 59        | 16.0 | 13.31    | .000    |
| Listening to music                           | 277       | 75.3 | 145       | 39.4 | 48.34    | .000    |
| Painting/drawing                             | 173       | 47.0 | 72        | 19.6 | 31.01    | .000    |
| Personal care of my child(ren)               | 246       | 66.9 | 201       | 54.6 | 5.82     | .016    |
| Photography/photo albums                     | 202       | 54.9 | 102       | 27.7 | 28.00    | .000    |
| Playing board games                          | 236       | 64.1 | 97        | 26.4 | 52.64    | .000    |
| Playing frisbee                              | 127       | 34.5 | 46        | 12.5 | 24.70    | .000    |
| Playing with/caring for pets                 | 209       | 56.8 | 120       | 32.6 | 21.74    | .000    |
| Reading (books, magazines, etc.)             | 252       | 68.5 | 185       | 50.3 | 12.60    | .000    |
| Religious/church activities/events           | 208       | 56.5 | 87        | 23.6 | 41.36    | .000    |
| Running errands                              | 220       | 59.8 | 138       | 37.5 | 18.26    | .000    |
| Shopping                                     | 234       | 63.6 | 118       | 32.1 | 36.48    | .000    |
| Singing                                      | 128       | 34.8 | 55        | 15.0 | 19.24    | .000    |
| Sports activities (soccer, volleyball, etc.) | 129       | 35.1 | 73        | 19.8 | 10.79    | .001    |
| Storytelling                                 | 202       | 54.9 | 120       | 32.6 | 18.54    | .000    |
| Swimming/water activities                    | 236       | 64.1 | 122       | 33.2 | 35.07    | .000    |
| Taking car/bus/train rides                   | 215       | 58.4 | 104       | 28.3 | 33.85    | .000    |
| Teaching my child(ren) new things            | 167       | 45.4 | 98        | 26.6 | 14.08    | .000    |
| Visiting beaches/lakes                       | 251       | 68.2 | 116       | 31.5 | 49.43    | .000    |
| Visiting local/regional attractions          | 215       | 58.4 | 95        | 25.8 | 40.00    | .000    |
| Visiting neighborhood or local parks         | 282       | 76.3 | 138       | 37.5 | 56.32    | .000    |
| Visiting zoos/wildlife parks/animal farms    | 283       | 76.9 | 145       | 39.4 | 53.02    | .000    |
| Watching movies/TV/videos                    | 268       | 72.8 | 137       | 37.2 | 46.98    | .000    |
| Yard work/landscaping                        | 191       | 51.9 | 127       | 34.5 | 11.32    | .001    |

Table 3.

*Parent and Child Engagement in Interest-Based and Ability-Based Everyday Activities*

| <i>Everyday parent/family activities</i> | Parent Interests |       | Parent Abilities |       | <i>t</i> -test | <i>p</i> -value | <i>d</i> |
|--|------------------|-------|------------------|-------|----------------|-----------------|----------|
|  | Mean             | SD    | Mean             | SD    |                |                 |          |
| Parent involvement in the activities     | 33.30            | 13.08 | 17.01            | 13.36 | 11.82          | .0000           | 1.58     |
| Child involvement in the activities      | 26.20            | 13.39 | 14.26            | 12.33 | 8.90           | .0000           | 1.19     |
| Child learning in the activities         | 17.80            | 13.87 | 11.42            | 12.14 | 4.70           | .0000           | 0.62     |

Parents were involved in more interest-based activities compared to ability-based activities, the parents' children were involved in more interest-based activities compared to ability-based activities, and parents reported that child learning occurred more frequently in interest-based activities compared to ability-based activities. The results, however, suggest a more nuanced pattern of child participation and learning in interest-based and ability-based everyday parent activities as described next. This pattern is evidenced in the descending sizes of effects for the three dependent measures.

### **Child Learning Opportunities**

The results in Table 3 provide a somewhat limited perspective of how interest-based or ability-based parent activities are sources of child learning opportunities. This is the case because the Table 3 averages do not tell us if child involvement in the activities considered either personal interests or individual abilities are ones in which children are also participants and provide the children parent-reported learning opportunities.

The parent activities identified as personal interests and individual abilities in which the children were involved are shown in Appendix A and B, respectively. What is shown is the percent of parents who indicated the activities were personal interests (Appendix A) and individual abilities (Appendix B). These percentages are shown in the third column of the two appendices. The fourth column of each table shows, for those parents who indicated that each of the activities was either an interest or ability, the percentage of children who participated in the activities. For example, 77% of the parents indicated that visiting a zoo, wildlife reserve, or animal farm was a personal interest. Among these parents, 95% of these parents' children participated in the activity. The fifth column of each table shows, for those children participating in an activity, which percentage of the parents reported child learning in the activities. For example, among the 95% of the children visiting zoos, nature reserves, or animal farms with their

parents, the parents indicated that 73% of the children learned new behavior or skills while participating in the activities.

The data in the two appendices were used to determine, for those everyday activities identified as the parents' interests and abilities, the percent of children who were engaged in the activities, and the percent of children for whom parents reported child learning. Results showed that on average 80% of the children were involved in the 50 interest-based parent activities and that 84% of the children were involved in the 50 ability-based parent activities. Among children involved in either type of activity, parents reported, on average, that 68% of the children learned a new behavior or skill in interest-based activities, and that 81% of the children, on average, learned a new behavior or skill in ability-based activities.

Descriptive analysis of the data in both appendices finds some noteworthy patterns of results. First, and with only a handful of exceptions, two-thirds or more of the children participate in the majority of activities identified as parents' interests or abilities. Second, there is considerable overlap between those activities in which most of the children participate (family mealtimes; visiting zoos, wildlife preserves; animal farms; visiting neighborhood or local parks; holiday celebrations or activities; going on picnics or family outings; family visits or gatherings). Third, the activities in which parent-reported child learning occurs most often include a mix of similar and dissimilar activities as described in Table 4.

Table 4 shows the 20 interest-based and ability-based parent activities identified most often where child learning occurs. The two sets of activities are rank-ordered in terms of the percent of children learning in the activities. Several things can be gleaned from these results. First, half of the activities identified where child learning occurs are the same for interest-based and ability-based participation. Second, several activities that are specific to interest-based or ability-based participation are functionally similar (e.g., doing yard work and gardening). Third, taken together, the two sets of activities make up the fabric of everyday life (e.g., cooking or preparing meals; telling children stories; teaching children new things; playing with or caring for pets).

Table 4.  
*Everyday Parent Activities Identified Most Often as Contexts for Child Learning*

| Rank | Interest-based parent activities           | Ability-based parent activities            |
|------|--|--|
| 1    | Cooking or preparing meals                 | Painting or drawing                        |
| 2    | Reading books, magazines, etc.             | Skiing and other winter activities         |
| 3    | Arts and craft activities                  | Reading books, magazines, etc.             |
| 4    | Teaching my child new things               | Playing with or caring for pets            |
| 5    | Doing household chores                     | Crocheting                                 |
| 6    | Attending or playing sports activities     | Computer or tablet activities              |
| 7    | Painting or drawing                        | Storytelling                               |
| 8    | Fixing things around the house             | Teaching my child new things               |
| 9    | Storytelling                               | Working in a flower or vegetable garden    |
| 10   | Home decorating                            | Visiting neighborhood or local parks       |
| 11   | Computer or tablet activities              | Cooking or preparing meals                 |
| 12   | Camping                                    | Haircare or styling                        |
| 13   | Doing yard work                            | Hiking or taking walks                     |
| 14   | Visiting zoos, wildlife preserves or farms | Playing board games                        |
| 15   | Playing board games                        | Visiting local or regional attractions     |
| 16   | Playing with or caring for pets            | Visiting zoos, wildlife preserves or farms |
| 17   | Working in a flower or vegetable garden    | Arts and crafts activities                 |
| 18   | Visiting local or regional attractions     | Fishing                                    |
| 19   | Listening to music                         | Visiting beaches or lakes                  |
| 20   | Swimming or other water activities         | Dancing and movement activities            |

## Discussion

Findings for the different sets of analyses help illustrate how parents' personal interests and individual abilities are sources of young children's learning opportunities. The major findings are as follows. First, personal interests and individual abilities are highly individualized as evidenced by the fact that few activities were identified by the majority of participants as parent strengths. Second, more of the everyday activities were identified as personal interests compared to individual abilities. Third, among those activities identified as either personal interests or individual abilities, most parents' children were participants in the activities. Fourth, among those children involved in parent interest-based or ability-based activities, parents reported that their young offspring learned new behavior or skills.

The findings provide evidence that parents' interests, parents' abilities, child learning opportunities, and child competence development are interdependent. The results are consistent with those in studies where specific parent interests and abilities were used as sources of young children's learning opportunities (e.g., Finn & Vandermass-Peeler, 2013; Moore et al., 1991; Ring, 2006; Young & Gilen, 2007). Results reported in this paper indicate that a broad range of interest-based and ability-based parent activities are used as sources of young children's learning opportunities.

The pattern of results is consistent with a strengths-based perspective of positive psychology (Biswas-Diener, 2011; Lopez et al., 2018) that places an emphasis on participation in mutually satisfying and enjoyable everyday family and community activities (Seligman, 2011; Zumeta et al., 2016). This is the case because the activities that were most often reported as sources of child learning opportunities were family outings and family gatherings. The fact that these were the kinds of activities that most involved the parents' children was not surprising because these types of participatory activities are ones that have positive consequences on the persons involved in the activities (Kashdan & Silvia, 2009; Kogan, 2001).

The study described in this paper is part of a line of research and practice on the characteristics of family-centered capacity-building intervention practices (Dunst & Espe-Sherwindt, 2016; Mas et al., 2019) and how strengths-based practices can support and strengthen child, parent, and family functioning (Dunst, in press; Swanson et al., 2011). This research and practice have been implemented with families from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, families with diverse racial and ethnic heritages, young children with identified disabilities, children at-risk for poor developmental outcomes, and typically developing children.

This line of family-centered capacity-building research and practice is premised on the belief that all people have existing strengths and the capacity to become more competent (Eagle, 2008; Rappaport, 1981). Research and practice of the author and his colleagues on strengths-based interventions include child interest-based learning opportunities (Dunst, 2020; Dunst, Raab, & Hamby, 2016), child ability-based learning opportunities (Raab, Dunst, & Hamby, 2018), adult ability-based interventions (Dunst, 2008), and adult interest-based and ability-based child learning opportunities (Dunst, Masiello, & Murillo, 2012). Findings from these intervention studies indicated that both young children and their parents or other primary caregivers derive positive benefits from interest-based and ability-based intervention practices (Dunst, 2018). In one line of research and practice, for example, findings from ability-based intervention practices with young children with significant developmental delays and multiple disabilities indicated that both the children and their parents'



derived positive benefits in terms of their psychological well-being (Dunst, Raab, & Hamby, 2017, 2018).

It is important to note that parents' interests and abilities are only two person factors (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) that are associated with young children's participation in everyday learning activities. Personal and environmental factors are also associated with variations in child involvement in family and community activities. These factors include, but are not limited to, family socioeconomic status, parental age and education, geographic proximity, gender, race/ethnicity, child age, and the severity of a child's developmental delay. As part of the line of research and practice described in this paper, results showed that nearly all these factors were related to differences in the types of learning opportunities afforded young children, but that children throughout the United States participate in many different kinds of learning activities (see e.g., Dunst et al., 2002; Dunst, Hamby, Raab, & Bruder, 2017). Results are consistent with findings in other studies of the factors related to differences in participation in informal, everyday activities (e.g., Akiva et al., 2017; Barnett, 2006; Trivette et al., 2004).

### **Contributions to Theory**

Conceptualizing and operationalizing strengths as personal interests and individual abilities differs from how strengths have been typically described in the literature (see e.g., DeFrain & Asay, 2007). This expands the strengths concept to include motivational factors (preferences, belief appraisals, etc.) that engage people in desired activities. Examining strengths in this way also provides a frame of reference for understanding how parent strengths become the sources of everyday child learning opportunities. This is one way young children learn about everyday life (Rogoff et al., 2015). Further research could help identify which particular types of parent strengths have development-instigating characteristics and result in positive child knowledge and skill effects (Bronfenbrenner, 1992).

### **Implications for Practice**

The goal of applied positive psychology is to improve the everyday lives of people (Biswas-Diener, 2011; Donaldson, Csikszentmihalyi, & Nakamura, 2011). The goal of family-centered positive psychology is to improve the lives of children, parents, other family members, and the family as a whole.

(Sheridan & Burt, 2009). Findings reported in this paper and elsewhere indicate that when family strengths are conceptualized and operationalized as individual and collective interests and abilities, these strengths can be used as the building blocks for engaging children and parents in capacity-building experiences for improving child, parent and family functioning (Dunst & Trivette, 2009; Eade, 1997).

Findings from this study and other studies in this line of research and practice point to the need to individualize strengths-based practices for both parents and children when the focus of intervention is everyday child learning opportunities. A simple strategy, and one that has proved effective in terms of identifying mutually interesting activities, includes two steps. First, have parents identify or list their personal interests and the things that they consider their abilities. Second, ask them to identify which of these are a child's interests or activities that the parent thinks the child would find interesting. Methods have been developed to increase child and parent participation in the activities (see e.g., Dunst, Raab, & Trivette, 2013; Trivette, Dunst, Simkus, & Hamby, 2013).

Interest-based and ability-based intervention practices are indicated for all families but especially for families who are presumed to have few or even no strengths. This is often the case for families living in poverty and especially for multigenerational families living in poverty. The author's research and practice with families living in poverty where family member strengths (interests and abilities) have been used to support and strengthen competence have borne out this contention. Several examples illustrate this claim. The target groups of participants in both studies were all living in poverty and many in public housing.

In one applied research study, the interests and abilities of parents and other family members were used to barter for desired resources and supports (Dunst, Trivette, Gordon, & Pletcher, 1989). In another applied research study, parents and other family member interests and abilities were used sources of young children's learning opportunities (Dunst, 2008). In both studies, interest and ability inventories were administered to the study participants to identify behavioral strengths and to identify which strengths parents and other primary caregivers used to obtain desired resources or to provide young children learning opportunities.

Several positive outcomes were realized from practices to promote the use of personal interests and individual abilities to achieve desired outcomes. First, the participants had many different strengths that proved beneficial to themselves and other family and community members. Second, the participants often developed new interests and new capabilities as a result of participation in the interventions. Third, the results showed that the participants experienced a host of positive outcomes, including, but not limited to, enhanced well-being, a stronger sense of self-efficacy, and better child, parent, and family functioning. As noted by Stoneman (1985), "Every family has strengths and if the emphasis of [intervention practices] is on supporting strengths rather than rectifying weaknesses, chances of making a difference in the lives of children are vastly increased" (p. 462).

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to the study. One is the fact that a survey was the source of information about parents' interests and abilities. Consequently, it is not known if participants occasionally or frequently engaged in interest-based or ability-based activities. A second limitation is that the sample was self-selected. It could be the case that the participants are not representative of parents of young children residing in the United States. A third limitation has to do with how child learning was discerned. This did not permit an assessment of the types of learning opportunities afforded the children nor a determination of which behavior or skills the children learned in the activities. Further research addressing each of these limitations should prove informative in terms of clarification of how parents' interests and abilities influence child learning and development.

## Appendix A

***Percent of Parent Personal Interests Involving Children and Providing Child Learning Opportunities***

| Rank | Personal Interests                           | Percent of<br>Parents Having<br>the Personal<br>Interests | Percent of<br>Children<br>Involved in<br>the Activities | Percent of<br>Children<br>Learning in the<br>Activities |
|------|--|---|---|---|
| 1    | Visiting zoos/wildlife parks/animal farms    | 76.9  | 95.1  | 72.5  |
| 2    | Visiting neighborhood/local parks            | 76.3  | 92.9  | 69.1  |
| 3    | Listening to music                           | 75.3  | 90.3  | 70.4  |
| 4    | Eating out                                   | 74.7  | 89.1  | 59.2  |
| 5    | Watching movies/TV/videos                    | 72.8  | 88.1  | 63.1  |
| 6    | Holiday celebrations/activities              | 72.3  | 93.6  | 69.5  |
| 7    | Festivals/fairs/community events             | 72.0  | 91.3  | 65.7  |
| 8    | Family visits/gatherings                     | 71.5  | 93.5  | 66.3  |
| 9    | Going on picnics/family outings              | 70.7  | 92.3  | 62.5  |
| 10   | Family mealtimes                             | 69.8  | 94.2  | 62.4  |
| 11   | Reading (books, magazines, etc.)             | 68.5  | 89.7  | 80.5  |
| 12   | Visiting beaches/lakes                       | 68.2  | 63.6  | 67.5  |
| 13   | Personal care of my child(ren)               | 66.9  | 93.2  | 68.0  |
| 14   | Computer activities                          | 66.3  | 67.2  | 73.2  |
| 15   | Playing board games                          | 64.1  | 74.2  | 72.0  |
| 16   | Swimming/water activities                    | 64.1  | 91.5  | 70.0  |
| 17   | Hiking/taking walks/jogging                  | 63.9  | 86.0  | 69.8  |
| 18   | Shopping                                     | 63.6  | 84.6  | 56.1  |
| 19   | Giving/going to parties                      | 61.1  | 84.0  | 58.2  |
| 20   | Baking cookies/cakes                         | 60.9  | 78.1  | 69.1  |
| 21   | Running errands                              | 59.8  | 85.9  | 52.4  |
| 22   | Taking car/bus/train rides                   | 58.4  | 91.2  | 61.2  |
| 23   | Visiting local/regional attractions          | 58.4  | 91.6  | 70.6  |
| 24   | Arts/craft activities/projects               | 57.6  | 79.7  | 80.0  |
| 25   | Cooking/preparing meals                      | 57.3  | 69.7  | 83.7  |
| 26   | Exercising/aerobics                          | 57.1  | 60.1  | 69.5  |
| 27   | Playing with/caring for pets                 | 56.8  | 91.9  | 71.9  |
| 28   | Religious/church activities/events           | 56.5  | 90.4  | 69.7  |
| 29   | Going to concerts/theater/ballet             | 56.0  | 53.8  | 69.4  |
| 30.5 | Photography/photo albums                     | 54.9  | 60.4  | 61.5  |
| 30.5 | Storytelling                                 | 54.9  | 92.1  | 74.2  |
| 32   | Home decorating                              | 54.4  | 46.0  | 73.4  |
| 33   | Flower/vegetable gardening                   | 52.7  | 77.8  | 70.9  |
| 34.5 | Camping                                      | 51.9  | 80.0  | 73.2  |
| 34.5 | Yardwork/landscaping                         | 51.9  | 75.9  | 73.1  |
| 36   | Dancing                                      | 51.1  | 80.3  | 69.5  |
| 37   | Biking                                       | 50.3  | 78.9  | 50.0  |
| 38   | Doing household chores                       | 48.6  | 88.3  | 77.8  |
| 39   | Painting/drawing                             | 47.0  | 86.7  | 74.7  |
| 40   | Teaching my child(ren) new things            | 45.4  | 86.8  | 78.6  |
| 41   | Bowling                                      | 43.8  | 58.4  | 56.4  |
| 42   | Flying kites                                 | 40.5  | 83.8  | 63.2  |
| 43   | Sports activities (soccer, volleyball, etc.) | 35.1  | 67.4  | 75.9  |
| 44.5 | Fishing                                      | 34.8  | 75.8  | 67.0  |
| 44.5 | Singing                                      | 34.8  | 91.4  | 65.0  |
| 46   | Playing frisbee                              | 34.5  | 78.0  | 59.6  |
| 47.5 | Boating/canoeing                             | 32.9  | 68.6  | 65.1  |
| 47.5 | Hair care/styling                            | 32.9  | 60.3  | 58.9  |
| 49   | Fixing things/carpentry                      | 32.6  | 65.8  | 74.7  |
| 50   | Journaling/writing                           | 32.3  | 47.1  | 67.9  |

## Appendix B

***Percent of Parent Personal Abilities Involving Children and Providing Child Learning Opportunities***

| Rank | Personal Abilities                        | Percent of<br>Parents Having<br>the Personal<br>Abilities | Percent of<br>Children<br>Involved in the<br>Activities | Percent of<br>Children<br>Learning in the<br>Activities |
|------|---|---|---|---|
| 1    | Doing household chores                    | 55.7  | 84.4  | 82.1  |
| 2    | Personal care of my child(ren)            | 54.6  | 93.5  | 77.1  |
| 3    | Cooking/preparing meals                   | 53.3  | 74.0  | 84.8  |
| 4    | Reading                                   | 50.3  | 93.0  | 88.4  |
| 5    | Family mealtimes                          | 49.7  | 96.7  | 76.8  |
| 6    | Baking cookies/cakes                      | 46.5  | 81.9  | 77.9  |
| 7    | Holiday celebrations/activities           | 45.9  | 95.9  | 75.9  |
| 8    | Family visits/gatherings                  | 43.2  | 95.0  | 72.2  |
| 9.5  | Listening to music                        | 39.4  | 94.5  | 77.4  |
| 9.5  | Visiting zoos/wildlife preserves/farms    | 39.4  | 95.2  | 83.3  |
| 11   | Going on picnics/family outings           | 37.5  | 94.9  | 77.1  |
| 12   | Running errands                           | 37.5  | 86.2  | 68.9  |
| 13   | Visiting neighborhood/local parks         | 37.5  | 96.4  | 85.0  |
| 14   | Watching movies/videos/ TV                | 37.2  | 93.4  | 75.8  |
| 15   | Yardwork/landscaping                      | 34.5  | 72.4  | 80.4  |
| 16   | Arts/craft activities/projects            | 34.2  | 86.7  | 83.3  |
| 17   | Giving/going to parties                   | 34.2  | 85.7  | 75.0  |
| 18   | Swimming/water activities                 | 33.2  | 90.2  | 81.8  |
| 19   | Playing with/caring for pets              | 32.6  | 93.3  | 87.5  |
| 20   | Storytelling                              | 32.6  | 91.7  | 86.4  |
| 21   | Shopping                                  | 32.1  | 89.0  | 69.5  |
| 22   | Eating out                                | 31.8  | 94.0  | 73.6  |
| 23   | Hiking/taking walks/jogging               | 31.5  | 91.4  | 84.0  |
| 24   | Visiting beaches/lakes                    | 31.5  | 95.7  | 82.9  |
| 25   | Computer activities                       | 29.6  | 67.9  | 86.5  |
| 26   | Festivals/fairs/community activities      | 29.6  | 93.6  | 82.4  |
| 27   | Taking car/bus/train rides                | 28.3  | 93.3  | 70.1  |
| 28   | Photography/photo albums                  | 27.7  | 75.5  | 70.1  |
| 29   | Home decorating                           | 26.6  | 46.9  | 76.1  |
| 30   | Teaching my child(ren) new things         | 26.6  | 86.7  | 85.9  |
| 31   | Playing board games                       | 26.4  | 87.8  | 83.7  |
| 32   | Visiting local/regional attractions       | 25.8  | 93.7  | 83.6  |
| 33   | Exercising/aerobics                       | 25.5  | 71.3  | 79.8  |
| 34   | Religious/church activities/events        | 23.6  | 96.6  | 79.8  |
| 35   | Flower/vegetable gardening                | 22.0  | 84.0  | 85.3  |
| 36   | Dancing                                   | 21.5  | 87.3  | 82.6  |
| 37   | Camping                                   | 21.2  | 87.2  | 80.9  |
| 38   | Playing sports (soccer, volleyball, etc.) | 19.8  | 67.1  | 77.6  |
| 39   | Painting/drawing                          | 19.6  | 88.9  | 90.6  |
| 40   | Biking                                    | 19.0  | 82.9  | 77.6  |
| 41   | Journaling/writing                        | 16.0  | 49.2  | 75.9  |
| 42   | Repairing things/carpentry                | 15.0  | 52.5  | 82.0  |
| 43   | Singing                                   | 14.9  | 87.3  | 81.3  |
| 44   | Hair care/styling                         | 14.4  | 73.6  | 84.6  |
| 45   | Fishing                                   | 14.1  | 75.0  | 83.3  |
| 46   | Playing a musical instrument              | 14.1  | 84.6  | 81.8  |
| 47   | Crocheting                                | 13.6  | 52.2  | 87.5  |
| 48   | Frisbee                                   | 12.5  | 84.8  | 82.1  |
| 49   | Flying kites                              | 12.2  | 97.8  | 81.8  |
| 50   | Skiing                                    | 12.2  | 42.2  | 89.5  |

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