THE RELATION BETWEEN MOTHERS' AND CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF RIGHTS

by

Jodi B. Wolfe

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
Department of Human Development and Applied Psychology
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the
University of Toronto

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Jodi B. Wolfe
Graduate Department of Education
University of Toronto

ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between mothers’ and children’s understanding of rights. The sample consisted of 141 children in grades six, eight, and ten and 107 mothers. Participants were presented with 4 hypothetical “rights” vignettes and were required to decide whether the story character should assert the right and provide a rationale for their decision. Several interesting findings emerged. Children did not differ in terms of their support of rights or reasoning responses. While mothers saw themselves as “nurturers”, mothers of tenth graders regarded children as requiring less nurturance and more autonomy than mothers of younger children. Comparisons between mothers and children indicated greater support for nurturance rights by mothers while the opposite was found for children together. Separate analyses indicated greater concordance between tenth graders and their mothers as compared to the other two groups. Findings are discussed in terms of their implications for balancing protection and autonomy rights.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .......................................................................................................................... ii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ........................................................................................................ iii

LIST OF TABLES ................................................................................................................... vi

## INTRODUCTION

Overview ............................................................................................................................... 1

Historical Background: Concepts of Childhood and Children’s Rights ......................... 2

Relevant Research ................................................................................................................ 6

Theoretical Framework ....................................................................................................... 10

The Present Study .............................................................................................................. 14

## METHOD

Participants ............................................................................................................................ 17

Procedure .............................................................................................................................. 17

Child Interviews .................................................................................................................. 18

Maternal Interviews .......................................................................................................... 19

Materials ............................................................................................................................... 20

Coding Scheme .................................................................................................................... 22

Inter-Rater Agreement ........................................................................................................ 24

## RESULTS

Support of Rights .................................................................................................................. 26

Self-Determination Situations ............................................................................................ 28

Nurturance Situations ......................................................................................................... 29

Comparison of Self-Determination and Nurturance Situations .................................... 30

Summary ............................................................................................................................... 31

Reasoning about Rights ...................................................................................................... 32

Self-Determination Situations ............................................................................................ 33

Nurturance Situations ......................................................................................................... 36

Comparison of Self-Determination and Nurturance Situations .................................... 39

Summary ............................................................................................................................... 41
# TABLE OF CONTENTS
(continued)

## DISCUSSION
- Support of Rights ................................................................. 43
- Reasoning about Rights ....................................................... 48
- Achieving a Balance between Nurturance and Self-Determination Rights ........... 53
- Suggested Areas for Future Research ...................................... 54
- Conclusions ............................................................................. 57

## REFERENCES ........................................................................ 58
LIST OF TABLES

1. Self-Determination and Nurturance Vignettes ...................................................... 21
2. Coding Scheme of Reasoning Responses ............................................................. 23
3. Percentage of Participants’ Responses by Grade and Type of Vignette Indicating that the Story Character Exercise the Right in Question ...................... 27
4. Percentage of Participants by Group Mentioning Each Category of Reasoning for the Self-Determination Vignettes .................................................. 34
5. Percentage of Participants by Group Mentioning Each Category of Reasoning for the Nurturance Vignettes .............................................................. 37
INTRODUCTION

Overview

The twentieth century has witnessed significant advances in the field of child advocacy; children have been granted partial person status through the extension of many rights formerly reserved for adults, and children’s rights have extended from a focus on protection or nurturance to include issues pertaining to self-determination (Ross, 1982). Underlying this growth in interest regarding children’s rights is the long-established child advocacy movement, in favour of protection rights for children, and the more recent establishment of the “kiddie liberation” movement, which supports young people’s rights to autonomous decision-making (Hart, 1991).

Since the early 1980’s, a small body of research has examined children’s and adolescents’ capacities to think about and exercise their rights. While empirical data have supported the importance of cognitive variables (e.g., Melton, 1980, 1982), it has been suggested that these factors do not fully explain the developmental trajectory of how children think about and use their rights (Ruck, 1994). Specifically, it is proposed that rights-related understanding of children and adolescents occurs within a contextual framework. That is, an interplay between contextual and cognitive variables is believed to influence how children think about and assert their rights. However, few systematic investigations examining contextual factors have been conducted to date.

Understanding the context within which rights operate serves to protect young people from unnecessary harm in the real world. The literature reveals a diversity of public
opinion regarding the appropriate balance to be achieved between nurturance and self-determination rights for children. (Hart, 1991; Stier, 1978). For example, while most jurisdictions in the United States have legally lowered the age of majority to eighteen, individuals of that age remain restricted in their decisions regarding sexual practices, occupational decisions, and work hours (Rogers & Wrightsman, 1978). If children’s rights are to be extended and an appropriate balance is to be accomplished, such decisions need to be based on empirical evidence regarding not only children’s cognitive capacities but also in terms of the various contexts within which young people conceptualize and exercise their rights.

To this end, the current study was initiated as part of a larger research project exploring the relative influence of various contextual factors (e.g., social and economic disadvantage, the influence of significant adult figures) on children’s understanding of rights. Its specific purpose was to examine the relationship between mothers’ and children’s understanding of rights. Examination of the maternal influence on children’s understanding of rights holds important implications since the home setting is typically the first socializing agent in a child’s life and thus thought to play an important role in exposing children to rights-related experiences. This study is one of the first to investigate this potentially important variable in young people’s understanding of rights.

**Historical Background: Concepts of Childhood and Children’s Rights**

The concept of childhood and the notion that children possess and need rights that may be qualitatively different from those accorded adults appear to be relatively recent
phenomena. Prior to the fifteenth century, children of six or seven years of age were considered as miniature adults with similar rights and responsibilities (Takanishi, 1978). In fact, the term “child” was used to confer kinship and status rather than to identify a particular life-stage. Parents, particularly fathers, of infants and young children had almost complete control over their offspring. Children were granted lesser value than adults due to a number of factors, including child helplessness, parental immaturity, and high rates of mortality in infancy and childhood, believed to be a key contributor to lack of attachment between parents and their children (Hart & Pavlovic, 1991). Overall, it is commonly believed that for much of early history, childhood was a “nightmare of mistreatment” in which children were “ignored, abandoned, abused, sold into slavery, and mutilated” (Hart, 1991).

Between the 16th and 18th centuries, a different view of childhood began to unfold. While children continued to be ignored and without individual identity in the early part of this period, their contribution to the economic stability of the family began to be recognized, and children gradually came to be considered as a special class in need of protection. By the 19th century, influenced by the Romantic movement, children’s special status became further demarcated as some began to conceive of children as innately good and innocent (Rousseau’s position), or disposed neither toward good nor evil, but molded through their experiences (Locke’s influence). Alternatively, children were viewed as innately sinful, yet potentially redeemable through the determined efforts of parents (Calvinist perspective). In any case, while parents continued to exert substantial power over their children, they began to be expected to care for their offspring and provide for
their well-being in order to ensure optimal child development (Hart & Pavlovic, 1991).

The evolution of a new conceptualization of childhood appears to have played a primary role in the establishment of the child advocacy movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Child-saving campaigns, while bearing important implications for all children, were directed primarily towards the disadvantaged, particularly those of the socially lower class (Hart, 1991). It was believed, according to Takanishi (1978), that the upward productivity of society was dependent upon the preventative measures directed toward children, including “preservation of life and health, freedom from premature toil, education of children, and care of dependent children”. As Wiggins (cited in Takanishi, 1978) stated, “It is easier to form than reform” and “To cure is the voice of the past; to prevent, the divine whisper of today”. Such statements are illustrative of the importance that was allocated to a child’s early years for the rest of his or her life, as well as for the betterment of society as a whole. This “child-as-redeemer” perspective played a central role in the development of child labour reforms, compulsory education, and the juvenile court system (Hart, 1991).

Thus, the early children’s rights movements were dominated by advocates for children’s nurturance rights. This is apparent in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1959, which was devoted exclusively to the protection and safety rights of children. It was only during the latter part of the 20th century that the “kiddie liberation” movement emerged and attention began to be given to children’s self-determination rights, documented in the White House Conference on Children in 1970 and the Declaration of the Psychological Rights of the Child (Hart, 1991). More recently, the
ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989) has expanded its focus by placing greater emphasis on the rights of children to free expression and exercise of choice in addition to children's rights to protection and nurturance (Cohen & Naimark, 1991). In his content analysis of the UN document, Prilleltensky (1994) identified nine articles out of 41 which dealt specifically with children's rights to self-determination. For example, Article 12.1 articulates that "States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child". Clearly, inclusion of such statements represents a significant advancement in the realm of children's rights which for too long have advocated for the "best interest" of the child without taking heed of children's own views and interests.

Over two decades have past since the introduction of the concept of children's self-determination rights, and the children's rights movement is still marked by ambivalence. At once, some are devoted to protecting children from both societal and familial harm while others seek to liberate children and increase their rights to independence. In theory, the shift from nurturance to a focus on children's self-determination rights in the international arena has advanced the children's rights cause by providing young people with a greater sense of mastery and control over decisions in their own lives. However, it is still unclear how these changes have impacted upon children's and adolescents' actual experiences with respect to their rights to self-determination in the real world.
Relevant Research

Despite significant public interest pertaining to children’s rights, relatively little psychological research exists that examines children’s understanding of rights-related issues. As Tapp (cited in Melton, 1980) noted, “the essential paucity of data or research in the area of children’s rights and the meaning of rights generally is awesome, especially in light of the general press for rights by children and parents, patients and prisoners, ‘subjects’ and students”.

Melton’s (1980, 1982) research examining children’s concepts of their rights represents one of the first investigations in which children were directly asked for their own views about important rights issues. He interviewed a total of 90 children in grades one, three, five, and seven from the Greater Boston area. Participants were approximately evenly divided between low and high socioeconomic backgrounds. The children participated in a two-part semi-structured interview. First, the participants were asked questions that examined their knowledge of “rights”. In the second part of the interview, the children were presented with 12 hypothetical vignettes that were designed to measure the children’s understanding of and attitude toward various interpersonal conflict situations in which a self-determination right might be asserted. Stories consisted of a child’s conflict with parents, peers, school officials and other authority.

In keeping with Tapp & Levine’s (1974) stage model of legal reasoning, Melton proposed that children’s reasoning about rights would follow a three-level sequence of development. Specifically, children in Level 1 were suggested to conceptualize their rights in egocentric terms; rights are viewed as arbitrary privileges to be given or withdrawn at
the discretion of adults. Level 2 reasoning was believed to involve a confusion of rights with privileges in that rights would be conceived in terms of fairness and being “nice”. Finally, children with a Level 3 understanding of rights are capable of viewing them in terms of abstract moral principles. In order for children to reach this level of reasoning, it was suggested that egocentricity must be diminished and morality must include a degree of reciprocity whereby children would be receptive to the needs and rights of others.

Results indicated that both developmental factors and social class were significant predictors of children’s conceptualizations of rights. Most children in first grade, regardless of socioeconomic status, gave Level 1 responses; that is, they perceived rights as privileges bestowed or withdrawn by adults. By grade three, the majority of the high SES children reached Level 2 reasoning about their rights, while those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds did not demonstrate this level of conceptualization until at least a couple of years later. Only a few children in the study reached Level 3 reasoning which, according to Melton, is hardly surprising given the level of cognitive development necessary for abstract moral reasoning and the fact that a majority of the adult American population does not reach such a level of abstraction.

Recent studies (Ruck, 1994; Ruck, Abramovitch & Keating, in press; Ruck, Keating, Abramovitch & Koegl, in press) have expanded on Melton’s (1982) research by examining the development of children’s understanding of both nurturance and self-determination rights. Ruck’s sample consisted of 169 participants from the Metropolitan Toronto area ranging in age from 8 to 16 years. Consistent with Melton’s procedure, the study took the form of a semi-structured interview. Children were
administered 8 hypothetical vignettes, 4 involving assertion of a self-determination right and 4 depicting a child wishing to assert a nurturance right.

The findings indicated that, for the majority of nurturance vignettes, participants at all ages supported the assertion of nurturance rights. In contrast, for most of the self-determination vignettes, younger children were less likely to support the story character’s self-determination rights than were children in the older age groups. These results suggest that children of different ages differ in their support of self-determination rights, but that children’s support of nurturance rights does not vary significantly with age.

With respect to the rationales children provided for their responses, developmental differences were reported for several categories of reasoning, for both self-determination and nurturance issues. In general, for self-determination situations, younger children tended to mention authority, rules, or laws in their reasoning responses, while children in the older age groups spoke either implicitly or explicitly about having or not having various self-determination rights. For the nurturance vignettes, factors relating to age, knowledge, ability and role were commonly mentioned by children in different age groups. Younger children also spoke about various negative consequences of not being provided with nurturance, while older children often mentioned the responsibility and duty of parents to care for their children. Based on these results, it has been suggested that children’s understanding of rights-related issues, particularly with respect to their support of nurturance rights, may not be fully explained by the stage theories employed in previous research. Rather, findings support children’s understanding of rights as more accurately relating to the specific context in which they are embedded.
In contrast to the child-centered empirical investigations previously discussed, some research has examined parents’ views regarding children’s rights to personal freedom and independence (i.e., self-determination rights). For instance, Nucci & Smetana (1996) theorized that parents contribute to the development of their children’s individuality by providing them with opportunities for self-expression. The question of which issues are considered within the child’s personal domain as compared with those in need of parental regulation constituted the focus of their study. The sample consisted of 40 white, middle to upper middle class mothers of children ages five to seven. Participants were queried about issues pertaining to their children’s autonomy and independence, including an examination of which areas mothers believed to be within the realm of their child’s personal freedom and those conceptualized as within parental jurisdiction. The results suggested that while mothers tend to recognize and support children’s rights to personal autonomy, it is thought to be the duty of parents to delineate the boundaries within which such rights are exercised. More specifically, most mothers supported their child’s rights to autonomous decision-making with regard to personal issues such as choice of food, clothing and playmates while advocating for parental limit setting on matters that would impinge on their child’s safety or that went counter to societal or family conventions.

While implementation of boundaries would not pose a significant threat to young children, it is believed that such limits would not be readily tolerated by older children or adolescents. In their study of parental authority and personal autonomy, Smetana & Asquith (1994) examined conflicts between adolescents and parents with respect to various rights-related situations. Results suggested that adolescents and parents held conflicting
views with respect to the assertion rights of children, particularly in terms of self-determination issues. These findings hold important implications for the present study by suggesting that the home setting may be one important context where children accrue experiences that may impact on their understanding of autonomy rights.

**Theoretical Framework**

Past research has attempted to explain the age-related changes in children’s reasoning about rights issues through application of cognitive-developmental frameworks, such as those posited by Piaget and Kohlberg. Recently, the usefulness of global stage theories has been questioned in favour of contextually-based models in explaining differences in children’s thinking about rights. The following provides a brief account of the Piagetian and Kohlbergian theoretical orientations as they have been applied to children’s rights research in the past. These perspectives will then be contrasted with contextually-based approaches, such as those postulated by Gilligan and Bronfenbrenner, that may better account for observed differences in children’s rights reasoning.

Piaget’s theory of cognitive development describes a qualitative stage-like progression from lower-order functioning to higher, more complex reasoning capacities (Small, 1980). Application of Piagetian theory to rights-related issues would suggest that children’s understanding and reasoning about rights progresses from concrete to more abstract levels of conceptualization (Melton, 1983). Children in middle childhood are at the level of concrete operations and would be expected to perceive rights as privileges bestowed by those in authority. In comparison, children at the level of formal operations
(beginning at 11 or 12 years of age and established by the age of 15) would tend to conceptualize rights as abstract moral or ethical principles since this stage is characterized by *hypothetico-deductive reasoning*, a process whereby concepts can be considered independent of their original context, and comparisons between concepts can occur through application of logical principles.

Piaget's work formed the conceptual foundation of Kohlberg's theory of moral judgment. Kohlberg's six-staged sequence of moral development has been well-documented in the literature and, consistent with the Piagetian orientation, is proposed to progress in an orderly, hierarchical manner that is dependent on an individual's level of cognitive development (Kohlberg, 1976). That is, moral reasoning is thought to proceed from an immature, extrinsic orientation toward an internal morality involving a broad spectrum of culturally sanctioned norms and values. According to Kohlberg (1976), the onus for moral decision-making by children in the earliest stages lies with those in authority rather than by the child himself since the morality of an action is evaluated according to the consequences that that action brings to the child. In the context of rights, children who hold such views about morality would not be expected to advocate rights for themselves. As cognitive structures mature, however, egocentrism diminishes and reciprocity appears in children's moral reasoning, resulting in a greater awareness of the needs and rights of others. According to Melton (1980), "partial respect for the rights of others" is a necessary prerequisite to assertion of rights on one's behalf, and it is only at this point in an individual's moral development that complete assertion of rights is made possible.

Findings from past research (Melton, 1983; Ruck, 1994) suggest that Kohlberg's
justice-oriented theory of morality may be applicable in explaining young people’s understanding of self-determination rights. However, Ruck (1994) postulated that the stage approach may not adequately capture children’s understanding of nurturance rights. It is suggested that Gilligan’s (1982) “morality of care” may play a role in children’s conceptualization of nurturance issues. In addition to Kohlberg’s male-oriented justice perspective, Gilligan has described a care orientation, characterized as a network of interpersonal relationships, that contributes to an individual’s moral decision-making. Application of Gilligan’s theory to children’s rights would seem to suggest that children develop an understanding of rights that is based on their relationships with parents and other adults in their environment. For example, a child who is raised with unconditional parent emotional availability would be expected to develop a different concept of children’s nurturance rights than a child whose parents encourage emotional independence.

According to this position, children’s understanding of rights develop within a contextual framework that is not necessarily congruent with the abstract, hierarchical model set forth by Kohlberg.

As mentioned, prior research on children’s rights has primarily focused on the structuralist theories of Piaget and Kohlberg. Mounting evidence seems to suggest, however, that such formulations do not adequately capture the developmental trajectory of young people’s understanding of rights. For example, while Ruck’s (1994) research suggested that there were developmental differences in children’s support of self-determination rights, this finding was not replicated with respect to nurturance rights since the majority of participants in every age group supported their right to safety and
protection. In contrast, the results obtained for children's reasoning responses indicated developmental differences for various categories of reasoning for both nurturance and self-determination situations, though an age progression was more apparent for the self-determination than nurturance vignettes. Taken together, these findings suggest that structuralist theories may not adequately explain the development of children's understanding of rights. Moreover, it is postulated that a contextually-based model may be more appropriate, since Ruck (1994) found that the way children perceived, interpreted and reasoned about rights-related issues was dependent upon the particular context of the vignettes.

Bronfenbrenner's social ecology model may be useful for explaining the developmental trajectory of children's rights understanding since how children think about and use their rights seems to be influenced by the context in which they are embedded. He postulated that developmental outcomes are a joint function of characteristics of person and environment (Moen, Elder, & Luscher, 1995). For example, it has been suggested that adolescents' decisions about rights-related issues are more closely related to the influence of parents and peers than a product of cognitive capacities. The utility of applying a more ecologically-based model to children's rights research lies in its ability to account for differences observed in children's understanding of rights that cannot be explained by cognitive maturity alone. It is believed that as studies begin to examine the relative influence of contextual factors on children's rights understanding, the application of a contextually-based model to children's rights research will prove useful.
The Present Study

As previously discussed, the current study was conceptualized within the framework of a larger research project examining the relative influence of various contextual factors on children’s understanding of rights. The particular focus of this study was to evaluate the relationship between mothers’ and children’s understanding of rights. The way in which mothers conceptualize rights seems relevant to how children think about and use rights since the family represents one of the earliest influences in the socialization process. It is believed that rights knowledge and understanding in part would be passed down to children either through overt discussion or, more likely, through the implicit transmission of parental beliefs by way of specific routines and rituals that the child experiences within the home. Moreover, the family is thought to influence what children know about rights since it is within the parental domain that decisions are made with respect to which rights children will be exposed to. To date, none of these assumptions have been empirically evaluated, however, suggesting the important contribution of this line of inquiry to the scientific literature.

The current study explored two facets of children’s rights: (a) support of rights and; (b) reasoning about rights. Children in grades six, eight, and ten and their mothers were presented with a series of vignettes depicting situations pertinent to the home environment in which a child story character could exercise either a nurturance or self-determination right. Following presentation of each vignette, participants were asked whether the story character should assert the right in question and to provide a rationale for their response.
Two sets of questions guided this research. The first set of questions examined children’s and mothers’ support of nurturance and self-determination rights. Specifically, the questions studied were: (a) Child comparisons. Do children in different grade levels differ with respect to their support of nurturance and self-determination rights? In accordance with prior research (e.g., Ruck, 1994) which suggests a developmental progression in terms of children’s support of self-determination rights, it was expected that developmental differences would be revealed for children’s self-determination rights but not in terms of their rights to nurturance and protection; (b) Mother comparisons. Do mothers of children in different grade levels differ in terms of their support of both types of rights? and; (c) Comparisons between children and mothers. Are there differences between children and mothers in their support of protection and autonomy rights? Specifically, analyses examined differences between sixth graders and their mothers, eighth graders and their mothers, and tenth graders and their mothers. Smetana and Asquith (1994) reported conflicting views among parents and adolescents regarding young people’s rights to self-determination. Therefore, it was hypothesized that mothers and children would be in greater agreement with regards to children’s nurturance rights than self-determination rights.

The second set of questions examined children’s and mothers’ reasoning about nurturance and self-determination issues. The specific questions addressed were: (a) Child comparisons. Do children in different grade levels differ in the way in which they reason about self-determination and nurturance rights? As previously discussed, Ruck’s (1994) research suggested the presence of developmental differences with respect to children’s
reasoning about both types of rights, particularly self-determination rights. Therefore, it was predicted that similar results would be obtained for the present study; children of different ages would use different categories of reasoning, and this pattern would be more pronounced for self-determination than nurturance situations; (b) Mother comparisons. Do mothers of children in different grade levels differ in terms of their reasoning about children’s rights? and; (c) Comparisons between children and mothers. Are there differences between children and mothers with respect to their reasoning responses? As previously, analyses examined differences between sixth graders and their mothers, eighth graders and their mothers, and tenth graders and their mothers.
METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 141 children in grades six, eight, and ten and their mothers (n=107). There were 78 sixth graders (29 males and 49 females), 33 eighth graders (15 males and 18 females), and 30 tenth graders (15 males and 15 females). Children in grades six, eight and ten were, on average, 12.6 years (12 years, 6 months; range = 11.0-12.11), 13.7 years (range = 12.5-14.6), and 15.9 years (range = 15.2-16.10), respectively. The sample was ethnically diverse, although most children were Canadian born (71%) and more than three-quarters were fluent in English (78%). The children were drawn from five elementary schools and one high school in the Metropolitan Toronto area.

With respect to the mothers, eighteen percent had some high school, 33% were high school graduates, 8% had completed some post-secondary education, 40% were college or university graduates, and 12% had earned either a post-graduate degree or were professionals. Approximately one-quarter were Canadian born (27%), with the remaining mothers reporting birthplaces in the Caribbean (17%), South Asia (16%), Europe (9%), Guyana (9%), South-East Asia (2%), Africa (2%) and United States (1%); 17% did not provide this information.

Procedure

The present study was undertaken as part of a larger research project which consisted of 4 parts: (1) hypothetical vignettes to assess assertion of and reasoning about
rights; (2) declarative knowledge questions to evaluate children's and mothers' understanding of rights and responsibilities; (3) assessment of children's expressive language competence and; (4) examination of the dimensions underlying parenting style. The following descriptions will be limited to those portions of the project that are directly relevant to the current study.

**Child Interviews:**

Children participated in a semi-structured individual interview which took place in a quiet room or area within their school. The interview took between 45 minutes to one hour to complete. The researcher introduced the study with the following statement:

I am a researcher of child development at the University of Toronto, and I am part of a study looking at what children in different grades know about different situations. I have been talking to students at your school and now I would like to talk to you. As we mentioned in your class when we handed out the permission letters for you to take home to your parents, we are studying what children know and think about situations that could occur at home or at school...Do you have any questions? Would you like to participate?

With respect to the procedures relevant to the current study, participants were administered a series of vignettes which were orally presented by the researcher. The order in which the vignettes were presented was randomized. Following presentation of each vignette, participants were asked whether they thought the child depicted in the story should assert the right implicitly contained in the story. They were then asked to provide a rationale for their response. Probes were used to help the children clarify their responses and to obtain additional information as necessary (e.g., "explain what you mean"; "can you tell me more about that?"). At the end of the interview, demographic information was
obtained from the participants. They were then thanked for taking part in the study. Participants were also informed that a copy of the study's results would be made available in their school's main office.

Maternal Interviews:

The mothers of the child participants were also administered an abbreviated version of the same semi-structured interview administered to the children. Interviews took place by phone and lasted between 30-40 minutes.

For the parent interviews, the researcher presented participants with four of the eight hypothetical vignettes previously administered to the children, specifically, those vignettes depicting rights dilemmas within the family context. Consistent with procedures for the child participants, order of presentation of vignettes was randomized. As with the children, mothers were queried as to whether they thought the story character should assert a right and why. Responses to the vignettes were probed if they were unclear or were lacking in detail. Finally, demographic information was obtained from the mothers and included such questions as mother's country of birth, highest level of education, occupation, and languages spoken at home. At the end of the interview, the mothers were debriefed and informed that a copy of the study's results would be made available to them if they so requested.
Materials

As part of a two-part semi-structured rights interview, children were presented with eight hypothetical vignettes, adapted from the research of Melton (1982) and Ruck (1994). Four vignettes described rights dilemmas occurring within a school context and four depicted family-based dilemmas. As only the latter were presented to the mothers, analyses will be limited to the family vignettes. The vignettes are presented in Table 1. Vignettes consisted of short stories about various situations that were designed to be both relevant and meaningful to children. Two vignettes consisted of nurturance situations while the other two depicted a child character who wished to assert his/her right to self-determination. For each vignette, gender and age of the story character was matched to that of the participant. Of note, the term “right” was not explicitly stated in the vignettes; rather, the right in question was embedded within each story so that participants were not explicitly aware that they were being questioned about “rights”.

Table 1: Self-Determination and Nurturance Vignettes

Self-Determination Vignettes:

1. Protection of Privacy: Pat kept a diary and said that no one else could read it, not even his/her parents, even if they wanted to see it. Should Pat be able to keep his/her diary a secret from his/her parents?

2. Freedom of Choice: Dale’s parents want him/her to attend a particular school because they have heard good things about it, but Dale wants to go to a different school because it offers some special courses that s/he wants to take. Should Dale be able to decide where s/he goes to school?

Nurturance Vignettes:

1. Parent Emotional Availability: Kelly had an argument with his/her best friend and was very upset. S/he wanted to talk to his/her parents about it, but they were too busy. Should Kelly’s parents have to help him/her when s/he is upset?

2. Freedom from Excessive Work at Home: Everyday when Chris finishes school, s/he has to go straight home and look after his/her younger brother and sister, because both Chris’ parents work long hours. By the end of the day, Chris is so tired that s/he cannot do his/her homework or any of his/her own things. Should Chris’ parents have to make sure that s/he does not have to spend so much time looking after his/her younger brother and sister?
**Coding Scheme**

The reasons participants provided with respect to their decisions about whether the children depicted in the vignettes should assert various rights were categorized according to a coding scheme previously developed by Ruck (1994). The coding scheme “was designed to capture both the content and the sophistication” of participants’ responses (Ruck, 1994, p. 40). Post-hoc modifications were made to the coding scheme for the current study to accommodate for differences in response content between the two studies. Specifically, Ruck’s (1994) study examined children’s understanding of rights in both home and school settings, unlike the current study which exclusively focused on situations relevant to the family, and categories that did not pertain to the home environment were removed from the coding scheme used in the present study. Reasoning responses of mothers and children were analyzed and grouped in one of eight non-mutually exclusive categories. The categories used are presented in Table 2.
Table 2: Coding Scheme of Reasoning Responses

1. **Age, knowledge, ability, and role**: response focuses on factors such as cognitive or physical maturity/immaturity, understanding, ability, experience or role as it relates to parents and children (e.g., “adults are older, they know what to do”). Parental role deals with parents having jobs and money and being able to buy food and clothing (e.g., “parents work so they can provide for their kids”). However, duty and obligation in terms of providing for children are not mentioned. Child role relates to being in school or not having money or jobs (e.g., “children don’t have money, they go to school”).

2. **Parental responsibility, duty, and care**: response focuses on aspects of parents’ responsibility, duty, protection, assistance, and care (e.g., “parents should always be there for their kids,” “it’s the parents’ duty to make sure their children are safe and happy,” “it’s not the child’s responsibility”).

3. **Implicit rights**: response focuses on an implicit notion of having or not having rights (e.g., “it’s his personal stuff”).

4. **Explicit rights**: response focuses on an explicit notion of having or not having rights (e.g., “kids have a right to privacy”).

5. **Qualified rights**: response focuses on qualified notion of having or not having implicit or explicit rights. A right is considered as qualified if the respondent sees its use being restricted, limited or curtailed in situations where exercising the right would either harm the child or others (e.g., “because it’s private unless his parents suspect that something bad had happened to him,” “it’s personal unless he was doing drugs”).

6. **Outcomes or Consequences**: response focuses purely on avoiding trouble, conflict, or on the positive aspects of the situation (e.g., “if you don’t do well in school you can’t get a good job,” “because she will get in big trouble,” “it affects his future”).

7. **Other**: the response did not fit into the coding scheme (e.g., “she should do it”).

8. **Don’t know/No response**: the respondent did not know the answer or failed to respond to the question.
Inter-Rater Agreement

Inter-rater agreement of the coding scheme was established between the primary investigator and an independent rater. Approximately 20% of protocols were randomly selected for reliability testing. Inter-rater agreement, defined as percentage agreement with respect to category assignment, was established for each of the categories, with the exception of the "other" and "don't know/no response" categories (due to the small number of responses that fell into these categories from the randomly selected protocols). Ambiguities in codes were resolved through discussion. Inter-rater agreement for each of the categories was as follows:

1. Age, knowledge, ability and role 100%
2. Parental responsibility, duty and care 81%
3. Implicit rights 90%
4. Explicit rights 100%
5. Qualified rights 100%
6. Outcomes or consequences 86%

Inter-rater agreement by type of vignette was as follows:

1. Protection of Privacy 95%
2. Freedom of Choice 97%
3. Parent Emotional Availability 89%
4. Freedom from Excessive Work at Home 93%
Inter-rater reliability was established for children by grade level and for mothers of children at each grade level as follows:

1. Sixth graders 94%
2. Eighth graders 88%
3. Tenth graders 86%
4. Mothers of sixth graders 92%
5. Mothers of eighth graders 100%
6. Mothers of tenth graders 87%
RESULTS

Results are presented in two main sections: (a) Support of Rights (self-determination situations, nurturance situations, comparison of self-determination and nurturance situations) and; (b) Reasoning about Rights (self-determination situations, nurturance situations, comparison of self-determination and nurturance situations).

Analyses conducted to assess participants' support of and reasoning about rights included loglinear and chi-square procedures. Loglinear analyses allow for comparisons to be made across three or more categorical variables, while chi-square tests served as post-hoc comparisons of the precise nature of differences between groups. A variety of nonparametric procedures were also employed to examine the relationship between various nurturance and self-determination situations.

Individual pairwise comparisons between children and their mothers were conducted which examined both support of rights and reasoning about rights. However, a majority of these analyses proved invalid, based on limited variability between responses, and results will be presented exclusively for those findings relating to group differences (i.e., differences between groups of children, between groups of mothers, and between sixth graders and the group of mothers of those children, eighth graders and their mothers, and tenth graders and their mothers).

Support of Rights

Following the presentation of each vignette, participants were asked whether they thought the child story character should assert the implied right contained in the story.
Responses were analyzed only for those participants who provided a “yes” or a “no” response. Responses such as “don’t know” or “maybe” were provided in less than 20% of cases and were excluded from analyses. Table 3 indicates the percentage of children and mothers by grade level who supported the story character’s rights for each of the four vignettes. With the exception of mothers of sixth and eighth graders for the freedom of choice vignette, the majority of participants in each group were in favour of the child story character’s rights to self-determination and nurturance.

Table 3: Percentage of Participants’ Responses by Grade and Type of Vignette Indicating that the Story Character Exercise the Right in Question

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vignette</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protection of Privacy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom of Choice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>88</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>68</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Emotional Availability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>83</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom from Excessive Work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>92</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Self-Determination Situations:

Loglinear analyses indicated significant overall effects for “choice of action” ($p<.01$ for both self-determination vignettes); that is, participants were significantly more likely than not to endorse the rights depicted in the self-determination vignettes. Loglinear analyses of student responses indicated no significant grade effects, gender effects, or grade by gender interactions for self-determination issues. However, differences between mothers of sixth, eighth and tenth graders and between children and their respective group of mothers were significant (all $p$-values ranging from $p<.01$ to $p<.001$).

An overall chi-square examining children’s and mothers’ support of self-determination rights revealed significant differences for both the protection of privacy vignette, $\chi^2(5) = 33.60$, $p<.001$, and the freedom of choice vignette, $\chi^2(5) = 33.88$, $p<.001$. Pairwise comparisons were computed between groups of mothers of children in each grade level and between groups of mothers and children by grade (e.g., group of sixth graders versus their mothers, group of eighth graders versus their mothers, and group of tenth graders versus their mothers). Chi-square analyses comparing the different groups of mothers revealed significant differences between mothers of tenth graders and mothers of sixth graders, $\chi^2(1) = 7.43$, $p<.001$, and between mothers of tenth graders and mothers of eighth graders, $\chi^2(1) = 10.02$, $p<.001$, for the protection of privacy vignette. As can be seen in Table 3, mothers of children in grade ten were more supportive of a child’s right to keep a secret diary than were mothers of children from the two younger grade levels. Analyses for the freedom of choice vignette pointed to significant differences between mothers of sixth graders and mothers of tenth graders, $\chi^2(1) = 4.80$, $p<.05$. Mothers of the
oldest children were more likely to support the right of children to choose their own school than were mothers of children in grade six.

With respect to differences between groups of children and mothers, separate chi-square analyses indicated significant differences between eighth graders and their mothers, $\chi^2(1) = 6.40, p<.01$, for the protection of privacy vignette. Children in grade eight were more supportive of a child’s right to privacy than were mothers. For the freedom of choice vignette, significant differences were indicated between sixth graders and their mothers, $\chi^2(1) = 16.10, p<.001$, and between eighth graders and their mothers, $\chi^2(1) = 10.96, p<.001$. That is, children in both of those grade levels were more likely to support a child’s right to choose where s/he goes to school than were their mothers.

Nurturance Situations:

Results from loglinear analyses indicated significant overall effects in terms of participants’ choice of action for both nurturance vignettes ($p<.01$). Differences between children with respect to gender, grade, or gender by grade interactions were not significant for either nurturance situation. Furthermore, differences between mothers of children in different grade levels were not significant. However, significant effects were indicated in loglinear analyses comparing mothers and children ($p$-values ranging from $p<.01$ to $p<.05$).

Chi-square tests pointed to significant differences between groups for both the parent emotional availability vignette, $\chi^2(5) = 19.63, p<.001$, and the freedom from excessive work vignette, $\chi^2(5) = 12.85, p<.02$. Post-hoc comparisons between mothers and children indicated significant differences between sixth graders and their mothers,
\(\chi^2(1) = 8.53, p<.01\), and between eighth graders and their mothers, \(\chi^2(1) = 7.69, p<.01\), for the parent emotional availability vignette. Children in those grade levels were less supportive of a child’s right to the emotional availability of parents than were their mothers (see Table 3). For the freedom from excessive work vignette, chi-square analyses indicated a significant difference between sixth graders and their mothers, \(\chi^2(1) = 8.81, p<.01\).

Specifically, mothers of children in grade six were more likely to support a child’s right to be free from excessive work at home than were children in that grade level.

**Comparison of Self-Determination and Nurturance Situations:**

The next set of analyses were concerned with whether participants were more likely to support nurturance or self-determination rights. Both types of vignettes were collapsed and a total score was obtained consisting of the sum of participants’ responses for each type of vignette. For either type of vignette, participants could receive a total score of 0 (did not support the story character’s right for either one of the nurturance or self-determination vignettes), 1 (supported the story character’s right for one vignette but not the other) or 2 (the story character’s nurturance or self-determination rights were supported for both vignettes). Wilcoxon tests were conducted to evaluate whether participants’ support of nurturance versus self-determination differed within groups. Findings indicated that mothers of sixth graders and mothers of eighth graders were significantly more likely to support children’s nurturance than self-determination rights (\(z = 5.08, p<.001; z = 2.92, p<.01\), respectively). In contrast, children did not differ with respect to their support of the story character’s nurturance versus self-determination rights.
Kruskal-Wallis one-way ANOVAs were conducted to assess whether differences between the groups of children and mothers were significant in terms of their likelihood of supporting nurturance or self-determination rights. Analyses indicated significant differences between the six groups of participants (i.e., sixth, eighth and tenth graders and the three groups of mothers) in terms of their support of children’s rights to nurturance and self-determination ($\chi^2(5) = 27.13, p<.001$; $\chi^2(5) = 35.96, p<.001$, respectively). Mann-Whitney U tests indicated that for nurturance situations, significant group differences were found between sixth graders and their mothers and between eighth graders and their mothers, in that children in grades six, $z = 4.10, p<.001$, and eight, $z = 2.66, p<.01$, were significantly less likely to support children’s nurturance rights than were their respective group of mothers. For self-determination situations, the reverse was found, whereby sixth and eighth graders were significantly more likely than their mothers to support children’s rights to autonomy ($z = 3.74, p<.001$; $z = 3.12, p<.01$, respectively). With respect to gender differences, Mann-Whitney U tests did not reveal any significant differences between responses of male and female students for either nurturance or self-determination situations.

**Summary:**

In general, the pattern of results suggests that the majority of children and mothers supported the story character’s nurturance rights. For self-determination situations, most children endorsed the story character’s self-expressive rights. However, mothers of younger children were significantly less likely than mothers of tenth graders to support the
story character’s self-determination rights. For example, with regards to the protection of privacy vignette, children were significantly more likely to support the story character’s right to keep a secret diary than not to have the right to keep it private from parents. Conversely, mothers of sixth and eighth graders were significantly less likely than mothers of children in grade ten to support the story character’s privacy rights. Differences between children and mothers were also indicated for both nurturance and self-determination situations, in that children tended to support self-determination rights more often than mothers, while mothers were more inclined to favour children’s nurturance rights. Furthermore, children in the younger grades, in contrast with tenth graders, tended to disagree with mothers in terms of the support they gave to both types of rights. Specifically, sixth graders were discordant with mothers for both nurturance vignettes and one self-determination situation. Alternatively, the group of eighth graders disagreed with mothers regarding children’s self-determination rights but for only one of two of the nurturance situations. However, no differences were indicated between tenth graders and their mothers with respect to their support of either nurturance or self-determination rights.

**Reasoning about Rights**

The reasons participants provided for their choice of action with respect to the nurturance and self-determination issues depicted in the vignettes were categorized according to the coding scheme described in the Method section. For convenience, analyses will be presented only for those categories in which significant findings were indicated.
Self-Determination Situations:

Table 4 presents the percentage of participants in each group referring to the different categories of reasoning for the self-determination vignettes. In general, for the protection of privacy vignette, the implicit rights category was the most frequently mentioned category of reasoning by both mothers and children. For the freedom of choice vignette, the children reasoned most often in terms of outcomes/consequences, while mothers more frequently mentioned the age, knowledge, ability and role category.

Loglinear analyses did not reveal any grade effects, gender effects, or grade by gender interactions for children, nor were differences indicated between mothers for any of the categories of reasoning for the self-determination vignettes. Significant overall differences were indicated, however, between the reasoning responses of mothers and children. For the protection of privacy vignette, differences between mothers and children were significant for the age, knowledge, ability and role category, and the implicit rights category (p-values ranging from p<.05 to .01). Categories with significant differences for the freedom of choice vignette included the age, knowledge, ability and role category, implicit rights, and the outcomes/consequences category (all p-values ranging from p<.05 to .001).

Post hoc chi-square tests were conducted separately for each category of reasoning. For the protection of privacy vignette, mothers of sixth graders were significantly more likely to mention the age, knowledge, ability and role category than children in that grade level, $\chi^2(1) = 10.29$, p<.01. In contrast, children in grade six were significantly more likely
Table 4: Percentage of Participants by Group Mentioning Each Category of Reasoning for the Self-Determination Vignettes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Protection of Privacy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age/knowledge</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Responsibility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit Rights</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit Rights</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualified Rights</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
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<td>Outcomes/Consequences</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Don’t Know/No Response</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
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Table 4 cont.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Grade</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B. Freedom of Choice</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age/knowledge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>59</td>
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<td>Parental Responsibility</td>
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<td>Children</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit Rights</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Explicit Rights</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualified Rights</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes/Consequences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know/No Response</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
to reason in terms of implicit rights than were their mothers, $\chi^2(1) = 22.35$, $p<.01$. For the freedom of choice vignette, the age, knowledge, ability and role category was more frequently mentioned by mothers of sixth, eighth, and tenth graders than by children in those grades ($\chi^2(1) = 29.70$, $p<.01$; $\chi^2(1) = 4.55$, $p<.05$; $\chi^2(1) = 7.92$, $p<.01$, respectively). In comparison, children in grades six and eight were more likely to mention implicit rights than were their mothers ($\chi^2(1) = 6.07$, $p<.01$; $\chi^2(1) = 3.74$, $p<.05$, respectively). Sixth graders were also significantly more likely to reason using the outcomes/consequences category than were their mothers, $\chi^2(1) = 8.99$, $p<.01$.

Nurturance Situations:

Presented in Table 5 are the percentages for participants' reasoning responses by group and category for the nurturance vignettes. The following categories were frequently mentioned for nurturance situations: (1) parental responsibility; (2) outcomes/consequences and; (3) age, knowledge, ability and role.

Loglinear analysis indicated a significant gender effect for the age, knowledge, ability and role category for the parent emotional availability vignette, in that females in grade ten were significantly more likely to mention this category than males in that grade level ($p<.05$). No other grade, gender or grade by gender effects were indicated. For the freedom from excessive work vignette, loglinear analysis revealed significant differences between children and mothers for the categories referring to age, knowledge, ability and role; parental responsibility; and outcomes/consequences ($p<.01$ for each category of reasoning).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Reasoning for the Nurturance Vignettes</th>
<th>Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Parent Emotional Availability</td>
<td>6     8  10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age/knowledge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>6     9  17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>18    5  11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Responsibility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>62    52 67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>66    64 67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit Rights</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>1     18  3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>2     0   0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit Rights</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>1     0   0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>0     5   11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualified Rights</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>0     0   0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>0     0   0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes/Consequences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>18    12  3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>11    18  7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>13    12  10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>4     5   4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know/No Response</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>0     0   0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>0     0   0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5 cont.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B. Freedom from Excessive Work</th>
<th>Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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Post hoc chi-square analyses were conducted for several categories of reasoning for the freedom from excessive work vignette. Mothers were significantly more likely than children to mention the age, knowledge, ability and role category (significant difference between mothers and sixth graders, $\chi^2(1) = 8.24, p<.02$; between mothers and eighth graders, $\chi^2(1) = 6.40, p<.01$; and between mothers and tenth graders, $\chi^2(1) = 4.78, p<.03$) and the parental responsibility category (significant difference between mothers and sixth graders, $\chi^2(1) = 28.84, p<.01$; and between mothers and tenth graders, $\chi^2(1) = 6.32, p<.01$), while children more commonly reasoned in terms of outcomes/consequences (significant difference between mothers and sixth graders, $\chi^2(1) = 23.66, p<.01$; and between mothers and tenth graders, $\chi^2(1) = 11.26, p<.01$).

Comparison of Self-Determination and Nurturance Situations:

Wilcoxon tests were next computed in order to determine whether participants were more inclined to mention certain categories of reasoning for nurturance or self-determination situations. As with assertion of rights, a total score was obtained for both types of vignettes by collapsing across vignettes and summing participants’ reasoning responses. For instance, for the age, knowledge, ability and role category for nurturance situations, participants could receive a score of 0 (failed to mention this category for either nurturance vignette), 1 (mentioned this category for one nurturance situation but not the other) or 2 (mentioned this category for both nurturance vignettes). The results of the Wilcoxon analyses indicated that for children the following categories were more likely to be mentioned for nurturance than self-determination situations: parental responsibility,
\( z = 8.71, p < .001 \), and outcomes/consequences, \( z = 3.83, p < .001 \). In contrast, for self-determination situations, the children were more inclined to mention implicit rights, \( z = 9.41, p < .001 \), and explicit rights, \( z = 9.41, p < .001 \). Analyses of mothers' responses revealed that they were more likely than children to reason using the parental responsibility category, \( z = 7.92, p < .001 \), for nurturance situations. However, when reasoning about self-determination issues, mothers more commonly spoke in terms of the child's age, knowledge, ability and role, \( z = 3.36, p < .001 \), implicit rights, \( z = 6.82, p < .001 \), or explicit rights, \( z = 3.27, p < .001 \).

Results from Kruskal-Wallis analyses indicated significant differences between children and mothers for certain categories of reasoning. For nurturance situations, significant differences were revealed for the following categories: age, knowledge, ability and role, \( \chi^2(5) = 12.08, p < .05 \); parental responsibility, \( \chi^2(5) = 25.48, p < .001 \); implicit rights, \( \chi^2(5) = 29.29, p < .001 \); outcomes/consequences, \( \chi^2(5) = 39.39, p < .001 \) and; other, \( \chi^2(5) = 14.08, p < .02 \). In terms of self-determination issues, significant differences were as follows: age, knowledge, ability and role, \( \chi^2(5) = 46.67, p < .001 \); implicit rights, \( \chi^2(5) = 38.06, p < .001 \) and; outcomes/consequences, \( \chi^2(5) = 11.09, p < .05 \).

The nature of these group differences was determined through application of Mann-Whitney U tests. For nurturance situations, the following results were obtained: children were significantly more likely than mothers to mention the categories pertaining to implicit rights (significant difference between eighth graders and their mothers, \( z = 2.29, p < .02 \); outcomes/consequences (significant difference between sixth graders and their mothers, \( z = 4.82, p < .001 \); and between tenth graders and their mothers, \( z = 2.67, p < .01 \).
and; other (significant difference between sixth graders and their mothers, z = 2.77, p<.01). Analyses of participants’ reasoning responses for the self-determination situations were as follows: mothers were significantly more likely than children to mention factors relating to age, knowledge, ability and role (significant difference between mothers and sixth graders, z = 5.74, p<.001; between mothers and eighth graders, z = 2.23, p<.05; and between mothers and tenth graders, z = 2.54, p<.01). In contrast, children more commonly reasoned in terms of implicit rights (significant difference between sixth graders and their mothers, z = 5.02, p<.001; and between eighth graders and their mothers, z = 2.04, p<.05) and; outcomes/consequences (significant difference between sixth graders and their mothers, z = 2.55, p<.01).

Summary:

The pattern of results for participants’ reasoning responses suggests that self-determination situations were more commonly perceived as “rights” than were situations pertaining to protection of children, in that the various “rights” categories were more frequently mentioned for self-determination than nurturance situations. For self-determination situations, both mothers and children referred to potential consequences if children were to be granted certain self-determination rights. Moreover, mothers were concerned to a greater extent than children with factors relating to age, knowledge, ability and role, while children were more inclined to see these issues as rights-related, particularly children in grades six and eight. With respect to participants’ reasoning about nurturance situations, mothers again referred to the category pertaining to age, knowledge, ability and
nurturance and protection from parents.

than mothers various adverse outcomes and consequences associated with a lack of

of parents to care for their children. Children, on the other hand, suggested more often

role to a greater extent than the child participants while also mentioning the responsibility
DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to examine the relationship between mothers’ and children’s understanding of rights. This was accomplished by means of a methodology which presented participants with hypothetical vignettes depicting situations pertinent to the home environment in which either a nurturance or self-determination right could be exercised. Participants were asked whether they supported the right in question and to provide a rationale for their choice.

Support of Rights

In terms of whether children in different grade levels differed in their support of nurturance and self-determination rights, findings indicated that the majority of children in each of the three grade levels supported the child story character’s rights to both nurturance and self-determination. Moreover, children in different grade levels did not differ significantly with respect to their support of both types of rights. For example, in the freedom of choice vignette, most children supported the story character’s right to choose his/her own school. In addition, for the freedom from excessive work vignette, an overwhelming majority of children stated that the story character should not have to take care of his/her younger brother and sister after school on a regular basis.

Results from Ruck’s (1994) research differed from the findings reported here, in that developmental differences were indicated in children’s support of self-determination rights. His findings indicated that, for the majority of self-determination situations, younger
children were significantly less supportive of self-determination rights than were children in the older age groups. For example, in the protection of privacy vignette, Ruck reported that the youngest children were significantly less likely than children of other ages to answer that the story character should be able to keep a diary secret from his/her parents. However, his sample included children between the ages of 8 and 16, a wider age range than that included in the current study, which may account for discrepancies in results obtained between the two studies. That both Ruck (1994) and the present study generally did not find developmental differences in children’s support of nurturance rights suggests that this type of right may be considered an entitlement by children of different ages since this is how rights are actually experienced in their lives. In contrast, access to self-determination rights may be more closely tied with a child’s cognitive maturity and capacity for responsible decision-making, which would suggest that older children would experience autonomy and independence to a greater extent than younger children. As previously suggested, sampling from a wider age range may be necessary to parse out these differences.

With respect to differences between mothers in terms of their support of children’s rights, results indicated that, for the nurturance vignettes, the majority of mothers supported the story character’s nurturance rights. This implies that these mothers tended to conceptualize their parental role in terms of “nurturer” or “provider” for their children’s well-being. The identification of most mothers in this study with nurturing their offspring as a salient component of their role as parents is consistent with research regarding gender role differences. This literature suggests that women tend to be more nurturing and
empathic than men, who more commonly exhibit characteristics relating to achievement, autonomy, and emotional control (Barbee et al., 1993). In relation to the current findings, for the parent emotional availability vignette, mothers tended to identify with the stereotypical role of women, in that virtually all of them stated that the story character’s parents should be available to help their child resolve a peer-related conflict. As well, mothers overwhelmingly endorsed the story character’s right to be free from excessive work at home. It would be of interest in future research to examine whether gender role differences play a part in fathers’ endorsement of children’s rights.

In comparison, for the self-determination vignettes, greater variability was apparent in mothers’ responses. For the protection of privacy vignette, while the majority of mothers expressed support for the story character’s right to keep a secret diary, mothers of tenth graders were more likely to support this right than mothers of children in grades six and eight. In the freedom of choice vignette, most mothers did not support the story character’s right to choose his/her own school, with mothers of sixth graders less likely to support this self-determination right than mothers of children in grade ten. Taken together, these findings suggest that mothers of tenth graders generally saw children as being more competent to make decisions independent of parents than mothers of children in the two younger age groups. This interpretation is in line with mothers’ reasoning responses, in that a large percentage of mothers mentioned factors pertaining to age, knowledge, ability and role in their explanations as to why they endorsed or failed to support children’s self-determination rights. That tenth graders would be perceived as more capable of responsible decision-making than children in the lower grades makes sense given that older
children would be expected, based on Piaget's theory of cognitive development, to have the capacity for logical decision-making to a greater extent than younger children who have yet to consolidate the principles of formal operations.

Examining the relationship between mothers and children with respect to their support of rights indicated significant differences between the two groups, in that greater support was shown by mothers for children's nurturance rights while children favoured young people's rights to self-determination over their rights to protection. These findings should not be surprising given that adolescence has traditionally been conceptualized as a period of familial contention; parents strive to maintain their authority while young people detach themselves from the family unit as they begin to develop an identity of their own (Feldman & Elliott, 1993).

More specific analyses between groups of mothers and children in each of the three grade levels revealed an interesting pattern of results. Specifically, children in grade ten did not differ significantly from mothers for either nurturance or self-determination situations. The congruence found between this group of mothers and their children suggests that mothers of the older adolescents tended to see their emerging competencies similarly to the way in which the young people saw themselves. That is, they were perceived by both mothers and children as being more capable of autonomous decision-making and less in need of care and protection from parents at this stage in their development. These findings are inconsistent with those reported by Smetana & Asquith (1994), in that their research indicated conflicting views between adolescents and parents in terms of their support of self-determination rights; while parents were generally invested in maintaining the familial
status quo, adolescents desired greater autonomy over decisions in their lives. Discrepancies between the two studies may be explained by differences in domains examined. That is, Smetana & Asquith conceptualized rights in terms of moral (e.g., taking money from parents without their permission), conventional (e.g., cursing), multifaceted (e.g., a boy wearing an earring), personal (e.g., listening to heavy metal music), prudent (e.g., smoking cigarettes), and friendship (e.g., inviting a boyfriend or girlfriend over when parents are away) issues. It is postulated that many of the situations presented in their research would be considered more controversial than those used in the present study, which may account for differences in results obtained.

In contrast, the present study found conflicting views between mothers and children in the two younger grades. Analyses between mothers of sixth graders and children in that grade level revealed that, for nurturance situations, mothers tended to see the story character as more in need of care and protection from parents than did children, despite the fact that the majority of sixth graders supported nurturance rights. For the self-determination vignettes, while a majority of mothers and children indicated that the story character should be allowed to keep a secret diary, differences were evident for the freedom of choice vignette, in that the child participants supported the story character's right to choose his/her own school to a greater extent than mothers. Results pertaining to eighth graders and their mothers showed significant differences for both self-determination vignettes, in that children saw themselves as more capable of autonomous decision-making than did mothers. In comparison, for the parent emotional availability vignette, children saw themselves as less entitled to nurturance than did their mothers, while no differences
were apparent between children and mothers for the nurturance situation calling for the
story character to routinely care for his/her younger brother and sister; a substantial
majority of both mothers and children supported this nurturance right.

That children in grades six and eight differed from mothers with respect to the story
character’s right to choose his/her own school, but not children in grade ten, is interesting
given the particular stage that these children would be presumed to be negotiating in their
academic lives. Specifically, grades six and eight are typically transition years for children,
as sixth graders prepare to move into middle school and eighth graders anticipate their
advancement to high school. Thus, it is likely that parents of sixth and eighth graders as
well as children in those grade levels would see this self-determination issue as most salient
to their real-life situations, as parents attempt to maintain their authority and children strive
to assert their independence. Conversely, tenth graders and their mothers would have
already negotiated this life stage and would likely be better able to take an objective stance
regarding children’s capacity to make this type of decision.

**Reasoning about Rights**

With respect to the reasons participants provided for their choice of action,
a clear pattern of reasoning was evident for both nurturance and self-determination
situations. As previously discussed, one of the most striking findings to emerge from these
analyses is that for both nurturance vignettes and one of two self-determination situations,
participants did not reason about these issues in terms of “rights”. Instead, participants
mentioned various other categories of reasoning. For example, in the freedom of choice
vignette, participants were inclined to mention factors relating to age, knowledge, ability and role, while others were concerned with various outcomes (positive or negative) that could arise should a child exercise this self-determination right. For nurturance situations, participants tended to reason in terms of parental responsibility or considered several negative consequences that could ensue should children be denied care and protection.

One possible explanation for participants not conceptualizing nurturance situations as “rights” per se, more so than for the self-determination vignettes, may relate to the nature in which rights are experienced by children in the real world. Whereas young people commonly experience nurturance and protection from parents throughout their childhood years, self-determination rights are more likely acquired as a child matures and demonstrates his/her capacity for responsible decision-making. It is postulated that families would more frequently engage in overt discussion regarding children’s rights to self-determination than nurturance and/or experience familial conflict around such issues to an extent that would influence both parents’ and children’s understanding of self-determination rights. In contrast, nurturance rights may not be perceived as such since they are not likely to be subject to overt expression or disagreement within the home since the majority of both children and mothers agree that children, regardless of age, should be provided with care and protection. As another explanation, self-determination issues may be conceptualized more frequently as “rights” than nurturance situations since the former represent rights that children strive for whereas the latter are things that are provided by parents regardless of children’s desires or efforts. In other words, the “direction of flow” with which each type of right is conceptualized is different; it is the parent’s responsibility
to provide nurturance while it is the child’s “job” to seek out independence.

Examination of group differences indicated that neither children in grades six, eight, and ten nor mothers of children in each those grade levels differed significantly in their reasoning responses. That developmental differences were not evident in the reasons provided by children of different ages contrasts with findings reported by Ruck (1994), and it is postulated that a similar explanation to that proffered earlier, that a wider age span may be necessary for detecting developmental differences, may apply here as well. For example, Ruck found that 8-year-olds less frequently mentioned implicit rights in their responses than 12-year-olds for the protection of privacy vignette. In addition, his results indicated that 8- and 10-year-olds were less likely to refer to parental responsibility, duty and care for the parental assistance with peer-related conflict vignette, while 8-, 10- and 12-year-olds were more inclined to mention outcomes or consequences than 14- and 16-year-olds for that same vignette. In relation to the present study, a lack of age differences in children’s reasoning responses suggests that a cognitive-developmental perspective, such as that posited by Piaget, may not accurately account for the way in which children conceptualize rights. Specifically, children’s reasoning about rights did not progress from concrete to abstract levels of conceptualization; rather, their reasoning was dependent on the type of right that was in question, whether nurturance or self-determination.

Differences between children and mothers were significant, however, for several of the reasoning categories, for both the self-determination and nurturance vignettes. For self-determination situations, mothers were significantly more likely than children in each of the three grade levels to mention factors relating to age, knowledge, ability and role. As
one mother of a sixth grader said in response to the freedom of choice vignette, “She’s just a kid...the parents have to decide for her because kids aren’t able to make those kinds of decisions.” Children, on the other hand, were more inclined to view self-determination issues as rights, although most did not explicitly use the word “right” in their reasoning responses. For instance, as one grade six student said in explaining why young people should be able to keep a secret diary, “It’s personal and it contains her inner thoughts and only she should be able to read it.” Furthermore, one eighth grader noted that, “Parents should respect the privacy of their kids. Just like he wouldn’t go through his parents’ private things, they should give him the same respect back”. For this category of reasoning, differences were significant between children in the two younger grades and their respective group of mothers. Mothers and children in all three grade levels also mentioned various consequences (positive or negative) in allowing a child to choose his/her own school, although sixth graders were the only group of children to use this category to a significantly greater extent than their mothers. As one sixth grader noted, “It’s her life and the special courses may be important for a job or career in the future.” Thus, similar to results obtained regarding participants’ support of rights, children in the younger grades were more discrepant from mothers with respect to their reasoning responses than were children in grade ten, suggesting that mothers may perceive tenth graders as more capable than younger children. This interpretation is supported by the fact that mothers tended to focus on factors relating to age, knowledge, ability and role in their reasoning responses.

For the nurturance vignettes, as with self-determination situations, mothers of children in all three grade levels tended to mention age, knowledge, ability and role to a
greater extent than children. As one mother said in response to the freedom from excessive work vignette, “She’s a child and she shouldn’t have the burden of looking after her younger brother and sister.” Mothers were also more inclined than children to respond that it was the parents’ responsibility to provide their children with care and protection. For example, one mother commented, “It’s not the child’s responsibility to raise their siblings. If the parents choose to work, then it is their responsibility to find child care.” In comparison, children tended to reason about nurturance issues to a greater extent than mothers in terms of a variety of negative consequences that could arise should children be denied nurturance and protection in certain situations. As one grade eight student noted for the freedom from excessive work vignette, “If he has to take care of his younger brother and sister, his marks will drop and he won’t have as bright a future.” These findings suggest that mothers understand their role as “nurturer” as stemming from both their more mature status as well as their responsibility as parents for protecting their children from undue harm. Conversely, while children generally referred to the same categories of reasoning as those mentioned by parents, they were more likely to refer to various negative consequences of not having their nurturance rights upheld. Thus, mothers conceptualized these rights with respect to their own role in nurturing their offspring, while children reasoned more commonly in terms of consequences to themselves rather than in relation to the role of caregivers in the nurturance process.
Achieving a Balance between Nurturance and Self-Determination Rights

The present findings complement prior research on children’s rights (e.g., Ruck, 1994), which suggests that by 12 years of age (i.e., grade six), young people tend to hold positive attitudes toward the extension of self-determination rights to children. Furthermore, children of this age and older tend to favour the continued expression of children’s nurturance rights. However, research examining adults’ views concerning children’s rights suggests that adults tend to support the extension of children’s nurturance rights to a greater extent than self-determination rights (Rogers and Wrightsman, 1978; Morton and Dubanoski, 1980). This finding was partially supported in the present study, in that mothers of children in grades six and eight were more supportive of children’s rights to nurturance than self-determination. However, mothers of tenth graders were equally likely to support the extension of self-determination rights as their children.

These findings hold important implications for establishing an appropriate balance between children’s nurturance and self-determination rights. Ruck (1994) suggests that in the past nurturance and self-determination rights were conceptualized as two distinct concepts. Children were typically provided with unconditional nurturance and support but were not seen as possessing the cognitive capacity for self-determination. Adolescence, on the other hand, was seen as a period of struggle for autonomy and independence while young people’s need for nurturance was generally disregarded. However, this conceptualization of nurturance and self-determination rights may not be accurate, as suggested by recent empirical findings. In the present study, a majority of young people at each of three grade levels and their mothers as a whole supported children’s rights to both
protection and autonomy, although mothers of younger children were less supportive of children’s self-determination rights than mothers of children in the oldest grade level. This implies that nurturance rights may be perceived by both mothers and children as more relevant to the adolescent period than traditionally believed, while greater congruence was suggested, at least for the adult participants, between past and present conceptualizations of self-determination rights; mothers were more likely to support self-determination rights for older children than younger children.

**Suggested Areas for Future Research**

Research examining the relative contribution of various contextual factors in children’s understanding of rights is still quite preliminary, and there are a number of areas calling for empirical investigation. For example, research is needed that examines the contribution of fathers’ understanding of rights to that of children. As previously noted, the gender role literature (e.g., Barbee et al., 1993) suggests that males perceive themselves as autonomous as compared to women who more commonly see themselves as nurturers. Given these differences, it is proposed that parents may think differently about children’s rights; mothers would be expected to more closely identify with nurturance rights while fathers would more likely support children’s self-determination rights. Another area where future research may be of interest is with respect to the contribution of a child’s birth order on his/her understanding of rights, although this type of research is often subject to various confounding factors. It is believed that children born into different positions within the family would likely be exposed to divergent rights-related experiences. For instance, it is
possible that a last born child would be coddled more, as "baby" of the family, and may therefore come to expect greater entitlement to nurturance from parents than a child born into an earlier position. Parenting style may also contribute to a child's understanding of rights, as it is believed that offspring of democratically-oriented parents would be exposed to more rights-related experiences than children of authoritarian or permissive parents. Finally, contexts other than the home environment should also be examined, such as school, legal, or medical settings, as potential contributors to children's understanding of rights.

Research is also needed to determine whether status variables such as socioeconomic status (SES), gender and ethnicity contribute to children's understanding of nurturance and self-determination rights. With regards to the role of SES, research findings are still quite preliminary and at present contradictory. For example, Melton's (1980, 1982) research found SES differences in children's understanding of rights, which were thought to reflect differences in children's experiences of entitlement and access to various rights. In contrast, Ruck (1994) found no effect of SES on children's understanding of nurturance and self-determination rights, although his examination of SES was not comprehensive and caution was suggested in generalizing these results.

The effect of gender was assessed in the current investigation and did not emerge as a salient factor. For only one nurturance vignette did gender differences emerge in children's reasoning responses. Specifically, female students in grade ten were significantly more likely than males in that grade to mention factors relating to age, knowledge, ability and role for the parent emotional availability vignette. A potential explanation for this finding can be extrapolated from the existing literature on sex role differences (Barbee et
al., 1993). Current stereotypes propose that men should be able to handle problems competently and independently, whereas women are provided with freedom to express dependency on others. Furthermore, research indicates that males minimize the importance of problems, which may hinder them from seeking support from others. As the present findings suggest, by tenth grade young people may internalize gender role expectations to an extent that females may be more willing than males to seek help from parents with a peer-related conflict. Nonetheless, no other differences were indicated between males and females in terms of their reasoning about rights or support of specific rights-related situations.

Ethnicity may also contribute to children's understanding of rights, although no research has as yet examined the role of this potentially important variable. Specifically, it is suggested that children and adolescents from minority groups who may have experienced the negative effects of racism and discrimination may hold different views of rights than their non-minority counterparts. While the current study involved an ethnically diverse sample, the effect of ethnicity was not examined and would be of interest in future investigations.

A limitation of this study is that examination of participants' understanding of nurturance and self-determination rights was restricted to indirect observation. While the present findings indicate overwhelming support for nurturance rights and somewhat less support by mothers for self-determination rights, it is as yet unknown how participants' responses correspond with reality. For instance, in the parent emotional availability vignette, the majority of both mothers and children endorsed young people's right to
receive help from parents for a peer-related problem. However, without direct observation, it is difficult to assess whether participants’ responses are in fact correlated with they would actually do in practice. It is suggested that future research attempt to examine parent-child interactions directly in response to various hypothetical rights-related situations as those used in the present study.

Conclusions

For over a century, children’s rights issues have elicited widespread interest. The children’s rights movements were initially dominated by advocates who favoured children’s nurturance rights, which later gave way to the establishment of the “kiddie liberation” movements supporting children’s rights to self-determination. Empirical investigations to date, however, are scant and have predominantly focused on children’s views regarding their entitlement to nurturance and self-determination rights, while neglecting to examine the various contexts within which their rights understanding is thought to develop. The present study represented an initial attempt to document the relationship between mothers’ conceptualizations of rights and that of their children. Several interesting findings emerged from this research. It is hoped that information derived from the present study will serve as a springboard for future research regarding the various contributing factors to children’s understanding of rights.
REFERENCES


