

Forums for Parents of Young Children: Parents' Online Conversations in Israel and France.

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This paper compares discussions in online forums on the parenting of young children in France and Israel through a cross-national perspective. We mapped and coded the activity in four major forums on early-age parenting, two in each country, during two months ($N= 3,244$ posts). Analysis of the posts revealed that, overall, parents in both countries focused more on children than on parenting issues and were mostly interested in their children's educational settings. French participants discussed cognitive and developmental issues more than Israelis parents, whereas Israeli parents were more concerned with social-emotional development and parenting issues than the French participants. Results are discussed from a cross-national perspective, and practical implications are suggested, relating to a safe and empowering virtual space where parents and professionals assist parents of young children from different cultural backgrounds to adjust to their particular needs, interests and expectations.

Keywords: Early age, parenting, internet forums, France, Israel.

Parenting of young children constitutes a meaningful time for the child and for the family. Typically, in Western countries, parents tend to spend many hours out of the house and are subjected to pressures and constant demands from both work and family (e.g., Cinamon, Weisel, & Tzuk, 2007). Compared with previous generations, parents of the present era tend to spend less time with other parents of similar-aged children. Consequently, they can both give and receive less support during their day-to-day lives (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005). Fundamental changes in the world of work and structural changes in the family have enabled more mothers to pursue careers while raising young children and have challenged fathers to become more involved with their young children's lives (Bond, Galinsky, & Swanberg, 1998). Demonstrating this change, Cinamon, et al. (2007) found that fathers of young children attributed higher importance to the parental role compared to the work role. In families with two biological parents, fathers' involvement, responsibility and care have increased toward the end of the 20th century (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000). Mothers still shoulder the lion's share of the parenting, but fathers' involvement relative to that of mothers appears to be increasing (Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean, & Hofferth, 2001).

Parents of young children frequently search for effective methods of coping with the new challenges of parenting (Badinter, 2004; Holden & Miller, 1999; Périvier, 2007). The idea of simple methods for good parenting has practically vanished with the understanding that there are multiple ways to deal with the parenting task (Badinter, 2004). Parenting also has to do with a range of background factors such as culture, socio-economic-status, family structure, available support resources, and more (e.g., Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000). Online forums have become a popular channel for parents seeking support, knowledge, and a consulting platform on the complex task confronting them (e.g., Martland & Rothbaum, 2006; Radey & Randolph, 2009). Research on this topic has thus far been limited and the aim of the present study is to offer a cross-national perspective on the characteristics of such forums.

Parenting from a cross-national viewpoint

The present study explored parenting of young children, as expressed in parents' activities on parents' forums on the internet, in two national contexts: Israel and France. For doing so, we rely on the "Developmental Niche" theoretical model (Harkness & Super, 2002; Super & Harkness, 1986), according to which parenting necessarily involves culture-bound issues. The model rests on four assumptions: (a) daily surroundings are important for the adaptation of both parents and children; (b) parent-child routine activities in

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different cultures are a key to the understanding of the child's development; (c) parents from different cultures assign unique definitions to their contexts and activities; and (d) parenting is constructed from the parents' cultural experiences and the children's individual characteristics. Accordingly, parents play a central mediating role between the culture and their children's developmental experiences.

Intercultural differences, especially between Western and more traditional (mainly Asian or African) societies have been extensively researched (e.g., Kağitçibaşı, 2005; Triandis, 1995; Tamis-LeMonda, Way, Hughes, Yoshikawa, Kalman, & Niwa, 2008; Wang & Tamis-LeMonda, 2003). Few studies, however, have focused on the cross-cultural differences in parenting styles between various Western societies (e.g., Kremer, 2007). In the present study, we compare Internet parents' forums in Israel and France, two similar societies in their technological level, the overall structure and goals of their educational system, the number of children per family, and other factors (ICBS, 2012; INSEE, 2010, 2012). However, these two contexts also differ significantly on variables that could affect the issues explored in this study, such as the nature of their cultural heterogeneity, the position of religion within the culture, and the society's approach to children. These issues are elaborated below.

The French cultural context

The birth rate in France is the second highest in the European Union after Ireland (INSEE, 2010, 2012). The average family in France has 2.1 children; 53% of them are born outside of a married structure, to two working parents. In several studies that explored central family values, French mothers reported on tolerance, sense of responsibility, modesty, individuality, and obedience as the central values to pass on to their children (Sabatier & Lannegrand-Willems, 2005; Suizzo, 2002). In the cognitive realm, French mothers reported on devoting a great deal of attention to their children's academic achievements and less involvement in their children's leisure and social lives (Ibid). From Suizzo's review, it appears that French parents (both mothers and fathers) tend to demonstrate somewhat reserved emotional expressions toward their children. Quite a few of the parents that participated in his study expressed a sense of ambivalence toward physically holding their children and, overall, reported on fewer conflicts with their children compared with parents from other European countries. In a study comparing mothers' perceptions of their motherhood in seven countries (Argentina, Belgium, France, Israel, Italy, Japan, and the USA), French mothers assessed their own investment in parenting and the relevance of their efforts to

their children's success as relatively low (Bornstein, Haynes, Azuma, Galperin, Maital, Ogino,...Wright, 1998). These findings appear to be consistent with two views that are rather common in France: (1) child development is perceived as a natural process that does not require specific parental intervention, which seems to be in line with French mothers reporting that they rely on their own intuitions and on the educational system when caring for and educating young children; and (2) French mothers feel that they are expected to balance their roles as wives and mothers and, therefore, they do not see themselves as compelled to be constantly available to their children (e.g., Bornstein, et al., 1998; Sabatier & Lannegrand-Willems, 2005).

The Israeli cultural context

Israel is a multilingual and multicultural society; Hebrew and Arabic are its official languages, and there are also many other minority languages (heritage, immigrant, and community) (Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999; Tannenbaum, 2009). Since the present study focuses on Internet forums in *Hebrew*, we refer here to the main characteristics of Hebrew-speaking families, which are usually Jewish¹. Thus, the average Jewish, non-Orthodox family in Israel has 2.9 children (ICBS, 2012). Typical values prevalent in Hebrew-speaking Israeli society include the centrality of the family and the centrality of children within the family (e.g., Lavee & Katz, 2003). Among the sources and inspirations for these values in Israel are probably Jewish tradition, which often views the family as the primary safeguard of traditional values, the historical circumstances of being a persecuted minority, and the unstable political situation that at times seems to affect the tendency to bring children into the world as 'compensation' for the constant sense of threat (e.g., Ben-Rafael & Peres, 2005; Krieger, 2010).

Non-Orthodox Jews in Israeli society today are thus part of a modern society with a Western culture that emphasizes individualistic values, but is still more cooperative and collectivistic than that in the United States (e.g. Mayseless & Scharf, 2003). In their comparative cross-cultural study, Bornstein, et al. (1998), found that Israeli mothers tend to believe that their investment in childrearing is a means for personal realization and an obligation toward the society, which is a feature rather typical of collectivistic societies (Mayseless & Scharf, 2003).

¹We do not relate to the ultra-Orthodox community because this group is segregated from the non-Orthodox majority in many ways, including a tendency to avoid the Internet in general and non-Orthodox sites and forums in particular.

Moreover, despite a rise in the average level of women's education in Israel and their increased participation in the workforce, women are frequently perceived by the society, and by themselves, first and foremost as mothers (Plazental-Berger, 2007).

The world-wide-web in the parental and family context

In the current study, we chose to focus on parenting in Israel and France, exploring parenting of young children as expressed via Internet forums for parents in these countries. The Internet has become an inseparable aspect of daily life in the Western world, gradually spreading to the whole world. From the last decade of the 20th century onwards, there is a significant change that reduces the digital divide; thus groups that previously were not part of the Internet, like older women or less educated populations, have gradually connected to the Internet as well (Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 2002).

According to Internet World Stats (2010), 69% of the French population is connected to the Internet, using it primarily for emails, information search, and general surfing. Over the past decade, there has been an increase by more than 400% of Internet users in France, mostly among younger people and those of medium- and high socio-economic status (SES), but also among other sectors. In fact, there is evidence that using the Internet for various activities has become a daily habit for most French people (Fleishman-Hillard & Harris Interactive, 2008; GFK, 2008; Médiamétrie, 2009 - cited in Journal du Net, 2009) in spite of the existence of a digital divide (Renahy, Parizot, & Chauvin, 2008). In Israel, 72% of the population is connected to the Internet (Internet World Stats, 2010), and during the past decade there has been an increase by more than 300% of Internet users in Israel. In 2006, the Israeli Internet Association reported that the most common online activities among Jewish Israeli users were information search, emails, news sites, consumer sites, chats, forums, and downloading of games, music and movies. In Israel, options for Internet usage are growing at a rapid pace, with participation in chats spreading most rapidly (Gombor & Vas, 2008).

In spite of differences due to gender, age and digital divide, the majority of parents around the world who use the Internet do so to seek both information and social support (Plantin & Daneback, 2009). Indeed, the Internet offers extensive information on a range of issues related to parenting, and the possibility of exploring it in a fast, private, and comfortable manner adds further appeal to this channel of communication (e.g., Martland & Rothbaum,

2006; Porter & Edirippulige, 2007). Moreover, parenting sites are seen by parents as a safe and supportive space in which they can better understand the role of parenting (Brady & Guerin, 2010). A survey conducted in Sweden, for example, showed that parents view online parents' sites as a firsthand source of information and advice, where they are also exposed to other parents (Sarkadi & Bremberg, 2005). Chenais (2007) found that pregnant women in France prefer information that they find in forums to that found in other media. The women valued the Internet as an immediate, relevant, interactive, free, and pleasant service, and reported that participating in such forums gives them the opportunity to deal with questions that they had not had the opportunity or had not felt comfortable to ask during their doctors' appointments (see also Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005, on online forums for pregnant women and new mothers in the US). Other studies showed that parents of children with special needs tend to use the Internet in order to receive information about services, medication, educational options for their children, and their functioning as parents of children with disabilities (e.g., Gundersen, 2011; Porter & Edirippulige, 2007). Furthermore, studies show that electronic networks have the potential for creating social connections between parents which are felt as authentic and complex (Sarkadi & Bremberg, 2005) as well as satisfying and emotionally empowering in various contexts and countries (e.g., Chenais, 2007; Godkar, 2008; Madge & O'Connor, 2006).

Most of the existing research on the topic of electronic communication in relation to parenting focuses on the parents' coping with the risks of their children's Internet usage (e.g. Beebe, Asche, Harrison, & Quinlan, 2004; Livingstone, 2003; Mesch, 2009; Wong, 2011), or on issues related to children with special needs, as mentioned above. Despite the plethora of virtual discussion groups in the area of family and parenting, few studies have examined the actual online activity of parents of young children on Internet forums (Madge & O'Connor, 2006). Also, to date, no studies have referred to parenting forums from a cultural viewpoint. Our study aims to begin considering this question from a cross-national perspective, comparing forums for parents of young children in Israel and France regarding the scope of this activity, its participants, the characteristics of the children about whom they write posts, and the main topics of discussion. In our view, such cross-national comparison is very important, in that it can shed light on the universalities as well as uniqueness of the specific contexts investigated. Such knowledge can help, for example, educationalists who manage such forums, in creating appropriate platforms - both on the

general level, as well as for the specific national context in which these forums take place.

In line with the above review, the research aims were: (1) to learn about parenting of young children, as expressed in the discourse of parents who participate in parents' forums on the Internet in France and Israel, and to describe the characteristics of this activity in both countries; and (2) to explore the extent to which parents in these countries discuss developmental, educational and childcare issues.

Method

In this study we applied a mixed method design, combining quantitative data collection (categorization of posts) with a qualitative approach (thematic analysis). Using mixed methodological approaches is especially relevant in questions that cross paradigms and disciplines, as in this study. As stated by Jang, McDougall, Pollon, Herbert, and Russell (2008), "one should choose methods that are most likely to provide evidence useful for answering important research questions given the inquiry objectives, research context, and the available resources" (p. 222). Moreover, mixed method design allows a wider scope of investigation, increases research validity, and allows us to 'benefit from both [paradigmatic] worlds' (see e.g. Creswell, 2003; Dörnyei, 2007). The qualitative database was created by encoding the posts written by parents on the forums. It included broad categories; each one was divided into sub-categories, which were decided upon a priori as representing central themes in parenting of young children (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). After forming the categories and collecting the data, categories were matched with contents in posts, in line with grounded theory (Gibson, 2001).

Forum selection: As a first step, we conducted a comprehensive Google search of the following terms in Hebrew and French: "Internet, forum, parents, young children." We checked the activity and relevance to the current study of the first ten forums in each language. We then established four criteria for the selection of each forum: (a) positioned at the head of the Google search results list; (b) focuses on parents of young children; (c) forums in both countries are comparable in terms of content; and (d) open participation at no cost. Based on these criteria, we selected four forums, two from each country, one focusing on general issues related to parenting of young children and one focusing on specific issues related to the parenting of first graders. The selected forums belong to major commercial portals or sites in Israel and France. In Israel, two forums, "Education of young children" (henceforth H-EYC) and "Entering first grade" (henceforth H-EFG), were selected from

the *Tapuz* portal (www.tapuz.co.il). In France, one forum was selected from the *Magic Maman* portal (www.magicmaman.com): "School 3-7 years" (henceforth F-S3-7), relating to the main developmental and educational topics relevant to this age range. The second forum was selected from the *Doctissimo* portal (www.doctissimo.fr): "Doctissimo-first grade" (henceforth F-DFG), relating to issues concerning the parenting of first graders. We documented the entire scope of activity in all four forums over two separate months: September, the first month of the school year in both countries, and May, when parents tend to review the past year and make decisions concerning their children for the following one.

Analysis of post: A 'post' is defined as any written message in a forum. We categorized posts as either 'openings' - new posts potentially calling for responses - , or 'responses' - posts sent in response to a prior message. When a particular opening receives a number of responses, a 'thread' of posts is created relating to the original post. All posts were encoded by native speakers of Hebrew and French, respectively. Each post was analyzed according to the following criteria: forum's name, date of publication, username, gender, writer's status (mother, father, family relative, forum administrator, child expert), type of post (opening or response), and characteristics of children about whom the post was written (gender, age, educational setting). We then performed thematic analysis of all the categories and sub-categories included (a post often relates to several topics (categories), and each reference to a sub-topic (sub-category) was counted in order to reflect the entire content; (see e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was done according to the following procedure:

(1) In a pilot study we downloaded 30 Hebrew and 30 French posts (the first 30 posts posted during the same week) from the forums in the study, and encoded their topics. The pilot encoding was performed independently by three academics specializing in child development. The categories they agreed upon formed the initial encoding table.

(2) The researchers assembled related sub-categories into broader categories. For example, sub-categories 'homework' and 'reading and writing' were placed into the broader category 'learning and cognition.'

(3) We assessed the validity of this list of categories by analyzing 30 additional posts in each language in the selected forums. Consequently, more categories and sub-categories were added to the final encoding table (see Table 3). Inter-rater reliability (Kappa measure) between three independent raters (MA students who were native-speakers of the relevant languages), was very high: 0.92 in Hebrew, and 0.93 in French.

(4) We then analyzed all the activity in the four forums in Israel and in France during the two selected months according to the agreed categories and sub-categories.

Results

Scope of activity

Overall, 3,244 posts were collected, containing 8,690 references to the encoded sub-categories. Much more activity was recorded in Israel than in France. Table 1 describes the basic data of the posts that were analyzed in this study, including the frequency of posts, openings, responses, basic information about the users, and the sub-topics that were discussed in each country. As Table 1 shows, more posts were published in Israel (79%) than in France (21%), and, based on usernames (total 679), more unique users wrote posts in Israel (62%) than in France (38%).

Most of the posts referred to a number of sub-categories (i.e. more than one sub-topic per post) (Table 1). ANOVA that compared the average number of sub-topic references in each post in the two countries reveals a significant effect of country ($F(1,3244)=147.24, p=.000, \eta^2=.04$). Participants referred to more sub-topics in each post in France ($M=3.43, SD=.07$) than in Israel ($M=2.44, SD=0.37$). In both countries, the majority of the posts in the

forums were responses to previously published posts (Table 1). A Chi square test revealed that this phenomenon was especially noticeable in Israel, which had nearly 6.5 times more responses than openings, while in France there were 3.5 times more responses than opening posts ($\chi^2(1)=11.42, p<.001$).

In order to characterize the forum users, we examined how they presented themselves online. Table 1 shows that 82% of all posts were written by women, and only 8% were written by men. Of all the posts, 58% were written by mothers, and this was more often the case in France (65%) than in Israel (56%). Fathers wrote 7% of all posts, and more were written by fathers in Israel (9%) than in France (0.1%). A Chi square test revealed significant differences between the positions of the writers (e.g., father, mother, relative, forum administrator) and their countries ($\chi^2(6)=366.59, p=.000$). More posts were written by family members in France (10%) than in Israel (0.4%), while more posts were written by forum administrators in Israel (12%) than in France (0.1%). In addition, we explored gender differences of children whom the posts were written about; analysis reveals no significant differences between numbers of posts written about boys (26%) vs. girls (22%). All other posts did not mention the child's gender explicitly.

Table 1.
Central characteristics of posts and forums' users

Characteristics of posts	France <i>n</i>	Israel <i>n</i>	Total <i>N</i>
Total number of posts	689	2555	3244
Openings	531	869	1400
Responses	1861	5429	7290
Users	259	420	679
Sub-topics	2392	6298	8690
Gender of the users			
Women	517	2137	2654
Men*	2	243	245
Unknown	170	165	335
Affiliation of the users			
Mothers	450	1442	1892
Fathers*	1	224	225
Both parents	18	54	72
Family members*	72	9	81
Experts	32	132	164
Forums' admin.*	1	298	299
Unknown	115	396	511

*Contributes to χ^2 significance

Thematic analysis

This section presents the topics referred to by at least 5% of the writers in one of the two countries. We examined differences in the proportions of the posted topics and sub-topics and conducted multiple comparisons between countries. Due to the large number of comparisons (up to 12), we performed a Bonferroni adjustment to correct the level of significance. For all the multiple comparisons, we used a confidence interval (CI) of 99.87%, with a

critical value of $Z=2.65$, for a significance level of $p=.001$. As presented in Table 2, significant differences emerged between the proportions of posted topics in Israel and France: 'Social-emotional development' and 'parenting' received greater attention in Israel than in France, while 'learning and cognition,' 'developmental issues,' 'society, religion and community,' and 'adjustment and adaptation' received greater attention in France than in Israel.

Table 2.

Topics¹ of posts and multi-comparisons of proportions between Israel and France

	France (n=2392)			Israel (n=6298)			Z
	n	% within	CI	n	% within	CI	
Educational setting	755	32	[28.4-38.71]	1810	29	[26.9-30.6]	2.64
Social-emotional development	238	10	[8-12.1]	974	16	[14-17]	5.32***
Parenting	188	8	[6.1-9.8]	823	13	[11.7-14.5]	6.74***
Developmental issues	260	11	[8.9-13]	522	8	[7.2-5]	3.78***
Learning and cognition	277	12	[9.5-13.8]	477	7	[6.5-8.7]	6.44***
Society, religion and community	160	7	[5.1-8.5]	295	5	[3.8-5.6]	3.73***
Adjustment and adaptation	141	6	[4.4-7.6]	263	4	[3.4-5]	3.35***

¹Topics (categories) that were referred to by at least 5% of the writers in one of the two countries

Note. CI = confidence interval = 99.865%.,

*** p<.001

At the next stage, we examined proportional differences and conducted multiple comparisons between the numbers of references to sub-categories in each country along with the statistical comparisons between the two countries (see Table 3). The central findings from this analysis are elaborated below, illustrated with relevant quotes.

Educational setting. This topic was the one most frequently discussed in both countries (32% and 29% of the total posts in France and Israel, respectively). Within it, the sub-topics 'parent-teacher interaction,' 'child-teacher relationships,' and 'the setting's schedule' received similar levels of interest in both countries (see Table 3). The following is a Hebrew post that discusses 'child-teacher relationships' and 'parent-teacher interaction':

"I talked to the teacher who sent my daughter out of the classroom (as if she was in fourth grade!). We had a disgusting talk. She said that my daughter doesn't have patience to sit and learn..." (H-EFG).

A French post on the same topics wrote:

"My son is in first grade. The teacher moved him from his seat in the classroom to one next to an energetic kid and asked him to supervise him...My husband and I are not happy about the fact that our son will be labeled 'the supervisor.' Why is the teacher not doing her job?...Should I talk to the teacher?" (F-DFG).

Significant differences were found between the two countries on the following sub-topics: 'educational program,' 'multi-age classrooms,' and 'choosing an educational setting' (see Table 3). The greatest significant difference emerged in the percentage of references related to the 'educational program', which was discussed much more in Israeli (25%) than in French forums (7%).

One Israeli mother, for example, wrote:

"I'm not sure about the way they study English. Yes, they sing and paint, but is that necessary?" and another asked in the same forum: "They are studying the same subjects as last year. Do you think that my child will be bored?" (H-EYC).

Social-emotional development. Within this topic, participants in both countries referred with similar frequency to the sub-topics of 'behavior' and 'emotional development' (see Table 3). For example, a French mother related to her son's behavioral problem:

"I'm looking for someone who could help me. My son is five, and he doesn't stop hitting and shoving his friends... I don't know what to do. He's a good student and his behavior is inexplicable because at home he's not like that" (F-S3-7).

Another example is that of an Israeli mother who referred to her son's emotional issues:

"The separation in the morning is so easy that I feel sad about it. How come it's so easy for him to say goodbye?" (H-EYC).

The 'relationships' sub-topic was discussed significantly more in Israel (47%) than in France (36%) (see Table 3). For example, an Israeli mother wrote:

"My son is four years old. He made a good friend at kindergarten... Every time I come to fetch him at the end of the day, his friend asks to come with us... On the one hand, I try to encourage my son to make other friends, but on the other, I feel bad to spoil such a good friendship. So what should I do?" (H-EYC).

Parenting. In both countries, the sub-topic that was most discussed was 'values and beliefs' (50% in Israel and 41% in France). Here is a Hebrew post reflecting differences between the parents' beliefs concerning sleeping habits:

"My husband and I argue all the time about the way I raise our son. My son is almost three months old and every time he wants to sleep, he cries. He only calms down after I hold him, and my husband feels this is not the best way to raise him" (H-EYC).

Participants in Israel referred more significantly to 'authority and boundaries' (29%) than participants in France (8%) (see Table 3). For instance:

"Why is it that every time I give up, this is a threat to my parental authority?... Let's say, I cooked a dish with chicken and rice. If my child doesn't want to eat this, he can find something else to eat in the fridge. There's no argument and he's happy. Is this a problem?" (H-EYC).

Developmental issues. The sub-topic mostly discussed in this category was 'health' (31% in Israel and 25% in France). For example:

"How many times have you asked yourselves when to go to the emergency room? If your child's high fever does not go down for two days? If your daughter does not stop complaining about headaches? If your son falls and his back hurts? It's important for every parent to know what to do, so please read this link" (H-EYC).

Another sub-topic widely discussed was 'weaning and toilet training' (27% in Israel and 25% in France). For example, a French mother wrote:

"My three year-old son adjusted well to preschool, but during the last two weeks he's peed at school, and only at school, every day! At home, he uses the potty chair. I've tried everything (presents, punishment, talks...). Nothing helps. I don't know what to do!" (F-S3-7).

The sub-topic 'difficulties and disabilities' was discussed significantly more in France (19%) than in Israel (8%) (see Table 3). For example, a French mother wrote:

"Hello everybody. I came back to tell you about my son's stuttering... the speech therapist thought that his stuttering may come from separation anxiety ... She suggested I tell my son that we don't give up on him even if we don't stay with him" (F-S3-7).

Learning and cognition. Within this general topic, the sub-topic 'reading and writing' was mentioned in both countries more or less equally (18% in Israel and 16% in France). For example, a French post wrote:

Table 3.

Sub-topics of posts and multi-comparisons of proportions between countries

	France			Israel			Z
	n	% within	CI	n	% within	CI	
Educational setting							
Educational program	53	7	[4.4-10.5]	449	25	[21.5-28.2]	10.29***
Parent-teacher interaction	96	13	[0.91-17.1]	224	12	[10-15.1]	0.17
Choice of educational setting	46	6	[3.7-9.4]	223	12	[9.9-15]	4.62***
Setting's schedule	80	11	[7.3-14.7]	139	8	[5.8-9.9]	2.33
Child-teacher relationships	63	8	[0.5-12.1]	146	8	[6.1-10.3]	0.14
Multi-age classrooms	40	5	[3.3-8.5]	11	1	[0.2-1.4]	7.59***
Social emotional development							
Relationships	85	36	[26.1-46.2]	460	47	[42-52.4]	3.13***
Behavior	98	41	[31.1-51.8]	313	32	[27.3-37.1]	2.56
Emotional development	55	23	[15.1-32.9]	201	21	[16.6-25.1]	0.74
Parenting							
Values and beliefs	77	41	[29.7-52.9]	407	50	[43.7-55.1]	1.89
Authority and boundaries	15	8	[3.2-16.4]	241	29	[24.2-34.6]	4.55***
Developmental issues							
Health	64	25	[42.6-56.9]	160	31	[24.3-37.5]	1.67
Weaning	65	25	[8.3-17.8]	146	28	[21.8-34.7]	0.79
Sleep	49	18	[11.9-27.8]	88	17	[12-22.7]	0.59
Difficulties & disabilities	50	19	[5.9-14.4]	41	8	[4.6-12.4]	4.55***
Learning and cognition							
First grade	35	13	[7.2-20.3]	173	36	[29.3-43.7]	6.91***
Homework	25	9	[4.5-15.9]	111	23	[17.4-30]	4.8***
Reading and writing	44	16	[9.7-24.11]	88	18	[13.1-24.4]	0.78
Oral language	44	16	[9.7-24.1]	13	3	[1-6.1]	6.44***
Mathematics	30	11	[5.8-18.1]	19	4	[1.7-7.8]	3.52***
Adaptation and adjustment to:							
Educational setting	119	84	[72.4-92.3]	223	85	[76.4-90.9]	0.04
Living place	6	4	[9.6-12.8]	20	8	[3.5-14.3]	1.09
New sibling	8	6	[1.59-14.8]	15	6	[2.1-11.6]	0.21

Note. CI = confidence interval = 99.865%.

*** $p < .001$.

"My daughter is 3.5 years old and she's in kindergarten. She knows how to copy the letters and write her name alone. Once, she came back with a drawing she had signed but wrote her name upside down!!" (F-S3-7).

Significant differences were found between Israel and France on all other sub-topics

in this category, including (respectively) 'first grade' (36%, 13%), 'homework' (23%, 9%), 'math' (4%, 11%), and 'oral language' (3%, 16%) (see Table 3). With regard to the 'first grade' sub-topic, an Israeli mother wrote:

"My daughter is five years old and will enter first grade next year. I thought we'll study together to make her ready for first grade. I want to have fun with her. She was very

enthusiastic about it. Do you have ideas or recommendations about nice handbooks with letters and numbers?" (H-EFG).

Adjustment and adaptation. References to the sub-topics in this category were similar for participants in both countries (see Table 3). These include 'adjustment to educational setting', 'place of living,' and 'new sibling'. Here is an example of an Israeli mother who wrote on 'adjusting to an educational setting':

"It's easy to blame the family... Today, we know that children don't learn as adults do and it is difficult for some kids to adjust to other kids...!" (H-EFG).

Focus on the child or the parent? We conducted comparisons to examine whether the focal point of the posts was the parent or the

child. To do so, we created two new categories: 'Focus on the child', which included all the sub-topics that related to the child, his or her developmental and educational issues (e.g., reading, adaptation to a new sibling); and 'Focus on the parent', which included all the sub-topics that related to the parents' role as caregivers and educators (e.g., parent-teacher interaction, authority). We found that overall, across the two countries, the contents of the posts focus more on the child (71%) than on the parent (29%). In Israel, the focus on the parent was significantly greater (31%) than in France (23%) ($Z = 5.52$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

This study assessed online activity in forums for parents of young children, comparing Israel and France. Quantitative and qualitative analysis revealed several similarities as well as significant differences between the two contexts which were under investigation.

Extent of online activity

Analysis of forums' posts in both countries revealed that activity includes more 'responses' than 'openings', in line with users' behavior on Internet forums generally (e.g., 'ifeel', 'nana10.co.il', 'enfant.com', 'famili.fr'). Previous studies have emphasized that openings are usually personal, though with general implications, and users expect others to respond fairly quickly (e.g., Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005). In mothers' forums in particular, all participants are expected to be committed to one to another (Ley, 2007) and contribute to the discussion, be it with information or social-emotional support (see also, Godkar, 2008). This is illustrated, for example, by signs of 'appreciation' to other users to mark the scope of their participation. In our study, active participants in the "Doctissimo" forum, for example, were granted distinctions as 'silver' or 'gold' users.

Thematic analysis of posts demonstrated that, in both countries, the average post refers to at least two different sub-topics, which tend to be related. For example, a discussion relating to a child's temperament that influences the parent-child relationship also addresses the child's social interactions with her friends. Parents probably see the connections between the sub-topics and take advantage of the opportunity to discuss several issues at the same time. This is in line with the findings of Oren, Mioduser and Nachmias (2002), who report that participants' behavior in forums' virtual discussions is very similar to oral conversations, where there is no limit on the number of subjects (see also Journal du Net, 2009).

Although the percentage of Internet users in the European Union is nearly equal for men (68%), and women (62%) (Seybert & Lööf, 2010), studies show that, insofar as parenting is involved, mothers are more likely to use the Internet than fathers (Brady & Guerin, 2010; Radey & Randolph, 2009). Our study supports this finding, inasmuch as 88% of the participants were women. In both countries, the low level of fathers' involvement in online forums focusing on parenting of young children may reflect, at least partially, the low level of fathers' involvement in rearing young children in 'real life.' This finding gains further significance if we adopt Dahan's (2004) claim that frequently, the Internet is an arena that reproduces the existing social order. Indeed, some of the evidence suggests that, even in the twenty-first century, mothers tend to be more responsible and active than fathers in the day-to-day lives of their children from infancy until middle childhood (e.g., Aram, 2010; Parke, 2004; Cette, Dromel, & Méda, 2005). In the current study, however, 10% of Israeli participants are males, while males are almost completely absent in the French sample. The low level of participation of fathers in the French forums could point to the stronger social association of forums on parenting with *motherhood* rather than with *parenthood* (Périer, 2004). Moreover, the fathers' participation in Israeli forums could reflect the spreading recognition of their significant role in their children's development from birth, and a growing tendency toward paternal involvement (e.g., Gaunt, 2005; Lewis & Lamb, 2003; Parke, 2004; Sagiv, 2003).

Thematic analysis of online discussions

'Educational setting' is the topic most frequently discussed in the forums in both countries (one-third of all posts), perhaps because parents of children who have not yet entered the compulsory education system have a choice. As is the case in other marketplace contexts, when the need for selecting an educational framework arises, parents behave like consumers and the forums help them learn about their options. An additional explanation is that we collected data during months of transitions (e.g., to daycare or to first grade). Children's transitions in general, and to first grade in particular, are known as a significant concern to parents, causing them to feel that not only are their children required to face new and perhaps threatening challenges but that they themselves are also at a turning point in their parenting (see e.g., Mangione & Speth, 1998).

Another angle worth further elaboration is the differences that emerged between the two countries regarding specific sub-topics of 'educational settings'. Thus, the sub-topic of 'educational program' and 'choice of an

educational setting' was of greater concern to Israeli than to French participants, while the 'setting's schedule' sub-topic interested the French more than the Israeli participants, possibly reflecting these societies' internal discourse. In recent years, the educational setting for young children in France has undergone changes, meant to provide adequate solutions for working parents on the one hand, and to permit children to spend fewer hours in their daily setting in accordance with their needs on the other (Godet & Sullerot, 2005). In Israel, parents have been exposed to a variety of private early education settings during the last decade, whose differences are not easily discernible at times, making choices difficult (Fisher & Friedman, 2009).

'Social-emotional development' was the second most discussed topic in the Israeli forums and the fourth in the French ones. Nearly half of all references to this topic in the Israeli forums focused on children's social arena in various contexts. This finding is in line with previous studies (Suizzo, 2002; Suizzo & Bornstein, 2006), who stressed that French parents are concerned with fostering personal hygiene, obedience, and the internalization of behavior codes at an early age more than with advancing the social-emotional aspect of their children's personalities (see also, Sabatier & Lannegrand-Willems, 2005).

The topic of 'parenting' was in third place in order of occurrence in Israeli forums and fifth in the French ones. Discussions in Israel may reflect the importance of parenting topics because 'familism' as a cultural value, is central in Israeli public discourse. Parenting is a central social issue in both Israeli and French cultures but, in France, 'parenting' apparently relates primarily to the child and his or her development as a natural process, with parents expressing interest in the development of other children. In Israel, 'parenting' basically reflects the parents' involvement as responsible for the child's development and, therefore, they are interested in knowing what other parents do (see also, Bornstein et al., 1998). Furthermore, participants dealing with this topic in both societies refer mostly to 'values and beliefs', and concern with it seems to reflect uncertainties about parenting in modern times (Lazartigues, 2001). In the twenty-first century, women are expected to reach a smooth balance between being perfect mothers and independent, successful professionals. As a result, mothers frequently feel guilty when their children experience educational, social, or emotional difficulties (Badinter, 2004). In contrast with the past, we do not have one correct parental model but rather many models affected by different circumstances and ideologies (e.g. conservatism, democracy, feminism), which often add further confusion and

decrease parental self-confidence (Bornstein & Lansford, 2010). Our findings point to the empowering impact of online forums as a consequence of conversing with other parents (see also Brady & Guerin, 2010).

Of all the sub-topics of parenting, one quarter focuses on 'authority and boundaries' (effectiveness of forceful parenting, punishments, and so forth). There were nearly three times more discussions on 'authority and boundaries' in Israeli forums than in French ones. In recent years, 'the new authority' has become a central issue in the public educational agenda of Israeli society (Omer, 2008), possibly because today's young parents grew up in a rather young society. In a developing society, like the Israeli one, which constantly confronts an existential threat that requires children to be drafted into the army, parents may find it hard to enlist sufficient resources for developing a secure and authoritative parenting model (see also Ben-Rafael & Peres, 2005). This in turn, may lead young parents to search for alternative ones.

'Learning and Cognition' was the second most discussed topic in the French forums and only the sixth on Israeli ones. Suizzo (2002) found that French parents tend to believe that their central task as parents is to provide varied cognitive stimuli. She further claimed that French parents place great importance on cognitive development because they think that it contributes to higher academic achievements that, in turn, affect career options. French participants primarily discussed issues related to language and literacy development, which is in line with the attention of French professionals to children's language (e.g., Dolto, 1994), and the emphasis of pre-elementary academic learning programs on language development as a key aim in the first year of nursery school (Ministère de l'Éducation, 2013).

Focus on the child vs. focus on the parent

In both Israeli and French forums, conversations focus more on the child than on the parent, yet the proportion of child-focused topic references was significantly higher in the French context. In Israel, parents are perceived as a central influence on a child's development (Bornstein et al., 1998) and they tend to discuss at length whether they are good enough parents (Omer, 2008). According to Vygotsky (1978), the mediating adult is the one who leads the child's development, a view that has earned wide recognition in Israel in many contexts, including parenting (e.g., Aram, 2007). Israeli parents may be influenced by this approach and be inclined to assume great responsibility for the child's development; in some of their conversations, they doubt their abilities to fulfill this role appropriately. French mothers tend to rely more on parental intuition and respond spontaneously

to their children. More than parents in other Western societies, they tend to endorse Piaget's view of child development (e.g., Piaget & Inhelder, 1973), viewing it as a universal process that unfolds according to stages, independent of parental behaviors and responses (Bornstein et al., 1998). Accordingly, the adult accompanies the child's natural development as a caregiver, an enabling supporting figure, a perception that was also reflected in the contents and the overall tone of many posts in the French forums.

Limitations, Conclusions, and Implications

There are several limitations in this study. First, like in other studies examining activity on the Internet, we cannot be sure how representative the parents who are using the parenting forums are, with regard to the general parents' population in their respective societies. Second, we are aware of the possibility that some users presented themselves incorrectly, either by mistake or on purpose. On top of these, we cannot be sure how relevant our findings and insights are to other countries or cultures.

Nevertheless, this cross-national study is an important, preliminary attempt which explores issues touching on parents' online behavior; further and more extensive research on these issues in other nations and cultures is needed to broaden and deepen our understanding. Additionally, we believe it is worth comparing between more specific online forums for parents, designed for specific family models (such as

single, adoptive, gay/lesbian, and reconstructed families), within and across cultures.

In sum, the Internet constitutes a channel of knowledge thanks to its unique advantages (fast, available, interactive, up to date, free, diverse, anonymous, and personally adjusted), that are essential to the modern way of life. In view of the major changes the family encounters in Western societies, participation in Internet forums may influence parents as a result of knowledge acquisition and emotional and social support they may receive online. Parenting involves shared practices and perceptions across cultures and nations, but there are also differences in parenting between the two national contexts explored in this study. Forums are a meaningful tool in the service of parents and we may safely assume that they will become an even more significant source of knowledge for parents in the future. Professionals dealing with early childhood must therefore be present in the virtual space in order to offer expert advice to parents. Moreover, the findings of the present study could be of assistance in the development of a central support center for parents both in Israel and in France, hosting experts who meet parents' expectations and areas of interest. Virtual support centers can provide an informal online space where parents can 'talk' safely with others, share their concerns and feel they are heard.

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