

Parenting Centrality in Emerging Adulthood

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Background

The transition to parenthood in the U.S. has been shifting in recent years, with the average age at which mothers first give birth rising from about 21.4 in 1970 to 27.3 in 2021 (CDC, 2002; CDC, 2023). Meanwhile, the United States has been consistently below replacement (the level at which a generation can replace itself) since 2008 (CDC, 2023). Despite these trends revealing a shift in values and beliefs about parenthood, many people are still having children and placing value on parenting in general (Peterson et al., 2012). However, we know very little about the centrality of parenting for emerging adults who are likely actively beginning to plan for current and future fertility decisions.

Parenting centrality was conceptualized in this study as the value one places on parenting in relation to other central areas of personal identity including marriage, career, and personal leisure/hobbies. This can help inform scholars, practitioners, and the public about how emerging adults are preparing for parenting roles. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to analyze general trends across time in parenting centrality among emerging adults.

Method

The data used in the current study came from Waves 1-6 of Project READY. The final analytical sample for this study included 1,733 emerging adults.

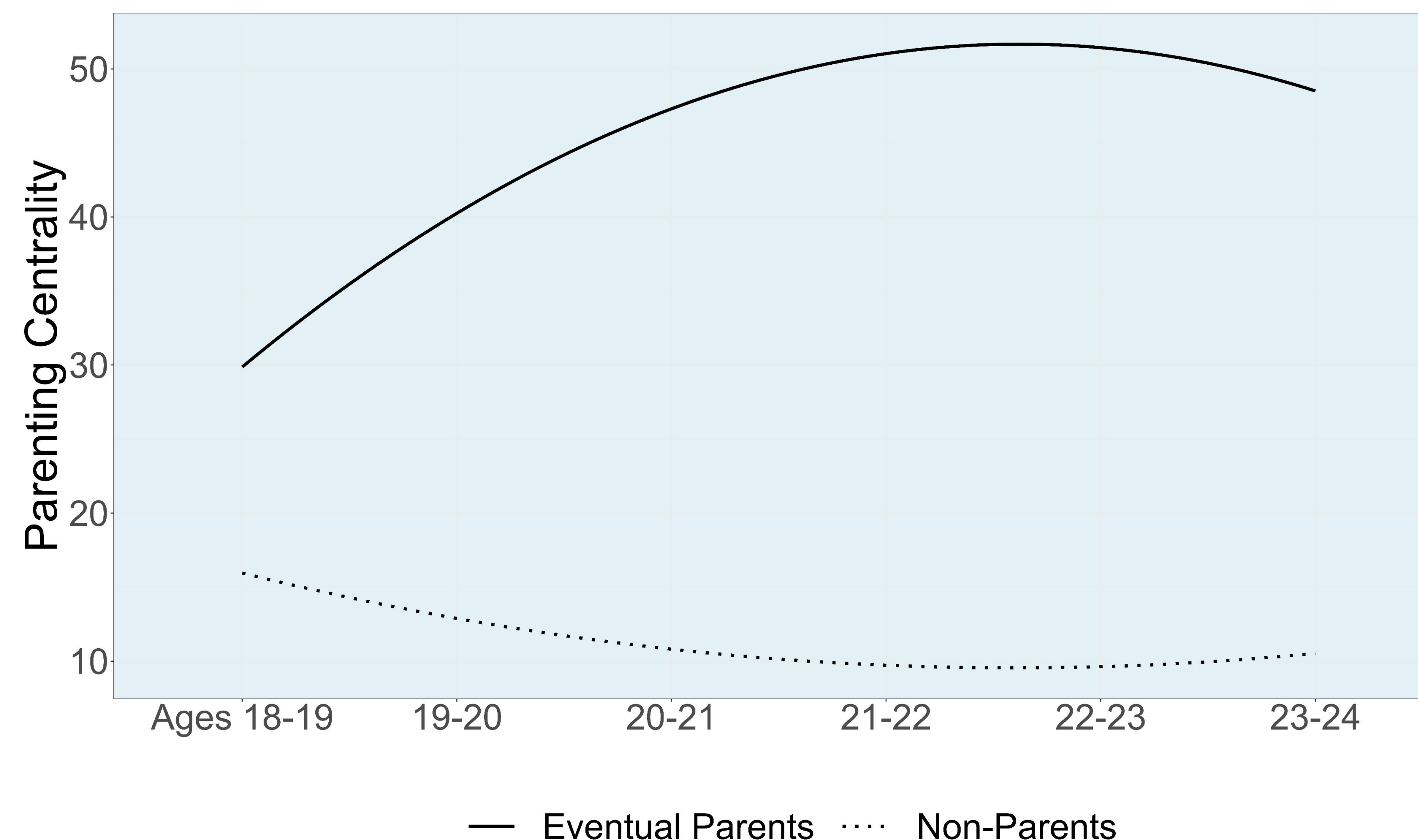
Parenting Centrality was the main measure used in the study. At each wave, participants were asked: "How much importance do you expect to place on the following aspects of your life? (totaling 100%)". Participants then indicated the percentage on each item (parenting, marriage, career, and personal leisure/hobbies). Theoretically, 25% on each of the items would represent an equal balance, and indicating a higher percentage on one would necessitate placing a lower percentage on one or more of the other items.

Gender, Race, Education, Relationship Status, and Religiosity were included in the model as covariates.

A multiple-group latent growth curve model was used for the analysis. The two groups for the growth curve model were eventual parents (those who had children at some point within the six waves) and non-parents (those who reported zero children at each wave).

Results

Figure 1. Average Growth Curves for Parenting Centrality



Results (Continued)

Eventual parents tended to increase in their parenting centrality across the first 4 waves of the study, while non-parents tended to decrease. We also tested some covariates to see how different factors predicted the intercepts and slopes ($*p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$). For eventual parents, females had a higher intercept than males ($\beta = .19^*$), and education was negatively associated with parenting centrality at Wave 2 ($\beta = -.18^{**}$), Wave 4 ($\beta = -.17^{**}$), Wave 5 ($\beta = -.16^{**}$), and Wave 6 ($\beta = -.14^*$). For non-parents, females had a more negative slope ($\beta = -.15^{**}$), and a more positive quadratic term ($\beta = .13^*$) compared to males. Non-parents who were Asian had a lower intercept compared to White non-parents ($\beta = -.10^{**}$). Being in a relationship was positively associated with parenting centrality for non-parents at Wave 1 ($\beta = .10^{***}$), Wave 2 ($\beta = .06^*$), Wave 3 ($\beta = .07^{**}$), Wave 4 ($\beta = .07^{**}$), Wave 5 ($\beta = .07^{**}$), and Wave 6 ($\beta = .06^{**}$). Religiosity was also positively associated with parenting centrality at Wave 2 ($\beta = .09^{***}$), Wave 3 ($\beta = .15^{***}$), Wave 4 ($\beta = .11^{***}$), Wave 5 ($\beta = .12^{***}$), and Wave 6 ($\beta = .14^{***}$).



Table 1. Average % Placed on Each Value for Eventual Parents and Non-parents

Value	Eventual Parents			Non-Parents		
	Wave 1	Wave 3	Wave 6	Wave 1	Wave 3	Wave 6
Parenting	30.7%	38.7%	42.6%	17.6%	15.7%	13.0%
Marriage	23.5%	22.5%	20.1%	20.8%	20.3%	19.9%
Career	30.1%	24.7%	23.8%	38.1%	38.8%	36.1%
Hobbies	16.0%	14.3%	13.8%	23.6%	25.4%	31.0%

Discussion and Conclusions

We found a large gap between eventual parents and non-parents when it comes to parenting centrality in emerging adulthood. While a gap between eventual parents and non-parents was expected, the different trajectories were not. For eventual parents to increase in parenting centrality, participants in the survey needed to put less centrality on the other topics (marriage, career, personal leisure/hobbies). This means that what we are seeing in their trajectory is not only an increased emphasis on parenting, but a decreased emphasis on other important aspects of life. The same is true for non-parents, although for them it means placing more emphasis on the other aspects of life.

It is also critical to note that our eventual parents group consisted of those who had children at any of the waves. This means that even if an emerging adult waits to have children until 5 or 6 years into this period of life, they still tend to have a very different trajectory than those who do not. The timing of children and parenting centrality is a topic ripe for future research and discussion.