



## **Social-Contextual Determinants of Parenting**

**JAY BELSKY, PhD**

*Institute for the Study of Children, Families and Social Issues  
Birkbeck University of London, UNITED KINGDOM*

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### **Topic**

*Parenting skills*

### **Introduction**

By tradition, students of socialization have directed their primary energies toward understanding processes whereby parents' child-rearing strategies and behaviours influence children's development. An abundance of mostly correlational (but some experimental) evidence underscores parenting practices that, in general, promote child well-being. In the infant-toddler years, these take the form of sensitive-responsiveness, which is known to foster attachment security,<sup>1</sup> and mutually-positive parent-child relations, which themselves promote child cooperation, compliance and conscience development.<sup>2</sup> In the preschool through adolescent years, authoritative (vs. neglectful) parenting that mixes high levels of warmth and acceptance with firm control and clear and consistent limit-setting fosters prosocial orientation, achievement striving, and positive peer relations.<sup>3,4,5</sup> Across childhood and adolescence, then, parenting that treats the child as an individual, respecting developmentally-appropriate needs for autonomy, and which is not psychologically intrusive/manipulative or harshly coercive contributes to the development of the kinds of psychological and behavioural "outcomes" valued in the western world.

### **Research Question**

The fact that not all parents engage in such generally growth-promoting child-rearing raises a fundamental question that was generally neglected until 15 to 20 years ago: Why do parents parent the way they do? Whereas the earliest work on this topic emphasized the socio-economic status of parents and the way in which (maltreating) parents were themselves reared, subsequent work, guided principally by Belsky's<sup>6</sup> process model of the determinants of parenting, highlights social-contextual factors and forces that shape parenting.<sup>7</sup> These include (a) attributes of children; (b) the developmental history of parents and their own psychological make-up; and (c) the broader social context in which parents and this relationship are embedded.

### **Recent Research Results**

Virtually all the work to be considered derives from correlational (and sometimes longitudinal) studies linking some putative determinant with some feature of parenting.

As such, most of the work fails to account for the fact that parenting, like so much of behavioural functioning, is itself heritable.<sup>8,9</sup> Thus, findings to be summarized linking social-contextual “determinants” and parenting “outcomes” illuminate potential causal processes rather than confirm them.

#### *Characteristics of children*

It has long been presumed that hard-to-manage, negatively emotional and demanding children are not only more likely to develop behaviour problems, especially of the externalizing variety, but do so because of the hostile-intrusive or even detached-uninvolved parenting they evoke. A number of investigations do link infant or child negativity/difficulty with less supportive, if not problematic parenting,<sup>10,11</sup> as well as children’s positive emotionality with sensitive-responsive parenting.<sup>11</sup> Pike and associates<sup>12</sup> found, in fact, that more negative, irritable or aggressive adolescents received more negative parenting even after accounting for heritability. Such results are in line with experiments manipulating child behaviour to investigate its causal effect on parenting.<sup>13</sup> All this is not to say, however, that variation in parenting is exclusively – or even primarily – a function of child temperament/behaviour, only that it makes a contribution, especially when considered in the context of other sources of influence.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Characteristics of parents*

Research on the etiology of child maltreatment called attention to the role of child-rearing history in shaping parenting. What has become clear, however, is that the intergenerational transmission of parenting, whether maltreating or growth-promoting, is by no means inevitable.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, in the main, both harsh<sup>14,15</sup> and supportive parenting<sup>16,17</sup> tend to be transmitted down generational lines, in the case of mothers, fathers or both.

Psychological attributes of parents also influence the way parents manage their children.<sup>18</sup> Parents prone to negative emotional states, be it depression, irritability and/or anger, tend to behave in less sensitive, less responsive and/or harsher ways than other parents; and this appears true whether they are parenting infants/toddlers,<sup>19</sup> older children<sup>20</sup> or adolescents.<sup>21</sup> When parents are extroverted, that is, experience frequent positive emotions and enjoy social engagement, their parenting tends to be emotionally sensitive, responsive and stimulating during the early-childhood<sup>22,23</sup> and later-childhood years.<sup>9</sup> How agreeable parents are also seems to make a difference, as those who are more cynical, vengeful and manipulative and less trusting, helpful and forgiving are more negatively controlling than other parents,<sup>9</sup> particularly in disciplinary situations.<sup>24</sup>

There is reason to believe that these personality characteristics shape parenting by influencing the emotions parents experience and/or the attributions they make about the causes of child behaviour (e.g. crying is caused by tiredness or by a desire to manipulate the parent).<sup>7,25</sup> The possibility must be entertained, as well, that these processes are themselves a product of how parents were raised by their own parents.<sup>6,26</sup>

*The social context: marital/partner relationships*

Evidence dating back to at least the 1930s linking troubled marriages and child behaviour problems led to the hypothesis that while some of the association between marital processes and child functioning is direct and unmediated via parenting,<sup>27</sup> some of it derives from the effect of marriage on parenting.<sup>6,28,29</sup> One way in which marriages affect parenting involves emotions, be they positive or negative, spilling over from one relationship to affect the other,<sup>10</sup> though compensatory mechanisms also seem to be at work in some families, with problems in the marriage fostering more sensitive and involved parenting.<sup>30</sup> In some cases this probably reflects efforts to protect the child from marital stress,<sup>31</sup> though in other cases it may reflect developmentally inappropriate enmeshment, whereby adults use the parent-child relationship to meet unmet emotional needs.<sup>32</sup> Anger in the marriage can also promote parental withdrawal,<sup>33</sup> something that children can perceive as rejection. But it is also the case that spousal withdrawal from partner conflict can engender hostile and intrusive parenting.<sup>33,34</sup> The fact that marriage-parenting linkages are so varied probably explains why simple marriage-parenting correlations are not always as strong as might be expected.<sup>16,31</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Twenty years ago, Belsky<sup>6</sup> argued that parenting is multiply determined by a variety of factors and forces and that weakness or strength in any one was unlikely to determine how parents behaved, as the positive contribution of the latter buffered the undermining effect of the former. Thus, what was most important to understanding why parents parented the way they did was the *accumulation* of stresses and supports or, in developmental-psychopathology terminology, risk and protective factors.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, while the cited evidence calls attention to some of the social-contextual determinants of parenting, these need to be considered “in context,” i.e. in the context of other determinants, only some of which have been discussed.

### **Implications**

The most important implication of this observation is that there should be no single way to promote growth-fostering parenting. In some cases, the best way may be to promote marital relationships; in other cases, it may be to shape how parents think about the causes of child behaviour. And in still others, it may be to enable parents to better regulate their negative emotions. Of course, if it can be done well, there is no reason not to target multiple avenues of potential influence.

**To learn more on this topic, consult the following sections of the Encyclopedia:**

- [How important is it?](#)
- [What do we know?](#)
- [What can be done?](#)
- [According to experts](#)
- [Key messages](#)

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