



## **Parents' Attitudes and Beliefs: Their Impact on Children's Development**

*JOAN E. GRUSEC, PhD*

*University of Toronto, CANADA*

*(Published online February 9, 2006)*

### **Topic**

*Parenting skills*

### **Introduction**

Why do parents behave as they do when raising children? One obvious answer is that they are modelling the behaviour of their own parents, having learned how to parent in the course of being parented. Another is that they are behaving in accord with information they have acquired about the nature of appropriate parenting, information that is plentifully available in the form of books, magazines, Web sites, informal and formal advice, and so on. Another major determinant of their behaviour, the topic of this essay, lies in the attitudes, beliefs, thoughts and feelings that are activated during parenting. These often have a very powerful impact on behaviour, even if parents are distressed by or even unaware of that impact. For researchers interested in children's development, parenting attitudes, cognitions and the resulting emotions (such as anger or happiness) are of interest because they guide parenting behaviour, which in turn has its impact on children's socioemotional and cognitive development.

### **Subject**

Child-rearing attitudes are cognitions that predispose an individual to act either positively or negatively toward a child. They have been considered to be good predictors of parenting behaviour because they are an indication of the emotional climate in which children and parents operate and therefore of how good their relationship is. The attitudes most frequently considered have to do with the degree of warmth and acceptance or coldness and rejection that exists in the parent-child relationship, as well as the extent to which parents are permissive or restrictive in the limits they set for their offspring. In addition to attitudes, researchers have lately begun to pay attention to more situation-specific thoughts or schemas – filters through which events, particularly ambiguous ones, are interpreted and reacted to. These include cognitions such as beliefs about parenting abilities, expectations about what children are capable of or should be expected to do, and reasons why children have behaved in a particular way.

### **Problems**

Although the influence of attitudes on parenting behaviours has been a favourite topic of investigation, the linkages obtained have generally been modest.<sup>1</sup> In part, this is because

reported attitudes do not always have a direct impact on parenting actions, which are often directed by specific features of the situation. For example, parents might endorse or value being warm and responsive to children, but have difficulty expressing those feelings when their child is misbehaving. Thus researchers have begun to look for more specific thoughts in specific situations, such as parents' beliefs about why the child misbehaved, or about how effective they might be in dealing with this particular problem. Some of these thoughts are conscious and accessible, whereas others are unconscious and automatic. In the former case, parents may be reluctant to present themselves in too negative a light and so may not be totally accurate in their reports to researchers (a difficulty encountered with the study of attitudes as well). In the latter case, researchers are challenged to find means of measuring automatic or unconscious thought processes.

### **Research Context**

The study of parent attitudes, belief systems and thinking has taken place along with changing conceptions of child-rearing that have emphasized the bidirectional nature of interactions, with children influencing parents as well as parents influencing children.<sup>2</sup> Although many studies have addressed links between parents' thoughts and actions, more and more investigation is being extended to the influence of parents' thoughts on child behaviour, with actions as the connecting link. Most of the work has been done with mothers, although increasingly research is being extended to fathers.

### **Recent Research Results**

A large body of research on attitudes indicates that parental warmth in combination with reasonable levels of control or restrictiveness combine to produce positive child outcomes. Although not strong, the results are quite consistent.<sup>3</sup> Researchers have also noted that what is seen to be a reasonable level of control varies as a function of sociocultural context. Thus attitudes toward control are generally more positive in lower socio-economic status contexts and in non Anglo-European cultures such as the Chinese, with these attitudes having less detrimental effects on children's development.<sup>3,4</sup>

With respect to specific parenting cognitions, parents look for reasons why both they and their children act the way they do. These attributions can make parenting more efficient when they are accurate. They can also interfere with effective parenting when they lead to feelings of anger or depression (a possibility if children's bad behaviour is attributed to a bad disposition or an intentional desire to hurt, or the parent's failure or inadequacy). These negative feelings distract parents from the task of parenting, and make it more difficult for them to react appropriately and effectively to the challenges of socialization.<sup>5</sup>

Bugental and colleagues have studied mothers who believe their children have more power than they do in situations where events are not going well.<sup>6</sup> These mothers are threatened and become either abusive and hostile or unassertive and submissive. They send confusing messages to their children, with the result that children stop paying attention to them as well as showing a decrease in cognitive ability.<sup>7</sup> This view of the power relationship takes its toll on mothers' ability to problem-solve and therefore to operate effectively in their parenting role. In a similar vein, mothers who are low in self-efficacy, that is, do not believe they can parent effectively, give up on parenting when the

task is challenging and become depressed. They are cold, unemotional and disengaged in interactions with their babies.<sup>8</sup> Brody and his colleagues, in a study of single-parent African-American families, reported that efficacy was related to the goals mothers set for their children, such as being well educated and well behaved, and it was these goals that predicted parenting practices that were ultimately linked to children's ability to regulate their own behaviour and to plan ahead.<sup>9</sup> Other mothers have unrealistic positive beliefs about their ability to parent, and are likely to be angry and critical of their preschoolers, who are in turn defiant.<sup>10</sup>

Researchers have also assessed parents' ability to take the perspective of their child. Children of parents who can accurately predict their children's cognitive performance perform better, presumably because they can better match their teaching efforts to their children's needs.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Hasting and Grusec found that parents who could accurately identify their children's thoughts and feelings during conflicts were better able to achieve satisfactory outcomes for those conflicts.<sup>12</sup> Finally, "mind-mindedness," or the ability of parents to think of children as having mental states as well as being accurate in their assessment of these mental states, has been linked to children's secure attachment.<sup>13</sup>

### **Conclusions**

Parents observe their children through a filter of conscious and unconscious thoughts and attitudes, and these filters direct the way they perceive their children's actions and how they behave toward them. When the thoughts are accurate and benign, they direct positive actions. When they are distorted and distressing, however, they distract parents from the task at hand as well as leading to distressing emotions and attributions that impair effective parenting.

### **Implications for Policy and Services**

Most intervention programs for parents involve teaching them effective strategies for managing the behaviour of their children. For some parents, however, problem parenting is linked not to lack of knowledge of how to control their children's behaviour, but to maladaptive ways of thinking. In these cases, researchers and clinicians need to think of other interventions that will alter their schemas and ways of viewing relationships with others so that they are able to parent effectively.

**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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To cite this document:

Grusec JE. Parents' attitudes and beliefs: Their impact on children's development. In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development; 2006:1-5. Available at: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/GrusecANGxp.pdf>. Accessed [insert date].

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