



Synthesis on parenting skills

(Published online Mars 26, 2007)
(Revised November 26, 2008)

How Important Is It?

There is strong consensus that parents matter in how their children develop and function. Many of the [skills](#) children acquire are fundamentally dependent on their interactions with their caregivers and the broader social environment. In fact, the [quality of parenting](#) a child receives is considered the strongest potentially modifiable risk factor that contributes to the development of behavioural and emotional problems in children.

Parent-child interactions affect many different areas of development, including self-esteem, academic achievement, cognitive development and behaviour. Yet according to data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, only one-third of Canadian parents use [optimal parenting](#) approaches.

What Do We Know?

Effects of parenting practices

To ensure the best possible outcome for their children, parents must [balance](#) the maturity and disciplinary demands they make to integrate their children into the family and social system with maintaining an atmosphere of warmth, responsiveness and support. When parent conduct and attitude during the preschool years do not reflect an appropriate balance on these characteristics, children may face a multitude of adjustment issues.

In a number of investigations, [sensitive-responsive parenting](#) was linked to positive emotionality in children, while children who were negative, irritable or aggressive were found to have received less supportive, if not problematic parenting. More specifically, inconsistent, rigid or irritable explosive discipline, as well as low supervision and involvement, have been closely associated with the development of [child conduct problems](#).

Parental responsiveness is also important for [cognitive development](#). Studies have shown that cognitively-responsive behaviours, such as maintaining vs redirecting interests and rich verbal inputs, provide the child structure in developing his attention and language skills. Moreover, the early and consistent participation in learning activities, as well as the provision of age-appropriate learning materials foster [language development](#) and learning in general. Not only do those parental practices set an optimal learning environment for the child, they encourage him to assume an active role in the learning process and to develop a positive attitude toward learning.

For children living in poverty, [other factors](#) in the child's social environment in addition to parenting have been found to have an impact on later child functioning,

Synthesis on parenting skills

such as parental age, well-being, and history of antisocial behaviour, social support within and outside the immediate family, and neighbourhood quality.

Determinants of parenting

What makes parents parent the way they do? A number of personal and social factors come into play.

[Social-contextual factors](#) that shape parenting include the attributes of the children, the developmental history of the parents and their own psychological make-up, personal and inter-parental distress, social isolation, and the broader social context in which parents and their relationship are embedded. Parents' personality characteristics also play a role by influencing the emotions they experience and/or their cognitions, including the attributions they make about the causes of their child's behaviour.

Research shows that language stimulation and learning materials in the home are the [parenting practices](#) most strongly linked to school readiness, vocabulary and early school achievement, while parent discipline strategies and nurturance are most strongly linked to social and emotional outcomes such as behaviour and impulse control and attention.

[Parental knowledge](#) also plays a key role. When parents are aware of developmental norms and milestones and are familiar with caregiving skills, it provides them with a global cognitive organization for adapting to or anticipating developmental changes in children. Studies show that mothers with higher knowledge of infant and child development have higher levels of parenting skills. In the same way, parents' inaccurate beliefs or overestimation of their child's performance can actually undermine the child's performance, probably because parents' expectations can have an effect on their behaviours.

What Can Be Done?

A large number of [parent support programs](#) exist to support and strengthen parenting abilities and promote the development of new competencies. Parent support programs do not share a uniform intervention, but they do have a common goal — to improve the lives of children and their parents — and a shared strategy — to affect children by creating changes in parents' attitudes, knowledge and/or behaviour. These programs aim to give parents the knowledge and skills they need to carry out child-rearing responsibilities effectively and provide their children with experiences and opportunities that promote child learning and development. Many of these programs are community-based initiatives designed to promote the flow of resources and supports to parents.

[Successful parenting programs](#) address specific types of child behaviour (e.g. developmental disabilities or child conduct problems) or target specific developmental transitions. They cover multiple factors, such as consistent caregiving in other contexts (preschool or day care) and maternal well-being. Moreover, they devote enormous efforts to the initial training of staff who implements the program with parents, and to maintaining the quality of the intervention over time. Finally, they maximize parents' investment by emphasizing the importance of young children's development and linking development to parenting skills and healthful decisions.

Synthesis on parenting skills

These successful programs give parents opportunities to meet together and provide peer support. The [data](#) are particularly strong for programs that combine a parent support intervention with direct educational services for children, with both components contributing to improved outcomes for children.

Parent-support programs play an important preventive role. An analysis of the [costs and benefits](#) of several intervention strategies indicated that parent training was more cost-effective in preventing later crime than home visiting plus day care or supervision of delinquents. Still, the challenge for Canadian health and social-service providers is to promote optimal parenting in a proactive and cost-effective manner. The [barriers](#) are numerous: service fragmentation, narrowness of mandate, power differential created by provider expertise, and access problems due to location, language or hours of availability.

In research on parenting and support programs, [four trends need to be considered](#): specifying parenting skills both within and outside the home (for example, the importance of interpreting events, establishing a routine, being alert to outside resources); specifying outcomes, for children or for parents (and determining which processes are related to which outcomes); finding ways of putting children more fully into the picture (i.e. considering children's views of what makes a good parent); and paying greater attention to cultural variations in the way parents think, feel or act. Research in the area of parent-child interaction must therefore continue to expand to evaluate outcomes in a broader variety of [ethnic, racial, cultural and socioeconomic groups](#).