

PARENTING SKILLS

The role of parents in early childhood learning

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Introduction

Children's development of the cognitive and social skills needed for later success in school may be best supported by a parenting style known as responsive parenting.¹ Responsiveness is an aspect of supportive parenting described across different theories and research frameworks (e.g. attachment, socio-cultural) as playing an important role in providing a strong foundation for children to develop optimally.²⁻⁴ Parenting that provides positive affection and high levels of warmth and is responsive in ways that are contingently linked to a young child's signals ("contingent responsiveness") are the affective-emotional aspects of a responsive style.⁵ These aspects, in combination with behaviours that are cognitively responsive to the child's needs, including the provision of rich verbal input and maintaining and expanding on the child's interests, provide the range of support necessary for multiple aspects of a child's learning.⁶

Acceptance of the child's interests with responses that are prompt and contingent to what the child signals supports learning, in part, by facilitating the child's development of mechanisms for coping with stress and novelty in his or her environment.² With repeated positive experiences, a trust and bond develop between the child and parent that in turn allow the child to ultimately internalize this trust and then generalize their learning to new experiences. This sensitive support promotes the child's continued engagement in learning activities with his or her parent.^{7,8} Thus, these affective-emotional behaviours communicate the parent's interest and acceptance, fostering self-regulation and cooperation, critically important behaviours for effective learning to occur. From a socio-cultural viewpoint, cognitively responsive behaviours (e.g. maintaining versus redirecting interests, rich verbal input) are thought to facilitate higher levels of learning because they provide a structure or scaffold for the young child's immature skills, such as developing attentional and cognitive capacities.⁹ Responsive behaviours in this framework promote joint engagement and reciprocity in the parent-child interaction and help a child learn to assume a more active and ultimately independent role in the learning process.¹⁰ Responsive support for the child to become actively engaged in solving problems is often referred to as parental scaffolding, and is also thought to be key for facilitating children's development of self-regulation and executive function skills, behaviours that allow the child to ultimately assume responsibility for their well-being.^{11,12}

Subject

Responsive parenting is one of the aspects of parenting most frequently described when we try to understand the role the environment plays in children's development. Research shows it has the potential to promote normal developmental trajectories for high-risk children, such as those from low-income backgrounds and/or those with very premature births.¹³ In contrast, unresponsive parenting may jeopardize children's development, particularly those at higher risk for developmental problems.¹⁴ The critical importance of responsive parenting is highlighted by recent evidence identifying links between high levels of early responsive parenting and larger hippocampal volumes for normally developing preschool aged children. Increased volume in this brain region is associated with more optimal development of a number of psychosocial factors (e.g., stress reactivity).¹⁵ Links between early responsive parenting and increased volume in the hippocampal region also suggest that the early developmental period is an important time to facilitate responsive parenting practices, especially in high risk families, in order to enhance the parent-child relationship. Given the potential importance of responsive parenting, more specific knowledge of the types of behaviours that are most important for supporting particular areas of a child's learning could further our understanding of how to facilitate effective parenting practices.

Problem

Despite the central role for responsive parenting in different research frameworks, much of what we know about this parenting style comes from descriptive studies. This means that we can only infer the importance of responsive parenting. To assume a causal influence of responsive parenting on child outcomes would require data from experimental studies with random assignment. A strong body of experimental studies that demonstrate how greater degrees of responsive parenting promote higher levels of learning could provide a clearer understanding of the mechanism by which responsive behaviours promote a child's learning. Fortunately, there is growing evidence from interventions targeting the facilitation of responsive parent practices that show positive results and some evidence that when responsive behaviours are increased children showed at least short-term increases in cognitive, social, and emotional skills.^{16,17} However, many questions still need to be addressed including whether there is specificity between particular responsive behaviours and the support

they provide for certain areas of child development as well as whether there are sensitive periods of early development when particular types of responsive behaviours are most helpful.

Research Context

Young children's acquisition of problem solving, language and social-emotional skills is facilitated by interactions with their parents. There is some evidence that the mechanism by which responsiveness supports a child's development may be dependent on consistency across development in this parenting style.^{13,18} As the child and parent are part of a broader social context, many factors may support or impinge on a parent's consistent use of responsive behaviours. Personal factors that may compromise a parent's responsiveness include depression, perception of the parent's own child-rearing history as negative, or beliefs and attitudes that detract from a parent's sense of importance in his or her child's life.¹⁹ However, other factors, such as higher levels of social support from friends and family, can buffer some of these negative social-personal factors¹³ as well as predict which parents move from a non-responsive to a responsive style with intervention.²⁰ This is an encouraging finding, as parenting interventions can be developed to provide a level of social support mothers from high-risk social backgrounds need in order to develop responsive parenting styles.²¹

Key Research Questions

1. Do increases in parent responsiveness behaviours result in increases in young children's learning?
2. Can interventions targeting responsive parenting work for different types of high risk parents?
3. Do increases in the various aspects of responsiveness explain the positive changes in different aspects of cognitive and social development?
4. Is there an optimal time in the child's development when responsiveness is particularly important, or is consistency across development necessary for more optimal learning to occur?
5. Is parental responsiveness equally effective, or does its effectiveness vary for children with varying characteristics (e.g., socio-economic status, ethnicity, biological risk factors)?

Recent Research Results

A recent random assignment intervention study examined whether mothers' responsive behaviours could be facilitated and whether such behaviours would boost young children's learning.⁶ To also examine the most optimal timing for intervention (e.g. across infancy versus the toddler/preschool period versus both), families from the intervention and non-intervention groups were re-randomized at the end of the infancy phase, to either receive the responsiveness intervention in the toddler/preschool period or not.²² The intervention was designed to facilitate mothers' use of key behaviours that provided affective-emotional support and those that were cognitively responsive, as both types of support were expected to be necessary to promote learning. After the infancy phase, mothers receiving the intervention showed strong increases in all responsiveness behaviours and their infants showed higher levels and faster growth rates in a range of skills. For example, independent problem-solving during toy play showed greater increases for infants whose mothers received the intervention compared to infants whose mothers did not receive the intervention. Affective-emotional and cognitively responsive behaviours together mediated the effect of the intervention on children's learning, demonstrating that the effectiveness of responsiveness can best be understood if defined as a broad construct. In addition,

different aspects of children's learning were specifically improved by certain specific responsive behaviours. For instance, children's cooperation was best improved by mothers' increased use of contingent responsiveness and verbal encouragement and by their less frequent restriction of the children's activities, while children's use of words was best improved by mothers' more frequently maintaining children's attention on their interests and labelling objects or actions.

Examination of evidence for the most optimal timing of an intervention showed that it depended upon factors such as the type of support a responsive behaviour provided and the degree to which it was linked to a child's developmental needs. For example, behaviours such as warm sensitivity (from an attachment framework) were best facilitated during the infancy phase, while those that were more complex, as they had to be responsive to the child's changing developmental picture (e.g., contingent responsiveness), required both intervention phases. The effects of the intervention also generalized to positively influence parent and child behaviours during a shared book reading activity, even though this activity was not a specific focus of the intervention.²³ The intervention worked equally well with children who were or were not at high biological risk.^{13,22} This supports the notion that responsiveness facilitates learning through parental sensitivity and willingness to meet young children's individual needs. Finally, interventions targeting responsive parenting practices also show similar positive effects for parents of varying risk factors (e.g., teen versus adult parents).²⁴

Research Gaps

Recent findings from experimental studies demonstrate that some areas of a child's learning are best supported by specific responsiveness behaviours or combinations of these. Now research is needed to further delineate this specificity between particular types of responsive support and particular developmental goals.

Expanding our understanding of how responsive parenting looks and works across different family and child characteristics would add to the development of a more highly specified model of responsive parenting. Finally, determination of what supports need to be in place to assist parents with their attempts to be responsive could enhance the effectiveness of responsive parent interventions.

Conclusions

Responsive parenting, according to many descriptive studies and fewer experimental studies, is an important process for supporting young children's learning. There is now support for a causal role of responsive parenting, as greater gains in the parental behaviours associated with a responsive style were responsible for the effect of several parenting interventions on greater gains in young children's learning.^{6,22,24} Also, recent evidence for normally developing children showing links between early high levels of responsive parenting and increased volume in brain regions responsible for regulation of stress suggests the critical importance of this parent practice in early development.¹⁵

As both normal and high-risk children benefited from responsiveness that provided affective-emotional and cognitively responsive support, the effectiveness of responsiveness seems best understood when it is defined as a broad construct. Recent evidence shows that certain responsive behaviours may provide different types of support for children's learning and this support may vary depending on a child's developmental needs. There are many new research avenues that need to be explored and questions addressed in recent studies that require further examination.

Implications

The importance of responsive parenting for young children's well-being has many policy implications. Policy and practice decision-makers need to pay particular attention to parents who are most at risk: they need find ways to facilitate change in parents' behaviours, taking into consideration factors such as parent beliefs, social support, mental health status, in order to maximize effectiveness. Synthesis of relevant research should guide new investments in parent programs and the development of research initiatives concerning responsive parenting. Developmental science is frequently not well integrated into policy or program application. Given the critically important role of early experience in brain development, policy-makers have an interest in making sure that young children's environments (e.g. home, child care) are of high enough quality to promote positive outcomes. When new investments are made in publicly funded services for children and families, there is often a greater emphasis on accountability. This should serve to encourage a greater consideration of research-based evidence that can better assure program effectiveness.

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