ENCYCLOPEDIA on Early Childhood Development

Parenting Styles and Child Social Development

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December 2014, 3e éd.

Introduction

During the first years of life – thought by many to be a unique period of human development – parents assume special importance. As parents guide their young children from complete infantile dependence into the beginning stages of autonomy, their styles of caregiving can have both immediate and lasting effects on children's social functioning in areas from moral development to peer play to academic achievement. Ensuring the best possible outcome for children requires parents to face the challenge of balancing 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 spectra, children may face a multitude of adjustment issues. *What parenting styles best achieve this balance?*

Subject

There are probably almost as many opinions on what constitutes "good parenting" as there are people asked. New parents often receive advice and guidance on how to parent from their

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parents and experts, as well as from peers and popular culture. Developing an appropriate parenting style during the first years of a child's life is a challenging proposition for new parents, especially when not all sources agree. Research on effective parenting styles can help guide parents to a proper balance of sensitivity and control.

Problems

A major obstacle in family systems research is the question of relevance: Can researchers draw conclusions about parenting style that bridge cultural and socioeconomic gaps? Much research shows that the authoritative and flexible parenting style is optimal for the white, middle-class child from a nuclear family, but the same may not be true for other children growing up in other circumstances and situations. Allowing children flexibility and freedom may result in positive outcomes when children live in safe areas and their peers are less likely to engage in dangerous behaviour, but in high-risk neighbourhoods, higher degrees of parental control might be necessary. Before policy-makers and clinicians can set guidelines or make recommendations regarding appropriate parenting behaviour, the extent to which the research conclusions apply to different ethnic/racial/cultural and socioeconomic groups must be evaluated. Furthermore, the positive and negative child outcomes associated with different types of parenting styles in preschool children may not necessarily apply to children at later stages of development. Longer-term outcomes must also be factored into policy-making and advising parents.

Research Context

Contemporary studies of parenting styles in large part expand on several concepts put forward in Diana Baumrind's formative research in the 1960s, which outlined a three-group classification system. Since the advent of this type of research, generally conducted through direct observation and by questionnaires and interviews with parents and children, classification has been based on evaluations along two broad dimensions of parenting styles: control/demandingness (claims parents make on a child relating to maturity, supervision and discipline) and responsiveness (actions that foster individuality, self-regulation and self-assertion by being attuned and supportive). Contemporary researchers typically classify parenting styles in four groups: authoritarian parenting, characterized by high levels of control and low levels of responsiveness; indulgent permissive parenting, characterized by low levels of control and high levels of responsiveness; authoritative parenting, characterized by high levels of both control and responsiveness; and neglectful parenting, characterized by lack of both control and

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responsiveness.

Recent Research Results

Research has generally linked authoritative parenting, where parents balance demandingness and responsiveness, with higher social competencies in children. Thus, children of authoritative parents possess greater competence in early peer relationships, engage in low levels of drug use as adolescents, and have more emotional well-being as young adults. Although authoritarian and permissive parenting styles appear to represent opposite ends of the parenting spectrum, neither style has been linked to positive outcomes, presumably because both minimize opportunities for children to learn to cope with stress. Too much control and demandingness may limit children's opportunities to make decisions for themselves or to make their needs known to their parents, while children in permissive/indulgent households may lack the direction and guidance necessary to develop appropriate morals and goals. Research has also uncovered significant associations between parenting styles across generations; bad parenting appears to be "passed on" as much as good parenting.

Even though these kinds of results appear to be robust, their applicability across cultures and environments is questionable. Many studies focus on white, middle-class children and families, but children with different ethnic/racial/cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds may fare better under different types of guidance. Recent controversy concerns the outcomes of different parenting styles for child social development in low-SES, high-risk, inner-city families. While some research has suggested that more authoritarian parenting styles may be necessary in high-risk areas, other research has shown continued benefits of authoritative parenting. Factoring into this research is the idea that parenting may actually "matter less" among low-SES families due to the greater force of environmental factors, such as financial difficulties and higher crime rates.

Ethnic and cultural differences must also be taken into account in studying the effects of parenting styles on child social development. It is difficulty to escape social pressures that judge some parenting styles to be better, usually those that reflect the dominant culture. Authoritarian parenting, which is generally linked to less positive child social outcomes, tends to be more prevalent among ethnic minorities. In Asian ethnic families, authoritarian parenting is linked to positive social outcomes and academic success, due in part to parenting goals and training specific to Asian-origin families.

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Although parenting quality inevitably adjusts, improves or declines as children mature and parents face new and different challenges, some level of stability in parenting style over long periods of time obtains.

Conclusions

Information and education on optimal parenting styles and early establishment of effective practices are both important to a child's social adjustment and success. In many situations, adoption of a flexible and warm authoritative parenting style is most beneficial for a child's social, intellectual, moral and emotional growth. However, research in the area of parent-child interaction must continue to expand to evaluate not only outcomes in a broader variety of ethnic/racial/cultural and socioeconomic groups, but also outcomes in children of different ages so that families in all types of situations can reap the full benefits of research.

Implications for the Policy and Services Perspective

The development of personality, morals, goals and problem-solving that occurs during the first years of life is critical and developmentally unlike any other time in the life course. It is important for family policy-makers and family support service workers to aid new parents in adopting appropriate parenting techniques and strategies to ensure that children receive guidance that will best allow them to succeed in later life. However, research into the broad applicability of certain types of parenting techniques must continue so that policy-makers can tailor advice and guidelines to optimize outcomes for every child.

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