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

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Introduction

Why do parents behave the way they do when raising children? One 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 about appropriate parenting acquired through books, Web sites, or informal and formal advice. Yet another major determinant of their behaviour lies in their general attitudes as well as specific beliefs, thoughts, and feelings that are activated during parenting: These have a powerful impact on behaviour, even if parents are distressed by or unaware of that impact. Researchers interested in children's development have explored parenting attitudes, cognitions, and the resulting emotions (such as anger or happiness), because of their influence on parenting behaviour and on the subsequent impact of that parenting behaviour on children's socioemotional and cognitive development.

Subject

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Child-rearing attitudes are cognitions that predispose an individual to act either positively or negatively toward a child. Attitudes most frequently considered involve 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. Researchers have also studied more situation-specific thoughts or schemas – filters through which parents interpret and react to events,, particularly ambiguous ones. 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

The influence of attitudes on parenting behaviours has been a favourite topic of investigation, with research suggesting that linkages are generally of a modest nature.[1] 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. As a result of this realization the study of parent cognitions has been widened to include more specific ways of thinking.

Research Context

The study of parent attitudes, belief systems, and thinking has taken place along with changing conceptions of child-rearing. These changes have emphasized the bidirectional nature of interactions, with children influencing parents as well as parents influencing children.[2] Accordingly, an interesting extension of research on attitudes and cognitions has to do with how children's actions affect parents' attitudes and thoughts, although little work has been done in this area.

Key Research Questions

1. Which parental attitudes result in the best child outcomes?
2. How do negative/positive thoughts and cognitions hinder/facilitate child development?
3. How can parents' harmful attitudes be modified?

Recent Research Results

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A large body of research on attitudes indicates that parental warmth together with reasonable levels of control combine to produce positive child outcomes. Although not strong, as noted above, the results are consistent. Researchers have noted that what is seen to be a reasonable level of control varies as a function of sociocultural context.[3] Attitudes toward control are generally more positive in non Anglo-European cultures, with these attitudes having less detrimental effects on children's development because they are more normative and less likely to be interpreted as rejecting or unloving.[3,4] In accord with the realization that children's behaviour affects that of their parents, researchers have found that, whereas parent attitudes affect child behaviour, this relation shifts as the child grows, with adolescent behaviour having an impact on parenting style and attitudes.[5]

Research on more specific cognitions also highlights the importance of parent thinking on child outcomes. As an example, parents look for reasons why both they and their children act the way the 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.[6]

Specific cognitions have been assessed both with respect to their impact on children's socioemotional development and on their cognitive development. For example, Bugental and colleagues have studied mothers who believe their children have more power than they do in situations where events are not going well.[7] 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.[8] This view of the power relationship takes its toll on mothers' ability to problem-solve and therefore to operate effectively in their parenting role. Similarly, mothers of infants 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 and disengaged in interactions with their babies.[9] Furthermore, parents who trust that their child's course of biological development will proceed in a natural and healthy way are able to adjust better to their parenting role and less likely to develop a coercive parenting style.[10]

Other aspects of parent thinking include the ability to take the perspective of the child. Mothers who recognize what is distressing for their children have children who are better able to cope with their own distress[11] and parents who can accurately identify their children's thoughts and

feelings during conflicts are better able to achieve satisfactory outcomes for those conflicts.[12] "Mind-mindedness," 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,[13] with a positive link between mothers who describe their children using positive mental descriptors and mothers' sensitivity.[14]

Research Gaps

Little has been done to see how fathers' cognitions and attitudes affect child development. There has been some investigation of how mothers and fathers differ in their parental cognitions and parenting style: Mothers report higher endorsement of progressive parenting attitudes, encouraging their children to think and verbalize their own ideas and opinions, whereas fathers endorse a more authoritarian approach.[15] What is unknown is the extent to which these differences in attitudes affect child outcomes. Another gap has to do with the direction of effect between parent and child, that is, how children affect their parents' cognitions and attitudes.

Conclusions

The study of parent cognitions, beliefs, thoughts, and feelings can expand our knowledge of child development. Child-rearing cognitions influence parents to act either positively or negatively towards their children. These beliefs have been considered good predictors of parenting behaviour because they indicate the emotional climate in which children and parents operate and the health of the relationship. In sum, parents observe their children through a filter of conscious and unconscious thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes, and these filters direct the way they perceive their children's actions. When the thoughts are benign, they direct positive actions. When the thoughts are accurate they will usually lead to positive actions. When they are distorted and distressing, however, they distract parents from the task at hand as well as leading to negative emotions and attributions that ultimately impair effective parenting.

Implications for Policy and Services

Most intervention programs for parents involve teaching effective strategies for managing children's behaviour. But problems can also arise when parents engage in maladaptive thinking. Mothers at a higher risk of child abuse, for example, are more likely to attribute negative traits to children who demonstrate ambiguous behaviour, and see this behaviour as intentional.[16] Bugental and her colleagues have administered a cognitive retraining intervention program for

parents which aims to alter such biases. They found that mothers who participated in the program showed improvement in parenting cognitions, diminished levels of harsh parenting, and greater emotional availability. In turn, children, two years after their mothers participated in the program, displayed lower levels of aggressive behaviour as well as better cognitive skills than those whose mothers had not undergone such cognitive retraining.[17,18,19] These findings, then, clearly underline the important role played by parental beliefs in the child-rearing process.

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