

PARENTING SKILLS

Social-Contextual Determinants of Parenting

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Introduction

By tradition, students of socialization have directed their primary energies toward understanding processes whereby parents' child-rearing strategies and behaviours influence children's development. An abundance of mostly correlational (but some experimental) evidence underscores parenting practices that, in general, promote child well-being. In the infant-toddler years, these take the form of sensitive-responsiveness, which is known to foster attachment security,¹ and mutually-positive parent-child relations, which themselves promote child cooperation, compliance and conscience development.² In the preschool through adolescent years, authoritative (vs. neglectful) parenting that mixes high levels of warmth and acceptance with firm control and clear and consistent limit-setting fosters prosocial orientation, achievement striving, and positive peer relations.^{3,4,5} Across childhood and adolescence, then, parenting that treats the child as an individual, respecting developmentally-appropriate needs for autonomy, and which is not psychologically intrusive/manipulative or harshly coercive contributes to the development of the kinds of psychological and behavioural "outcomes" valued in the western world.

Research Question

The fact that not all parents engage in such generally growth-promoting child-rearing raises a fundamental question: Why do parents parent the way they do? Whereas the earliest work on this topic emphasized the socio-economic status of parents and the way in which (maltreating) parents were themselves reared, subsequent work, guided principally by Belsky's⁶ process model of the determinants of parenting, highlights social-contextual factors and forces that shape parenting.⁷ These include (a) attributes of children; (b) the developmental history of parents and their own psychological make-up; and (c) the broader social context in which parents and this relationship are embedded.

Research Results

Virtually all the work to be considered derives from correlational (and sometimes longitudinal) studies linking some putative determinant with some feature of parenting. As such, most of the work fails to account for the fact that parenting, like so much of behavioural functioning, is itself heritable.^{8,9} Thus, findings to be summarized linking social-contextual “determinants” and parenting “outcomes” illuminate potential causal processes rather than confirm them.

Characteristics of children

It has long been presumed that hard-to-manage, negatively emotional and demanding children are not only more likely to develop behaviour problems, especially of the externalizing variety, but do so because of the hostile-intrusive or even detached-uninvolved parenting they evoke. A number of investigations do link infant or child negativity/difficulty with less supportive, if not problematic parenting,^{10,11} and greater sensitive-responsiveness and warmth on the part of parents with greater positive emotionality,¹¹ prosocial behaviour^{12,13} and social competence¹⁴ on the part of children. Pike and associates¹⁵ found, in fact, that more negative, irritable or aggressive adolescents received more negative parenting even after accounting for heritability. Such results are in line with experiments manipulating negative child behaviour to investigate its causal effect on parenting.¹⁶ Such experimental efforts to document truly causal effects have not been undertaken with positive child behaviour. All this is not to say, however, that variation in parenting is exclusively – or even primarily – a function of child temperament/behaviour, only that it makes a contribution, especially when considered in the context of other sources of influence.⁷

Characteristics of parents

Research on the etiology of child maltreatment called attention to the role of child-rearing history in shaping parenting. What has become clear, however, is that the intergenerational transmission of parenting, whether maltreating or growth-promoting, is by no means inevitable.^{7,17,18}

Nevertheless, in the main, both harsh^{19,20,21,22} and supportive parenting^{23,24,25} tend to be transmitted down generational lines, in the case of mothers, fathers or both.

Psychological attributes of parents also influence the way parents manage their children.²⁶ Indeed a meta-analysis of 30 studies focused on the Big 5 personality characteristics involving almost 6,000 parent-child dyads revealed that higher levels extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness to experience and lower levels of neuroticism were related to greater warmth and behavioural control on the part of parents, whereas higher levels of agreeableness and lower levels of neuroticism were related to the provision of more support for autonomy;²⁷ somewhat similar results emerged in a related meta-analysis that also examined the influence of parental psychological problems on parenting.²⁸

There is reason to believe that these personality characteristics shape parenting by influencing the emotions parents experience and/or the attributions they make about the causes of child behaviour (e.g., crying is caused by tiredness or by a desire to manipulate the parent).^{7,29} The possibility must be entertained, as well, that these processes are themselves a product of how parents were raised by their own parents.^{6,30}

The social context: marital/partner relationships

Evidence dating back to at least the 1930s linking troubled marriages and child behaviour problems led to the hypothesis that while some of the association between marital processes and child functioning is direct and unmediated via parenting,³¹ some of it derives from the effect of marriage on parenting.^{6,32,33,34}

One way in which marriages affect parenting involves emotions, be they positive or negative, spilling over from one relationship to affect the other,¹⁰ though compensatory mechanisms also seem to be at work in some families, with problems in the marriage fostering more sensitive and involved parenting.³⁵ In some cases this probably reflects efforts to protect the child from marital stress,³⁶ though in other cases it may reflect developmentally inappropriate enmeshment, whereby adults use the parent-child relationship to meet unmet emotional needs.³⁷ Anger in the marriage can also promote parental withdrawal,³⁸ something that children can perceive as rejection. But it is also the case that spousal withdrawal from partner conflict can engender hostile and intrusive parenting.^{38,39,40} The fact that marriage-parenting linkages are so varied probably explains why simple marriage-parenting correlations are not always as strong as might be

expected.^{23,36}

Conclusion

Almost 25 years ago now Belsky⁶ argued that parenting is multiply determined by a variety of factors and forces and that weakness or strength in any one was unlikely to determine how parents behaved, as the positive contribution of the latter buffered the undermining effect of the former. Thus, what was most important to understanding why parents parented the way they did was the accumulation of stresses and supports or, in developmental-psychopathology terminology, risk and protective factors.⁴¹ Therefore, while the cited evidence calls attention to some of the social-contextual determinants of parenting, these need to be considered “in context,” i.e. in the context of other determinants, only some of which have been discussed.

New theory and research also warns against over interpreting the findings summarized here and the general conclusions drawn regarding social-contextual forces shaping parental behaviour. And this is because differential-susceptibility theory, along with ever-emerging evidence consistent with it, stipulates that individuals vary in their susceptibility to environmental effects.^{42,43,44} What this implies with regard to the determinants of parenting is that not all parents will prove equally affected by characteristics of their children and/or the marital/partner relationship—and so much more. Perhaps the most compelling evidence to this effect comes from Dutch research indicating that the anticipated effects of daily hassles on sensitive parenting was most pronounced in parents with a combination of genes leading to the least efficient dopaminergic system functioning (COMT val/val or val/met, DRD4-7Repeat). Indeed, and consistent with the differential-susceptibility hypothesis, more daily hassles were associated with less sensitive parenting, whereas lower levels of daily hassles were associated with more sensitive parenting, but only among such parents, not those who did not fit this genetic profile.⁴⁵ One implication of this observation and differential-susceptibility thinking more generally is that evidence cited highlighting effects of child behaviour and marital/partner relationships on parenting likely over- and under-estimates such effects, as it fails to take into consideration variation in susceptibility on the part of parents. Thus, the research over estimates effects in the case of those less susceptible and under estimates effects for those more susceptible, clearly implying that future work needs to consider variation in susceptibility to better illuminate the determinants of parenting.

Implications

The most important implication of the notion that parenting is multiply determined is that there should be no single way to promote growth-fostering parenting, especially among those who

prove highly susceptible to the contextual regulation of their parenting. In some cases, the best way may be to promote marital relationships; in other cases, it may be to shape how parents think about the causes of child behaviour. And in still others, it may be to enable parents to better regulate their negative emotions. Of course, if it can be done well, there is no reason not to target multiple avenues of potential influence.

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