ENCYCLOPEDIA
on Early Childhood
Development

Social-Contextual Determinants of Parenting

Jay Belsky, PhD

University of California, Davis, USA

December 2014, Éd. rév.

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

©2014-2026 ABILIO | PARENTING SKILLS

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's[6] 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 competence[14] on the part of children. Pike and associates[15] 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

©2014-2026 ABILIO | PARENTING SKILLS

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 Belsky[6] 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.

References

1. De Wolff MS, Van IJzendoorn MH. Sensitivity and attachment: A meta-analysis on parental antecedents of infant attachment. *Child Development* 1997;68(4):571-591.
2. Kochanska G, Forman DR, Aksan N, Dunbar SB. Pathways to conscience: Early mother-child mutually responsive orientation and children's moral emotion, conduct, and cognition. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 2005;46(1):19-34.
3. Ackerman BP, Brown ED, Izard CE. The relations between contextual risk, earned income, and the school adjustment of children from economically disadvantaged families. *Developmental Psychology* 2004;40(2):204-216.
4. NICHD Early Child Care Research Network. Early child care and children's development prior to school entry: Results from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care. *American Educational Research Journal* 2002;39(1):133-164.
5. Skinner E, Johnson S, Snyder T. Six dimensions of parenting: A motivational model. *Parenting: Science and Practice* 2005;5(2):175-235.
6. Belsky J. The determinants of parenting: A process model. *Child Development* 1984;55(1):83-96.
7. Belsky J, Jaffee S. The multiple determinants of parenting. In: Cicchetti D, Cohen D, eds. *Developmental psychopathology.* 2nd ed. New York, NY: Wiley; In press.
8. Spinath FM, O'Connor TG. A behavioral genetic study of the overlap between personality and parenting. *Journal of Personality* 2003;71(5):785-808.
9. Losoya SH, Callor S, Rowe DC, Goldsmith HH. Origins of familial similarity in parenting: A study of twins and adoptive siblings. *Developmental Psychology* 1997;33(6):1012-1023.
10. Goldberg WA, Clarke-Stewart KA, Rice JA, Dellis E. Emotional energy as an explanatory construct for fathers' engagement with their infants. *Parenting: Science and Practice* 2002;2(4):379-408.
11. McBride BA, Schoppe SJ, Rane TR. Child characteristics, parenting stress, and parental involvement: Fathers versus mothers. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 2002;64(4):998-1011.
12. Carlo, G., Mestre, M. V., Samper, P., Tur, A., & Armenta, B. E. (2010). The longitudinal relations among dimensions of parenting styles, sympathy, prosocial moral reasoning, and prosocial behaviors. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 35 (2), 116-124.
13. Newton, E.K., Laible, D., Carlo, G., Steele, J.S. & MCGinley, M. (in press). Do sensitive parents foster kind children, or vice versa? Bidirectional influences between children's prosocial behavior and parental sensitivity. *Developmental Psychology*.
14. Barnett, M. A., Gustafsson, H. Deng, M., Mills-Koonce, W. R., & Cox, M. (2012). Bidirectional associations among sensitivity parenting, language development, and social competence. *Infant & Child Development*, 21, 374-393.

©2014-2026 ABILIO | PARENTING SKILLS

15. Pike A, McGuire S, Hetherington EM, Reiss D, Plomin R. Family environment and adolescent depressive symptoms and antisocial behavior: A multivariate genetic analysis. *Developmental Psychology* 1996;32(4):590-603.

16. Brunk MA, Henggeler SW. Child influences on adult controls: An experimental investigation. *Developmental Psychology* 1984;20(6):1074-1081.

17. Belsky, J., Conger, R., Capaldi, D.M. (2009). The Intergenerational Transmission of Parenting: Introduction to the Special Section. *Developmental Psychology*, 45,1201-1204.

18. Conger, R.D., Belsky, J., & Capaldi, D.M. (2009). The Intergenerational Transmission of Parenting: Closing Comments for the Special Section. *Developmental Psychology*, 45,1276-1283.

19. Capaldi DM, Pears KC, Patterson GR, Owen LD. Continuity of parenting practices across generations in an at-risk sample: A prospective comparison of direct and mediated associations. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 2003;31(2):127-142.

20. Conger RD, Neppl T, Kim KJ, Scaramella L. Angry and aggressive behavior across three generations: A prospective, longitudinal study of parents and children. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 2003;31(2):143-160.

21. Bailey, J.A., Hill, K.G., Oesterle, S., Hawkins, J.D. & The Social Development Research Group. (2009). Parenting practices and problem behavior across three generations. *Developmental Psychology*, 45, 1214-1226.

22. Neppl, T.K., Conger, R.D., Scaramella, L.V., & Ontai, L.L. (2009) Intergenerational continuity in parenting behavior. *Developmental Psychology*, 45, 1241-1256.

23. Belsky J, Fearon RMP. Exploring marriage-parenting typologies and their contextual antecedents and developmental sequelae. *Development and Psychopathology* 2004;16(3):501-523.

24. Chen ZY, Kaplan HB. Intergenerational transmission of constructive parenting. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 2001;63(1):17-31.

25. Kerr, D.C.R., Capaldi, D.M., Pears, K.C., & Owen, L.D. (2009). A Prospective Three Generational Study of Fathers' Constructive Parenting: Influences from Family of Origin, Adolescent Adjustment, and Offspring Temperament. *Developmental Psycholog*, 45, 1257-1275.

26. Belsky J, Barends N. Personality and parenting. In: Bornstein MH, ed. *Handbook of parenting: Being and becoming a parent. Vol. 3.* 2nd ed. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 2002:415-438.

27. Prinzie, P., Stams, G.J., Dekovic, M., Reigntjes, A.H. & Belsky, J. (2009). The Relations Between Parents' Big Five Personality Factors and Parenting: A Meta-analytic Review. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 97, 351-362.

28. McCabe, J.E. (2014). Maternal personality and psychopathology as determinants of parenting behavior: A quantitative integration of two literatures. *Psychological Bulletin*, 140, 722-750.

29. Klausli, J.F, & Owen, M.T. (2011). Exploring actor and partner effects in associations between marriage and parenting for mothers and fathers. *Parenting: Science and Practice*, 11, 264-2011.

30. Bugental DB, Happaney K. Parental attributions. In: Bornstein MH. *Handboook of parenting: Being and becoming a parent. Vol. 3*. 2nd ed. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 2002:509-535.

31. Serbin L, Karp J. Intergenerational studies of parenting and the transfer of risk from parent to child. *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 2003;12(4):138-142.

32. Wilson BJ, Gottman JM. Marital conflict, repair, and parenting. In: Bornstein MH, ed. *Handbook of parenting: Social conditions and applied parenting. Vol.4.* 2nd ed. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 2002:227-258.

33. Belsky J. Early human experience: A family perspective. *Developmental Psychology* 1981;17(1):3-23.

34. Macfie, J., Houts, R. M., Pressel, A. S., & Cox, M. J. (2008). Pathways from infant exposure to marital conflict to parent–toddler role reversal. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 29, 297–319.

35. Emery RE. Family violence. American Psychologist 1989;44(2):321-328.

©2014-2026 ABILIO | PARENTING SKILLS

36. Cox MJ, Paley B. Families as systems. *Annual Review of Psychology* 1997;48:243-267.

37. Grych JH. Marital relationships and parenting. In: Bornstein MH, ed. *Handbook of parenting: Social conditions and applied parenting. Vol. 4.* 2nd ed. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 2002:203-225.

38. Margolin G, Oliver PH, Medina AM. Conceptual issues in understanding the relation between interparental conflict and child adjustment: Integrating developmental psychopathology and risk/resilience perspectives. In: Grych JH, Fincham FD, eds. *Interparental conflict and child development: Theory, research, and applications*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press; 2001:9-38.

39. Lindahl KM, Malik NM. Observations of marital conflict and power: Relations with parenting in the triad. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 1999;61(2):320-330.

40. Katz LF, Woodin EM. Hostility, hostile detachment, and conflict engagement in marriages: Effects on child and family functioning. *Child Development* 2002;73(2):636-652.

41. Cicchetti D, Toth SL. Perspectives on research and practice in developmental psychopathology. In: Sigel IE, Renninger KA, eds. *Handbook of child psychology: Child psychology in practice. Vol.4*. 5th ed. New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons; 1998:479-583.

42. Belsky, J. & Pluess, M. Beyond diathesis-stress: Differential susceptibility to environmental influences. *Psychological Bulletin*, 2009;135:885-908.

43. Belsky, J., & Pluess, M. Beyond risk, resilience and dysregulation: Phenotypic plasticity and human development. *Development and Psychopathology*,2013;25:1243-1261.

44. Ellis. B.J., Boyce, W.T., Belsky, J., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M.J., & van Ijzendoorn, M.H. (2011). Differential Susceptibility to the Environment: A Neurodevelopmental Theory. *Development & Psychopathology* 2011;23:7-28.

45. van Ijzendoorn, M. H., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J., & Mesman, J. Dopamine system genes associated with parenting in the context of daily hassles. *Genes, Brain, and Behavior* 2008;7(4):403-410.

©2014-2026 ABILIO | PARENTING SKILLS