PARENTING SKILLS

Sources, Effects and Possible Changes in Parenting Skills: Comments on Belsky, Grusec, and Sanders and Morawska

Jacqueline J. Goodnow, PhD

Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

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Introduction

Research on parenting skills offers a route into understanding development and a potential basis for clinical, educational or social action. To that research, these authors bring the assumptions that the quality of parenting matters and that it is open to change. They also share a record of productive breaks from some traditional approaches, leading research in new directions and offering changes in implications for action. Where they differ is in the nature of those breaks.

Grusec, for example, builds on a long-standing interest in parents' general "styles" (e.g. their warmth, coerciveness, consistency, sense of efficacy) and "schemas" (e.g. their views about appropriate methods of control). There is an additional recognition that parents can hold more than one view of children or parenting (e.g. parenting as easy or impossible). What matters then are the particular thoughts, feelings and actions that come to the fore in specific situations, especially problem situations.

Belsky starts from a long-standing recognition of two influences on parenting: the characteristics of the child and those of the parent. To the latter, he brings a revitalized interest in a parent's own history (parenting is in this sense "inheritable"). To both, he adds an emphasis on "the broader social context" (this includes the relationship between parents) and on the accumulation of stresses and supports that multiple influences involve.

Sanders and Morawska start from a tradition of action often cast in a clinical frame. They argue for a move beyond parents who are already experiencing problems. Instead, all parents may benefit from instruction or advice related to the nature of development and to useful strategies. Parents' expectations, for example, may then become more age-appropriate. They may also avoid coercive strategies, building instead on the positives already present.

Research and Conclusions

It would be unreasonable to expect three short papers to cover the field, noting all its directions and implications. I would have liked, however, to see more space given to four trends.

The first trend has to do with *ways of specifying parenting skills, both within and outside the home*. Within the family, parents' skills in interpreting events and in establishing some degree of routine or pattern in family life have emerged as important, both for everyday life (e.g. understanding television, establishing safety rules) and at times of trauma or radical change.[1-4] Outside the family, skill takes the form of being alert to what neighbourhoods offer and being able to negotiate with daycare centres or schools in order to achieve one's goals.[5,6] It also takes the form of effective monitoring. Children are not always under a parent's eyes. Parents need to be able to stay informed about what children do, either by a direct check or – from a young age – promoting a child's willingness to "disclose."[7,8] For the mix of life within and "outside," skill may also take the form of effectively preparing children for what they may encounter (especially negative encounters).[9,10]

The second trend has to do with *ways of specifying outcomes, for children or for parents*. There is general agreement that we need tighter accounts of which aspects of parenting are related to which outcomes and by what processes, especially over time. We also need to have a wider recognition of outcomes in relational terms: for example, in terms of a child's sense of reciprocity or group membership (e.g. "we're a family") or collective identity.[11-14]

The third trend has to do with *ways of putting children more fully into the picture*. We now know more about parents' views of parenting and of children than about children's views of what makes a good parent or what represents appropriate parental action.[15] This is all the more surprising in

the face of proposals that children's interpretations are a major part of children coming to adopt parents' values and to see them as their own.[16,17]

The fourth and last piece that I see as needing more emphasis has to do with *cultural variations in the way parents think, feel or act*, as noted briefly by Grusec and now strongly documented.[18-20] Those variations matter not simply as a way of documenting that people differ. They are also a vivid reminder of the need, when one social or cultural group decides that the skills of another need improving, to examine the values and assumptions of both groups, and their views of each other.[21]

Implications for Policy

Research can contribute to action in two large ways.[22] One is by providing general models that guide decisions: models, for example, of why parents act as they do or – less apparent in the present papers – of how children change (e.g. models of whether children grow into or grow out of aggressive behaviours[23]). The other route is by input into more specific policy questions: questions about why, when, who and how.

Questions about "who" provide a starting point for comparing the present papers. In one approach (often described as "targeted"), the emphasis is on particular groups of parents. Grusec, for example, places the emphasis on parents who are already experiencing problems. The critical issue is then one of isolating where the problem lies and how it can best be tackled. Grusec points to the value of considering specific problem situations (in everyday terms, this might mean pinpointing "the worst times of the day" or times when parents are at risk of losing their temper). Action can then be directed toward ways of coping with the particular feelings, thoughts or strategies that are "activated" at these times and that get in the way of effective action.

Sanders and Morawska come closer to approaches that have been called "universal." Skill in parenting is in many ways seen as comparable to skill in driving a car. It seldom comes naturally, and it always benefits from some degree of instruction. The parents of most interest are first-timers (first baby, or first encounters with a new problem). Potentially, however – and Sanders and Morawska suggest this expansion – providing a mix of useful strategies and information could be brought to bear on all aspects of behaviour and all groups of parents, before or after the appearance of difficulties. It could also be provided by ways not limited to face-to-face approaches.

Neither of these papers, however, points strongly to changes in the physical or social environment. It is possible to aim to change the way daycare centres or schools operate, to try to

improve social contexts (e.g. promoting parent-friendly work practices), or to enhance parents' financial resources, all in ways that can flow on to what parents do and how children develop.[24] Belsky's emphasis on multiple influences on parenting comes closest to including this approach. There is, he argues, no single way forward. Instead, a variety of steps may alter the accumulation of stresses and supports that shapes the nature of parenting.

In effect, the implications for action are varied. All three papers share, however, an emphasis on the ultimate goal being changes within the child and within the parent-child interactions. These changes also remain the prime indicators of effects from any action taken. All three also provide a clear sense of major concerns and a strong reminder of the need to continue both with research and with the analysis of what its results and its underlying concepts imply for the way parenting proceeds.

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