

COMMENTARIES

The Role of Parents in Children's Psychological Development

Jerome Kagan, PhD

ABSTRACT. This article reviews the three major ways parents influence children: direct interaction, identification, and transmission of family stories. This essay summarizes some of the relevant empiric data in support of this claim and describes the operation of other mechanisms that also contribute to the child's development. *Pediatrics* 1999;104:164-167; *parental influence, children.*

The profile of cognitive abilities, beliefs, ethical values, coping defenses, and salient emotional moods that characterizes each child at each developmental stage is the result of diverse influences operating in complex ways. Most students of human development agree that the most important determinants of the different profiles include 1) the inherited physiologic patterns that are called temperamental qualities, 2) parental practices and personality, 3) quality of schools attended, 4) relationships with peers, 5) ordinal position in the family, and, finally, 6) the historical era in which late childhood and early adolescence are spent.¹ Each of these factors exerts its major influence on only some components of the psychological profile and is usually most effective during particular age periods. For example, the quality of social relations with peers affects primarily the child's beliefs about his/her acceptability to others and has its major effect after school entrance.² By contrast, parental conversations with the child, and especially naming unfamiliar objects, affect the child's future verbal talents and have maximal effect during the first 6 years of life.³

Current discussions of the consequences of parental practices, whether in the media or in professional journals, favor one of two positions. One awards seminal power to parental factors; the other minimizes the family. The advocates of attachment theory, for example, propose that the relationships established between an infant and its caretakers during the first 2 years of life have a permanent effect on the child's future.⁴ But Harris's recent book, *The Nurture Assumption*, makes the opposite claim by arguing that parents have little or no permanent influence on their child's future personality.⁵ Although the attachment theorists take too

strong a position, I side with a majority of developmental scholars who, in disagreement with Harris, believe that parents do affect their child's psychological growth. This article summarizes what most developmental scientists believe to be the major effects of parents on children.

It is important to appreciate, however, that some of these effects are difficult to quantify and, as a result, scholars working in this domain are caught between two opposing imperatives. On the one hand, they recognize that conclusions must be based on empiric evidence; if one does not have valid measurements, one should be cautious. On the other hand, investigators also recognize the error of awarding significance only to statements that rest on objective measurements. Because the current Zeitgeist is more positivistic than it was a half-century earlier, contemporary scientists usually have ignored important causative conditions that are subtle in their expression.

PARENTAL INFLUENCE: DIRECT INTERACTIONS

Parents can affect their children through at least three different mechanisms. The most obvious, and the one easiest both to imagine and to measure, involves the consequences of direct interactions with the child that could be recorded on film. For example, a mother praises a 3-year-old for eating properly, a father threatens the loss of a privilege because a child refuses to go to bed, a parent names an unfamiliar animal in a picture book. These everyday events that involve the rewarding of desirable actions, the punishment of undesired ones, and the transfer of knowledge from parent to child have a cumulative effect. Failure to discipline acts of disobedience and/or aggression is correlated with children's asocial behavior.⁶ Display of interest in a young child's activities is correlated with greater levels of responsibility in the child.⁷

However, these first-order effects can have second-order consequences that appear later in life. A 7-year-old with a more extensive vocabulary than her peers, because her parents encouraged language development 5 years earlier, will master the tasks of the elementary grades more easily and, as a result, perceive herself as more competent than her peers. This belief is likely to embolden her to resist domination by others and, perhaps, motivate the initiation of unusually challenging tasks. The 7-year-old who was not chastised for aggressive behavior earlier or who had abusive or overly intrusive parents is likely to be aggressive with peers.

From Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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Address correspondence to Jerome Kagan, PhD, Harvard University, 33 Kirkland St, Cambridge, MA 02138-2044.

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As a result, these children provoke peer rejection and eventually come to question their acceptability to others.⁸⁻¹⁰

EMOTIONAL IDENTIFICATION

An emotional identification with either or both parents represents a second, quite different way in which the family affects children. By age 4 to 5 years, children believe, unconsciously, that some of the attributes of their parents are part of their own repertoire, even although this belief might have no objective basis.¹¹ A girl whose mother is afraid of storms and large animals is tempted to assume that she, too, is afraid of these dangerous events; a girl with a relatively fearless mother will come to the opposite conclusion. In addition, children share vicariously in some of the experiences that occur to the parents with whom they are identified. A boy whose father is popular with friends and relatives, for example, will find it easier to conclude that he, too, has qualities that make him acceptable to others.

The more distinctive the features shared between child and parent, the stronger the identification of the former with the latter. A father who is tall, thin, and has red hair and freckles will, other things equal, engender a stronger identification in a son with these four features than in a son who is short, chubby, brown-haired, and has no freckles.¹ That is why many members of minority groups that possess distinctive features have a strong identification; for example, whites in South Africa are more strongly identified with their ethnic group than whites in the United States.

Children also can identify with the class, ethnic, or religious group to which their family belongs and often feel an imperative to honor the identification. To fail to do so is to violate a principle of cognitive consistency between an ethical standard and an action and, as a result, to feel uncertain. Some adolescents for whom the group identification generates anxiety may attempt to minimize bases for the perceived similarity; hence, some Jews change their last name, some Mexicans try to lighten their skin, and some African-Americans straighten their hair.

The importance of identification for personality development means that the parents' personality, talents, and character, as they are perceived by the child, are of significance. When the content of parental rewards and punishments is in accord with the adult's persona as a role model, the content of adult socialization is potentiated. A child praised for her intellectual competence by parents who read books and display a curiosity about the world is more likely to value intellectual pursuits than one whose parents praise academic success but do not display any interest in intellectual competence in their personal lives. Children tend to honor what parents do rather than what they say.

The power of identification can be seen in the robust relation between the educational level of the parents, which is a good index of the social class of the family, and many psychological outcomes, in-

cluding level of school achievement, frequency of aggressive behavior, and attitude toward authority.¹² The psychological differences between young adults born to college graduates, compared with those born to parents who never graduated from high school, cannot be explained completely as a result of direct interactions between parents and children. These psychological products also involve the child's identification with the family's social class. The features that define social class, as distinct from ethnicity, include place of residence, nature of the neighborhood, and material possessions. But because most parents do not remind their children of their social class and signs of family's social class position can be subtle, a child's discovery of the family's class is conceptually more difficult than discovery of his/her gender or ethnicity and usually is not articulated before 7 years of age.

The proportion of economically stressed families in a particular region will affect the strength of a child's identification. An awareness of those who are affluent and those who are not is most distinctive in societies like our own, where there is considerable variation in material wealth. No uniform psychological outcomes flow from absolute poverty, but many predictable outcomes flow from the belief that one's family is either advantaged or disadvantaged relative to others. Because many Americans believe that persistent hard work and intelligence are all that are needed to gain the wealth that has become, in this century, a defining feature of personal worth, class has a greater potential for shame in America than it does in many countries of the world. Ten-year-olds who identify with their relatively poor families are vulnerable to feelings of shame or psychological impotence if they wonder whether their family's status is attributable to the fact that their parents were either lazy or incompetent. The literary critic Frank Kermode, born to poor parents, once admitted to feeling like an outsider, "Looking the part while not being equal to it seems to be something I do rather well."¹³ Because identification with a poor family can generate anxiety, shame, or anger, it can represent a chronic psychological stress that might contribute to the generally poorer health of the economically disadvantaged.¹⁴

It has proven difficult to gather the objective evidence needed to affirm beyond doubt the truth of these statements about identification because of insufficiently sensitive procedures. However, some evidence does support this claim. In one unpublished study from my laboratory, white high school students, all with good grades, who came from either upper-middle or working-class families in the Boston area, came to a laboratory at Harvard University to be interviewed and evaluated for autonomic functioning. The working-class adolescents were more subdued in their interaction with the female examiner. In addition, the working-class youth had greater power in the lower-frequency band of the cardiac spectrum. This second fact implies greater sympathetic tone on the barorecep-

tor reflex, perhaps attributable to greater apprehension in a context that was symbolic of affluence and privilege.

FAMILY STORIES

A third mechanism of family influence is related to identification, but is more symbolic. Some parents tell their children stories about relatives—uncles, aunts, grandparents, cousins—who were, or are, especially accomplished in some domain. Perhaps an uncle made an important discovery, accumulated wealth, performed a courageous act, was a talented athlete or writer, or a respected public official. The child is likely to feel pride on hearing these stories because of the implication that if he or she is biologically related to this important family member, the child, too, must also possess some admirable characteristics. George Homans, an influential Harvard sociologist, noted in a memoir written shortly before his death that he coped with his childhood anxiety over poor school grades and unpopularity with peers by reminding himself that he could trace his pedigree back to John Adams.¹⁵ Charles Darwin's description of his father glows with awe for his father's intelligence, sympathy, kindness, and business sense.¹⁶ Darwin knew about the inheritance of psychological features through his acquaintance with animal breeders and may have felt that his cognitive talents were inevitable given his family's eminence.

Direct interactions, identification, and knowledge of the accomplishments of family members are three important ways in which families influence children. The first mechanism has its greatest effect on intellectual development and character traits, especially the control of aggression and motivation for achievement. The second and third mechanisms, identification and family myths, have a greater influence on the child's confidence or doubt about his/her talent and, therefore, on the child's expectation of future success or failure.

INDICATORS OF FAMILY RELEVANCE

A persuasive source of support for the significance of family experience is found in follow-up studies of young children who suffered serious privation, usually the result of war, and were later adopted by nurturant families. Many of the orphans produced by World War II and the Korean conflict, who had extremely fragile bonds to any caretaker in their early years, appeared to develop well after adoption by loving foster parents.^{17,18} More recently, a group of children who had spent the first year in depriving orphanages in Romania were adopted by nurturant British parents. When they arrived in London, they were emaciated and psychologically retarded, as one would expect, given their harsh experience. However, when they were evaluated several years later, after adoption by middle-class parents, a majority, although not all, were similar in their intellectual profile to the average British child (Michael Rutter, personal communication, 1998).

A study of 13 624 families living in 10 different

cities provides a particularly persuasive demonstration of the importance of the family. The children, who were observed as infants and again at 3 years of age, had experienced varied forms of early care. Some were in day care centers, some were in family day care, and some were raised only at home. The form of care outside the home had little effect on the prevalence of problems with self-control, compliance, and asocial behavior; variation among the families was a critical determinant of differences in these psychological traits.¹⁹

OTHER INFLUENCES ON CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Although empiric data affirm that parental behaviors and personality traits influence the child's talents, motivation, academic performance, and social behavior,²⁰ their influence is part of a larger web of conditions that includes inherited temperamental biases, ordinal position, social class, ethnicity, quality of peer friendships, and the historical era in which adolescence is spent. The importance of temperament is seen in a longitudinal study of a large group of healthy children. Approximately 20% of these healthy infants inherited a temperament that was revealed at 4 months of age in vigorous levels of motor activity and irritability to unfamiliar stimulation.²¹ Approximately one third of these infants, called high reactive, were shy and fearful to unfamiliar people and settings during the preschool years, and approximately one fourth were likely to develop anxious symptoms when they were 7 years old.²² Although only 20% of the high reactive infants were consistently shy and fearful from 14 months to 8 years of age, it was rare for a high reactive infant to become a consistently bold, extroverted child.

The influence of ordinal position is affirmed by the fact that, controlling for social class, first-born children obtain better grades and are more often high school valedictorians than later born children.²³

The influence of historical era is revealed in a study of the cohort of Americans that was between 10 and 20 years of age during the economic Depression in America from 1930 to 1940. A large proportion of these American adolescents, who are now in their 7th decade, saved more money than the generation before or after and conducted their lives with a gnawing concern over financial loss.²⁴

The protest against the Vietnam War at the end of the 1960s also affected large numbers of privileged adolescents who turned against the values of established authority. College students seized administration buildings or shared sexual partners in unheated communal homes. High school youth defiantly left their classrooms to protest the war, and they got away with it. It is heady for a 16-year-old to defy the rules of authority and escape punishment. For many youth, such experiences eroded a tendency to worry about coming to work at 10:00 in the morning instead of 9 and leaving at 4 instead of 5. Many of these middle-class youth thumbed their noses at authority because they happened to be born during a brief period when segments of

American society were uncertain as to which actions were legitimate. When history tears a hole in the fabric of consensual assumptions, the mind flies through it into a space free of hoary myth to invent a new conception of self, ethics, and society.

CONCLUSION

The influence of these extrafamilial factors suggests that it is more accurate to state that parental qualities contribute to a child's psychological profile, rather than to conclude that family conditions determine a particular outcome. An infant's secure attachment to a parent does not guarantee a benevolent outcome or protect a child against psychological problems later in life, but the secure attachment probably constrains the likelihood of producing an adult who is homeless. Physicians are familiar with this form of restrained conclusion. Chronic middle ear infection during the first 2 years of life does not always lead to language delay, but it can make a small contribution to that phenomenon.

Eleanor Maccoby, a colleague and a distinguished developmental psychologist, wrote that the contribution of parental practices to children's personality cannot be viewed in isolation. Each parental behavior or parental personality trait is part of a complex system that in some respects is unique to each parent-child relationship.²⁵

This conclusion is not different in substance from most generalizations about complex natural phenomena, including the appearance or extinction of a species or the duration of an infectious epidemic. The proper conceptual posture is restraint on shrill dogma that claims either that the family is without significance or that it represents the only conditions that matter.

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