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PARENT ENGAGEMENT AND SCHOOL READINESS: PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS IN EARLY LEARNING

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Abstract

Parental behavior during a child's first five years of life is critical for the development of important social and cognitive outcomes in children that set the stage for life-long adaptation and functioning. This chapter will review some of the key findings about the importance of parent-child relationships in early learning. Three dimensions of parent behavior will be described as "parental engagement": (a) warmth and sensitivity, (b) support for a child's emerging autonomy, and (c) active participation in learning. Cross-cultural variations in which the styles of these behaviors are expressed will also be considered.

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Parental behavior during a child's first five years of life is critical for the development of important social and cognitive outcomes in children. The child's first relationships, it is now clear, are critical for the establishment of competences-- cognitive, social-emotional, and self-regulatory skills--that set the stage for life-long adaptation and functioning. The interactions and experiences that children have in the home and family setting provide a framework for how the child will interpret his or her world and give meaning to culturally-framed events. Even the degree to which children are prepared to benefit from later schooling is predicated in part on what transpires before they enter the school door. This chapter will review some of the key findings about the importance of parent-child relationships in early learning. The term, "parent," will refer to the primary parenting figure in a child's life; it may refer to the child's guardian or even to a small number of attachment figures who closely share parenting duties.

Parental behavior consists an almost infinite variety of specific actions that unfold over time as the child develops, but in our work we have found it useful to summarize three key dimensions of parental behavior that we call *parent engagement* (Sheridan et al., in press). These three dimensions appear to facilitate child learning and develop in conceptually distinct and practically important ways that will describe. The dimensions of parent engagement include: (a) *warmth and sensitivity*, (b) *support for a child's emerging autonomy*, and (c) *active participation in learning*. All three dimensions influence the developmental pathways, including neural capacities, leading to social-emotional, cognitive, and communicative competence

(National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2002; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Parental Warmth and Sensitivity

The first dimension of parental engagement clusters around warm and sensitive responsiveness to the child's needs and cues. It includes all those behaviors variously described in the child development literature as *loving nurturance*, *warmth and sensitivity*, *responsive contingency to children's cues*, and *emotional availability toward the child* (e.g. Bornstein & Tamis-LeMonda, 1989; Emde & Robinson, 2000; Landry et al., 2001, 2006; Mitchell, 1987). Beginning in the neonatal period, parental responsiveness can be seen in adults imitating and highlighting infant behavior, pausing to give the infant an opportunity to respond, respecting the infant's needs for an occasional break from communication (Field, 1970), responding enthusiastically and appropriately to the infant's interests (Mahoney, Finger, & Powell, 1985), following the infant's attentional focus (Thomasello & Farrar, 1986), and letting the infant initiate interactions (Glynn, 1987). As children grow older, parental warmth and empathy have been identified as global qualities that lead children to interact more smoothly with their parents and to form a strong identification with parental values that extends outside the home to cooperation with other adults and peers as well.

Children's very survival and development depend on parental warmth and sensitivity because children are inherently *relationship-seeking beings*. From the beginning of life, children seek to engage and interact with the people around them. When comfortable and fed, they direct their attention and interest outward toward others who seem friendly, exciting, or loving. They

reach out to get responses from these people and to send them signals of distress or pleasure as they try to help manage the pace, flow, and intensity of interaction. They actively strive to participate in the life around them. Without intimate, nurturing responses from others, children become too upset and exhausted to accept food and comfort. They cannot make sense of sensory stimulation and understand the world, connect to it, or care about it. Warm and sensitive parents create the framework for this vital interaction in the process of meeting their infant's basic needs.

Ample evidence exists that this first dimension of loving care is positively related to the all-critical development of the child's first attachments and close, secure relationships with a few significant others. Warm and sensitive caregiving that includes encouragement and support, lays the foundation for secure behavior and exploration such as through extended play episodes and pretend play (e.g. Ainsworth et al., 1972; Bowlby, 1969; Guralnick, 2006 Hirch-Pasek & Burchinal, 2006; Parker et al, 1999; Slade, 1987; Sorce & Emde, 1981). Much of the evidence emanates from research conducted within the attachment paradigm. Securely attached children tend to engage in more spontaneous reading activities and perform better on emergent literacy measures than insecurely attached children (Bus & van IJzendoorn, 1988). In preschool, observers describe securely attached children as more curious, self-directed, sensitive to others' needs, and eager to learn than children who were insecurely attached as infants (Bost, Vaugh, Washington, Gielinski, & Bradbard, 1998). Children with less secure relationships with their caregivers tend to have lower levels of behavioral and emotional control, less adaptive levels of autonomy, and to experience difficulties approaching learning tasks (e.g., Sroufe, 1983).

Parental interactions that include displays of affection, physical proximity, contingent positive reinforcement and sensitivity have repeatedly related to children's cognitive growth over time (Bornstein & Tamis-leMonda, 1989; Burchinal, Campbell, Bryant, Wasik, & Ramey, 1997;

Howes, Phillips, & Whitebook, 1992; Landry et al., 2001). Specifically, research has identified that positive, early relationships between children and caregivers contribute to neural connections that facilitate children's long-term developmental success (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). Children in more highly 'connected' parent-child relationships tend to display more positive socioemotional outcomes, such as stronger prosocial orientations, more numerous and higher quality friendships, and higher levels of peer acceptance in kindergarten (Clark & Ladd, 2000; Cohn, 1990; Kerns, Klepac, & Cole, 1996). Through connected interaction with parents, children appear to develop an empathic socioemotional orientation that serves as a foundation for interpreting social situations and responding more prosocially to agemates and teachers (Clark & Ladd, 2000).

Clearly, young children benefit in the short and long term from nurturant caregiving that is emotionally warm, available, and responsive. Yet, there are many styles in which this caregiving can be delivered (Edwards & Liu, 2002; Harkness & Super, 1996; Keller, 2007; LeVine & New, 2008; Rogoff, 2003; Whiting & Edwards, 1988). Nurturance can be demonstrated in many ways all of which seem to promote infant health and well-being. No single cultural group or set of parents uses all of the available techniques, but instead each selects out some of them to make the customary approach. Parents and communities often use styles that emphasize either a physical, social, or cognitive style of expressing warmth and sensitivity. For example, certain kinds of parents may emphasize a *physical* style of nurturance, for example, focusing on the child's desires for food, holding, and responsive touch (by day or night) (Edwards & Whiting, 2004; Whiting, 1994; Whiting & Whiting, 1975). Through provision of food, holding, and other primary care oriented to the child's survival, these parents communicate to their children that they love them and are devoted to them. Through gentle touch, physical

games, or use of massage, they communicate their nurturing feelings and tell their child that they wish her to feel ease and comfort throughout her body. In contrast, other kinds of parents may take greatest pleasure in a *social* style of nurturing by singing to the child, grooming their child's hair, dressing the child up, taking her on visits, and teaching her social words and gestures. Indeed, in many cultures, adults take great delight in the social forms of nurturance and communicate their affection through beautifying their child and teaching the child the rudiments of good manners. Finally, a third kind of parents may emphasize a *cognitive* style of expressing warmth and sensitivity by responding to the child's developing interests and preferences, offering them objects to look at and manipulate, and following their eyes to see what they are looking at, in order to label those things and expand on the child's exclamations and words. These parents often are verbal in their interaction with even the youngest children, and they treat their babies as conversational partners and "intelligent" beings who wonder about how things work and what causes things to happen. Of course, all three styles can be combined

In today's post-industrial societies, it is the third style, focused on cognitively-stimulating interactions, which seems to lead to the optimal outcomes for children's school readiness and academic success. Warm interactions of the mother provide the foundation for compliance and internalized controls in young children (Maccoby & Martin, 1983), and limit-setting and discipline may be less effective in the absence of positive, warm relationships (DeKlyen et al., 1998.) The expression of positive affect and emotional availability are also associated with improved short-term cognitive performance (Clarke-Stewart, 1973) and long-term effects of positive academic performance (Estrada, Arsenio, Hess, & Holloway, 1987). The emotional, social, and behavioral competence of young children predicts their academic performance in first grade over and above their cognitive skills and family backgrounds (Raver & Knitzer, 2002),

whereas the absence of a secure attachment with a caregiver or multiple caregivers leaves a child at a distinctive disadvantage (Denham & Weissberg, 2004). Qualities of parental engagement have been linked to a number of adaptive characteristics in preschool children, such as good work habits, frustration tolerance, fewer behavior problems, and better social skills.

Parental Support for Autonomy

The second dimension of parental behavior clusters around parental guidance and support for autonomy. It includes all those behaviors variously described in the child development literature as *discipline, positive guidance,* and *support for the development of independence, self-reliance, and self-regulation.* Children cannot remain infantile forever and must learn to do things for themselves so they can get along without constant supervision. They must individuate from their attachment figures and develop a certain initiative in relation to their surroundings. This dimension of parent behavior begins at the child's birth but becomes particularly salient (and conscious to parents) during the toddler years when children begin to be resistant and to want to do things independently. Parents promote autonomy by helping children to care for their own needs in the areas of eating, dressing, and personal hygiene. They support their capacity to function maturely in the home, neighborhood, or school classroom by teaching them to regulate the expression of their needs and emotions, respond cooperatively and compliantly to adult authority and direction, resist temptations to misbehave and violate rules, and find ways to tolerate frustration and stay on task.

Parental support for children's autonomy has been associated with the development of many positive cognitive and social outcomes for young children (Clark & Ladd, 2000; Grolnick

& Farkas, 2002; Grolnick & Ryan, 1987, 1989). Parents teach and model skills that help children to recognize and express feelings in culturally-appropriate ways so that they are not rejected by others for crying, screaming, or expressing anger in ways that are too violent and uncontrolled. By supporting their child's independence and inviting children to participate in decision making, parents foster self-regulatory skills and intrinsic motivation in children that serves them well in any situation, but especially in school and work-related settings. By providing developmentally-sensitive support for problem-solving, they promote children's ability to learn from others and work cooperatively on home or school tasks. Parent-child interactions that are attentive but nondirective provide children some guidance, but they also allow children the freedom to be expressive, initiating, and self-directed. Interactions that are monitored and responses that are matched to children's developmental abilities and interests can foster continued interest in a current activity, comfortable exploration of its potential dimensions, and mastery motivation.

Research indicates that by promoting autonomy, parents promote desired outcomes such as effective communication with peers (Martinez, 1987), self-regulation (Neitzel & Stright, 2003), adaptive levels of social assertiveness and self-directedness in social and play interactions at preschool (Denham et al., 1991), and increased levels of cognitive competence in young children (Mulvaney et al., 2006; Wood, 1980). By supporting their child's independence and inviting children to participate in decision making, parents foster self-regulatory skills and intrinsic motivation to accomplish tasks set by adults, peers, or themselves. Children of parents who support autonomy have shown higher scores on standardized tests (e.g., quantitative and literacy skills; Hill, 2001), as well as more appropriate social assertiveness and self-directedness (Denham et al.; 1991; Martinez, 1987). In contrast, parents who undermine autonomy through

greater frequency of controlling, hostile behaviors have children with more disruptive behavior problems in early childhood (Campbell, 1994; Campbell, March, Pierce, Ewing, & Szumowski, 1991; Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994). Children of parents who provide inconsistent guidelines, are harsh or coercive, disengaged, and/or are unable to appropriately monitor child behavior are likely to display more aggression and antisocial behavior (Brier, 1995; McFayden-Ketchum, Bates, Dodge, and Pettit, 1996). In studies of child-mother interaction, differences in parenting discipline account for a substantial portion of the variance in behavior problems in childhood (Pianta & Ferguson, 1997).

As with warmth and sensitivity, there are many styles by which parents can promote their children's autonomy (Edwards & Liu, 2002; Harkness & Super, 1996; Keller, 2007; LeVine & New, 2008; Rogoff, 2003; Whiting & Edwards, 1988). Some families encourage motoric or *physical* autonomy by allowing their child lots of opportunity for active movement. They might allow their child to explore independently in a carefully childproofed home or yard, or take the child outside for regular vigorous exercise. Still others might encourage physical autonomy by being exceptionally patient as the child struggles to climb stairs, use a fork, put on shoes, wash their hands, pour cereal and milk, or put things away. Another dimension of autonomy is *social*. Some parents may emphasize social autonomy because it helps the child to function in a social group without constant parental intervention. Parents orient their babies toward social autonomy, for instance, when they help them learn to remain patient and pleasant during a long family meal or to control their jealousy of a smaller baby visiting their house. Socially-oriented families might also encourage their child to enter a playgroup of same aged peers, to freely share their toys, or to accept another adult's care to the extent of being able to join the fun of the family outing to the park or swimming pool. Still other families put a premium on *cognitive*

styles of autonomy, and they demonstrate this by encouraging early mastery of language skills, so that the child can use words to express his needs ("up," "milk," "do car"). They may put special energy into helping the children solve his or her own problems and make independent use of a nice play room with its rich store of books, creative art materials, and constructive toys.

Cultural values about autonomy influence the manner in which parents and other family members evaluate and set limits with their children. For instance, there are many ways that parents can express praise and approval for what a child is doing. Some parents and cultural groups tend to use applause and hurrahs to encourage small children to show off and do little performances. In other cultures, parents do not want their children to seek attention or be "boastful and proud," so instead of giving overt praise they comment to another adult how well the child is doing, give the child another responsibility that indicates his success with the first one, or wordlessly display the child's lovely picture to share it in the family. The child notices what the parent is doing and feels a quiet pride that does not make him the center of attention. Parents' values about appropriate autonomy also influence what they see as too indulgent and as "spoiling" a child. All cultures have some areas in which they expect early attainment of autonomy and mature behavior, and other areas in which they are relatively lax and indulgent. When people are looking at families from other cultures, they tend to notice those areas of childrearing where that other culture is either much stricter or more indulgent than their own. However, they are unaware of what aspects of their own culture that others tend to find either overly indulgent, or overly strict.

Parental Participation in Learning

The third dimension of parental behavior clusters around promoting and participating in children's learning. It includes all those behaviors variously described in the child development literature as *teaching, scaffolding, facilitating,* and *promoting language and learning*. This dimension of parent behavior begins at the child's birth but becomes particularly salient (and conscious to the parent) during the toddler or preschool years. Parents provide for their young child's general learning both at home and outside the home in many direct and indirect ways, and this is sometimes called the "curriculum of the home." For example, they promote their children's learning by interacting with them in an attentive and interested way and by providing them ample opportunities to gain new information and encouraging or permitting them to solve their own problems. Parents have many opportunities throughout the day to engage in responsive language and learning interactions with their children and allow the child to learn through complex and constructive play, asking questions, shared book-reading or involvement in household tasks, and open-ended exploration.

Ample evidence exists for the importance of parents' participation and engagement in their children's early learning. Well before starting school, children interact with materials that are important for the emergence of literacy. By interacting with all the forms of environmental print, children gain valuable information about print, signs, and books; sounds, letters, words, and sentences; and when they practice the decontextualized language associated with songs, rhymes, and stories they are enjoyable prepared for later, more formal literacy instruction in school (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999). Parents play a critical role in influencing early language learning by commenting, mimicking and expanding on their children's play schemes and speech

(Dunst & Bruder, 1999). The richness of the literacy environment strongly predict children's children's language and academic outcomes (Arnold, Lonigan, Whitehurst, & Epstein, 1994; Espinosa, 2002; Fagan & Iglesias, 1999; Senechal & LeFevre, 2002; Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2006). Specific interactions during shared storybook-reading, such as labeling pictures, pointing out words and letters and relating the story to a child's own life are important for learning early literacy rules/conventions and children's later school success ((Bus & van ljzendoorn, 1988, 1992, 199; Wood, 2002). Parents also influence children's learning by modeling and supporting simple verbal and written productions such as the alphabet song, nursery rhymes or how to write their name on a greeting card. (Dunst & Bruder, 1999). Young children who experience reading and writing as pleasurable events are generally more successful later in school (Paratore, Melzi, & Krol-Sinclair, 1999). Mothers who use comments and open-ended questions during conversations and shared reading activities, rather than predominantly verbal directives and closed questions, usually have children who develop more advanced vocabulary and language skills (Hart & Risley, 1995; Pan, Rowe, Singer, & Snow, 2005). Parents who frequently engage in responsive language and literacy interactions with their children, and who provide a home environment rich in opportunities for learning through shared book-reading, constructive play, and exploration, have children who display higher language and cognitive skills in the preschool and primary years (e.g., Hindman & Morrison, n.d.; Huttenlocher, Haight, Bryk, Seltzer, & Lyons, 1991; Tamis-LeMonda & Bornstein, 2002; Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2006; Wood, 2002).

Additionally, parents directly and indirectly provide natural learning environments for young children by determining their everyday activities (i.e., mealtimes, interactions with siblings, outdoor or indoor play) in the settings and community locations frequented by young

children of a similar age, culture and geographic region. Children interact with parents in routine daily activities (e.g., dialing the phone, reading the mail, writing a grocery list), and thereby learn and practice a variety of skills that will serve them well once they start school. The degree to which parents engage their children in these activities (e.g., by providing the opportunity to watch, imitate, practice or ask questions) influences the amount of information children take from these interactions, have been found to be associated with optimal developmental changes (Dunst, 2001. Informal activities, such as eating a meal or getting dressed or playing in the park or backyard, are also important natural learning opportunities for children if parents use them to engage with children in positive ways and use language and problem-solving strategies to highlight the experiences and express high, realistic expectations for achievement, and become involved with their child's explorations (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Parents' ability to provide such a "curriculum at home" have been related to early childhood language outcomes and literary success and positive academic outcomes (Bradley et al., 1988; Foster et al., 2005; Hill, 2001; Payne, Whitehurst, & Agnew, 1994; Senechal & LeFevre, 2002; Weigel et al., 2006).

Finally, parents play an important role in arranging for young children's out of home learning opportunities, by how they select a quality child care or preschool experience for their children and how they engage fully with the children and staff. Assuring language- and literacy-learning opportunities at child care or preschool or kindergarten involves parents' participation and collaboration with teachers and education professionals. Parents' regular participation in school activities, such as parent-teacher conferences, as well as involvement in class activities, observation visits, and take-home activities (songs, books, etc.) have been linked to young children's later academic success (Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2006; Pena, 2000). However, successful home-school collaboration is the responsibility of both parents and education

professionals, and effective communication between parents and schools is critical to the successful bridging of home and school learning opportunities for children (Christenson & Sheridan, 2000); Epstein & Sanders, 2000). A strong connection between schools and families assists children in developing the skills needed to be, successful socially and emotionally, as well academically, and has been shown to be a significant factor in children's overall achievement (Christenson & Hirsch, 1998; Mashburn & Pianta, 2006). When parents are involved in their children's schooling, children show improvements in many adaptive outcomes, including prosocial behavior (Comer & Haynes, 1991; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004; Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1991), self-esteem (Collins, Moles, & Cross, 1982; Sattes, 1985), perseverance and mastery motivation (Estrada, Arsenio, Hess, & Holloway, 1987; Turner & Burke, 2003), and participation in learning activities (Collins et al., 1982; McWayne et al., 2004; Sattes, 1985).

As with warmth and sensitivity, and promoting autonomy, there are many styles by which parents can participate in their children's learning (e.g., Edwards & Liu, 2002; Harkness & Super, 1996; Keller, 2007; LeVine & New, 2008; Rogoff, 2003; Whiting & Edwards, 1988). . Parents in different cultural communities have distinctive beliefs about what they believe children should learn, and in a general way, these parental beliefs match the demands of the cultural context. For instance, a *physical* style of participating is promoted in cultural environments that contain strong physical dangers for young children (drowning, falling, getting burned, getting run over, getting lost). By using a physical style, parents promote the acquisition of gross and fine motor physical skills that help children learn to move safely and efficiently through the world and to begin to handle and manipulate necessary tools and implements, whether they be spoons, knives, digging tools, or pens and pencils.

The *social* realm of language and learning is also important to most families, as has been described. Parents promote their child's incorporation of social skills and knowledge by letting them participate in household work and including them in the joyful celebrations and rituals that are most meaningful to the family. They can achieve similar effects by incorporating their youngest children in events that give the whole family pleasure, such as sports events. For infants and toddlers, sitting with the family on the sidelines through long games can be either barren and boring (when they are primarily pacified with food and drink) or instead rich in learning and literacy experience, when family members take time to draw them out in extended conversation, teach them meaningful routines (e.g. the rudiments of the game), and show them all the numbers, letters, and words on the score boards, food containers, programs, and uniforms.

Today, however, the pre-academic or *cognitive* side of parental participation in learning has become at least as important as the social and physical sides because of its connection to readiness for school success. Indeed, explicitly symbolic learning that promotes emergent learning in the domains of literacy, math, science, and creative arts, reaches all the way down into the infant and toddler years. Parents set the stage for their babies' later school readiness treating them as conversational partners (echoing and expanding their vocalizations and utterances, e.g., when they say, "You want more milk in your bottle?" after their child says, "Bot-tle"). Likewise, they expand their children's future command of language by modeling and encouraging the pleasure of using words, whether in naming, describing, explaining, rhyming, joking, telling a story, singing, counting, comparing, or computing. Parents also support an early love of language and learning by introducing their children to the cultural arts (by providing drawing and listening materials, or taking the child to a puppet show, library, public garden, swimming pool, or park). Finally, they cultivate a pleasure in reading and future literacy by

reading stories to them from infancy and providing a rich supply of books, literacy tools, and imaginative play materials in their home. The pre-academic methods of fostering school readiness are very desirable as part of the "curriculum of the home," but they are not everything. Any and all of the parenting styles of promoting language and learning—physical, social, and cognitive--have their own merit and are positive supports to young children's present and future socioemotional and intellectual growth and development.

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