

## <T>Parenthood</T>

Imagine a mother and/or father and a child and think about all the things that are going to influence them. What is the most important thing you could do that will influence those parents in accomplishing the tasks parents everywhere have to accomplish? Many very important things come to mind: the resources and wealth of the parents, the characteristics of the children that that parent has, how the parent was raised, the beliefs and values of the parents, the resources parents have available personally in their households and in their community, other caretakers (grandparents, siblings, child care workers) to assist them, the parents' physical and mental health, and many others. However, it is worth considering that the single most important thing that you could do to influence those parents would be to decide where on earth the parents and children will grow up. In what local cultural community are the parents living?

A focus on the cultural and community contexts of parenting does not diminish the importance of parents. Rather, it points to a useful way to think about parenting: Parents are important to how children develop, but parents' contributions blend with genes, peers, and community context.

Americans might first think of parenting as primarily direct interactions between parent and child: showing love and affection, disciplining, managing the day, solving relational problems, and providing material resources for children. However, in addition to thinking of parenting by beginning with the individual parent in relationship to his or her child, it is useful to think about the community context -- the cultural learning environment -- in which the parent and child live. These communities vary widely around the world.

In Northeast Brazil, impoverished single mothers survive struggles of high child mortality, social oppression, and suffering by using their religious faith and kin to help. In rural western Kenya, mothers are concerned over the jealousy of others, the safety of their children, health and physical strength, and that they will have assistance with their heavy domestic and subsistence workloads. At the same time, they want their children to be bright and successful in school, diligent and hardworking, as well as socially competent and respectful. In northern India, modern ways of economic and family life blend with the moral virtues and caretaking support of the extended family. Women's investments in their household's success are often realized in their daughters' (and sons') achievement of education and improved jobs. Indeed, nonparental care of children, or alloparenting, as a complement to parental care is as important a proximal influence on children as direct parental care. (About 8% of U.S. children live with grandparents, for example, and grandparents provide care for many more children even when not living together).

In Japan, parents seldom have more than one or two children, and they strive to find economic and academic success for their children in the face of intense competitive pressures and provide children a deep sense of symbiotic harmony and empathy in social relationships, rather than generative tension from more autonomous, contractual social relations, like in the United States. Japanese parents strive to create this very close relationship early in life with the mother and then send their children to preschools and public schools, including extra tutoring schools later on, in hopes of ensuring both peer experience and educational success. In Germany, some parents will leave their young children alone at home for awhile when they go out and ensure the children have their

own room from an early age, believing that this is important for child autonomy and independence as well as parents' own clock-driven schedules. In parts of Holland, parents strive to create a calm, restful routine for babies and young children, and as a result they successfully have their young children sleeping longer than U.S. children. There are thousands more places in New Guinea, Sri Lanka, China, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and so forth with their own models for parenting and pathways available for parents and children.

It is not only that it takes a village to support parents to raise a child; it takes an understanding of the parents' and children's place in their local community and in the world they face today to understand parenting. Every community, region, and nation has its ways of making a living; its levels of public health; its demographic and fertility patterns; its conventions about gender, race, ethnicity, and age ranking; its practices regarding child work and ideas about success; and its ways of marriage, partnerships, household formation, and so forth—all of which influence parenting. Very broadly, parents in nonurban communities with high fertility, greater mortality threats, more gender segregation, lower literacy, and less formal education emphasize greater child (and parent) heteronomy and social interdependence. Parents in the opposite circumstances, on average, emphasize greater child (and parent) autonomy and independence. But other combinations, such as autonomous-relatedness (closer family and ethnic ties but sustained in modern economies), are common as well.

What accounts for this variability in parenting around the world? There are vast differences in material and economic resources that parents have available to sustain their households and provide for themselves and their children. Billions of parents around the

world continue to have little or no access to good biomedical health care, are unable to send their children to school, and face threats from war, forced migration, and political and social oppression.

Women still do most of the direct care and household management tasks of parenting; fathers are doing more such parenting today in industrialized nations and often provide more family resources, but the mothering role continues to be a task of women. This is due to a mix of evolved sexual dimorphism, gender preference, and social, cultural, and economic pressure.

Along with these wide variations in community contexts and parenting beliefs and practices, there are tasks all parents worldwide are responsible for: the universal functions of parenting. These include providing for the safety of children; providing subsistence needs; directing and managing everyday care of the child, including monitoring the child's daily routine of activities; providing emotional support, nurturance, and parental love; and providing for the socialization of the child; that is, ensuring that the child has acquired, through experience, training, and teaching, ways to be a socially and morally appropriate and competent person in that community. This last task of parenting can be thought of as the task of social replacement: preparing children as best as one can for a changing future.

Parents provide direct care but convey very different information to their children about how to live in the world and what to believe. With so many people around her, whom can and should a child trust and why? People with kinship ties to her, those who live nearby, those with familiar names or appearance, those who act in a certain way toward her, those who share group membership with her? Should girls and boys grow up

similarly or differently? Did the world come to be because of supernatural beings, and are those supernatural beings still influencing the world and people in it? Beyond interactions with the child, the meaning or content of what parents say to children about life, matters deeply.

The emotional context parents provide also matters. Parenting in a climate of fear, anger, and threat has very different—and negative—outcomes for children, even if the other tasks of parenting are being adequately met.

It is useful to think of parenting as the many linked activities parents engage in with their children or place their children in when the parent is absent. All of these activities matter for development. Family sleeping arrangements, the morning routine, household tasks, transportation, watching TV, doing homework, dinnertime, visiting family and friends, going to a religious site, participating in games and sports, playing together—all are activities between parent and child that constitute parenting. These activities take resources; accomplish often vital tasks; have a “script” (the accepted, appropriate ways to do such things; there is a right way to eat dinner together, to visit grandparents, to go to church); have particular people and relationships present; have parental goals, values, and beliefs embedded in them; and are experienced with varying emotions and feelings of engagement. What activities do parents prefer or accept as appropriate for their children (TV, movies, digital games; playmates and playdates; kin care, stranger care, center-based and after-school care)? To do all this reasonably well is the central accomplishment of parenting.

A pervasive sense of stress, pressure, and loss of control may ring true for many contemporary U.S. parents. American parents today are busy. Busyness is not only a

condition producing the stress of hectic work lives, produced by financial and family demands and pressures to provide for others (one's children and one's own parents); it is also sometimes perceived as a moral good. Dual-income couples and growing numbers of single mothers of necessity need to be organized, clock driven, productive, efficient, and engaged. As time for parenting grows scarcer and there are fewer kin to help, parenting tasks need to be purchased as commodities from others. Yet as parents are asked to do more, many today accept or are driven to the view that life is a race; the more done for children, the better; the earlier the process starts, the better! Not all parents share this view in the United States and certainly not around the world, yet many will recognize this cultural model of a good developmental pathway for parents. Many Western parents think the first mechanism for teaching children is through didactic instruction, teaching, and directives from parents and others. But the great majority of what a child learns is acquired not through direct instruction using words but in other ways. The most common way to affect children is through imitation, observation, and mimicry of people, behavior, language, and affect in those everyday activities. Parents can provide opportunities for children to rehearse, practice, experiment, and be apprentices in learning without direct instruction, and children are prepared to learn in these ways.

Today's world is a globalizing world with fewer barriers to the flow of information, goods, and beliefs about how to be a parent. It is also an increasingly pluralistic world. With so many models possible, what should a parent do? There is no shortage of handbooks on parenting. What are the grounds for determining that parenting practices are good? Here are four criteria that, often in some combination, are offered by science and/or found in common use by parents and communities: achieving reproductive

success, meeting basic needs, following religious authority, and engaging with our own cultural learning environments.

If offspring survive to reproductive age, successfully reproduce, and those offspring in turn are good enough parents to raise their own children to successfully reproduce, then parenting was good enough (parental investment was sufficient for both survival and psychosocial competence in a culture) to have successfully transmitted parental genes into future generations. Parents in the developed world, where child mortality is very low, may not find this criterion very useful in deciding how best to parent, but they remain concerned about health nonetheless. Yet hundreds of millions of parents around the world are living on less than \$2 a day, millions more live in war zones or live in places filled with risks to child and parental health and basic competence.

Good-enough parenting meets the basic requirements for growth that all children need. These basic needs include essential physical care, sufficient nutritionally adequate food, protection and safety, physical touching and holding, parental responsiveness to the child and the child's experience of responsiveness back from the environment, stimulation in the form of social participation, knowledge about how to become a competent and moral person, and perhaps some others. Specific standards for meeting basic needs vary among researchers, parents, and communities around the world, and so this criterion depends on establishing some blending of universal criteria and local contextual ones. However, all communities have core beliefs about the practices they expect from parents to meet basic needs. Nowhere are persistent parental violence, abuse, isolation, and exploitation accepted normal practices, and they are not good for children, although unfortunately parents and other caretakers do such things.

The world's religions have texts with commentaries on parenting and family life and descriptions of child-rearing practices, and indigenous religious beliefs offer parenting prescriptions and proscriptions. Some of these have become encoded in cultural group practices today. Many parents turn either to these texts or to their religious community's interpretations and strive to adhere to the laws of good parenting codified there.

Finally parents are embedded in a local cultural learning environment with a daily routine of life of family and work, economic constraints, and opportunities. Most parents use some version of what is familiar in their local community as the standard of good parenting. This is not the same as relativism (the idea that an individual can only assess what parents do in another community by the local standards there), rather it is contextualism: What local context presents as good parenting becomes, far more often than not, the implicit standard of good parenting (though it may change or be contested).

The purpose of parenting is in part to channel children's emotions, needs, and behaviors into the paths parents and their community want for them. Frustration is always going to be the result for parents and children alike. Good-enough parenting is an achievement; optimal parenting without frustration and problems does not exist—nor, really, can it.

Parents worry about scores of specific questions. What about co-sleeping or bed sharing with my child? How and how much should I stimulate my child to do well in school? How much TV and video games is too much? Might my child have a learning disability or not be developing typically? Will my child do OK since I am a single parent? How can I deal with drugs, sexuality, teasing, and aggression in school; poor

school success; and the added burdens of racial or ethnic minority identity? How do I best discipline children of different ages to engage appropriately in all these activities? Although there is useful advice to be found, there is no one answer that fits all. But if a practice fits with basic needs, does not threaten reproductive success, and meets moral criteria and the implicit standards in a local context, it will most likely also fit with how parents orchestrate their daily routine and so be good-enough parenting.

Parenting is not only about children; it is also about parents' own continuing development. Parenting means providing for a household, changing relationships with spouses and partners, growing up, and growing older. Becoming a parent has so many joys and rewards for the parent and brings the parent into maturity and recognition within their own families and communities. It brings anxiety, fears, material hardship, and many other challenges, along with privileges, status, deep satisfaction and joy.

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<XREF>See also: Adoption; Authority and Obedience; Discipline and Punishment; Family; Father-Child Relationship; Foster and Kinship Care; Gay and Lesbian Parents; Guardianship; Kinship and Child Rearing; Mother-Child Relationship; Rights, Parental; Rights, Termination of Parental; Single Parents</XREF>

<FR>Further Reading

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