



BPS KEY TOPICS IN PSYCHOLOGY

KEY TOPICS IN PARENTING AND FAMILY PSYCHOLOGY

ALINA MORAWSKA AND AMY E. MITCHELL



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Key Topics in Parenting and Family Psychology

This authoritative resource examines the significant influence parents have on children's developmental outcomes and the challenges of modern-day parenting. Highlighting the pivotal role parents play throughout their child's lifespan, this important book guides students through the complexities of raising children in the twenty-first century.

Key features include the analysis of the dynamics between parents and children across generations and cultures, a comparison of the historical background of parenting with contemporary issues faced today, and an exploration of the multifaceted effects of parenting on children's development, including health, emotional wellbeing, and academic achievement. Practical strategies and interventions are provided to navigate the complexities of modern parenthood and support healthy child development. The authors conclude with discussions on future research, policies, and practices, envisioning improved support for families of the future.

Providing essential knowledge to understand and enhance the parenting journey, this textbook is essential reading for students of psychology, social work, nursing, education, and child development.

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BPS Key Topics in Psychology

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Key Topics in Parenting and Family Psychology

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Contents

SECTION 1	
Key foundations	1
1 The role of parents in children's development	3
2 A brief history of parenting	19
3 Tasks and challenges of parenting across the lifespan	32
SECTION 2	
Key theories	53
4 The effects of parenting on children's development	55
5 Parent- and child-level determinants of parenting	76
6 Social and cultural determinants of parenting	94
SECTION 3	
Key methodologies	113
7 Assessing parenting and family interactions	115
8 Evidence-based parenting support	129
9 Engagement and innovation in parenting support	147
SECTION 4	
Key impacts on research, practice, and policy	163
10 Implications for research, policy, and practice	165

SECTION 5	
Key emerging areas	173
11 Challenges of parenting in the 21st century	175
<i>Index</i>	<i>183</i>

Key foundations

This section provides a comprehensive overview of the multifaceted role of parents and parenting across time and developmental stages. It begins by defining the concept of parenting and emphasising its critical influence on children's health, development, and wellbeing through biological, emotional, and social pathways. The discussion extends to the unique contributions of fathers and the influence of parental mental health, attachment, and family relationships. A historical perspective highlights how parenting roles and societal expectations have evolved, particularly in the twenty-first century, alongside the challenges modern parents face. Finally, the section traces the parenting journey across the life cycle – from the antenatal period to late adulthood – illustrating how parental roles, priorities, and challenges shift with children's developmental stages and changing family and social contexts.

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the concept of parenting and describe how parenting practices influence children's health, development, and wellbeing.
- Identify the diverse roles of mothers and fathers, including how parental mental health, attachment patterns, and family relationships shape child outcomes.
- Discuss how parenting roles and expectations have evolved over time, with particular attention to societal shifts and contemporary challenges facing twenty-first-century parents.
- Describe the parenting journey across the life course, from the antenatal period through late adulthood, and analyse how parental roles, priorities, and challenges change in relation to children's developmental stages and broader social contexts.



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The role of parents in children's development

Parents play a key role in children's lives and their development, and being a parent is an important identity that affects multiple aspects of parents' lives. Parents and how they raise their children influence most aspects of children's development, both in genetically transmitting a set of characteristics to children and in creating and shaping the environment in which they grow up. Both mothers and fathers, as well as other caregivers, and the relationships they have with their children are crucial to children's development and wellbeing. Furthermore, children also influence their parents: all family relationships are multi-directional and multi-determined and exist in a broader social and community framework which are important to understand in exploring the role of parenting and family.

The importance of parenting to children's lives

Many factors influence children's health, development, wellbeing, and lifelong outcomes. Since the late seventeenth century, the "nature versus nurture" debate has driven scientists to better understand the innate ("nature") and experiential ("nurture") factors that shape who we are and who we will become. We now know that children are born with many innate characteristics which contribute to their development, and the role of nature in how we develop and see ourselves, the challenges we experience, and how we cope with those is undeniable. For example, our prenatal development, what our mother ate while pregnant, how old our father was when we were conceived, and how we came into this world, all contribute to our overall makeup.

However, the community, city, and country in which we are born and grow up are also pieces of the puzzle that make up who we are. That is, our environment and experiences are also influential in contributing to our development. The environment which has the greatest influence on children's development in the early years is the family environment,



Figure 1.1 Family relationships are multi-directional and shape all members of the family.

Source: Image by Shannon Lawford from Pixabay

and therefore the role of parents in shaping that environment is central. As children grow into preschoolers and move toward school-age, more distal environments such as neighbourhoods, schools, and broader communities begin to play a more direct role in influencing children's development. Nevertheless, parenting and the family environment remain important influences on the course of a child's development from birth and throughout the lifespan (Collins et al., 2000).



Figure 1.2 Parents play an important role in children's development.

Source: Image by Jo Zef Mrkwa from Pixabay

What is parenting?

So, what is parenting? In essence, parenting is the process and activity of raising children from infancy to adulthood and all the many and varied responsibilities and caregiving activities that this involves. From feeding children to ensuring their safety, helping them learn skills ranging from tying their shoelaces to how to manage finances, providing emotional support, and supporting their growing independence are all encompassed in the parenting role. It is also an important relationship in which both parent and child participate and influence each other bidirectionally. That is, while parenting and specific parenting practices influence children, children's temperament and other characteristics and how children respond to specific parental behaviours also shape parents and their parenting practices. The focus of parenting and parenting research has often been on outcomes, usually for children (Dermott & Fowler, 2024), but parenting is also the moment-to-moment decisions and interactions that affect both parents and children over time.



Figure 1.3 Parenting involves many tasks.

Source: Image by Mircea Iancu from Pixabay

Hoghugh and Long (2004) describe parenting as involving a set of purposeful activities that ensure the survival, care, development, and wellbeing of children. The role entails multiple interrelated functions in numerous caregiving activities across varying contexts that gradually evolve over time as children grow and develop. Sanders and Turner (2018) list various functions of parenting as important avenues through which parenting can affect child outcomes. These include taking care of basic needs, emotional care, socialisation, offering guidance, providing boundaries and limits, teaching life skills and mentoring, being a child advocate, supporting children's education, and moral and spiritual guidance.

However, parenting isn't just about practices and behaviours. Parenting encompasses specific *parenting practices* or behaviours, but also the attitudes, values, and beliefs that parents hold about childhood and parenting. The way parents think about their role, the attitudes they have relating to parenting and child development, and the beliefs they hold about the role of parents are also important aspects of parenting. Parenting is a significant

Parenting practices are specific strategies or techniques parents use when interacting with their children (e.g., praise, time out). These can be positive and effective or harsh and ineffective.

modifiable factor in shaping children's development and has important effects for the adults in the parenting role. However, while parenting is often considered in the context of children and child development outcomes, it is also a role which is an important element of individual identity, shaping adult wellbeing and life satisfaction (Schrooyen, 2023).

Modifiable factor refers to any variable that plays a causal role in explaining an outcome that is amenable to change via intervention.

What effect do parents have?

There is a wealth of evidence that parents and the family environment affect most aspects of children's lives. Many of these effects are well documented, some less so, and still others are only now beginning to be understood. We do know that some effects are stronger than others, meaning that parents and parenting practices are more likely to influence certain aspects of children's development, while some child outcomes are more strongly shaped by other factors. It is important to note here that, while parents and the family environment are likely to influence children's development, we need to be careful not to blame parents for children's outcomes. Many different factors contribute to children's development, and parenting is just one of those.

Nevertheless, parenting and the family environment do have pervasive and enduring effects on children. For example, as described in Chapter 4, the parenting a child is exposed to has been shown to have effects on their brain development, healthy and unhealthy food intake, weight status, academic achievement, emotion regulation, and *internalising* and *externalising* behavioural and emotional problems.

Perhaps one of the most well-studied examples of how parenting influences child development is language development. Children's language develops in the context of hearing language and engaging in reciprocal communication. Children who grow up in environments with insufficient language

Internalising problems are emotional and psychological difficulties that are directed inwards and often not visible to other people. These can include problems such as anxiety or depression.

Externalising problems are emotional and psychological difficulties that are directed outwards. These can include problems such as aggression and hyperactivity, which can have effects on other people as well as those experiencing the problem.

input may show significant impairment in communication (Friedmann & Rusou, 2015). But more than just exposure to language and the quantity of words a child hears, the quality (e.g., rare words, complex sentence structures) of the language that is directed toward them in the first years of life matters a great deal, and underpins later language and cognitive development and academic achievement (Anderson et al., 2021).

How do parents affect child outcomes?

We have now moved on from the “nature versus nurture” debate. It is clear that it is neither one nor the other in isolation, but rather a complex combination of direct and indirect effects and interactions between “nature” and “nurture” that drives children’s development (see Sameroff, 2010). Parents and parenting affect children’s development via many different processes and pathways, ranging from the most basic biological processes through to the complexities of attachment relationships, social learning experiences, parenting styles and parenting practices, parent mental health, and family relationships. These processes all exhibit multiple influences and reciprocal interactions (Paschall & Mastergeorge, 2016), that is, rather than simplistic cause and effect relationships, parent-, child-, and family-level outcomes are mutually shaped and reinforced.

Biological processes.

Parents contribute to their children’s development and outcomes via the genes that they pass on to their children and through *epigenetic* effects. These alterations in gene expression can be transmitted from parent to child, impacting not only on child outcomes but also, potentially,

Epigenetic effects occur where environmental exposures (e.g., experience of famine or trauma) result in changes to whether or how genes are expressed.

across subsequent generations (Breton et al., 2021).

Many other effects occur before birth and even before conception. For example, maternal (Van den Bergh et al., 2020) and paternal (Halpern & Brannigan, 2020) health prior to conception can affect children’s health and development years and even decades later. Likewise, the in-utero environment can impact children’s development (Azoulay et al., 2022). For example, maternal stress during pregnancy (Azar & Booij, 2022), paternal health behaviours such as smoking (Easey & Sharp, 2021), and exposure to broader environmental factors such as air pollution (Yi et al., 2022) have all been linked to more negative child outcomes.

Once a child is born, many influences on their biology are at least partially determined by the environment in which they are raised. For example, access to safe, clean housing, nutritious food, and essential health care is crucial for healthy child development. Similarly, a healthy diet is important not just for physical health but also for psychological wellbeing, with high junk food consumption associated with higher levels of psychological distress (Malmir et al., 2023) as described in Chapter 4. Parents have some influence over their child's environment; however, their ability to change important aspects of that environment may be either supported or constrained by a variety of factors, including sociodemographic, health, and broader policy and cultural contexts. For example, where public health policies support free vaccination and preventive health interventions, parents are much less likely to experience barriers to accessing these services, and children are more likely to receive preventative health care. On the flip side, if families are experiencing poverty (Jensen et al., 2017) and food insecurity, affecting the extent to which they can provide a nutritious diet, this may result in negative child health and development outcomes (Gallegos et al., 2021).

While parents clearly contribute to the nature side of the equation by virtue of the genes they pass onto their children, and the environment in which they raise their child, many of these factors are not necessarily modifiable. Importantly, unlike many other factors, such as a child's genetic makeup, parenting is malleable. There are numerous aspects of how parents raise their children that are important to children's development and can also be promoted via evidence-based parenting supports (Doyle et al., 2023) as described in Chapters 4 and 8.

Attachment relationships. One of the first and most crucial aspects of parenting once a baby is born is to develop a bond with that baby and lay the foundation for a positive parent-child relationship. The importance of the *attachment relationship* was first described by Bowlby (1982), who saw secure attachment to a caregiver (often a parent) as fundamental to emotional, social, and cognitive development in infancy and beyond. The development of a secure attachment during the first few months and years of life is facilitated by a number of parenting practices such as physical contact (Norholt, 2020),

Attachment relationships are the emotional bonds that form in early childhood between children and their primary caregivers. These attachment relationships can influence how relationships are formed later in life.

sensitive responding (De Wolff & van Ijzendoorn, 1997), *serve and return interactions* (Komanchuk et al., 2023), and synchronicity (DePasquale, 2020). A secure bond between parent and child forms the foundation for ongoing, reciprocal positive interactions, which are important for child development (Frosch et al., 2021). This secure bond is also the framework within which other aspects of parenting affect child outcomes.

Social learning experiences. Another way in which parents affect child development outcomes is via modelling, consistent with Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), which describes a process of both observational and operant learning. The behaviours and actions parents engage with in the presence of their child are observed and copied by their children. Even young babies are close observers of the world around them, and especially the important people in their lives. Parents can transmit both positive and negative behaviours to children via modelling, and this can occur both actively and passively. For example, a parent might teach their child to brush their teeth by brushing their own teeth while the child is watching (passive modelling) but also describe to the child what they are doing and how they are doing it (active modelling). Parents can also inadvertently model behaviours that they might not want their child to engage in. For example, children's screen use is a major source of concern for parents, yet parents' own screen use is a key predictor of children's screen use (Pyne et al., 2025).

Parenting styles. The concept of *parenting styles* was originally proposed by Diana Baumrind (1967, 1972). Baumrind proposed three main parenting styles: an *authoritarian* style characterised by high demandingness and low responsiveness, a *permissive* style characterised by low demandingness and high responsiveness, and an *authoritative* style characterised by high levels on both dimensions. A fourth style, *neglectful*, is characterised by low levels on both dimensions and was subsequently described by Maccoby and Martin (1983). Decades of research have consistently demonstrated that an authoritative parenting style is associated

Sensitive responding occurs when the parent can recognise and interpret the meaning of a child's signals or communication and respond appropriately in a timely manner in a way that meets the child's needs.

Serve and return interactions are back-and-forth interactions between a child and an adult. The child begins the exchange (i.e., "serves") by babbling, gesturing, or looking, while the caregiver "returns" the serve with attention and a response (e.g., smiling, imitating, conversation).

Parenting styles are broad patterns or approaches to parenting.

with the most positive outcomes for children across multiple domains of functioning (Ulferts, 2020). Chapter 4 provides a more in-depth look at the concept of parenting styles.

Parenting practices. The specific *parenting practices* that parents use are also important to understanding the effects of parenting on children. Positive parenting practices include the use of praise (Leijten et al., 2019) or time out (Corralejo et al., 2018), whereas negative parenting practices include ineffective or potentially harmful actions such as smacking and other types of corporal punishment (Gershoff et al., 2018). There

Parenting practices are specific strategies or techniques parents use when interacting with their children (e.g., praise, time out). These can be positive and effective or harsh and ineffective.

is consistent evidence that specific parenting practices result in different child outcomes (e.g., Gershoff et al., 2018), and when implemented as part of parenting interventions can lead to change in child outcomes (e.g., Leijten et al., 2019). The parenting practices described in the literature often have their foundation in operant learning, as described within Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986). This form of learning is based on principles of reinforcement, where behaviours that are rewarded (e.g., through praise) are likely to be strengthened, while behaviours that are punished (e.g., via smacking) or ignored are likely to be weakened.

Parent mental health and family relationships. Beyond parenting styles and practices, the broader parenting environment can also affect child outcomes in both direct and indirect ways. Parental stress (Chiang & Bai, 2024) and mental health (Spry et al., 2020) can affect children in negative ways. These effects can be direct, such as when a parent models poor coping skills or negative mood to the child, or indirect, such as by altering the parent-child relationship or parenting practices. For example, maternal depression during infancy has been shown to affect the mother-baby attachment relationship (Slomian et al., 2019). Furthermore, other relationships within the family can also affect child development both directly and indirectly, including the couple relationship, and especially the extent of conflict within the parents' relationship (Harold & Sellers, 2018).

What about fathers?

While up to this point we have described parenting in general, it is important to note that until very recently, the majority of research on parents, parenting and parenting intervention was conducted with mothers. It is still the case that most of the research conducted today has a focus on mothers rather than fathers. Nevertheless, increasing attention and research on the role and importance of fathers indicates that fathers have an important role to play, both directly and indirectly (Diniz et al., 2021). Directly, many of the same effects of parenting styles and

strategies that have been demonstrated for mothers are equally relevant for fathers. However, there is evidence that specific paternal parenting practices may be especially important for children. One example is in the use of play that involves controlled risk taking which has a protective role against the development of anxiety (Bögels & Phares, 2008). Indirectly, fathers can affect children's outcomes by the support they offer to their co-parent. *Co-parenting* approaches, where both mothers and fathers take an active role in parenting, are partially a response to greater gender equality, with gender differences related to parenting often more reflective of social norms than differences in capability (Byrne & Morawska, 2024). Research suggests that in the context of parenting, motivation and practice are more influential than biological differences (e.g., Abraham et al., 2014). That is, while stereotypes abound suggesting that mothers are instinctually or innately better parents, any differences in parenting approach or effectiveness are more likely to be due to social norms, beliefs about parenting roles and practice effects than innate differences

Co-parenting is where parents share the responsibility of raising their children and includes situations where parents are living together, as well as when they live apart.



Figure 1.4a Fathers often engage in more challenging play with children.

Source: Daren Mehl

between mothers and fathers. Much more work is needed to better understand the role of fathers in children's lives and how to most effectively support fathers in the context of major shifts in how fatherhood is conceptualised in our society (Byrne & Morawska, 2024).



Figure 1.4b Fathers often engage in more challenging play with children.

Source: Petra from Pixabay