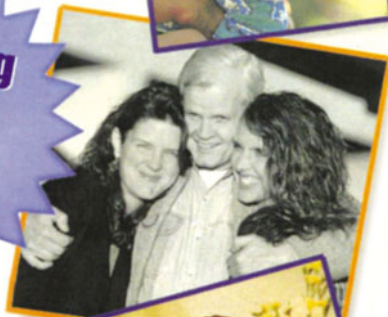
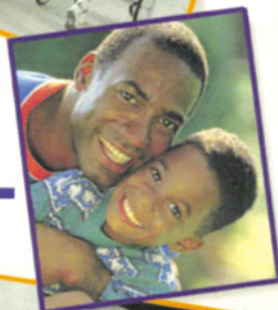


The Effect of Children on Parents

Second Edition

Featuring
Eight
NEW
Chapters!

Anne-Marie Ambert, PhD



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The Effect of Children on Parents

Second Edition

Anne-Marie Ambert, PhD

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Preface

Nine years have elapsed since the first edition of *The Effect of Children on Parents* was published. A great deal of research has since accumulated in various disciplines, particularly sociology and psychology, on topics related to the parent-child relationship. In addition, the books and articles I have since written have allowed me to become acquainted with a broader range of perspectives that can shed some light on the effect of children on parents.

As a result of these developments in the literature and in my research, this second edition actually constitutes a new book. Eight of the thirteen chapters are entirely new, that is, Chapter 1 and Chapters 7 through 13. Chapters 5 and 6 are entirely rewritten and substantially altered while Chapters 2, 3, and 4 have been updated and considerably revised. Consequently, this edition entirely replaces the first one.

The second edition contains new topics on the effect of children on parents. For example, the new chapters discuss the effects of children's peers on parents, professionals' role in the parent-child relationship, the effect of adult children on parents, as well as some aspects of the life conditions of immigrant and adoptive parents. Chapter 12 reminds us to consider the interaction between heredity and environment and discusses some of the results and interpretations of behavior genetics within a sociological perspective.

The framework amalgamates interactional, social constructionist, and social structural theories as well as behavior genetics theories. The effect of children on parents is thus studied within the global social contexts in which families are situated, parental roles defined, and children socially constructed.

I sincerely hope that this second edition will be more useful to instructors, researchers, and especially parents and professionals,

such as teachers and clinicians, who provide services to children. I wish to thank Bill Palmer, Vice President, The Haworth Press, as well as those who have contributed to making this edition a better one: Patricia Brown, Yvonne Kester, Dawn Krisko, Peg Marr, Andrew Roy, and Donna Biesecker.

I dedicate this book to all parents and their children. I particularly wish to acknowledge my daughter Stephanie, not only because she did all of the word processing and indexing, but also because of our close bond.

Chapter 1

Child Effect: What *Is* This? An Introduction

“Child effect *on parents*?” I was once asked by an incredulous clinician. “Surely, you mean how parents treat their children?”

This misunderstanding is by no means unusual, even though researchers and professionals are becoming more aware of the interactional nature of the parent-child relationship. A slow awakening occurs, consequently, to the fact that causality can also flow from children to parents. Nevertheless, as we will see, there is still a widespread tendency to assume that the direction of effect is from parents to children only. This perspective is based on social constructions of parenting and children that are widely accepted in our society. Therefore, the way parents and children are perceived and the erroneous conclusions that may flow from this situation are important topics of this book.

I have chosen to introduce our subject matter with a series of quotes from everyday parents and adult children to illustrate the range of child effect on parents' lives. These comments are abstracted from my research, including my interviews with divorced and remarried couples, my recent fieldwork on the effect of delinquency and adolescent “difficultness” on parents, as well as my research based on over 1,400 student autobiographies. The first is a quote from a male student responding to a specific autobiographical question asking what effect, if any, he had had on his parents while growing up.

What effect I had on my parents' lives? I never thought about this until now. I can see how they affected me and I think I've covered this in the other question. . . . I was always a model child, especially as boys go and I honestly think that when my parents compared me to other children they were always relieved that I was turning out so well, was doing so well in school. I am certain that I messed up their plans once in a while but on the whole they were thrilled with me. I had a positive effect on them. (*Male student, about twenty-one years old*)

What has been the happiest moment since I've turned twenty-five is bound to be the birth of my son. I cannot describe how much joy and how much life he has added to our lives. An added bonus was that he is the first male grandchild my parents have and this has contributed a lot to my parents' respect for me, something that had been lacking in my life up to this point. (*Married male student, about twenty-six years old*)

I'm sorry if I am late in turning in this paper but my daughter had the chicken pox, ran a high fever, and I found it impossible to concentrate on my schoolwork. (*Married female student, in a letter attached to her assignment*)

If I had to do it over again, I wouldn't have children. I guess mine are fine, well sort of. But being a parent is a downgraded occupation in our society, plus the fact that you get no breaks from the system: everything conspires against your attempts to raise children decently. I sincerely feel that this society is against its parents. And then we get blamed. (*Employed, remarried mother of two, age thirty-four, during an interview*)

I hope our sons stay with us as long as they can. I really enjoy their company. They are interesting, they do well, and they have nice friends. What more can parents ask for? (*Married female student, about forty-five to fifty years old*)

For their part, the following two students refer to their birth order and anticipate what are called "child characteristics" in Chapter 2:

At the age of zero to five I feel that I had a great impact on my parents' lives in that I was their first born and they seemed to feel that they had so much to look forward to . . .

I was the first child in the family and I can remember taking care of my sisters quite a bit. I am sure that I influenced my parents positively . . .

Overall, students could talk about the effect they had had on their parents when prompted by a specific question. But otherwise this did not seem to be a topic that came up spontaneously when describing their lives and their relationship with their parents in general. In fact, for quite a few, this question came as a surprise, as illustrated by the first quote on page 1. Many students also pointed out that they would not have been able to answer such a question just a couple of years earlier, during adolescence. One woman wrote:

Such a question would have made me downright hostile at age 14 or even 17. There is no way I ever thought of my affecting my parents then because my whole thinking was oriented to what they were doing to *me*, how *they* affected *me*. . . . When you're in a period of your life that you don't see eye to eye with your parents, you think they're wrong and you're right, you think they just want to be mean to you. . . . Even now, I had to do a lot of thinking and I made an effort to get out of my little universe. . . . I think that when I am older and have children, I will reread this autobiography and I will probably think how awful I was to my parents.

Most of the students who thought they had had a negative impact on their parents pointed to adolescence as the most highly detrimental stage of theirs and their parents' lives in this respect (Ambert, 1992: 134). In fact, only 8 percent felt that the effect they had produced at that age had been entirely positive, despite the fact that fully a third of all students described always having had a great relationship with their parents. Without being prompted, students confirmed what researchers have found: adolescence *is* a difficult period for *parents*, a topic to which we return, particularly in Chapters 5, 6, and 7.

The above quotes are from average situations and express mainly a positive child effect on parents with a normal mixture of mild negative effect. With the next quotes, a few problems emerge in the families but they still fall within the range of normalcy. We begin with a student who, in the course of describing all the sacrifices her parents had made to lift their family out of poverty, concludes:

I really do not think that they regret the sacrifices they have made because they are very proud of my academic accomplishments as I am the first one of my entire family to have completed high school and am on my way to becoming a university graduate this year.

From fifteen to eighteen, I think I had again regained their positive feelings towards me as I was no longer rebellious and I [had] matured. I entered university which made them proud because neither of them had been to post-secondary school. I was overall becoming successful.

Since my mother was divorced at the age of twenty-six, and left to raise three children on her own, I feel I have had a great impact on her life at all stages. . . . I am sure that my mother's opportunity to remarry would have been far greater if she had no children . . . between eleven and fourteen. . . . she would often ask for my opinion concerning someone she was dating . . .

The above student quote is particularly interesting because it highlights an important aspect of child and parent effects that are paramount to the orientation of this book: both effects are interactive phenomena. In other words, not only are the children affected by the mother but, as they age, they play a very definite role in her life. In this case, the daughter becomes a confidante and, as such, helps her mother emotionally; in turn, her own development is affected by these early maturity requirements. Thus, there is an interaction of effect that takes place between parents and children.

Below, we turn to parents who have experienced a great deal of negative child effect and students who are conscious of having been quite detrimental to their parents' lives at some point:

They had to change their views about boys and me going out. It was a long and emotional battle. My father didn't sleep, he always yelled at my mother (because she was always on my side), and my mother was depressed a lot. (*Female student, about her adolescence between the ages of fifteen to eighteen*)

This was a period of experimentation for me, e.g., heavy metal music, different clothing, staying out late and drinking. Being that I was the first child, this must have been new and difficult for them. I was struggling against good behavior, and they would have to learn to handle it.

What was sociologically interesting about this last student is that she was very casual in her autobiography concerning the pains she had inflicted upon her parents. As she reiterated later in her narrative in support of her last sentence, it was part and parcel of her *parents' job* to adjust to the trials and tribulations of her adolescent experimentation. This perception was not an isolated instance: while most students indirectly perceived that they had had a negative impact on their parents at some point during adolescence, a quarter of these felt that this was “normal” and something that their parents *had* to go through—as if they themselves had had little say in the matter. Thus, we continue to see how people, in this case students, define or socially construct what adolescence is and what being the parents of an adolescent entails. In other words, this is a “job description” with many duties. In the next quotes, we progress to more drastic child effect:

Eleven to fourteen [years]. As far as my mother is concerned, I feel I really affected her life in a negative way. I was very rude and rebellious toward her. I made no effort to understand her point of view. I simply blamed her for everything. I know my behavior made it more difficult for her to develop a secure marriage with her new husband. For I did not give him a chance either. I would not let him get to know me, nor I him. I realize that I made their first years together very difficult. (*Woman student*)

I try to reason with myself and think positively. I have one very nice daughter [aged eighteen]. I mean she is easy, happy, she's

affectionate and she has never caused us any problems. But while I should think positively I can't erase the fact that her sister is a nightmare. [The girl, aged 15, is regularly absent from school, repeats grades, drinks, uses drugs, has shouting matches with her parents, and is generally out of control.] The first thing I think when I wake up in the morning is where is she and the last thing I think before falling asleep is the same or oh, God, why did this have to happen to us? She fills my entire life and it has reached the point where my husband doesn't even want to talk about her. (*Upper-middle class mother during an interview*)

I am sure that he's [delinquent son] going to outgrow this stage, at least that's what everybody says, but when all is said and done, I have nevertheless wasted years of my life uselessly trying to teach him right from wrong, uselessly worrying about him, putting up with his moods, his threats to leave and whatever, oh yes, the teachers' complaints. For what? Just because he is surrounded by friends who are just like him. At first, I blamed these children; now I see that he likes to be with them. It's all so useless and you can't imagine how lonely it is to have a life like this even though I have a nice husband. We can't even get to enjoy each other. (*Mother during an interview about her sixteen-year-old son*)

This mother's son has been difficult for five years already and she has no guarantee that it will be over any time soon. The last two mothers' reflections begin to illustrate what we will discuss in Chapter 4: many areas of parents' lives are affected by their children, whether positively or negatively. Later in the interview, this mother added that she wondered if she would ever "feel right" and "well-disposed toward my son later on in life even after he has straightened out." She felt that, by then, he would have ruined so many years of her and her husband's life that "something might die in me" and that "I may never feel he has a right to be forgiven." This mother introduces an intriguing research question related to the *life course* of parents who have very problematic children: what happens to them in their later years? Unfortunately, this is a topic that has not yet received much attention by scholars.

As did many other mothers and even a few fathers, the mother quoted above cried several times during the interview. Nevertheless, these parents were grateful for having been given the opportunity to express themselves without feeling that they were blamed or judged negatively. Apparently, this was the first such professional encounter among many negative ones in their lives. The following mother, like the previous one, also unknowingly adopts a life-course perspective during her interview. She sees no end to negative child effect:

[I] can't stand it anymore. When I retire, I am going to move as far away from here as I can. I am tired of being exploited and if I stay here I'll always have their problems in my face. They can go on welfare if that's what they want [this is a middle-class mother] but I don't want any part of this. I have just wasted ten years of my life. (*Single mother of three difficult but not delinquent girls ages eighteen to twenty-six*)

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF PARENTS

I have noticed that, in the late 1990s, many such parents have begun using the word “waste”—the waste in their children’s lives as well as in theirs. This term was rarely encountered among similar parents in the 1980s. I think that some parents are becoming conscious of the fact that there are alternatives in child development to difficultness and delinquency. Some are especially becoming aware that, if the social situation was different, if children were not surrounded by so many negative influences, if parents received more support, this “waste” would not occur. If, if, if. In Chapter 3, we refer to this situation as part of the characteristics of the societal response.

As I was writing the first edition of this book in 1990, I often had to explain *what* child effect was when people inquired about my topic. Nine years later, with the exceptions just noted, there has not been a huge evolution in the social constructs that people hold about children and parents. Overall, the lay but educated public continues to see parents as the prime, and often only, influence on children. Even if they perceive that peers can be very important, it is still believed that, if adolescents suffer from the effect of the detrimental influence

of their peer group, it is parents' fault: parents should supervise their children better. Although one can certainly agree that parental supervision is a key element in an adolescent's life, not all adolescents accept supervision, especially as they get older. Furthermore, when it is suggested that the media might bear a heavy responsibility, it is still pointed out that parents should monitor what their children watch. Unfortunately, parents have no say as to what comes into their home via the television and the Internet. Yet they are held responsible, no matter what.

At another level, it is also revealing to observe the reactions of students who have taken my honors seminar on the parent-child relationship. These students, mainly women, are sociology, psychology, and education majors in their senior year. They already have acquired quite a substantial background in the fields related to this topic. Yet, for most, it is obviously a difficult enterprise to think in terms of *child effect*. Unavoidably, discussions turn to parental causality and responsibility in child development. Even exam questions focusing specifically on child effect are turned around and answered along the lines of parental causality. Although still young, students have already been programmed to think in terms of what parents do *to* children; it is difficult for them to adapt to this new perspective because they are surrounded by opposite viewpoints or social constructions, many of which are in their textbooks on child development and family studies.

So basically, both for the general public and the specialized student population, the topic of child effect is one that does not belong to the daily ways of speaking and thinking. How children affect their parents, what kinds of children most affect their parents, and what characteristics make parents especially vulnerable to child effect are questions that are not commonly raised, even among professionals. Especially absent is the notion that society's response or support plays an important role in determining how children will affect their parents and whether they will do so negatively or positively. Finally, the circularity of feedback between parent-child and child-parent effects is an even less widely known or accepted phenomenon, although it is a tenet of interactional theories. The topics just enumerated are developed in the next chapters.

The 1992 edition of *The Effect of Children on Parents* has brought two different reactions. First, the most common: countless parents

have been in touch, particularly after radio or television programs where I discuss these topics, often just to thank me for having written the book—and then to tell me their problems. As one put it, it is an “incredible experience of self-validation” to read a book that recognizes their experience and is written by a university professor. At a much more minor level in terms of numbers, a few professionals, mainly psychologists, lawyers, and social workers who specialize in children’s rights are angered by the title of this book (not about its contents because they do not go so far as reading it!). As other sociologists have pointed out, these professionals make a good income as child advocates, and this book may seem to present a threat by challenging the assumption that children are merely passive receptacles, instead of participants in the parent-child relationship.

This is an understandable, however misguided, reaction: there is no incompatibility between children’s rights and the recognition that children affect their parents. There is no incompatibility between our duty to protect children against abusive parents, who are a minority, and our duty to recognize that parents in general are affected by their children and by society’s often negative attitude toward them. Furthermore, one also has to start thinking in terms of children’s and adolescents’ *duties*, not just rights, otherwise youths are squarely relieved of the responsibility for the consequences of their actions. Actually, it is one of my theses that if parents were given *moral* authority over their children, the latter would be less likely to be abused, neglected, and, particularly, less likely to become delinquent.

At the scholarly level, textbooks on child development and the family just recently have begun mentioning, however briefly, child effect or “reverse” causality. Texts on juvenile delinquency generally do not even raise the topic. Yet, at the theoretical level, the topics of child effect, of the interaction between parents and children, and even children as producers of their own development have long ago been recognized, as we see in Chapter 2. Empirical research has failed on the whole—with some exceptions—to follow through with these more recent advances in thinking about parents and children. It is thus not surprising that textbooks generally lag behind theoretical advances in the sociology of the family and in child development. The result is that students as well as many professionals are being educated within an outdated perspective that no longer fits the current social situation.

Basically, whereas the topics of reciprocity of effect and child effect were introduced three decades ago, the general research literature merely pays lip service to them. The paradox is that child effect has yet to be integrated into mainstream research although many theoretically oriented scholars believe it to be a well-accepted notion. This book thus offers a review of what is already “known” but generally ignored in the area of child effect. Above all, it offers additional perspectives in this field. It is also meant to suggest avenues for research, present new ideas, and restate recently advanced ideas that have been accepted only at a very superficial level. The study of child effect as presented herein is designed to complement, not negate, the more traditional perspective of parental causality and responsibility.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

I shall say just a few words about the organization of this volume. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 pursue some of the discussions herein initiated; they situate child effect historically, theoretically, and in terms of research. They present an overall framework for the topic in general. These chapters are an updated version of the 1992 edition. The subsequent two chapters, on children with difficult behaviors and emotional problems (Chapter 5) and on adolescents who are delinquent (Chapter 6) are new. These topics were included in the 1992 edition but at the theoretical level only: I had not yet conducted actual fieldwork in these domains. These two chapters are now entirely rewritten, contain recent information, and include new research perspectives coming to us from the field of behavior genetics.

All subsequent chapters are entirely original to this edition. Chapter 7, on the effect of children’s peers on parents, is a very unusual one, needless to say, because the literature on children’s peers tends to focus on two points: (1) how children function with their peers and how they are influenced by them; and (2) what is wrong with parents of children who have bad peers or are rejected by their peers. Obviously, this book’s theoretical leanings consider the second question out of line; the rationale for this becomes evident as we progress through the book. Rather, we ask: given that children have “good” or

“bad” peers, how does this impact their lives and consequently their parents’ lives?

Then, in Chapter 8, the role that professionals play in enhancing positive and exacerbating negative child effect on parents is examined. Questions are raised that are generally not considered—in great part because professionals themselves, not parents, are the ones who decide the types of research questions that are asked. The following three chapters examine three categories of parents. Chapter 9 inquires into adult-child effect toward parents, including elderly parents. This topic is very much “in,” but, as the reader will see, it is often examined from the perspective of caring for elderly parents as a burden to adult children. One of the questions we ask within the social construction perspective is this: Why is it a *burden* for adult children to care for their elderly parents when the care that parents give to their young children is never qualified as a “burden”? As the reader can see, a researcher who develops a different perspective can ask different questions.

Chapter 10 focuses on immigrant and minority parents, while Chapter 11 discusses adoptive parents. These groups experience very specific situations in North America; we want to see how they are affected by their children, particularly as a result of the way society socially defines them and treats them. Finally, Chapter 12 is graphically titled, “Let’s Not Forget About Genes!” This chapter presents a perspective that is only beginning to be acknowledged in the sociology of the family: the role that the interaction of genes and environment (*nature with nurture*) plays in the development of children’s personalities and life outcomes as well as in the parent-child relationship. The research originating from the discipline of behavior genetics and the interactional perspective helps us understand the limitations that are placed on parents’ efforts at raising their children. The topic of the roadblocks—cultural as well as genetic—that parents encounter in raising their children and consequently produce so much negative child effect is further pursued in the conclusions forming Chapter 13.

Basically, for want of a better term, this book falls within the vein of critical sociology or even the sociology of sociology. It presents a critique of the traditional literature on parent-child relationships and suggests alternative lines of inquiry. Social constructionism is an equally salient theoretical orientation in this discussion. Social con-

structionism is a perspective arguing that various phenomena which are taken for granted and seem to be natural are actually culturally defined or socially constructed—as is the case for parenting, adolescence, and child/parent roles. Finally, as has begun to transpire in previous pages, the chapters contain a great deal of material on gender roles, particularly regarding the fact that child effect is more salient in mothers' than fathers' lives.

This is an unusual book—but it should not be. The new research clearly indicates that children have an incredible impact on their parents' lives, generally unwittingly so, but often consciously so. Parents would do a far better job at raising them were this fact accepted, adequately researched, and supported socially. Therefore, *both* parents and children would benefit from the recognition that children, even small ones, affect their parents.

Chapter 2

The Neglected Perspective: Children's Effect on Parents

This book focuses on the effect of children on parents within a multiple-causality perspective—an interactive and transactional theoretical framework (Magnusson, 1995). This framework posits that individuals cocreate their own development and environment while being simultaneously affected by the environment and the interactions in which they participate. Parents and children contribute to the creation of their relationship within the context of their individual personalities and their environment. Thus, children do have an impact on their parents, which is a way of thinking that has been neglected in the vast sociology and psychology literature on parents and children. As far as children and parents are concerned, analyses have been informed by the concepts of socialization, childrearing, and child development, all of which implicate parental causality in parent-child interaction and child outcomes. This perspective has too frequently resulted in a narrow interpretation of family dynamics emphasizing the effect that parents have on their offspring without regard for other, more potent influences on children. Interactive effects between parents and children are usually omitted along with the question of child effect on parents.

FAILURES OF TRADITIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Within the traditional perspective, research questions are generally framed to measure the impact that parents presumably have on