The Changing Nature of Parenting in America

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to discuss how parenting has changed in recent decades. The topics discussed include: (1) increased focus on parenting in today's culture; (2) perception of pediatric dentists regarding parenting changes; (3) relative importance of parenting in children's development; (4) family/parenting trends; and (5) the role of stress in the changing nature of parenting. (*Pediatr Dent.* 2004;26:121-124)

KEYWORDS: PARENTING, FAMILY STRESS, PARENTING TRENDS, PEDIATRIC DENTISTRY

In recent decades, we have witnessed a significant increase of the interest in parenting. A visit to any major bookstore reveals shelves loaded with an ever-increasing number of books offering information and advice for parents. We are also exposed to a growing number of television and radio shows, magazine and newspaper articles, Web sites, and other such public forums devoted to the topic of parenting. It is little wonder that it has been reported that "Raising children has rated very near to sex—and to success—as an American fixation."[1]

Why do we have a fixation with parenting? One possible explanation stems from the complex issues parents face in raising children in today's society. The media regularly report national statistics such as:

1. every 1 second a public high school student is suspended;
2. every 9 seconds a child drops out of school;
3. every 4 minutes a child is arrested for drugs;
4. every 3 hours a child is a homicide victim.[2]

Parents also are frequently reminded by the media that child-rearing issues faced in the 1950s—such as children chewing gum in class, talking out of turn, and not cleaning their rooms—have been replaced with more serious issues such as drug addiction, suicide, violence, and teen pregnancy. Such messages can scare parents into the perception that parenting styles and methods today are more important than in past generations.

Concerns about the importance of parenting in today's society are strongly reinforced through our exposure to prevention efforts in the areas of drug abuse, violence, and teen pregnancy. Recent national media campaigns, such as those targeting youth drug abuse (ie, "Parents: The Anti-Drug"), imply parents hold the key to preventing such problems. While there is no doubt parents play a critical role in such prevention efforts, these messages also indirectly suggest parents are the cause of many of ills facing youth today. The "parents are to blame" belief is further reinforced in the way the media currently depicts modern parenting styles. Television has moved from *Ozzie and Harriet* and *Leave it to Beaver* to more controversial programs such as *Married with Children, The Simpsons,* and *The Osbournes.* It is no wonder that many in our society perceive parents as unable to "control" youth.

What pediatric dentists think

A recent survey of 577 board-certified pediatric dentists found the vast majority (88%) of respondents believe parenting styles have "absolutely or probably changed" during their lifetime.[3] More specifically, the dentists reported that, based on observations in their practices, parents today are much less likely to use physical discipline and set limits on their child's behavior. It was further revealed that dentists are more likely to use reasoning and bribes than when they started their practices.

The survey also found the majority of dentists believe today's parents are more willing to accept their child's disrespect, more overprotective of their child, and likely to try to prevent any suffering their child might experience from a dental procedure. On a more general level, the dentists believed that today many parents are unsure of their role as parents, are too busy to spend time with their children, and self absorbed or materialistic.

When asked to rank factors believed to be associated with parenting changes, the dentists ranked the factors in the following order (highest to lowest):

1. societal changes toward liberalism and breakdown of norms;

2. divorce;
3. both parents working;
4. hectic lifestyles;
5. loss of extended families;
6. increased stress of maintaining lifestyles; and
7. frequent relocation.

Eighty-five percent of the dentists believed these perceived shifts in parenting styles had resulted in "somewhat or much worse" patient behavior. On a related note, 43% of the dentists reported their satisfaction with practicing dentistry had decreased as a result of these parenting changes. Parenting changes also resulted in the pediatric dentists using fewer assertive behavior management techniques in their practice (eg, hand-over-mouth and immobilization).

Unfortunately, there are no large-scale, methodologically sound studies clearly documenting parenting changes over recent decades that can unequivocally confirm these perceptions. We can, however, examine the issue of changes in parenting from looking at trends in society and how these trends impact parenting. Before doing this, it is important to put parenting in context and acknowledge the limitations of parental influence on children's behavior.

How much does parenting matter?

While the public perception of parenting's importance has been increasing over the past several decades, some researchers have questioned whether parenting is really that important—considering the significance of genetic and peer influences on children. This debate was ignited by the 1998 publication of Judith Harris' book, *The Nurture Assumption*.[4] Harris used research findings to support her belief that parenting is relatively unimportant regarding children's personality and character development.

While data exist supporting the importance of genes and peers in children's personality development, the conclusion that parenting does not have a significant influence on children is not accepted by the vast number of researchers. Numerous researchers have been critical of many of Harris' conclusions. For example, Eleanor Maccoby of Stanford University notes most of Harris' research to support her conclusions was conducted prior to the mid-1980s.[5] Maccoby states that more recent studies, utilizing multiple measures, suggest parenting variables account for 20% to 40% of the variance in most child outcomes.

In all fairness to Harris, it is also important to note she was focusing primarily on children's personality development rather than all areas of child development. Harris did acknowledge the importance of parenting in areas such as the parent-child relationship, children's behavior at home, children's leisure time activities (eg, hobbies and sports), children's friendships, children's happiness, children's future professions, children's religion, and children's political preferences. Harris also acknowledges the importance of parents in teaching their children knowledge and skills as well as imparting aspects of their culture.

In summary, parenting is undoubtedly important but perhaps not as powerful as many might believe.

The context of parenting

It is important to remember that, in addition to parenting, children are impacted by various influences occurring at the individual, family, community, and societal level. Parenting itself does not occur solely at the family level but rather within a larger framework of interdependent elements. Parenting and families do not develop independently of the prevailing culture, and they typically reflect the problems of the larger society.

How is our society doing concerning problems that may impact parenting? Fordham University's Institute for Social Policy produced an Index of Social Health for the United States that quantified how the country is doing based on 16 factors, including drug abuse, unemployment, school dropouts, and homicides. The index ranged from 0 to 100. From the early 1970s to the mid-1990s, the index declined from the mid 70s to the low 40s.[6] This societal deterioration means that the overall well being of our society had decreased significantly. This makes it increasingly difficult for a growing number of parents to parent effectively. Whether at the individual level or societal level, stress can negatively impact parenting, as will be discussed later.

Parenting styles are also influenced by the popular advice of the times. Over recent decades, there have been several parenting experts who have influenced large numbers of parents. Such experts have included Benjamin Spock, Berry Brazelton, James Dobson, and John Rosemond. It is important to recognize social factors such as politics, religion, and media factors often influence the advice provided by such experts. Unfortunately, the advice offered by such experts is often conflicting, and parents are left confused by the different advice they are offered.

Recent research in the area of choice suggested that, in the long run, the more choices we have in a specific area of our lives the more likely we are to have "decision-making paralysis," anxiety, and stress about that area.[7] Given the wide variance in advice offered to today's parents, it is not surprising this may be very stressful to parents, leading them to be indecisive in managing their children's behavior.

Family trends

There is a trend for families to live increasingly isolated and disconnected lives in our society.[8] There are several factors contributing to this trend, including:
1. young families moving away from extended family members;
2. the increased rate of single parents; and
3. free time limitations due to the work schedules of dual-income or single-parent families.

Parents are often spending more time working to provide for their children's basic needs and less time providing for their emotional needs. As a result, parents are participating

less in social and community activities and interacting less with family members and friends.[9] This means many parents are receiving less emotional and practical support in rearing their children.

Another trend involves the decreasing amount of time parents and their children spend together. In a study by the US Council of Economic Advisors, it was reported that the average American family had lost 22 hours of parenting or family time per week over the past 3 decades.[10] Parents spend more of their time working to provide for their family's basic needs and, therefore, have less time to attend to their children's emotional needs. It has been reported that in the late 1990s, there were over 6 million American families in which 2 adults worked 4 jobs.[10]

Finally, families are under increasing financial stress. For 2-parent families with an income under $39,700 per year, it costs over $127,080 on average to raise a child to 18 years of age.[11] If the parents combined income is over $66,900 per year, then the average cost for raising a child increases to $254,400. For single-parent families with an annual income less than $39,700, the average cost of raising a child to the age of 18 is $120,720. For single-parent families making over $39,700, the average cost increases to $254,940.

It is also important to understand that, while most families are currently making more money than in the past, this has not decreased their financial stress. Today's 2-income American family earns 75% more than its single-income counterpart a generation ago, but actually has less money to spend.[12] In the 1950s, the average 30-year-old man could buy a median-priced house for only 15% to 18% of his salary.[13] Today, the average middle-class family typically cannot buy a house unless both parents work.[12] Another financial stress factor to consider is that, from 1981 to 2000, there was a significant decrease in average family savings as well as significant increases in family credit card debt. It is predicted a greater number of US children will experience parental bankruptcy than parental divorce this year.[12]

Even if financial concerns or other major stressors do not impact a family, they are typically not immune from significant stress. Daily hassles (eg, traffic problems, child behavior, school and work issues) have been found to have a cumulative impact and be a major source of stress.[14] As their lives become more hectic, parents are confronted with an increasing number of daily hassles in their lives. These hassles can occur in all aspects of life, including work. Job-related stress has been shown to impact parenting in several ways, leading to behavioral withdrawal, emotional withdrawal, and negative emotion spillover.[15]

The role of stress in shaping parenting changes

When we think about the effect of stress on individuals, we tend to ponder problems like headaches, hypertension, heart attacks, increased smoking/drinking, strokes, and various other medically related problems; however, stress can also have a significant impact on parenting. In fact, stress may be a major contributing factor to many of the parenting changes occurring in our society.

Based on issues previously discussed, it is clear parenting in today's society is occurring in an increasingly stressful context. Factors producing parenting stress include high workloads, low social support, negative life events, daily hassles, and difficult child temperament.[16] Parenting stress has been associated with:

1. inconsistent (sometimes lax or over-reactive) parenting;
2. more negative communication;
3. decreased monitoring/supervision of children;
4. setting unclear rules and limits on children's behavior;
5. being more reactive and less proactive; and
6. increasingly harsh discipline.[17,18]

As stress increases, the quality of the parent-child relationship declines, and parents become less involved with their children. Parent-child relationships often become more antagonistic and problematic when parents are stressed by minor "daily-hassle" events.[14] There is also an increase in coercive parent-child interactions in which parent and child behaviors worsen in a negative feedback loop.[14,17,18]

For example, a parent becomes irritable, which leads to the child's behavior worsening, which, in turn, makes the parent more irritable—resulting in the child's behavior becoming even worse. After considering such scenarios, there is little doubt stress impacts our parenting more than most of us initially recognize.

The impact of culture on parenting

No discussion on the changing nature of parenting in America would be complete without addressing the growing trend of our society becoming more ethnically and culturally diverse. In 1970, minority groups (ie, African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans) represented approximately 16% of the total US population. By 1998, this percentage had increased to 27%. By 2050, it is projected this percentage will increase to approximately 50%.[19] While it is important to understand there is significant heterogeneity within each of these groups, each group tends to have different traditional parenting values and styles.[20-22]

For example, among many Asian families, there tends to be a parenting style that might be considered by some to be more "restrictive" and "controlling," although others would consider the style as providing more "structure" and "guidance." Discipline can be verbally harsh and involve name calling, especially if children disobey the head of the family (typically the oldest male).

In African-American families, there is typically extensive involvement of extended family members in child rearing. Harsh discipline, including physical reprimanding, is more the norm. Within many Hispanic families, children are treasured and discipline may be more lax. The roles of men and women tend to be more traditional, and

women take on most parenting responsibilities. In the Native-American community, "family" can be more difficult to define, since members of the entire community take on child-rearing responsibilities. Discipline may be more relaxed and consistent with the prevailing value system, which includes respect for elders, loyalty, noninterference, noninquisitiveness, and a present rather than future orientation. As stated previously, there is great variation within each of these groups. The differences highlighted are meant to illustrate the many varied parenting approaches rather than stereotype groups.

We must be careful not to compare the parenting styles of specific cultures to our middle-class Anglo American parenting values and practices. This concern is validated by recent evidence suggesting what is an effective parenting practice in one ethnic group may not be an effective practice in another.[19]

Conclusions

It is easy to be critical of parents and their parenting efforts; however, there is much more involved than simply parents who do not care or who are knowingly doing the "wrong thing." Parenting is difficult under the best of circumstances. For a growing number of parents, the stressors in our society are making it increasingly difficult to parent effectively. It is important to remember that parenting occurs within the context of a society, not in isolation, and parenting problems often reflect society's problems.

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