

Parenting: Science and Practice

Volume 1, Issues 1 & 2, May 2001

Editorial

Marc H. Bornstein

Each day more than three-quarters of a million adults around the world experience the rewards and challenges as well as the joys and heartaches of becoming parents. Of course, everyone who has lived has had parents; the human race succeeds because of parenting. Parenting is a subject about which people hold strong opinions, but about which too little solid information or considered reflection exists. *Parenting: Science and Practice* redresses this imbalance.

Parenting is, perhaps first and foremost, a functional status in the life cycle: Parents issue as well as protect, care for, and represent their progeny; indeed, parenthood is the "final common pathway" to childhood oversight and caregiving. Parenthood is therefore a job whose primary object of attention and action is the child. But parenting also has consequences for parents themselves. *Parenting: Science and Practice* encompasses the broad themes of who are parents, whom parents parent, the scope of parenting and its many effects, the determinants of parenting, and the nature, structure, and meaning of parenthood for parents.

WHO ARE PARENTS, WHOM DO PARENTS PARENT

Many individuals "parent" children. In most minds, mothers are unique, the roles of mother universal, and motherhood essential to the development of children. Historically, fathers' social and legal claims and responsibilities have often been preeminent. In reality, in most cultures mothers and fathers divide the labors of parenting and engage their children by assuming different and complementary responsibilities and by devoting different resources to children. The modern world has also witnessed the emergence of striking permutations in parenting, notably in the rise of single-parent households, divorced and blended families, and unmarried parents.

Beyond mothers and fathers, pluralistic caregiving is common and significant in the lives of children, and at one or another time various people other than biological or adoptive parents assume responsibility for meeting children's developmental needs. They include other members of the parents' household or kin group, like siblings and grandparents, as well as nonfamilial caregivers, sometimes in institutional settings such as childcare centers. Children's constellation of caregivers is rich and multifaceted. *Parenting: Science and Practice* embraces this plurality of caregivers when *in loco parentis*.

Infants, toddlers, children in middle-childhood, as well as adolescents are the common objects of parenting attention and action. Parents also caregive to special populations: multiples, preterm, ill, developmentally delayed or talented, aggressive or withdrawn children. All those who are parented, and parenting appropriate to different ages, stages, and populations, are subject matter for *Parenting: Science and Practice*.

THE SCOPE OF PARENTING AND ITS EFFECTS

Children do not, and cannot, grow up as solitary individuals; parenting constitutes an all-encompassing ecology for development. From the start, parenting is a "24/7" job. Parenting formally begins during or before pregnancy and can continue throughout the life span: Practically speaking for most, *once a parent, always a parent*.

Parents intend much for their children and socialize them in myriad ways, both direct and indirect. Direct effects are of two kinds: genetic and experiential. Of course, biological parents endow a significant and pervasive genetic makeup to their children. Beyond genetic endowment, experience is a principal stimulus to development, and parent-provided experiences that directly influence children commonly take the form of cognitions and practices.

Parenting cognitions include perceptions, expectations, attributions, attitudes, ---knowledge, ideas, goals, and values about all aspects of childrearing and child development. These beliefs serve many

functions: They may generate and shape parental practices, mediate the effectiveness of parenting, or help to organize parenting. Parenting practices are the tangible experiences parents provide children. Parents meet the biological, physical, and health requirements of children; they promote children's wellness and prevent their illness. Parents interact with children socially: They help children to regulate their own affect, emotions, and morality, and they manage, monitor, and mediate interpersonal exchanges children use to form meaningful and sustained relationships. Parents stimulate children to engage and understand the environment and to enter the world of learning: They teach, describe, and demonstrate, and they provide opportunities for children to observe, to imitate, and to learn. Parents provision, organize, and arrange children's home and local environments and the media to which children are exposed. Parents also manage child development vis-à-vis childcare, school, the worlds of medicine and law, as well as other social institutions through their active citizenship.

Caregiving principles and practices constitute direct effects of parenting. Parents indirectly influence children as well, for example, through their relationships with each other and their local or larger community. Parents' bearing toward their spouse and their marriage, as their associations with larger social networks, modify their interactions with their children and, in turn, their children's development. All of these concerns -- genes and experiences, beliefs and behaviors, direct and indirect effects -- are subject matter for *Parenting: Science and Practice*.

Parents are ordinarily the most consistent and caring people in the lives of children. In everyday life, however, parenting does not always go right or well: Sometimes parents do not adequately provide for their children, sometimes parents abuse or neglect children. So parenting can be troubled, challenged, and problematic. But information, education, and support programs can remedy these ills. If parents possess knowledge, skills, and supports, if they have their own emotional and physical needs well met, they can parent their children positively and effectively. *Parenting: Science and Practice* is about positive as well as negative dimensions of parenting, and how to right the bad and enhance the good. It is also about the development and expression of parenting.

DETERMINANTS OF PARENTING

The origins of parenting are complex, but certain factors seem to be of paramount importance. Children affect parenting: Notable are their more obvious characteristics, like age, gender, and physical state or appearance; but more subtle ones, like temperament, cognitive ability, and other individual differences factors, are also instrumental. Some aspects of parenting are influenced by the very biological makeup of human beings; related ones are associated with pregnancy, parturition, or prenatal events. Parenting also draws on transient and enduring physical, personality, and intellectual characteristics of the individual -- including vital abilities and stamina, affective components like commitment, empathy, and positive regard for children, and cognitive considerations such as the hows, whats, and whys of caring for children. Finally, a full understanding of what it means to parent depends on the ecologies in which parenting takes place. Beyond the nuclear family, parents are embedded in, influence, and are themselves affected by larger social systems. These include family configuration; both formal and informal support systems; community ties and work; social, educational, legal, medical, and governmental institutions; economic class, designed and natural ecology, and culture. Generational, social, and media images of parenting, children, and family life -- handed-down or co-constructed -- play significant roles in shaping parenting beliefs and guiding parenting behaviors. *Parenting: Science and Practice* is concerned with all factors that influence parenting.

PARENTHOOD IS FOR PARENTS

Although parenting is giving and responsibility, parenthood has its own intrinsic pleasures, privileges, and profits as well as frustrations, fears, and failures. The transition to parenting is formidable, the intrinsic stages of parenthood are formative. Parenthood can enhance psychological development, self-confidence, and sense of well-being. Parenthood also affords opportunities to confront new challenges and to test and display diverse competencies. Parents can derive considerable and continuing pleasure in their relationships and activities with their children. But parenting is also fraught with small and large stresses and disappointments. In the final analysis, parents receive a great deal "in kind" for parenting -- they are often recipients of unconditional love, they gain skills, and they even pretend to immortality -- but they also risk much and expose themselves broadly. We don't often enough remind ourselves of the many positives that accompany parenting; we don't address the many negatives to find solutions often enough either. *Parenting: Science and Practice* will.