

The key for a healthy development

Why parenting matters for children in the 21st century

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Understanding today's nature of childhood requires an understanding of parenting in the 21st century. Parents and caregivers fundamentally shape children's lives and everyday experiences, which has a major impact on their cognitive, academic and socio-emotional development. [1] They also have a major impact on children's health and well-being.

Parenting now, as in the past, is challenging and demanding. Family life has changed over the years, bringing about new challenges for parents and the question if the way children are raised should change as well. [2] Unsurprisingly, many parents are uncertain how to master the parenting challenge. [3] Today, a wide variety of support services and information about parenting are offered offline as well as online (digital platforms, blogs, campaigns, parenting programs and other services).

Yet, parenting programs and other support services are implemented and run by a large variety of actors. [4] Particularly in countries where private, commercial providers cover huge shares of provision, cost and quality may vary substantially and not all offers may live up to their promise. [5] Parents may feel overwhelmed by the array of programs offered and unsure about the best choice. For governments and local authorities, on the

Scholars point that the social importance of the parent role has inflated, which for many has evolved to an 'identity-work' akin to a vocation. Consequently, the feeling of fulfilment and achievement depends for many parents on their children. At the same time, parents perceive a reduction of control with less room to influence their children than in the past, leading to widespread concerns among parents about their ability to ensure children's well-being and success in the future.

Recent studies suggest that warm parenting that provides children with age-appropriate autonomy and structure is key for a healthy and prosperous development of children.

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other hand, it may be difficult to decide how to best support parents, for instance, which parenting approach to promote through services and how to address best the needs and worries of 21st century parents.

Many parents turn to the Internet or parenting books and may get lost and confused by the sheer endless number of parenting approaches advocated for and warned against, from holistic and attachment parenting to hothousing and buddy parenting. [6] Taking a look at the sphere of available information reveals a confusing range of advertised parenting approaches with little or no evidence, on the one hand, and approaches that are well established and researched, on the other hand.

The study, therefore, provides a structured overview of the existing scientific parenting literature. Since ensuring a healthy and prosperous development of children is a primary concern of parents, policy-makers and professionals alike, the study aims at developing an evidence-based framework for understanding parenting and its influence on child development. The study focuses on the relatively global, consistent, and stable approaches to child rearing across situations and domains as they are considered key for predicting child outcomes. [7] The various references to parenting approach are referring to:

Parenting dimensions, which capture general characteristics of parents' approach to child rearing. Parental warmth, for example, describes parent-child-interactions as warm, comforting and sensitive.

Parenting styles, which describe the parenting approach along different dimensions. The authoritative parenting style, for instance, refers to parenting that is warm, loving and sets clear expectations for children's behavior.

Parenting in the 21st Century

Over the last half century the world has changed fundamentally, causing shift in expectations and experiences of how parents raise their children [8]. In the last two decades rates of fertility and marriage decreased, whereas the rates of divorce and numbers of single parent households increased. [9] Consequently, family forms and living arrangements have diversified with an increase of unmarried or divorced families, and single parents. Most children, both within OECD countries and beyond, live with two parents (whether biological, step, adoptive or foster, married or unmarried), with an average of 17% children under 18 living with one parent in 2017. [10] As family stability has decreased, many children experience different family living arrangements throughout their childhood and many children move from one household to another on a regular basis due to shared custody arrangements.

Parents are often older, better educated and tend to have fewer children. [11] More mothers work while raising their children. [12] Moreover, migration has led to unprecedented ethnic, cultural and religious diversity within many societies.

In modernized societies many families feel disconnected from their neighborhoods and communities. [13] This has weakened the informal social support and safety net for a lot of families, requiring more families to assume full responsibility for their children's welfare, rather than relying on the extended family and community as a whole to join in the oversight, protection, and nurturing of children. [14]

Today's parents, however, receive greater public support. Governments and municipalities increasingly focus on parenting in public provision and policy, [15] despite the fact that raising children is still essentially a private matter and parents have a lot of freedom in raising children. In many countries schools and early childhood education and care facilities have increased their provision and also their work with parents. Often families not only receive financial support but are also offered information and hands-on support through different initiatives and parenting programs. [16] At the same time, parenting support has developed into a lucrative market. Forbes estimates the 2019 market size of "the new mom economy" at USD 46 billion. [17]

Globalization and technology have exponentially increased the competition and uncertainty in the labor market. Technology has introduced further changes to family life, modifying the way family members interact. In the digital era, parents can seek and exchange support and information more easily than ever. [18] Millennial parents seem to prefer to consult the Internet and social media before seeing a professional offline or asking family members or neighbors. [19].

However, with more parents turning to digital platforms, chat groups and other less regulated channels as primary sources for information and support, new challenges emerge. Parents, especially insecure parents, have always been an easy target for misinformation and manipulation and while false and fabricated information are far from new, the "complexity and scale of information pollution in our digitally-connected world presents an unprecedented challenge". [20] A massive amount of information is shared by different actors - not all parenting experts - and with an honest interest in helping struggling or insecure parents. The desire to distort information for political, social or economic gain always existed but digital content gets reproduced and amplified at an unbelievable speed. [21]

Unsurprisingly, parents report suffering from such information pollution. [22] It seems almost impossible to escape public debates about the relative benefits and harms of different parenting. They are captured in a myriad of ubiquitous stories, parenting help books, blogs, and articles. Debates are often polarized without any evidence or with evidence selectively cited. Colorful, descriptive labels are used such as "Free-Range Kids", or "Buddy Parents" to heat up debates and underline positions. [23] Counterbalancing such heated public debates and insecurities attached to it, requires a thorough evaluation of the current evidence base on parenting.

Parenting framework

The study proposes a parenting framework that synthesizes and reviews parenting literature and integrates the factors explaining variations and differential impacts of parenting approaches. It discusses some implications for family policies and support, as well as research implications.

In the 21st century, as in the past, parents differ in how they raise their children. Such differences can be described with dimensions or styles, which have been shown to affect children and adolescents' development across a wide range of outcomes. Overall, an authoritative approach that is warm and provides structure and autonomy seems to foster a prosperous and healthy development, while neglecting children and adolescents and thwarting their needs for relatedness, competence and autonomy seems particularly harmful.

Notwithstanding, neither parenting nor child development occur in a vacuum: Both emerge in a national, regional and family context. [24] The framework points to the main factors explaining variations in parenting and its impact on different levels: individual; family, neighborhoods and community; and the wider context. More specifically, the reviewed literature in the study suggests that parenting approaches and their impact vary because:

- *A family's past and present cannot be understood in isolation from history, modernization and the wider context of parenting:* Parenting and child development are both directly and indirectly influenced by the wider socio-cultural, demographic, physical, technological, economic and political forces that change over time.
- *"It takes a village to raise a child":* Families depend on socio-economic and social resources in their functioning. The wider context affects family life through its influence on the resources of families and the communities that families live in 2016.
- *Parenting is a "family-centered process", instead of primarily parent- or child-driven:* Parenting consists in a process of mutual adaptation, accommodation, and negotiation between parents and children. These negotiations and interactions are embedded in a history of family relationships (e.g. parent-child trust or mistrust, quality of co-parenting), which constrains the interpretation of parents and children of the other's behavior.
- *Parenting is an expression of parents' individuality:* Rather than exclusively directed to the child, parenting is also an expression of gender roles as well as of personal experiences and attributes of parents.
- *Parenting is a two-way street and children are also in the driver's seat:* Children and adolescents are not passive recipients of parenting but influence their parents at the same time that parents influence their children. Children evoke, interpret and react to parenting, and, thus, actively shape it and its developmental impact.

Policy Implications

The review of the parenting literature highlighted the role of parenting for a healthy and prosperous development of children and adolescents. Without a doubt, parenting is challenging and requires support. While parenting is in many respects a private matter, public policies can create structures and services that enable parents to acquire and practice parenting skills beneficial for a prosperous and healthy development of children. There are various options for policy and practice to support families. As illustrated on the review and framework, focusing exclusively on the parents seems shortsighted; an effective parenting strategy is multi-layered and includes, inter alia, the following: [25]

- *Increasing the economic support to families:* Economic hardship is related to disrupted family functioning and parenting as well as negative child outcomes. Moreover, studies from different countries showed that a higher living standard relates to authoritative parenting and that cash transfers for families can improve parenting behaviors and child outcomes. Thus, a system of taxes and social benefits that provides an adequate income for families, including single parents, could help mitigate family stress and improve family functioning.
- *Mitigating family stress and enhancing family bonding through labor market and welfare policies:* Labor market, housing and welfare policies can also help parents in their functioning, for example by reducing precarious working conditions, ensuring stable, well-paid jobs and allowing flexibility in work models without repercussions. Time to care for children that is compensated for by paid leave allows for quality time and bonding, especially in the early years. This is crucial for establishing trusting relationships and warm and supportive parenting and paid parental leave has shown to relate to parental well-being and maternal employment rate after the leave period.
- *Empowering communities and strengthening the local support network for families:* Family functioning depends on the quality of neighborhoods and cohesive, well-resourced communities. Supportive communities provide high-quality family services as well as recreational areas and services, where families can meet and exchange parenting experiences and advice. Special attention should be given to restructuring dangerous, deprived neighborhoods as they can impede with parenting and exacerbate its impact. Connecting professionals working with parents is key, so that insecure or struggling parents are referred to the support needed. Reducing the physical distance of services such as offering services under one roof seems particularly promising.
- *Promoting beneficial parenting approaches through various initiatives:* Increased efforts are needed to counterbalance heated debates and expose parenting myths and misinformation spread on social media or other media. Parenting programs and low-

threshold initiatives should promote need-supportive parenting while discouraging need- thwarting and harmful parenting behaviors.

- *Ensuring high-quality and affordable programs:* Parenting programs can be effective in supporting parents of children and adolescents but quality on the market varies. Communities can support parents by implementing high-quality, affordable programs and regulating the private market, to the extent possible. Evaluation studies should have proven that offered programs effectively promote behavior that improves parent-child-interactions, relationship quality and child development. Programs should not only educate parents but also provide practical, guided training and ensure the transfer of acquired knowledge and skills.
- *Designing approaches that are strength- and community-based, family centered and enable individualized support for all families:* Support offers to families should build on the needs as well as existing or latent strength and resources of families and communities, instead of focusing on deficits and problems. Community stakeholders should be involved in the design and implementation process.
- *Strengthening schools' capacity for family support:* Schools should be supported in their capacity to build strong home-school-partnerships and trusting parent-teacher-relationships out of several reasons: Firstly, the scoped evidence suggests that parents' approach to child raising has important implications for children's success and well-being at school. Secondly, the involvement of parents in children's school life and career relates positively to academic achievement of students. Thirdly, effective work with parents is challenging for schools and teachers, particularly in terms of connecting to hard-to-reach, less involved families. All professionals working with families need specific training in working with families with diverse backgrounds and needs: They should be sensitive and respond adequately to common parental fears as well as

behaviors and expectations of parents varying in cultural and socio-economic background.

- *Remaining open to diversity and considering cultural differences in family support:* The expectations towards families and policies developed for them might not fit well with ethnic minority families whose parenting diverge from the dominant approach. A simple translation of language is not sufficient for a cultural adaptation, where an orientation towards the everyday realities and cultural norms may be needed.

Conclusion

In sum, the study highlights the importance of parenting approaches for the development of children and adolescents across various domains. Warm parenting that provides children with age-appropriate autonomy and structure is key for a healthy and prosperous development of children. The parenting approach adopted by parents but also its effect varies and research pointed to various contextual factors and individual factors explaining these variations. A systematic consideration of such factors not only sharpens the scientific understanding of parenting and its impact but also helps improving family policies and support. [26] To inform policymaking, practice and science, however, research needs to increase efforts to:

- Close research gaps, elaborate the practical implication of basic parenting research, and explore the generalizability of findings across cultures, developmental domains and all key figures involved in raising a child.
- Strengthen the methodological soundness and diversity of studies as well as the measurement of parenting approaches.
- Improve the conceptual clarity of parenting concepts, the comparability of their operationalization, and the scientific understanding of how different concepts relate to each other.

[1] Bornstein, 2019; Skinner, Johnson and Snyder, 2005.

[2] Zahran, 2011; Burns and Gottschalk, 2019.

[3] Dworkin, Connell and Doty, 2013; Radey and Randolph, 2009.

[4] Daly, 2013.

[5] Institute of Behavioral Science, 2020; Haslam, 2016.

[6] Burns and Gottschalk, 2019.

[7] Rodrigo, Byrne and Rodríguez, 2014; Smetana, 2017.

[8] Faircloth, 2014; Hayford, Guzzo and Smock, 2014.

[9] OECD, 2011.

[10] Miho and Thévenon, 2020; UN DESA, 2019.

[11] Hayford et al. 2014; Bongaarts, Mensch & Blanc, 2017.

[12] Miho and Thévenon, 2020.

[13] OECD, 2016; Zahran, 2011.

[14] Pimentel, 2016.

[15] Daly et al., 2015.

[16] Rodrigo, 2010; Daly et al., 2015.

[17] Klich, 2019.

[18] Radey and Randolph, 2009.

[19] İlknur Külhaş Çelik, 2019; Setyastuti et al., 2019.

[20] Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017, p. 10.

[21] Humprecht, Esser and Van Aelst, 2020.

[22] Özgür, 2016.

[23] Tremblay et al., 2015.

[24] Bornstein, 2012; Hill et al., 2007; Prevoo & Tamis-LeMonda, 2017.

[25] Ulferts, 2020.

[26] Mitchell, 2012.