

Experiences of Parenting Multiple Expressions of Relationally Challenging Childhood Behaviours across Contexts

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This entry delves into the parenting literature and reveals the complexities, perspectives, and multiple expressions of parenting challenging childhood behavior that distress or negatively impact the parent-child relationship so that we can better understand how to support families who are struggling to cope. The entry specifically focuses on the period of transition to school for children aged five to eight years. This transition can illuminate vulnerabilities previously hidden as children attempt to navigate the demands of their unfamiliar environment, meaning that parents can experience distress and emotional challenges. The entry explores the various expressions of relationally challenging behavior and comments on the intersectionality and reciprocity of explicit and implicit expressions of affect such as frustration and anxiety. To gain context, the entry examines common antecedents associated with relationally challenging behavior, such as academic comparison, forming friendships, hidden neurodiverse development, neglect, attachment dysfunction, and family conflict. Qualitative literature enriches understanding and identifies problems such as parental distress related to social stigma and minority stress and reveals specific struggles, including stress, related to homeschooling children with special educational needs, homeschooling during the recent pandemic, single parenting, grandparenting, parenting neurodiverse children, and the triangulated tensions that exist between the parent, the child, and the school. Holding in mind these diverse and context-orientated perspectives, this entry examines research that evaluates helpfulness and illuminates deficiencies of popular structured parent programs. Lastly, the entry identifies and illuminates the need to know more about the ways in which parent programs work, and it is anticipated that this new knowledge will help practitioners to better respond to the complexities of need and expectations of families who struggle to cope with relationally challenging behavior.

Keywords: parenting ; experiences: relationally challenging ; childhood ; behaviors ; contexts ; literature ; mother ; father ; primary caregiver

This entry first offers a brief overview of the central theories that support parenting programs, parenting, and the ways that parenting and children's development and adjustment relate.

Parental socialization recognizes parents as an all-important force in the socialization process, shaping and molding the values and behaviors of the child ^[1], and the centrality of the parent as mediator, interpreter, reflector, and moderator of the child's internal cognitive and emotional state of mind cannot be underestimated ^[2]. Parents are seen as influencers, guides, teachers, and indirect socializers in their capacity as role models, supported by social learning theory ^[3], and as social managers, taking charge of the child's social experiences. Parental socialization informs and educates infants and young children in societal norms, expectations, rules, and values that influence behavior. Children learn how to socialize within this early familiar framework, which helps them adjust to societal norms and expectations. Furthermore, parents are seen as moderators to the risk effects that deprived neighborhoods, poverty, and adverse life events have on children's emotional and behavioral development ^[4]. This process is guided using a combination of parental styles and practices, such as authoritative parenting, which is associated with a securely attached relationship with the main caregiver ^{[5][6]}.

Object Relations and Attachment

Object relations theory ^[7] originates from the psychoanalytic school and suggests that a person's primary motivational drive is to seek relationships with others, defined as object seeking. How these relationships manifest is influenced by the individual's internal mental world, which is populated by the self, its objects, and the relationship between them. This internal world is influenced by early experiences between the parent-infant dyad. Winnicott ^[8] describes such experiences as the infant conjuring up a utopian-like object that completely satisfies his needs, especially when excited, and if the "good enough" mother meets the needs of this conjured object, an illusion is created, where the infant believes that he has created the object himself. The repetition of these omnipotent hallucinatory wishes and their realization by the parent leads to a true self from which the reality of pain and loss can be met. Where the parent is not seen as good enough, for

example, where the parent is unable to respond to the emotional and physical needs of the infant, a compliant false self surfaces, hiding frustration and requisitioned instinctual drives. In response, the child develops defense strategies designed to generate a sense of security. These might include avoidance, inattention, or tactical misrepresentations, such as false statements that may attract or avert attention.

Attachment theory ^[6] extends object relations theory ^[7] by integrating evolutionary developmental psychology and proposes that children require a secure base from which they can explore their surroundings and a safe haven to return so that they learn to flourish ^[8]. Children who acquire this secure attachment are associated with being socially competent, relational, and self-assured, with robust affect coping skills, meaning that they are less likely to be anxious compared to insecurely attached children ^[10]. The theory posits that through this secure relationship, the child co-constructs their understanding of self, others, and the world. This is known as the child's internal working model, and the theory suggests that it is developed through countless interactions with the parent.

An observational paradigm is used to assess different attachment styles between mother and infant. The relational quality is assessed during the moment of reunion following a brief separation. The action of separating from the mother, seen as the secure object, tends to evoke anxious affect in the infant. A child who is easily soothed by the sensitive parent on their return demonstrates a secure attachment, whereas infants who anxiously ignore the returning mother, are not easily soothed, resist the mother's attempts to comfort, or demonstrate disorganized behavior are considered insecurely attached. Whilst associative and observational research points to the adaptive influences of a secure attachment ^[10], it is not to say that insecure attachments are necessarily maladaptive, and in certain environments where fewer trusting relationships are available, they are arguably a useful resource ^[11].

Further, cross-cultural research indicates that the different values placed on family relationships mean that a secure attachment, as defined by the strange situation test, might not be positioned as the gold standard for child adjustment cross-culturally ^[11]. However, a mother who is interested in the narrow world of the child and is able to believe in the intensity of the child's feelings is placed to support and guide the child when the child is overwhelmed with affect ^[8]. Here, the parent scaffolds the development of the internal mental states of the child's inner world. Mentalizing theory, which expands on attachment theory, examines these processes and proposes that they underpin a secure attachment ^{[12][13]}.

Mentalizing theory suggests that as children develop, they begin to work out the intentions and mental states of others based on their interactions with their parent as the parent attempts to hold self and child in mind. This meta-cognition aids comprehension of the intentional self and the other through recognizing the motivating influences of mental states, such as desires, feelings, goals, needs, beliefs, and reasons. Understanding these mental states guides relational behavior, which underpins a secure attachment ^[12]. To date, interventions that are specifically designed to enhance and promote mentalizing and reflective thinking among parents address the early years parenting audience. Nascent findings from a mixed-methods study of 16 parent participants at risk of severe parenting breakdown seem to indicate that parent interventions specifically designed to enhance reflective thinking appear to be helpful in promoting sensitive parenting and fostering the parent-infant relationship ^[14]. In recent decades, however, popular parenting interventions that support parents who struggle to manage childhood challenging behavior across the middle childhood years tend to focus on behaviorist strategies and principles adopted from social learning theory ^[3].

Social Learning

Social learning theory ^[3] offers relevance to this entry because supporting literature continues to guide current understanding of parenting skills and practices, particularly concerning the detrimental effects of harsh discipline, a lack of boundary setting, and ineffective monitoring of behavior ^{[3][15]}. Furthermore, popular parenting programs, designed to help families to foster an adaptive home environment, are based on social learning interventions that have been researched and tested ^[16]. Whilst social learning theory offers fundamental differences from the psychodynamic object relations attachment model, such as reciprocal determinism, there are striking similarities, such as the emphasis on parent-child interactions. This understandably means that parenting programs based on social learning principles tend to influence the attachment relationship through introducing behavioral strategies that foster adaptive discipline and positive reinforcement ^[17]. In fact, a recent study found that parents who attended a parenting program based on behavioral and social learning theories significantly improved their mentalizing skills and that this ability both moderated and mediated positive relational behavior, indicating that mentalizing seems to influence and explain behavior change ^[18].

Children's learning is influenced by the behavior of a significant other, for example, parents ^[19]. Social learning theory ^[3] suggests that learning occurs through a process of observation and imitation rather than reinforcement ^[20]. The theory is supported by the seminal Bobo doll experiment, which involves an adult aggressively hitting a doll whilst being observed by nursery school children and demonstrates how observational learning, such as watching an adult behave a certain

way, can result in children consequently displaying similar behavior. It purports that the process of learning takes place within the family setting as well as external settings, such as schools, peer groups, neighborhoods, and social media platforms. Moreover, the theory understands the child as active within their environment, which is termed reciprocal determinism. This means that the child shapes their environment as the environment shapes them. The goals and interactions the child seeks will be guided by their individual characteristics. The more successful the child is in achieving their desired goals by controlling their thoughts, feelings, and behavior, the more established their self-belief (perceived self-efficacy) becomes and the more adept the child becomes at meeting their goals.

Arguably, both theoretical frameworks fail to recognize the interdependent parts of a systemic whole, namely the family system, and the circular, causal, dynamic, complex reciprocal processes that exist within this structure ^[21]. Nevertheless, Belsky's model of parenting ^[22] includes multiple factors that influence parenting and child development, including un/employment, marital relations, social support, parent developmental history, and child and parent characteristics. Indeed, research does indicate that these external environmental factors begin to exert their influence on child socio-emotional behavior in utero ^[23]. It is important to consider these factors to gain a fuller understanding of parent/child needs so that parenting programs and the sessions within can better provide support to their service users.

Summary

The overarching purpose of this entry is to discuss the existing literature on parenting the multiple expressions of relationally challenging childhood behaviors across a variety of contexts, including the COVID-19 pandemic. This exploration incorporates the perspectives of mothers, fathers, grandparents, and other caregivers. This entry also considers literature that investigates parenting programs and parents' experiences of them to gain an appreciation of what is currently known about the ways in which these programs work. The aim is to provide the reader with a means by which to explore the multiple expressions of relationally challenging childhood behavior, including, aggression, fears and worries, and challenges associated with special educational needs (SEN) and developmental neurodiversity and parents' experiences of parenting these more relationally challenging behaviors. It intends to foster understanding around the needs that motivate parents of children in the early school years to engage in parenting programs that have been designed to help them cope with and manage challenging behavior. Lastly, it aims to offer the reader an evaluation of the research pertaining to how parents and caregivers experience parenting programs that are designed to foster parenting skills and support the parent-child relationship and to demonstrate what would be useful for practitioners to know more about.

Process and Selection

Searches were conducted through Psych Info, Google Scholar, university library resources, and reference lists of relevant journal papers and books. Search terms included anxious childhood behavior; parent experience and aggressive childhood behavior; developmental neurodiversity; SEN; referral pathways; experience; and parenting programs. This entry is concerned with parents' experience of parenting children's challenging behaviors that commonly emerge during middle childhood and distress the parent-child relationship. Therefore, studies were included on this basis of participant relevance, i.e., relevance to parents of children aged between five to eight years.

Qualitative studies were prioritized because this entry is specifically concerned with the experience of parenting from multifaceted contexts and perspectives. Whilst literature from the last decade dominated the search results, foundational studies that support the theories behind popular parenting programs, such as social learning theory and attachment theory, and their efficacy were also included. Quantitative studies that investigate measurable outcome of parenting programs across demographic contexts were included.

Overall, the selection process included studies that offer nuanced understanding from a range of contexts from which parents may seek help in managing common childhood challenging behaviors.

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