

Parenting

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The conception of parenting covers care and stimulation of infants and toddlers. Although basically all dimensions of care are included, like physical safety, nutrition, hygiene, warmth, and stimulation, the focus in mainstream developmental sciences has become mainly directed to the quality of responding to infants' cues, mainly during face-to-face interactional situations. In attachment theory, quality is defined as sensitivity: interpreting infants' signals and reacting to them promptly and appropriately. This model presupposes undivided exclusive attention from the caregiver to the infant. The degree of sensitivity is assumed to be related to the infants' attachment quality and thus to their socioemotional development, often generalizing to all domains of development. This attitude is represented in the popular slogan "no education without attachment." Thus, parenting is considered a major determinant of development. This conception of parenting reflects the ideology of a very small part of the world's population, however, despite claims of universal validity.

History

The term *parenting* is associated with the birth of the competent *infant*. For a long time, infancy was regarded as a time of "blooming buzzing confusion" ([James, 1890](#)), with parents' major goal being the infant's survival. The ethological methodology of long-term observation allowed researchers to recognize infants' capacities, however, especially social competences and predispositions for information perception and processing. Infancy thus was reconceptualized as a phase of the life span in which developmental pathways are supposed to be primed. This conception is reflected in the *first 1,000 days* concept, in which this period is defined as a unique window of opportunity for healthy development and brain growth ([Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007](#); [Bruer, 1999](#)).

In this conception, infants need more than safety, nutrition, hygiene, and warmth. Thus, the focus of parenting has shifted from physical care to psychological parenting, emphasizing both sensitivity and early stimulation. This shift is associated with assigning parents, especially mothers, a unique role for *adult-child* play and *adult-child* verbal exchanges. This conception of parenting is thus bound to the lifestyle of so-called WEIRD people (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic; [Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010](#)) [see [WEIRD](#)], who represent a very small part of the world's population and have distinctly different socialization agendas and caregiving strategies ([Keller & Chaudhary, 2017](#)).

Core concepts

Quality

Parenting is mainly evaluated for its quality. The degree of sensitivity is usually assessed with a rating scale ranging from low parental sensitivity (i.e., ignoring the infant's signals, not responding adequately) to high sensitivity (i.e., reacting promptly and adequately to even the most subtle infant signals) (e.g., Ainsworth sensitivity scale; [Mesman & Emmen, 2013](#)).

Mentalizing

Mentalizing refers to the verbal interpretation of infants' inner/mental states (wishing, intending, preferring, etc.), mainly embedded in questions directed to the child by caregivers during dyadic interactional interactions.

Although these methods are based in a particular cultural model of parenting representing a WEIRD lifestyle, they are nevertheless considered by some researchers as universally valid assessments of parenting quality. Criticisms of this conception from a cross-cultural perspective point to different socialization contexts, e.g., multiple caregiving arrangements, peer group socialization, and the prevalence of bodily and nonverbal communication. All of these aspects of cultural variation necessitate other criteria for parenting quality ([Keller, 2022](#)).

Parenting systems

The parenting systems approach is a descriptive, nonevaluative approach referring to the distinct behavioral styles of caregivers ([Keller, 2007, 2022](#)). Six systems can be differentiated: primary care, face-to-face contact, object stimulation, body contact, body stimulation, and narrative envelope. These systems have been demonstrated to exist in many different cultural contexts, yet in different amounts and different compositions, so that cultural styles of parenting can be identified. So far, three styles have been described: the distal style (mainly face-to-face contact, object stimulation, and narrative envelope) particularly prevalent in WEIRD contexts, the proximal style (mainly body contact and body stimulation) prevalent in rural non-Western villagers, and a proximal/distal combined style found in urban, educated families in non-Western contexts [see [Proxemics](#)]. These styles define preferences that do not exclude the co-occurrence of other parenting systems and that are not evaluated as better or worse but regarded as contextual adaptations.

Questions, controversies, and new developments

There is growing awareness that context and culture are pivotal in priming children's development, which contradicts claims of the universality and uniformity of developmental pathways (e.g., [Packer, 2017](#)). However, this awareness is mainly prominent in cultural anthropology and psychology, whereas mainstream development psychology and other social sciences maintain assumptions of universality. These assumptions imply that the WEIRD perspective is regarded not only as universally valid but also as superior to other ways of parenting, often leading to the perception of deficits. It is concluded that many young children in so-called low- and middle-income countries fail to reach their full developmental potential, which is believed to reproduce poverty and poor parenting in the next generation, leading to the "intergenerational transmission of poverty" ([Engle et al., 2007](#), p. 229).

Consequently, the Nurturing Care Framework was launched in 2018 with which WHO, UNICEF, and the World Bank defined a road map for global early childhood interventions. Although this framework consists of five components (health, nutrition, safety, opportunities for early learning, and responsive

caregiving), interventions mainly consist of training for responsive caregiving, which is also supposed to be crucial for cognitive stimulation and thus early learning (see [Scheidecker et al., 2023](#), for details). These programs are often enforced without prior-needs assessment in the targeted populations and without taking local cultures of caregiving into account. Moreover, they are not always evaluated properly ([Gibbons, 2024](#)). Contra these trends, there are ongoing conversations around decolonization and ending the exclusion of research from majority world countries ([Scheidecker et al., 2023](#)).

Broader connections

Interdisciplinary connections between cultural anthropology, psychology, neuroscience, and developmental sciences are critical for progress in our understanding of parenting ([Scheidecker et al., 2023](#)). Findings from neuroscience are often quoted when brain development is addressed, but these references often exclude cultural neuroscience. Findings from cultural neuroscience have demonstrated that cultural variability exists also in brain development and functioning ([Chiao, 2009](#)): brain development is responsive to the environment, as is behavioral development. Thus, the conception of “parenting” needs to be reconceptualized, and maybe even renamed.

Further reading

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