

Learning parenting

INTERGENERATIONAL INFLUENCES



Picture: Double Jay Graphic Design

'I always swore I wasn't going to be like my mother as a parent.'

As Neven (1996) says, 'parents are not made at birth but become parents over time'. Although parenting is a process that requires no formal training or educational qualification, future parents may well have some general ideas about children and parenting, ideas that are moulded by multiple influences (Arendell 1997; Okagaki and Divecha 1993). From their work with a community of American parents, Harkness and colleagues (1992), concluded that parents' ideas about children and their own parenting are influenced by their own family of origin, other informal sources (such as other relatives, friends, and neighbours), and formal sources (such as parenting books, the media and professionals working with families).

While all these influences are important to the development of normative parenting, family of origin represents a particularly important influence. As Neven (1996:13) explains: 'The process and the experience of childhood does not end with childhood itself. It remains within all of us as a live and informative experience that influences our current and future relationships and activities.'

Research, however, has been generally confined to those parents who were abused as children and their subsequent approach to parenting (Okagaki and Divecha 1993). If a negative background can impact on parenting, then it can reasonably be assumed that so, too, can a positive one.

This paper concentrates on intergenerational influences on parenting by exploring parents' responses to two questions: what sorts of things did they do that were *similar* to their own parents' style of raising children; and what sorts of things did they do that were *different* from what their own parents did. What it means to be a parent, the nature of childhood experiences and the quality of intergenerational relationships are important contextual details for understanding parents' responses, and these are also discussed.

So says the mother of a four-and-a-half year old child, when asked to what extent her parenting style replicated the style of her own parents. Despite the strong commitment to her belief, this parent later explained that she subsequently did 'just about everything' the same as her own mother!

In this article VIOLET KOLAR looks at the issue of learning to parent, focusing specifically on family of origin as a source of influence in the development of parenting.

Parenting-21 study

The following analysis is based on data from the Australian Institute of Family Studies' Parenting-21 study which investigated ways in which parents in Australian families are going about the task of bringing up their children (McGurk and Kolar 1997). Respondents, who were recruited through items placed in the media, were interviewed in mid-1996.

To reflect the diversity of Australia's families, the Parenting-21 Study included families with European, Asian and Indigenous backgrounds. However, preliminary findings presented here are based only on the

responses of 'Anglo-Australian' families, defined in the study as families in which the child and both parents were Australian born, with grandparents born in either Australia or the United Kingdom.

Personal in-depth interviews were conducted with one parent (57 mothers and three fathers) in each of 60 Anglo-Australian families with children aged between six months and eight-and-a-half years. Most parents were in a first marriage with at least two children and were aged 35 and over: 78 per cent had a tertiary qualification and 73 per cent were employed, mainly on a part-time basis.

Two points about the sample should be noted. First, the project relied on volunteers, and it was generally mothers who called to take part. This reflects the nature of the recruiting process, and also the fact that parenting remains largely the mother's responsibility. Second, the volunteers tended to be well educated and financially secure, and they were very willing to express their views about parenting practices. Such views may well differ from those who did not volunteer to participate.

However, Parenting-21 is essentially a 'bottom-up' approach to the study of parenting (McGurk and Kolar 1997). That is, the project seeks to explore parenting from the perspective of parents themselves. This qualitative focus means that analysis is based on key themes rather than generalisable results. Where appropriate, the paper does draw on quantitative data but the emphasis is on exploring the key themes that pertain to the intergenerational influence in the development of parenting, as expressed by parents.



Being a parent

Important to the notion of learning to parent is understanding what it means to be a parent. Parenting is a complex and demanding process that commits parents to the key responsibilities of daily care and nurture as well as socialising children

to become participating and contributing members of their societies (Arendell 1997; Tomison 1998). In other words, parents represent an important influence in the physical, social, psychological and cognitive development of their children (Arendell 1997; Luster and Okagaki 1993).

The social expectations on parents are immense with little recognition when parenting is done well (Leach 1994). Indeed, problems such as child maltreatment, juvenile crime, drug abuse, youth homelessness and suicide tend to overshadow the fact that the majority of parents have and are continuing to raise their children successfully and to live productive and fulfilling lives (McGurk 1996).

Parents were asked 'What does being a parent mean to you?'. As illustrated in the selection of comments below, the role of parent and the task of parenting represent a significant and major undertaking. Certainly, for this group, parents understood well the expectation and responsibility involved.

'It means responsibility for teaching about love and caring for others; responsibility for keeping them safe and secure so that their own personalities can develop in a healthy way.'

'It's something very special, close and loving. It means an enormous responsibility, it changes your life course – once you start being a parent it's an ongoing thing with worries and anxieties attached to that.'

'It's the most important job you will ever do in your life. The social ramifications of parenting are so important because the responsibility is yours to bring happy, well-adjusted people into adulthood . . . The joy and despair are often seconds apart and always oscillating. We really take being a parent so seriously.'



Parents' own childhoods

To provide a context for understanding the intergenerational influence in the development of parenting, parents were asked to describe the first ten years of growing up in their own families and about the relationships they shared with their

own mothers and fathers.

On the basis of these background descriptions, parents were assigned a rating indicating whether their childhood experience had been positive, negative or mixed. Overall, the vast majority felt able to recollect their first ten years. More than 60 per cent described this formative period in a positive way, 13 per cent gave negative descriptions of their childhoods, just over 20 per cent talked about positive and negative aspects, and 3 per cent (two respondents) either had difficulty remembering or were reluctant to comment on this period of their lives.

When asked about the nature of their relationships with their own parents during these childhood years, it was 'closeness' which characterised relationships with both mothers (80 per cent) and fathers (62 per cent). Relationships with mothers, however, tended to be more 'intense' than with fathers ('extremely close': 23 per cent compared with 8 per cent, respectively). Unstable or distant relationships with own mothers was reported by 20 per cent of parents, and with own fathers by 38 per cent.

Generally, these relationships remained stable over time; in some cases there was improvement, in others, a deterioration. The most dramatic improvement was recorded for relationships with own fathers, with 23 per cent of parents reporting they were now 'extremely close' to their fathers. A 'close' relationship with own mother during childhood, however, had become more variable in adulthood. Distant relationships during childhood remained distant in adulthood.

Not only was emotional closeness a general characteristic of these relationships but so too was physical closeness. Around 20 per cent lived within the same suburb as their own parents and an additional 45 per cent lived within an hour's drive. Around 55 per cent saw their own parents at least once a week or more.

So far, the picture is one of close ties and connected lives between kin. It is reasonable, therefore, to expect that family of origin would be an influential source in the development of respondents as parents, and that there would be some overlap in parenting styles between respondents and their own parents.



Intergenerational influences

To explore the issue of intergenerational influences in the development of parenting, parents were asked two questions regarding their child rearing strategies: 'What sorts of things would you do that are *similar* to your own mother and father?';

'What sorts of things would you do that are *different*?'

On the basis of their responses, respondents were assigned a rating indicating the general level of acceptance or rejection of the style of parenting exercised by their mothers and fathers. Respondents generally valued the family of origin model of parenting, although it was not accepted unconditionally – there were aspects of their mother's and father's styles that most respondents wanted to emulate, but there were also aspects they wanted to change.

Only a small group of respondents (13 per cent) embraced and consciously tried to recreate the family of origin model. These parents enjoyed their childhood years and shared very close relationships with at least one parent. An equally small group (7 per cent) rejected the family of origin model and approached child rearing in very different ways. It is not surprising that these parents described their childhood as a negative experience and had strained relationships with one or both parents.

The legacy of childhood was revealed in the way respondents spoke about their mothers and fathers and their approaches to parenting. Most parents spoke openly about their family of origin, some in general terms, others more specifically. From their comments several overlapping and interrelated themes emerged – personal qualities, emotional and physical nurturing, communication, involvement and availability, and discipline – which illustrate those child rearing components salient to this group of respondents.

• **Personal qualities** refers to characteristics such as being respectful, tolerant, patient and committed, and possessing a sense of humour:

'Like my mother, I want to have a sense of humour and a sense of adventure.'

'My father was lots of fun. His personality was always enthusiastic and energetic, and he brought that to his parenting.'

'Mum was very loving, and when I have difficulty with [my child] I think of my mother who was always calm in all those situations.'

Negative comments included:

'I really don't think she should have had children at all . . . she had four children by 21. I learned more from my grandparents than from my mum. Mum was nice but could be nasty as well.'

'I'm not as arrogant and dogmatic as my father, and I certainly display more love and affection.'

• **Emotional and physical nurturing** refers to the fostering of self-esteem, stability, harmony and loving relationships:

'Mum was very caring and she always had time for us. I was never knocked back by her. I mean that she was always very tolerant of me. I would like to feel that [my child] always thought I had time for her.'

'The manner in which my mother would speak to us children, the loving manner she would do it . . . was a very democratic way.'

'I'd like to stimulate the respect that Dad engendered in all of us . . . he gave us a sense of worth.'

The other end of the spectrum was represented by instability, undue pressure or demands on the child, and sometimes fear:

'I don't want my kids to be scared of me . . . my dad's favourite expression was that I was too scared to misbehave . . . I didn't like my dad for a long time because I was scared of him. I want my children to learn to behave because they know it's the right thing, not because they're scared of me.'

'My mother was very violent and unpredictable in her behaviour towards the children. [She was] also jealous and manipulating in her relationships with her children – she created an environment of fear.'

• **Communication** refers to talking and listening:

'[As with my mother] I want to be able to communicate and be able to have them talk to me.'

'Mum and I communicated a lot, we talked a lot, and I hope to have a similar style of communication with my children.'

Negative experiences or difficulties with communication were also expressed:

'I'd like less yelling and more listening and talking – more communication. My father's opinion was final . . .'

'I would listen more than Mum, reason and explain more in greater detail.'

'I do a lot of things different in how I talk to my children. For example, my father, he would say – oh, you're hopeless, you're useless – whereas I would never ever say that to my children.'

• **Involvement and availability** refers to spending time and playing with children, generally being interested and able to enjoy their company, and being physically present:

'My mother was a great teacher . . . She took great pride in her children's achievements, and she was a good self-esteem builder, very involved in lots of activities. She was spontaneous, fun.'

'Dad was very creative in what he did. We learned a lot about equipment, building things etc . . . we were involved in what he did. We try to involve our kids in projects, we work together.'

'My mum was always there, like when we came in from school and she'd be there with afternoon tea. School holidays she'd be there so that's really important. She was really good at helping us with homework, and she'd read all our English books with us – and reading lots of stories too.'

Negative comments included:

'I like to play with my kids more. I don't think my mother did that with us . . . just to get down to their level and have fun and not get caught up in your own world.'

'My father was fairly serious. He wasn't like a good-fun-roll-around-on-the-floor-play-with-the-kids-in-the-backyard sort of father.'

'I thought that if my father loved us why didn't he come on holidays with us. If the economic things were so important then what was the point of so much work, if he did not see the family.'

• **Discipline** refers to a consistent approach, clear rules and boundaries and democratic styles:

'I get the good planning and positive reinforcement from Mum – very much her style of parenting – and the importance of allowing the child to have a say.'

'I'd say I set boundaries like what my mother and father did – both of them did that . . .'

'I learned from Mum the need for consistency and that things need to be followed through.'

Negative aspects of discipline included:

'My father could be quite authoritarian and he knew what buttons to push that would reduce your self-esteem.'

'My mother was mainly responsible for discipline and she often over-reacted, so I would be more cautious about going crook at the kids just because I feel uptight. Punishment shouldn't be so severe, just something to get your message across effectively.'



Conclusion

For this sample of 60 Anglo-Australian parents, family of origin represented an important resource in terms of learning to be a parent and influencing child rearing strategies. In the main, positive childhood experiences and close relationships with their

own parents provided a context in which respondents were influenced by their mothers' and fathers' parenting style. Facets of parenting were identified based on analysis of qualitative data.

Overall, the analysis suggests two things. First, whether they embraced, modified or rejected the family of origin parenting model, parents had learned something about parenting from their mothers and fathers. Second, the data reflect both continuity and change in parenting style from one generation to the next. While the family of origin model was valued, in most cases a modified

model was adopted. In essence, parenting is not static but always evolving, thus some degree of change is an intrinsic component. Indeed, Harkness and colleagues (1992:172) explain that: 'in no case can the past simply be continued. In time, space, and social transitions, the present is separated from the past, and thus the task of becoming parents includes reconsidering and reconstructing past elements from the point of view of the present.'

These preliminary findings have implications in terms of public education programs. An understanding of the range of beliefs held by the community, and what shapes those beliefs, should inform the development of appropriate community education programs on issues such as child abuse and neglect, and the use of appropriate means of discipline (Donovan 1987).

The findings are also relevant to the development of specifically targeted parenting programs. Such programs need to be based on an understanding of the link between what parents believe and how they approach their parenting responsibilities (Okagaki and Divecha 1993:62). The evolution of a parent is subject to multiple influences. These include the presence of friends and neighbours, advice from professionals, the quality of the marital relationship, and the nature of parent-child relationship. But any attempt to understand how parental beliefs are formed and how they may be linked to behaviour would be incomplete without an understanding of the history of the parent, prior to becoming a parent (Arendell, 1997; Luster and Okagaki 1993:245). This necessarily includes understanding the influence of the family of origin.

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