

# What Parents Provide for Children that No One Else Can

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There are specific ways that parents do matter in helping their children develop social skills. My interest and research specialty in this area stems from a growing body of scientific evidence that indicates children's success or failure in life can often be traced to how well they get along with peers. Parents can provide the foundation for how well children adjust to their peer group in ways that no one else can. For example, authors of the recent, most sophisticated, and scientifically rigorous study of its kind concerning the effects of out-of-home child care on children's development stated the following:

One of the most significant conclusions of this inquiry is that even though quantity of child care, as well as other features of child care, significantly predicted multiple indices of socio-emotional adjustment, it was other facets of the ecology of child development which proved most predictive of social competence, problem behavior, and adult-child conflict. Recall that the most consistent and strongest predictor of all developmental outcomes to which quantity of child care proved to be related was maternal sensitivity: When mothers provided more sensitive care, their children evidenced greater social competence, fewer problem behaviors, and less conflict with adults. . . . It is critical to keep in mind such apparent influences of the family rearing environment when considering relations detected in this inquiry between any feature of child care and child development.<sup>1</sup>

Today, I would like to discuss what I have learned from research about how mothers and fathers can help their children become socially skilled and contributing members of society. First, I think it would be helpful to draw your attention to recent findings from our studies on children's social skills development. As will be seen, these skills can be tied directly to parenting. Second, I would like to discuss the complexity of parenting and specific ways it is associated with children's social skill development. Child-rearing practices do not occur in a vacuum, and we will consider a number of forces that impinge upon them. Third, I would like to consider three aspects of parenting that our research indicates can facilitate positive social/emotional adjustment across a variety of cultural contexts. Specifically, we will be discussing the love, limits, and latitude that parents can provide in ways that no one else can.

## Early Peer Group Adjustment

Several years ago, I worked with BYU colleagues in developing a model that guides our research program (See

Figure 1 at the end of this paper). If you ever feel perplexed in your parenting or grand-parenting roles or are trying to figure out why children do what they do, it is easy to understand why. Just take a look at this model. Understanding parenting and how young children develop is a complex venture. Studies show that a host of variables are involved. Most of the research that we have done focuses on how young children interact with peers and their social/communicative competencies. As we talk through this model, we will see that there are many factors that lend themselves to child social skills development. This line of research is important because we know from longitudinal studies that children who have difficulty in their early peer relationships are at risk for a host of academic and psycho-social problems throughout their lives. Here are just a few examples from our research program that illustrate more and less socially competent behaviors.

### *Aggressive/Disruptive Behavior*

Difficulties in peer interactions often stem from not regulating one's impulses and emotions and being aggressive and disruptive with peers. Our studies, for example, have documented that physical aggression (pushing, hitting, threatening physical harm) is displayed by preschoolers (particularly boys) in Australia, China, Japan, Russia, and the United States. Relational aggression is also observable in each of these cultural contexts and is more prominent among girls. This is a form of hostility that harms others by using relationships as vehicles of harm. Children who display this pattern of aggression typically rely on verbal attacks (e.g., threatening not to invite another child to a birthday party unless the child does what is wanted, gossiping, rumor spreading) and nonverbal forms of aggression (e.g., ignoring, walking away when angry, turning one's back towards another, or enacting the "silent" treatment).

### *Withdrawn Behavior*

Other difficulties can stem from being socially withdrawn. Our data from these varying cultural contexts reveals that childhood reticence, operationalized as the frequent production of observed onlooking or unoccupied behavior, reflects social fear and anxiety. Children who display this form of "being alone" on the playground or in classroom settings want to approach peers but are overwhelmed by fear and anxiety to the point that they actually avoid peer contact. A study we recently published showed that reticent child behavior lends itself to peer rejection during early childhood in Chinese, Russian, and U.S. cultural contexts. Other forms of withdrawal are not associated with

peer rejection. For example, children who are more solitary-passive can be social with peers when necessary, but prefer playing alone in constructive activities such as putting puzzles together or building with blocks. In early childhood, passive withdrawal is viewed as more normative by peers but can be problematic for peer group adjustment if it persists on into middle childhood.

#### *Socially Skilled Behavior*

Not surprisingly, studies have shown that positive social skills are predictive of later academic and social/emotional adjustment. A large body of research also confirms that children who are more socially competent are more capable of regulating their impulses and emotions. They tend to be more conforming and engage in more amicable, friendly, and cooperative behavior. Socially skilled children also display tendencies to be more pro-social and are often observed helping, sharing with, and comforting peers. They also are better social cue readers, and communicate in more socially contingent and relevant ways during social interaction. When trying to enter an ongoing peer group interaction, for example, we found in a recent study of several hundred children that socially skilled children generally engage in a three-step approach. First they briefly observe and size up the situation. Second, they engage in "parallel-aware" play where they do a similar activity next to the play group. Finally, when there is a break in the action, they say or do something that is relevant to the ongoing group activity.

To illustrate, several years ago, we were observing children in our Child and Family Studies Laboratories, and noticed a child who was carefully watching other children play with a farm set. After observing for a few moments, he started playing with a wooden dowel close to the group. When there was a break in the action, the child then started marching the wooden dowel across the floor towards the group, stating, "This is farmer Jones." And asking, "Which tractor would you like him to drive?" On the same day, we observed another less socially competent child trying to gain entry into the farm play activity. He did so by calling attention to himself by saying irrelevant things like, "Hey, I am wearing a black shirt today." And he tried to get the children to do something else after stating that he didn't like playing with farm toys. The peer group basically ignored him.

#### **Model Influences**

In our line of research, we are particularly interested in knowing more about what happens in early family interactions that might contribute to social skills development or the lack thereof. For example, we have found that social skill strengths and social skill deficits can be tied to proximal influences on young children's development (See Figure 1). These proximal influences include the type of parenting that children receive, and other factors such as marital interactions and sibling relationships that occur in the

home. Our recent study in Russia, for example, showed that child physical and relational aggression directed toward peers at school was less frequent when fathers were more patient, responsive, and playful, and when mothers were less coercive in their parent-child interactions. When less marital conflict was added to more positive parenting in our statistical model, even less child aggressive peer group behavior was observed at school. This just goes to show good parenting can also include how we model good conflict resolution in our marriages. Other studies consistently show that having both a mother and a father in the home who parent in positive ways is associated with children who are better adjusted socially, emotionally, and academically at school. We also discovered in our Russian sample that families who are less cohesive by tending to avoid other family members have children who display more relational aggression with peers.

Personal factors in parents and children can also influence parenting, family interactions, and subsequent child behaviors. Some of these factors can be tied to genetic predispositions that can create differential susceptibilities to childrearing influences. For example, some children are more impulsive and thrill seeking than others, requiring parents to work harder to help them discover ways to manage their impulsiveness, particularly when compared to other children who do not have these tendencies. If you have ever had children or teens who have the need to engage in risky behavior like driving too fast, or making rash, quick, or questionable decisions without much thought for consequences, you know what I am talking about. Recently, the DRD4 genetic marker has been associated with impulsive, novelty seeking behavior. However, it should be emphasized that this does not mean that individuals cannot choose to override many of these types of biological proclivities. Intervention studies show that many of these tendencies can be overridden if individuals choose to work at it.

Personal factors can also include the ease or difficulty of child temperament, parent and child gender, parental psychological factors such as depression, parental beliefs about child developmental timetables, parent perceptions of their child's personality, and opinions about what appropriate disciplinary strategies might be. You will notice that there are bidirectional arrows throughout the model. Most model factors influence each other in systemic ways. For example, difficult child temperament is often associated with harsh and punitive parenting, which serves to only make child behavior problems worse. However, research shows that parents who proactively work with a difficult child by setting limits and providing a warm and responsive home environment can help diminish difficult child tendencies over time.

In the extra-familial environment, there are a number of factors that influence children's social and cognitive

competence, either directly, or indirectly through parenting beliefs, parenting practices, and family interaction patterns. These can include media, government policies, law, religion, and cultural influences, to name a few. Research conducted by my colleagues, for example, recently demonstrated that private religiosity stemming from parental socialization in a larger religious cultural context is a tremendous deterrent to adolescent delinquency. Other research suggests that parents consistently exposing their children to violent media can be a catalyst for hostile, aggressive child behavior with peers, particularly for children who are temperamentally predisposed to violence to start with.

### Cultural Considerations

My colleagues and I have been particularly interested in learning how different cultural influences relate to each of these factors in the model. We have conducted numerous studies in Australia, mainland China, Japan, Russia, and in different parts of the United States. For example, we have discovered that although parenting styles can be similarly measured in different cultural settings, each culture emphasizes certain parenting practices in somewhat different ways that have implications for child development. In mainland China, for example, parents encourage moderate, humble, and social conforming behaviors when interacting with others. Historically, achieving and maintaining social order and interpersonal harmony have been primary concerns in the traditional collectivist Chinese society. Humble, modest behavior emphasizing group over individual accomplishments and interests, is a central Confucian principle, and is highly encouraged by parents to keep their children from "sticking out." In practice, this is accomplished by parents discouraging children from strongly expressing their point of view, proudly acknowledging compliments, appearing overconfident, or showing off their skills. Interestingly, we have recently discovered that this same parenting construct can be reliably measured here in Utah County as well, although it was practiced more by parents in our Beijing, China sample.

In another study that we have just submitted for peer review, we discovered both similarities and differences in how Chinese and North American parents respond to child temperament characteristics. Parents in both cultures were more likely to display more hostility with young children who displayed higher levels of emotionality, which includes "crying a lot" and "getting upset easily." However, Chinese parents were more likely than U.S. parents to respond positively to higher child activity level that includes always "being on the go" and "being very energetic." This finding was not anticipated in the Chinese culture. It was expected that high activity level would be met with more restrictive and harsh parenting given the cultural expectations for modest and reserved children. Part of the reason for this surprising finding is that parents

of four- and five-year-old Chinese children may be in a transitory phase of viewing children in a partial state of innocence to a stage of understanding and are therefore more tolerant of children's activity (but not emotionality) during this transitory period.

Beyond parent-child interaction styles, how parents arrange peer contacts for young children is also important for young children's development. For example, a recent study we conducted in Russia and Utah showed that mothers who initiated more peer contacts and play groups for their four and five year olds had children who were more accepted by their peers at school. Additional data indicated that some Chinese, Russian, and U.S. mothers were more likely to arrange peer contacts if their children were perceived by teachers as being more aggressive or withdrawn. This was likely done to help their children develop the social skills that they were lacking. Despite these similarities, cultural differences were also observed. Utah had the largest number of children in play groups, probably due to a higher birth rate that results in more same-age children living in proximity to one another. Chinese children had the smallest play groups. However, we discovered that Chinese children had the largest number of cousins in their play groups relative to the other cultural contexts. A further examination of the data revealed that mothers in Beijing went out of their way to assure regular contacts with cousins, who are literally viewed as brothers and sisters in the absence of siblings due to the one-child family policy.

### Transcending Cultural Boundaries

As you can see, we have discovered many similarities and differences across cultures in parenting practices and their associations with child social development outcomes. What else have we learned from our research that can be helpful for promoting child social skills that are applicable to parents in all cultures? Some of our more interesting findings point to how parenting styles can be similarly measured across cultures. Recent technological advances allow us to use multi-sample confirmatory factor analysis techniques to statistically examine data gathered from several thousand parents. Items on our parenting measures that are culturally invariant can be identified using this procedure. This provides us with the ability to directly compare parental responses across cultures in ways that have not been done in previous studies. Using this technique, we have uncovered parenting styles that are indeed quite similar in our Australia, mainland China, Japan, Russia, and U.S. samples. This has been somewhat surprising to many in the field because prior research and theory has pointed to vast differences in parenting across cultures. Let me caution, however, that even though these styles can be similarly measured across cultures, each culture may emphasize some aspects of parenting differently from others due to indigenous religious and cultural traditions.

In our cross-cultural samples, we have found that parenting can be classified into one of three general parenting styles: coercive, permissive, and authoritative. Our research suggests that authoritative styles are most effective in the long-term development of positive social behavior in children. Authoritative parenting, as we have measured it, involves consistently connecting with children in a loving way, setting reasonable limits, and allowing children an appropriate measure of autonomy or latitude. Fortunately, most parents parent in positive ways that matter. However, some do not. Coercion and permissiveness are less effective and often detrimental parenting patterns. Coercion involves the use of physical or psychological control to achieve desired behaviors in children. Permissive parenting overindulges children and allows them relatively free reign.

It is important to note that even in the same family, no two children are alike or respond exactly the same to parenting. Brigham Young, the founder of Brigham Young University, wisely encouraged parents to “study their [children’s] dispositions and their temperaments, and deal with them accordingly.”<sup>2</sup> For most children, adapting a carefully tailored balance of three authoritative parenting principles—what I call love, limits, and latitude—can teach them correct behavior and help them develop social skills. Usually parents who employ love, limits, and latitude are not thinking about how their parenting will affect their child’s peer relationships. However, the old adage, “you cannot not teach” applies here. Young children learn how to interact with others primarily through the way that their parents treat them. Going back to the point that I made early on, there is scientific evidence to suggest that parents do this in ways that no one else can.

#### *Love (Connection)*

Expressing love to children, or connecting, is the foundation of authoritative parenting. Parents lovingly connect with their young children by spending playful time with them, showing affection, praising what they do well, reading to them, and assuring them of the relationship during moments of correction. All of this takes time, energy, inspiration, and dedication. Even when circumstances cause parents to exercise their regulatory role or provide limits, they should do it in a loving way. Coercion, physical or psychological, is rarely appropriate. Coercive behavior includes abuse and excessive spanking, threats of physical aggression, shouting, manipulating, withdrawing love, shaming, putting children on guilt trips, invalidating another’s feelings, and being patronizing. While coercion often leads to immediate conformance by the child, research indicates it rarely results in a long-term solution and often leads to the child’s being more defiant, depressed, aggressive or withdrawn, and manipulative in the home and with peers.

We have consistently found evidence in all of our cultural samples that parental coercion is associated with more

child aggressive/disruptive behavior with peers. Earlier studies I have conducted also show that coercion leads many children to think that aggression is the best strategy for getting what they want from peers. Other research shows that children raised by more coercive parents are more likely to become defiant and to develop tendencies to avoid contact with their parents as they mature. For more reticent-withdrawn children that I discussed earlier, our research provides evidence to suggest that coercion, particularly when accompanied by intrusive, overprotective parenting, can only serve to intensify this problem. Alternatively, children of parents who nurture loving, patient, sensitive, understanding, and playful relationships tend to be better at regulating their emotions and finding peaceful resolutions to problems. They are also more likely to be skilled at reading social cues, and developing trusting and accepting friendships with parents, other adults, and peers.

#### *Limits (Regulation)*

While love is the foundation of authoritative parenting, children also need appropriate limits. What is appropriate in limit-setting depends on a given child’s disposition and maturity. In that way, parenting is like riding a horse. For some children, parents may need to hold the reins tighter. Other children may require less parental steering. And with some children, holding the reins too tightly may only lead to defiance. Knowing when to let up on the reins and when to tighten your grip takes a lot of creativity and inspiration.

Many limits can be implicit. For instance, children who grow up with parents who strive to eat dinner and pray as a family, always wear their seatbelts, and never curse may not need explicit rules about such matters. When parents do create explicit limits, it is helpful to distinguish mountains from molehills and not make the number of rules overwhelming. It is important that, when possible, parents provide reasons for rules in advance (“People are reading in the library. We can stay as long as we are quiet.”) rather than react arbitrarily to a child’s misbehavior. Research shows that this type of predisposing can ward off misbehavior 60–70 percent of the time. Reasoning is a powerful tool for parents. Our research studies have shown that parents who consistently reason about the consequences of their actions are more likely to have children who think about how their behavior will impact the emotions of, and their relationships with, others (*e.g.*, If you always do what you want to do when Johnny comes over to play, he probably won’t want to come anymore; or How would you feel if someone called you names?) When observed on the playground, children of parents who consistently reason are more likely to be engaged in cooperative and pro-social forms of play.

For adolescents and older children, reasoning can often come across as preaching and may provoke opposition and testiness. From my experience, rather than telling

teens what to do, playing a “consultant role” often works better. Saying things like, I can certainly understand your frustration. Or, Based on the options we’ve talked about, what do you think you should do? Or, What do you want to have happen here? Or, I am confused about why you want to drop algebra. You seemed so excited about a career in electrical engineering. These approaches can often go far in helping teens come up with their own solutions in more autonomous ways.

Rules should also have logical consequences. For example, if there is a family rule against rollerblading in the house, an appropriate consequence for breaking the rule might be that the child cannot rollerblade for a specified amount of time. Suspending driving privileges for traffic violations or calmly showing up at an adolescent’s teen party when curfew is violated are other examples. Parents become permissive when they don’t enforce boundaries. Calmly and consistently following through and explaining why punishments are administered are vital for helping children learn to regulate their behavior.

Some time ago, we had an instance in our family where one of our children decided to break with family tradition and not do any chores on a Saturday. My wife calmly reminded this child that if there was going to be a late night with friends, the chores had to be done first. Ten minutes were provided to allow for some decision making time. Either do the chores and enjoy the late-over, or not do the chores and forget the friends. The stove timer was set. Nine minutes and forty five seconds later the vacuum was humming.

Logical rewards can be appropriate consequences for keeping family rules. Complimenting children (“Your bedroom looks great.”), providing earned rewards (“If you finish your homework early, you can play your computer game until bedtime.”), and offering surprise rewards (“Thanks for eating your dinner each night this week. Let’s go out for ice cream.”) allow children to experience the fruits of good behavior, hard work, and obedience.

Research suggests that children whose parents establish appropriate limits on their behavior and follow through are less likely to abuse drugs and be aggressive and delinquent and are more likely to adjust well to school. They are better at thinking through the consequences of actions and are more willing to abide by laws. They also tend to be more capable of moral reasoning and are more self-controlled.

#### *Latitude (Autonomy Granting)*

From the time children are toddlers, parents can let them make reasonable decisions within established boundaries. Young children can help choose what to wear. Older children can have a say in how they accomplish their chores. Teens can be allowed to make media choices, so long as they fall within family guidelines. Giving children some say in decision making puts them in the “driver’s seat”

and prepares them to make farther-reaching decisions later (e.g., You can take the trash out either Wednesday night or Thursday morning, which do you prefer?). Giving children latitude means negotiating and compromising on rules when appropriate. Some rules can be adjusted under certain conditions. Suppose a family rule is that children can play only after chores are done. What if the cousins stop by for a short visit? If the parents won’t budge, they may create a lot of resentment in their children. Instead, the parents and children might decide to consider that day exceptional and work out an alternate plan. Being willing to negotiate with children and compromise when flexibility is possible gives them more control over their lives and prepares them for real-world negotiation and compromise.

Research backs up the need to allow children latitude. Children who experience an appropriate amount of autonomy tend to be better at sharing power and understanding others’ viewpoints. They have fewer disputes with their parents and are more respectful of adults in general. They better manage their activities. And in peer relationships they place more emphasis on persuasion and negotiation to get their way. In our Russian sample, we discovered that children who were included rather than excluded in family decision making were less likely to be relationally aggressive.

#### **Conclusion**

Results of a number of studies suggest that parents who creatively adjust these three aspects of authoritative parenting to individual child characteristics are more likely to have children who develop internal regulation mechanisms that override challenging behavioral inclinations towards aggression, impulsivity, and even withdrawal. Some children, because of their impulsive and aggressive natures, require more limits. Less impulsive and more socially skilled children may require fewer limits. Others who are more anxious, fearful, and withdrawn may require more love and reassurance. More independent and free-spirited children often require more latitude, accompanied by stronger limits in areas that parents deem necessary. Yet each child requires consistent doses of all three. Keep in mind, however, that all the research evidence I have discussed is based on statistical probabilities, as there can be exceptions to these rules. After all, children have agency to choose paths in life as they grow older, regardless of their child-rearing background. Notwithstanding, providing love, limits, and latitude significantly increases the probability that things will turn out well. And who is more willing than parents to invest what it takes to maximize the probability of success? Parents can do this better than anyone else.

I often joke that I was a much better parent before I had children. Authoritative parenting takes time, patience, creativity, faith, and inspiration. And no parent handles every situation perfectly. When we fall short as parents,

we need to apologize to them and try to do better. When I get perplexed in my parenting, or notice when my children are engaging in more or less socially skilled behavior, I often think of the model that we created and try to figure out which parts of it are impinging on my parenting and their social development. Despite all those influences, it is comforting to know that the good things I try to do as a parent really matter. At least my own experience and research findings from around the world seem to suggest that this is the case.

*Other versions of the topic Combating the Myth that Parents Don't Matter, can be found online at <http://www.worldcongress.org> and at <http://marriageandfamilies.byu.edu>.*

#### NOTES

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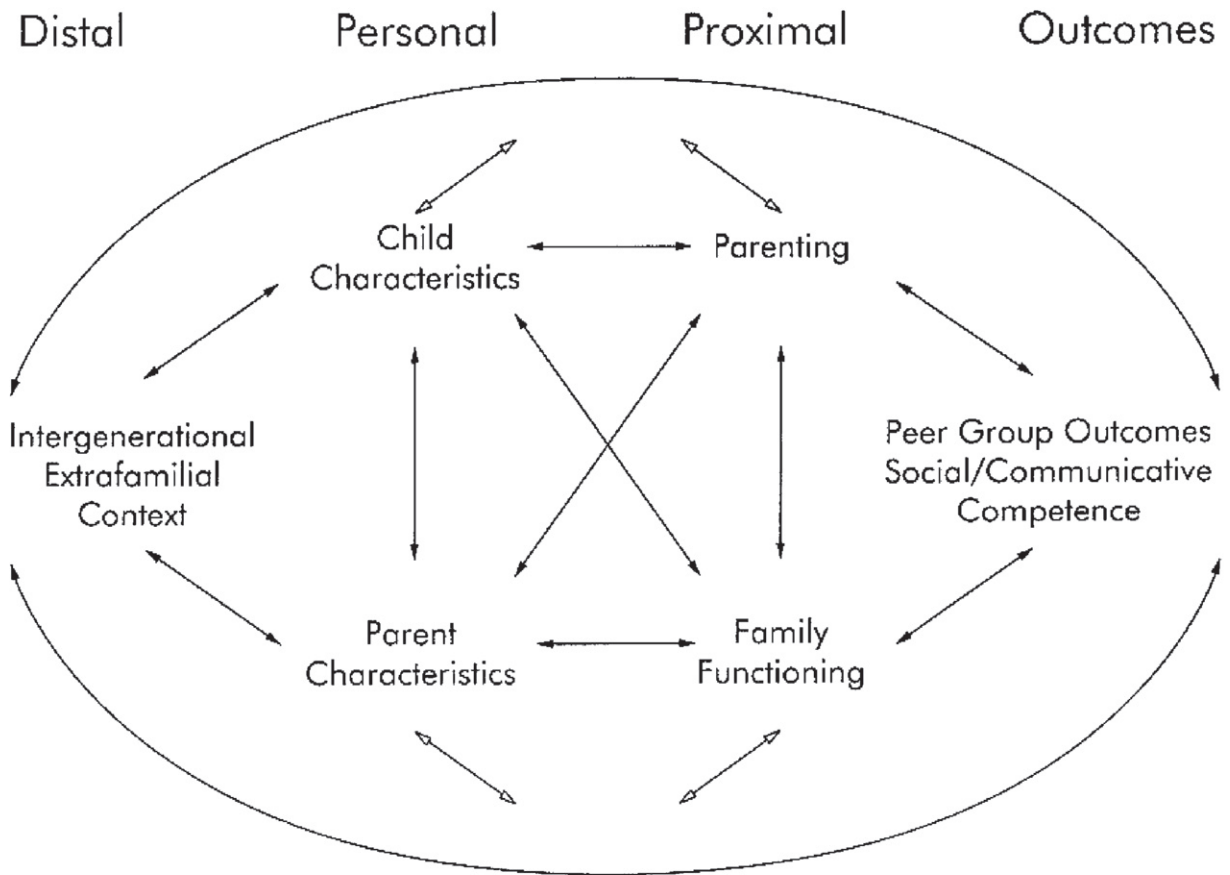


Figure 1. Representation of Interrelationships Among Model Components