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PREVIEW

**Children's Perceptions of Parental Roles**

**by**

**Christine Lessuck Namer**

PREVIEW

**A Doctoral Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Psychology in the Department of Psychology  
at Pace University**

**New York**

**1997**

**UMI Number: 9816325**

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*I would like to dedicate this doctoral project to my mother*

*Lillian Patricia Sondej Lessuck*

*1928 - 1974*

*Every day of her life, she demonstrated the importance of good parenting through love, humor and commitment to her five children. She will always be the source of my inspiration, and I will always miss her.*

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### Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the following persons for their contribution to this project:

My advisor, Dr. Barbara Mowder, for her commitment to research in the area of parents and children. I am grateful for her insight, encouragement, and guidance throughout this project.

My consultant, Dr. Florence Denmark, for her thoughtful suggestions regarding aspects of this research.

My husband, Michael, for his time and patience, and his pride and support of my work.

My sons, Matthew and Luke, for demonstrating to me the importance of listening and caring. Their interest and enthusiasm throughout this project constantly reminded me of the importance of this work.

Mr. Frank De Stefano, for welcoming me into the Greenwich Village School, and enabling me to work with the students.

Sister Kathleen Murphy, for taking an interest in this project, offering her insightful impressions, and enabling me to work with students at the Stella Maris School.

David Hazan, for his creative computer talents, and his friendship.

Finally, all of the children who participated in this project. Their enthusiasm made this project enjoyable for all.

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## Abstract

Parenting may be considered one of the most difficult tasks that humans have to perform; for people, unlike other animals are not born knowing how to be parents. While other animal species exhibit instinctive parenting behaviors, humans do not. The necessary skills and knowledge for parenting must be acquired through a process of modeling, education, and experience. Yet, it has long been a societal belief that parents have an inherent understanding of how to parent, and that they will instinctively perform as parents. Psychologists, educators, and parents themselves, only recently have begun to study the education and psychological well-being of children. Thus, the overall growth of parent/child relationships, how the parent role develops, changes, and adapts over time, and the complexity involved in parenting is just now being addressed.

In order to examine the complexities associated with parenting, researchers often view parenting as a social role that is to be performed by parents. A social role refers to a category of people, a societal relationship, and a set of expectations of how people in the category should act. Parent Role Development Theory (PRDT) has been developed to examine how the parent role shifts and changes over time, and has identified the following parental characteristics: bonding, discipline, education, general welfare and protection, responsivity, and sensitivity.

The current study contributes to our understanding of the importance and complexities attributed to the parent role from the perspective of the child. Questions for investigation were:

1. Do children acknowledge the important parental characteristics that have been identified from the research literature?
2. Do children view the roles of mothers and fathers similarly? Are mothers and fathers equal providers of parental characteristics to their children?
3. How are gender differences in children reflected in their responses concerning importance of parental characteristics? Do boys and girls differ in what they think parents do?
4. Do children perceive particular characteristics of parenting as shifting over time relative to their own developmental stages? For example, do affectional needs, and needs to be protected and cared for assume lesser importance, while aspects of discipline, and/or education assume greater importance with changes in development?
5. Do children view the characteristics of responsivity and sensitivity (which encompass parent-child communication and empathy) as decreasing over time?

An adaptation of the Parent Role Questionnaire (PRQ), an instrument designed to assess parents' perceptions of parental characteristics at children's developmental levels was developed for utilization with children. This instrument, the Child Response Parenting Questionnaire (CRPQ), assesses children's perceptions of the importance of parental characteristics at their different developmental ages. The CRPQ employs visual referents to portray parental characteristics, and is comprised of two parts. The first part asks the

child to identify his or her age and gender and answer an open ended question about the important things parents do with their children. Part two displays photographs of mothers and fathers interacting with their children, and provides definitions of parental characteristics that they portray. The child is then asked to rate the importance of each parental characteristic based on a four point Likert type scale ranging from very important to not important.

Seventy children, 35 boys and 35 girls in kindergarten (ages 5,6), third grade (ages 8,9), and sixth grade (ages 11,12) from a New York City Public School were interviewed. Results from the open ended question identified the six parental characteristics, in addition to an "other" category. The "other" category identified play and recreational activity, and was the most frequently reported characteristic cited by participants, at 76% across all age levels. For third graders, this was the most important kind of parent-child interaction at 33%. The next important parental characteristic, education, was cited by children across all age levels at 51%. The participants found mothers to be significantly more involved in children's education than fathers, but that mothers and fathers were equal providers of the remaining five parental characteristics. Girls felt that education was more important than boys. Discipline was the least frequently cited characteristic by both boys and girls, but significantly less so by boys than girls.

In terms of further gender differences, girls cited responsivity as significantly more important than boys. Sensitivity increased in importance for girls over time. Bonding, as determined by frequency of responses, was the only characteristic to be cited more often by boys than girls.

In response to standard format questions, general protection and welfare was found to be "very important" for mothers at 91% , and for fathers at 82%. Children in kindergarten reported significantly greater importance of general welfare and protection than did sixth graders. The importance of this characteristic was found to shift, or decrease over time. Discipline was the only parental characteristic to be reported as only "somewhat, or not important" at a comparatively higher rate than the other five parenting characteristics.

Results of this study contribute to our understanding of what good parenting is by understanding children's perceptions of parenting and what children believe to be effective parenting. Results provide a focus for family assessment, broaden communication and understanding between parents and children, and help evaluate families' strengths and needs, as well as establish appropriate intervention goals.

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## Chapter I

According to Karl Menninger, "Being a parent, whether father or mother, is the most difficult task humans have to perform. People, unlike other animals, are not born knowing how to be parents. Most of us struggle through" (Karl Menninger, cited in Carter & McGoldrick, 1989, p. 235).

Menninger refers to the instinctive parenting behaviors observed in non-human animals that are not believed to be present in humans. Humans must acquire the necessary skills and knowledge for parenting through the process of modeling, education and experience. Yet, it has long been the societal belief that parents have an inherent understanding of how to be a parent, and that they instinctively perform as parents. Mowder (1995) writes that one of the difficulties in working with parents is due, in part, to the overall assumed nature of parenting. Hillary Rodham Clinton (1996, p. 69) writes, "Children do not come with instructions." Parenting is such a prevalent activity, with most having had a parent, that many miss the complexity of the parent role and related parenting activities. There is an assumption that we know what good and poor parenting entails.

With regards to parenting, Bronfenbrenner quotes Goethe, "What is the most difficult of all? That which seems to you the easiest, to see with one's eyes what is lying before" (Goethe, cited in Belsky, 1984, p. 92). Therefore, parenting which has long been considered a natural and simple process is now being understood in terms of the complexities inherent to the process. Thus, the overall growth of parents over time, and the complexities involved in parenting are just now under investigation (Galinsky, 1987).

Furthermore, the current social climate contributes to the challenges that parents face today. Pugh (1984) maintains that being a parent in the second half of this century is often a lonely, difficult and demanding experience. While humans have brought up children since the beginning of time, often under conditions of considerable hardship, they have not done so in the isolation of today's nuclear family. Parents face the job of raising a family during the rapid technological, social and economic changes that we currently experience.

Gordon believes that parents receive little training for the task of parenthood, but are blamed if their children are not molded into model citizens (Donnelly, 1992). While parents receive no special set of instructions, they are often held responsible for their children's actions, particularly when they are negative. Concerning his view of the parent role Gordon (1973) writes, " Millions of new mothers and fathers take on a job each year that ranks among the most difficult that anyone can have, taking an infant, a little person who is almost totally helpless, assuming full responsibility for his physical and psychological health and raising him to become a productive, cooperative, and contributing citizen. What more difficult and demanding job is there?" (p.1).

In order to examine the complex topic of parenting, many psychologists, sociologists, and educators view parenting from a social learning theory point of view. From this perspective, the social roles of parent and child are key. In general, a role is characterized by a relationship, refers to a category of people, and provides expectations for how people in the category should act (Shonkoff & Meisels, 1990). Papilia and Olds (1988) define a social role as a set of behavioral expectations for people of particular social positions.



More specifically, what is the role of a parent? Mowder (1991) defines a parent as an individual who recognizes, accepts, and performs the parental role. The parent role represents how individuals and societies conceptualize the parent portion of a parent-child relationship and, depending on the culture, typically incorporates the elements of bonding, discipline, education, general welfare and protection, responsiveness, and sensitivity (Mowder, 1991). A child, on the other hand is an individual who is the receiver of parenting in a parent-child relationship (Mowder, 1991).

While many professionals view the parent role as a social role with implicit societal obligations, parents themselves may consider parenting to be one of life's most rewarding, yet challenging experiences. It is also a full time job that requires knowledge, patience and commitment. Whether viewed as a role, experience or job, it is one that historically has required no special skills or professional training. Mowder (1992) notes that being a parent is seldom thought of in terms of a very complex social role, or as an equally complex related set of expected activities. Parenting is a social role that is individually interpreted (Mowder, 1991). It is an individual creation in that people bring to the role their own prior experiences from their own parent child relations. Brazelton (1981) believes that learning to be a parent is likely to be a complex process for most people. Parents are learning about themselves as they learn about their children. The role is a demanding one and requires a kind of dedication for which we have already been shaped by our own past experiences of being mothered or fathered.

Yet, there are several ways that parents evolve, develop and redefine the parent role: They develop an awareness of parenting practices in previous times, they understand the importance of early childhood

experiences, and finally, they rely on advice and books from childcare professionals.

Parent Effectiveness Training ( PET), a course designed by Gordon in 1962, was initially meant to help parents who were having difficulty with their children (Donnelly, 1992). This course later expanded to provide preventative training for parents before the difficulties began. While Gordon (1973) believes parents rely almost universally on the same methods of raising children used by their parents and grandparents, he feels that with a special type of training, parents can improve their effectiveness. Above all, Gordon emphasizes that parents must be taught to accept, and communicate with their children. When parents demonstrate a feeling of acceptance toward their children, this feeling can be influential in the children's learning to accept themselves (Donnelly, 1992).

"A Job For Life" (Pugh, G., Kidd, J. & Torkington, K. 1982 ) a parent education manual, focuses on the life cycle approach to parent education. It notes that today's parents are more acutely aware than their own parents and grandparents of the crucial role that they will play in their children's development. They are also cognizant of the high expectations that society places on them to do their job well (Pugh, 1984). Parents must be able to fulfill their educational role in face of often conflicting advice from childcare experts and professionals. Therefore, there is a need for activities offering parents preparation, education, and support so that they may continue to bring up their children with greater self-confidence, increased knowledge, understanding and enjoyment (Pugh, 1984).

The importance of early experience has become an essential aspect in understanding child development within the framework of parent-child relations. Early childhood experiences and the social climate of the family,

including values, attitudes, and behavioral styles, have been identified as important contributors to a child's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Hunt, 1961; Rutter, 1985, Shonkoff & Meisels, 1990). What we do early in life lays the foundation for all the rest. The early years can provide a basis for a long, healthy life-span (Shonkoff & Meisels, 1990).

The importance of early experience was stressed by Freudian psychoanalytic theory at the same time that behaviorism was sweeping the country (Bettleheim, 1987). Psychoanalytic theory stresses both the intractability of much of our evolutionary inheritance and the importance of early experiences. Though we are unable to alter any of this inheritance, early experiences modify the way they find expression in an individual's personality. Psychoanalysis adds to the theory of evolution the idea that just as the embryo in the mother's womb repeats in its growth certain stages in animal evolution, so do the infant and small child recapitulate the important stages of the history of mankind (Bettelheim, 1987). How inherited characteristics will be shaped depend on a person's life experiences. Analytic insights into the significance of the inner life of children have sparked a virtual explosion into the systematic study of childhood (Galinsky, 1987).

The importance of being raised well has been examined by numerous child specialists. Bettelheim (1987) writes that a person who has been raised well possesses an inner life which is rich and rewarding, and with which she or he is satisfied. Having been raised well enhances one's ability to cope with the many hardships, and the serious difficulties she or he is likely to encounter in life, primarily because of feelings of security and self-worth. Growing up in a family with good intimate relationships between parents and children fosters one's ability to form lasting, satisfying, intimate relations to others, which thus gives meaning to their lives (Bettleheim, 1987).

Spock (1988) writes that feelings of love and trust form the foundation of all the child's future development and future relationships. Fraiberg (1959) notes that long before the child develops his inner resources for overcoming dangers, he is dependent upon his parents to satisfy his needs, to relieve him of tension, to anticipate danger and to remove the source of disturbance. Attachment and parenting are not simple matters of caring, but are also processes of learning how to deal with anger, frustration and the wish to escape the role (Brazelton,1981).

The ways in which parents raise their children powerfully influence how children develop and who they become. It is understandable then that parents seek the advice of experts, particularly when they cannot decipher the meaning of their child's behavior or they are anxious about his or her future. During the past few decades parents have increasingly sought and come to trust the advice provided by child rearing books and articles (Bettelheim,1987). Spock has observed women's greater willingness to take advice from professionals as one of the basic differences between the sexes (Eyer, 1992). Goldberg (1983) notes that when professionals whisk the baby away in the delivery room, they convey to the parents that they (professionals) are competent to care for the baby, whereas the parents are not. Much of the traditional hospital system for newborn care carries this message. Furthermore, when parents adhere to experts advice there is a near-universal bias in our society toward the idea that there is only one right way to do something, while all others are wrong (Bettelheim,1987). Consequently, parents feel obligated to use the correct approach. While theories on child rearing and professional advice are helpful, parents must remain objective, and not adhere rigidly to one approach. They may allow themselves to be guided by views that fit into their lifestyles and support their views on

healthy child rearing. For example, a parent who has been advised to place her infant on a rigid feeding schedule, while she herself is uncomfortable with rigid schedules, may choose to do what is more realistic for her as a parent. By choosing more flexibility, she can respond immediately to the infant's needs, which in turn may result in a happier more fulfilling infant/parent relationship. Therefore, while expert advice may be incorporated into the decision making process of parenting, parents must often rely on their own sense of what effective parenting means to them.

Galinsky (1987) writes that throughout history, parenthood has been a personal saga of images failed and achieved. It is a history of passing through stages, led by our children's growth. Over three hundred years ago children were seen as miniature adults, smaller, but not that different (Galinsky, 1987)). Jean Jacques Rousseau was the first to introduce our modern notion of childhood (Elkind, 1988). He criticized educational methods for presenting materials from an adult perspective, reflecting adult values and interests. Rousseau wrote, "Childhood has it's own way of seeing, thinking and feeling, and nothing is more foolish than to try to substitute ours for theirs." (Elkind, 1988, P.4).

Kennell (1980) who has been credited with Klaus for developing the theory of maternal infant bonding in the 1970's writes, "Are we in the midst of a revolution?" referring to current radically advanced methods of child rearing. Kennell writes that for millions of years humans have watched and studied the stars move across the heavens, apples fall from trees, and wood burn. Over a similar span of time, human beings have observed the birth of babies and their nursing and nurturing until they were ready to lead independent lives. Yet, Kennell asks if factors affecting human development have received the scrutiny, investigation and evaluation that has been

directed to the stars and planets and principles of chemistry, physics and mathematics. Kennell notes that there have been an accelerated number of powerful influences on child rearing practices, while there has been a shifting and changing of child rearing theories from restrictive and adult oriented, to child centered and more permissive.

An example of a powerful parenting influence was the theory of behaviorist John Watson in the late 1920's. Bettelheim (1987) writes that the belief that all is possible, provided one applies the correct scientific methods, found its expression in tenets of Watson's behaviorism. Watson believed in the "tabula rasa", a concept developed in the sixteenth century by philosopher John Locke. Locke spoke of the child as a blank slate upon which life experience is written. Watson advocated a rigid approach to child rearing and advised parents to impose strict schedules on their children for feeding, toileting and almost every other activity, including loving. He advised mothers not to kiss their children because kissing interferes with the glandular system (Kennell, 1980). He advised never to hug children or let them sit in your lap. Watson believed that depending on the conditioning to which a child was subjected in his early years, he could be turned into any type of radically different person.

In contrast, Piaget viewed the child's intellectual development as part of the ongoing larger process of biological adaptation (Elkind, 1985). Piaget's (1936, 1952) account of development relies upon the active processes of assimilation and accommodation; the developmental modifications of structures already present come about through active organism-environment interactions (Ainsworth, 1969). Piaget's interest in how children comprehend the world led to his belief that knowledge is a process rather than a state (Miller, 1989; Santrock & Yussen, 1989). Piaget theorized that cognitive growth

is much like embryological growth; an organized structure becomes more and more differentiated over time. Cognitive developmental theory emphasizes the developing child's rational thinking and stages of thought. Thoughts are the central focus of development, the primary determinants of children's actions. Intelligence is viewed as adaptation to the environment. Therefore, environmental experiences from Piaget's perspective are the food for children's cognitive machinery (Miller, 1989).

Cognitive developmental theory proceeds through a series of stages. Piaget emphasized that cognitive changes in children's development can be explained by the process of adaptation and its two subtypes: assimilation and accommodation, and organization and equilibration (Santrock & Yussen, 1989).

A child's effective interaction with the environment is called adaptation. This interaction is a cognitive one as it involves the child's use of thinking skills. Adaptation is divided into assimilation and accommodation which occur together. In assimilation, the child tries to incorporate features of the environment into already existing ways of thinking about them. In accommodation, a child incorporates new features of the environment into his or her thinking by slightly modifying existing modes of thought (Santrock & Yussen, 1989).

Cognitive organization refers to the tendency for thought to consist of systems whose parts are integrated to form a whole. Isolated behaviors or thoughts are grouped into a higher-order, smoother functioning system. Equilibration explains how a child shifts from one stage to the next. The goal of organization is to reach a more lasting state of balance and thought. Before a new stage of thought can be reached, the child must face the inadequacy of the current one. The child will experience cognitive conflict, or uncertainty and therefore experience equilibration.



In the Lockean formulation, the child is construed in physical rather than biological terms (Elkind, 1985). The child is seen as raw material to be molded and shaped by parents, educators and social institutions. Elkind views these contrasting principles as metaphors for childhood that we have traditionally employed (Elkind, 1985). These two metaphors are the child as a growing organism with it's own emergent identity, versus the child as malleable material awaiting imprinting.

Therefore, in order to understand children within the context of parenting, past and present, it is important to understand the many aspects of the parent role. Those who become parents create, as well as respond to, and modify the role (Donnelly, 1992). While part of this role is individually created, another part is imposed by social norms that have already been established by the culture within which one lives. In current society there are external forces as well imposing rules in regard to parenting, that are mandated to protect the health, welfare and rights of children.

Child focused professionals, as well as the general public, often regard the parent role as something about which there is consensus (Mowder, 1991). Previously cited examples have been about how parents learn child-rearing practices from the current literature and child specialists. Gordon (1973) believes that parents rely almost universally on the same methods of raising children and dealing with problems in their families that were used by their parents and grandparents. Spock (1988) believes that young children learn to be parents through the process of modeling and imitation. A small boy imitates his father's actions and mannerisms, tone of voice and phrases. A girl learns to be woman and mother by watching and modeling the behavior of her own mother. Ideas and thoughts about parenting and what it means begin when one is very young (Donnelly, 1992). Elkind (1976) explains that pre-school