

Parenting Children of Different Ages:
Adjusting Child Rearing Practices

By

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ABSTRACT

There are many developmental theories positing that individuals' needs change as they grow and develop. There are also many parenting theories that focus on which parenting behaviors tend to promote optimal developmental outcomes in children. Still, few parenting theories are sensitive to children's ages and how parenting might adjust to accommodate children's developmental needs.

This study examines changes in parenting behaviors in relation to children's age appropriate developmental needs. Respondents in this study include 302 subject matter experts (SMEs) who completed a modified version of the Parent Behavior Importance Questionnaire-Revised (PBIQ-R). The modified PBIQ-R elicits respondents' opinions about the importance of various parenting behaviors for six child age groups that range from infancy through adulthood; the PBIQ-R parenting behaviors correspond to six positive parent role characteristics including bonding, discipline, education, general welfare and protection, responsiveness, and sensitivity, as well as one negative parent role characteristic.

Results from this study indicate that the modified PBIQ-R is a reliable and valid measure with small subgroup response differences based on demographic variables. Results support that parenting behaviors change in importance across the lifespan of children. Regarding the positive parent role characteristics, importance ratings initially increase (i.e., infant/toddler to preschooler child age groups), then either increase (i.e., discipline, education), decrease (i.e., bonding, responsiveness, sensitivity), or remain constant (i.e., general welfare and protection) for elementary school-aged children, and subsequently decrease across the remaining child age

groups (i.e., adolescent, late adolescent, adult). Regarding the negative parent role characteristic, although importance ratings remain low across developmental levels, the negative parenting behaviors significantly decrease in importance as children age. Results from this study also reveal that for each child age group (e.g., infant/toddler, preschooler), some parent role characteristics are significantly more important than others. The bonding, responsiveness, and sensitivity parent role characteristics are generally most important for all child age groups while the discipline parent role characteristic is the least important positive parent role characteristic for all child age groups. The general welfare and protection and education parent role characteristics change in their relative importance to the other parent role characteristics based on the child's age group; they are more important for younger child age groups than for older child age groups.

Results from this study may inform practitioners and assist their work with parents. More specifically, practitioners who work with parents (e.g., family therapists, school psychologists) might educate parents on the importance of different parenting behaviors based on children's age as well as how parents might adjust parenting practices to accommodate children's developmental changes and needs. This is especially pertinent for parents of late adolescent and adult aged children as results from the study indicate parenting behaviors continue to be important through adulthood. Findings from the present study can also be used to develop parent training materials. Future research might establish the PBIQ-R as an assessment measure of parenting which can be used by practitioners to identify areas of intervention in terms of parenting behaviors.

Chapter I

Introduction

Parenting has long been recognized as integral to children's growth and development. Since parents act as their children's first guide in socioemotional and cognitive development, they strongly influence children's developmental outcomes (Kassin, 2001). There are many theories on parenting describing how parenting behaviors impact developmental outcomes in children. Much research has linked different parenting practices to both positive and negative developmental outcomes. For example, Baumrind's authoritative parenting style, characterized by high warmth and control, is associated with positive child characteristics such as social competence. Baumrind's authoritarian parenting style, characterized by low warmth and high control is associated with negative child characteristics such as difficulties with moral development (e.g., children of authoritative parents are likely to make moral justifications based on equality in social relations) (Baumrind, 1966; Leman, 2005). Through research, parenting practices that relate to positive developmental outcomes can be encouraged by clinicians and practices associated with negative outcomes discouraged (Mowder, 2009; Mowder & Sanders, 2008; Santrock, 2008).

There are many developmental theories of life, some positing that humans pass through various stages, with different needs (e.g., language acquisition, establishing independence) at each stage. As children move from infancy to adulthood, their needs change based on their age. For example, when children are

very young their needs for parental vigilance are substantial; however later in development, their need for supervision becomes reduced (Santrock, 2008). Thus, parents need to adjust their parenting practices in order to accommodate children's changing needs. Mowder (2009) states that "determining optimal parenting behaviors at different points in children's development... has the potential of offering a multitude of benefits for parents and children" (p. 14). Mowder asserts that parents are individuals who recognize, accept, and perform the social role of parent, and children, regardless of age, are the dyadic partners in the parent-child relationship. Holden and Miller (1999) recognize that if parents want to parent their children of different ages effectively, they need to adopt new behavioral repertoires. They note, however, "efficacious ways of modifying parental behavior have not received the attention they deserve" (p. 224). They believe that viewing parenting as static is tempting since this point of view makes assessment of parenting behaviors easier. However, ignoring children's obvious changing development and related needs is not in the best interest of the child.

Mowder's parent development theory (PDT) is a comprehensive theory of parenting. The PDT asserts that parenting beliefs develop over the life span, and parenting behaviors will be consistent, for the most part, with these beliefs. Based on the PDT, Mowder's research established that there are seven parent role characteristics including bonding, discipline, education, general welfare and protection, responsivity, sensitivity, and negativity (Mowder, 2009). Although Mowder's theory states that the relative importance of the parenting characteristics

changes over time to accommodate children's developmental needs from infancy through adulthood, the theory does not specify how (Mowder, 2005).

Research clearly establishes that individuals have different needs at each stage of development (e.g., Harter, 1999; Stegge & Terwogt, 2007; Thompson & Meyer, 2007). If parents are to facilitate children's growth and development, theoretically parenting practices should change to accommodate those needs. However, few parenting theories are sensitive to the developmental status of children. This study aims to evaluate the degree to which parenting behaviors change in importance based on children's developmental levels using a slightly modified version of the Parent Behavior Importance Questionnaire-Revised (PBIQ-R). Although the PDT suggests that parenting characteristics shift in importance over children's lives, the specific age-related changes are not specified. By examining responses to the PBIQ-R, changes in parenting behaviors' importance, associated with children's developmental levels, may be examined.

Purpose of this Study and Research Questions

This study examines the psychometric characteristics of the PBIQ-R and, in addition, considers the degree to which parenting behaviors change in importance based on children's age group, defined as infant/toddler (i.e., birth-2), preschooler (i.e., 3-5), elementary school-aged (i.e., 6-12), adolescent (i.e., 13-18), late adolescent (i.e., 19-24), and adult (i.e., 25+). The following research questions are posed:

1. What is the internal consistency of the PBIQ-R? That is, do respondents consistently rate the importance level of different parenting behaviors, for children of different ages, across seven parent role characteristic subscales

(i.e., Bonding, Discipline, Education, General Welfare and Protection, Responsivity, Sensitivity, Negativity)?

2. What are the relationships among the seven subscales of the PBIQ-R? That is, is there evidence for construct validity?
3. Do respondent subgroups rate the importance of parenting behaviors differently? More specifically, do participants respond differently based on gender, marital status, parent status, child gender for parent respondents, practitioner status, ethnicity, age, and child age for parent respondents?
4. Does the importance of parenting behaviors change as a function of the children's age groups? Further, for each child age group, are some parenting behaviors more important than others?

Chapter II

Literature Review

There are many developmental theories that address how individuals' needs change across the lifespan and many parenting theories that focus on which parenting behaviors promote optimal developmental outcomes in children. Yet, most parenting theories are not sensitive to how parenting might adjust to accommodate children's developmental needs at children's different ages. In order to address how parenting might be adjusted, children's developmental needs, developmental and parenting theories are important to consider. Therefore, this chapter first reviews the lifespan development research including theories of development (e.g., psychoanalytic, psychosocial, cognitive) and the developmental periods (e.g., infancy, early childhood). Next, the current parenting research is discussed including parenting ideas and theories (e.g., Baumrind, 1966; Bowlby, 1969) and parenting measures (e.g., Parent Behavior Inventory, Lovejoy, Weiss, O'Hare, & Rubin, 1999; Parenting Scale, Arnold, O'Leary, Wolff, & Acker, 1993). By considering children's developmental needs and parenting theories, the issue of how parenting might be adjusted to accommodate children's developmental needs at children's different ages can be considered.

Lifespan Development Research

To better understand how parenting activities might accommodate to children's developmental needs (e.g., biological, cognitive, socioemotional), different

theories of development (e.g., psychoanalytic, psychosocial, cognitive) are important to consider. That is, understanding development and how people are characteristically different at each stage of their life is integral to understanding how parents can adjust their parenting activities to each stage to optimize children's development.

Development refers to “the pattern of change that begins at conception and continues through the lifespan” (Santrock, 2008, p. 5). There are many theories of lifespan development from biological, cognitive, and socioemotional points of view; biological development is related to changes in physical nature, cognitive development has to do with changes in thoughts, intelligence, and language, and socioemotional development refers to changes in relationships, emotions, and personality. Much research supports the idea that development is influenced by both nature (e.g., evolution and genetics) and nurture (e.g., environmental experiences).

Most developmentalists agree that change (e.g., biological, cognitive, socioemotional) occurs throughout the lifespan. Although some believe that younger individuals have a greater capacity for change, others maintain that early experiences are just as important as later experiences in contributing to individuals' development (Nelson, 2003; Santrock, 2008). Since changes occur throughout the lifespan, the influences on development (e.g., the parenting received) theoretically can affect an individual from infancy through adulthood. Therefore, parenting influences the development of both young and adult aged children, and can influence developmental outcomes in children throughout the lifespan (Zarit & Eggenbeen, 2002).

Some developmental theories posit that humans move through various developmental periods over the course of their lives with different needs at each

stage. Developmentalists define a developmental period as “a time frame in a person’s life that is characterized by certain features” (Santrock, 2008, p. 16). To consider how parenting activities might accommodate to children’s developmental needs, developmental literature is addressed. The following sections will first review different theories of development followed by a review of the different children age groups (e.g., infancy, early childhood) and associated or related needs. Recognizing children’s changing needs can inform parenting that is sensitive to children’s needs.

Developmental theories are organized topically. First, psychoanalytic theories are reviewed including Freud’s (1969) psychosexual stages and Erikson’s (1968, 1985) psychosocial stages. Next, cognitive theories are discussed including Piaget’s (1954) cognitive developmental theory and Vygotsky’s (1962) sociocultural cognitive theory. Behaviorism is next considered including a review of Pavlov’s (1928) classical conditioning and Skinner’s (1966) operant conditioning. Bandura’s (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961) social learning theory is next considered followed by Kohlberg’s (1981, 1984) theory of moral development. Finally, the ethology (Bowlby, 1969, 1988; Lorenz, 1965) and ecology (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) theories are briefly reviewed.

Theories of development. The psychoanalytic theories of development conceptualize development that predominantly takes place in the unconscious. These theorists assert that behavior needs to be understood through symbolic meaning reflected by the unconscious (Santrock, 2008; Shaffer & Kipp, 2009).

Freud (1969) developed his psychoanalytic theory in the early 1900’s. He believed that personality is made of three structures; the id is the unconscious and

consists of instincts, the ego, reasons to make decisions, and the superego is someone's "conscience." Freud's theory purports that people move through psychosexual stages and the primary motivation for human behavior is the pursuit of sexual gratification. During the oral stage, which occurs between birth and eighteen months, the main source of pleasure is the mouth. The zone of gratification then moves to the anus (eighteen months to three years), then the genitals (three to six years). Following the anal stage is the latency stage when children repress their sexual desires and become interested in social and intellectual pursuits (six years to puberty), followed by a time when the individual rediscovers sexual needs (puberty on). Freud believed that the first five years of life, and how sexual conflicts are resolved, are the most important in determining an individual's personality (Elliott, 2002).

Erik Erikson (1968, 1985) developed a psychosocial theory of development as he believed that the primary motivation for human behavior is a desire to interact with others. He posited that people move through eight psychosocial stages of development that occur over the lifespan, and thus one's personality continues to change through adulthood. He believed that each stage is made up of conflicts that need to be resolved, and with each successful resolution comes healthier personality development. Infants experience the conflict of trust versus mistrust; they need to gain trust in their caregivers in order to develop the belief that the world is good. During the next stage, autonomy versus shame and doubt, infants and toddlers begin to see themselves as independent. If their caregivers are too restrictive, children at this age will doubt their ability to be autonomous. Preschool age children need to resolve the conflict of initiative versus guilt by learning they can act purposefully; in

the absence of experiences that allow children to feel responsible, they will feel irresponsible, anxious, and guilty.

Erikson's fourth stage is called industry versus inferiority which occurs when children are in their elementary school years; at this time children face struggles that will either result in feelings of competency or inferiority. Adolescents need to resolve the conflict of identity versus identity confusion in Erikson's fifth stage by exploring future roles in a healthy way; in the absence of such experiences, such as when parents impose an identity on their children, identity confusion may ensue. During the sixth stage, young adults struggle with intimacy versus isolation and seek intimacy in close relationships. The seventh stage occurs during middle adulthood and is called generativity versus stagnation; adults resolve this conflict by helping and contributing to the next generation. The eighth and final stage, integrity versus despair, occurs during late adulthood. As late adults reflect on their lives, they resolve this stage by feeling satisfied that their lives were worthwhile (Erikson, 1968, 1985).

The cognitive theories emphasize the development of conscious thought, as compared with the psychoanalyst's emphasis on the influence of unconscious thought (Santrock, 2008). Piaget's (1954) cognitive developmental theory suggests that children construct their understanding of the world through organizing experiences and adapting to new environmental demands. Piaget believed that children's thinking develops by either incorporating elements of the environment into how they already see things (assimilation) or modifying the way they think based on new information (accommodation). It is through assimilation and accommodation that children's thinking develops and matures.