

Parenting Perceptions, Beliefs, and Early Childhood Social-Emotional Outcomes

By

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PREVIEW

Abstract

Understanding parenting beliefs, perceptions, roles, and the resulting behaviors that parents adopt, particularly during the early childhood years, is essential in understanding the influence of parenting values on the development of early childhood social-emotional outcomes. Using the Parent Development Theory (Mowder, 2005), the current study aims to assess a variety of positive and negative parenting characteristics and their relationship to the social-emotional and behavioral outcomes in toddlers, preschoolers, and kindergarteners (ages 2 through 5). Furthermore, given the universal experience of stress that may emerge during the transition into parenthood, this study also examines the hypothesized influential role that parenting stress may have on the development of parenting beliefs and resulting early childhood outcomes. Overall, the current study aims to (1) examine the relationship between parenting beliefs and early childhood social-emotional outcomes as perceived by parents and (2) examine the role and relationship of parenting stress on parenting beliefs and early childhood social-emotional and behavioral outcomes. There are many implications for this study, ranging from further deepening the parenting literature to assisting clinicians in the development of parenting programs to support emerging parenting beliefs, identities, and behaviors. Thus, by carefully attending to the parental role, reflecting on the development of positive parenting perceptions, and reducing parenting stress, profound changes in parenting behaviors may help promote adaptive social-emotional development of young children.

Introduction

It is widely accepted that children rely on the relationship and love parents provide to foster development, feelings of safety, and learning. Thus, the role of a parent is an important one. Parents and their methods of parenting hold long-term implications for the social-emotional and behavioral outcomes of children as they grow and mature. Parents help set the foundation for a lifetime of social-emotional growth from infancy through adulthood. Understanding the beliefs, roles, the impact of stress, and resulting behaviors that parents adopt, particularly during the early childhood years, is essential in understanding the influence of parenting values on the development of early childhood social-emotional outcomes.

Review of the Literature

Parenting Perceptions and Beliefs

According to the Parent Development Theory (PDT; Mowder, 2005), the identity of a parent, cognitions, and resulting behaviors are conceptualized as a social role shaped in part by the parent's history of being a child within a parent-child relationship. Stemming from their own history, parenting values, thoughts, and feelings are slowly formed throughout development and emerge more fully as individuals transition into their parental role. The parenting role is defined as the recognition, acceptance, and performance of the parent or primary caregiver role in raising children. Opinions regarding childrearing develop over time and are influenced by personal circumstances, cultures, and a myriad of other factors (Mowder, 2005). For example, internalized parental attitudes may also be adopted from intergenerational experiences (Thompson et al., 2014). It is not only important to support parents as they develop their own identities at the individual level, but the roles a parent adopts and the combination of multiple parents in a child's life may have direct or indirect consequences for their child's development. Furthermore, the

perceptions, thoughts, or values that shape this identity ultimately may predict, although not necessarily, parenting decisions within the family unit (Bögels & Brechman-Toussaint, 2006; Mowder, 2005).

The PDT outlines six core dimensions of positive parenting: bonding, discipline, education, general welfare and protection, responsivity, and sensitivity (Mowder, 2005). Bonding includes a parent's display of warmth and affection. Discipline accounts for the setting of rules, guidelines, limit setting, or any other behavioral child expectations. Education considers parental attitudes towards reading, clarifying, and sharing of information with a child. General welfare and protection relates to value parents place to the creation of a safe environment, where the parent forms a sense of security by providing their child with basic necessities. Responsivity reflects a parent's ability to respond to the needs expressed or communicated by children. Finally, sensitivity refers to a parent's ability to remain attuned to their child and shape their own parental response to meet their child's specific emotional needs.

Unique to this model, each characteristic is deemed an important aspect of parenting across the developmental changes that take place throughout the parent-child relationship. Inevitably, the value and importance of each characteristic varies according to the child's developmental stage as parents work to meet the needs of their child at that moment in their life. For example, during the toddler and preschool years, parents typically value bonding, general welfare and protection, responsiveness, and sensitive parenting behaviors towards their children (Mowder, 2018). Values of discipline and education become increasingly more important as the child enters the more formal academic years (e.g. kindergarten), although discipline is also consistently considered to be one of the least valued parenting emphasis across children's lifespan (Mowder, 2018).

Most of the research regarding parenting perceptions focus on parenting beliefs in relation to established parenting “styles” and resulting childrearing effects and/or social-emotional outcomes in children (Barnett et al., 2010; Baumrind, 1967; Carapito et al., 2018; Crouch et al., 2017; Feinberg & Jones, 2018; Liew et al., 2018). More specifically, the literature is rich in the amount of thought, theory, and studies that aim to highlight negative parenting beliefs and behaviors and their association with practices or childhood outcomes. Despite these efforts, previous literature sometimes fails to simultaneously highlight parenting strengths that may exist alongside more problematic perceptions. For example, Crouch et al. (2017) suggest that there is an association between authoritarian parenting beliefs and the attribution of hostile intent in response to vignettes of children’s behavior, which in turn, is related to the inclination towards using harsher parenting behaviors. Not attending to simultaneous positive parenting beliefs alongside negative parenting beliefs may be considered a missed opportunity to evaluate positive parenting attitudes that pose as protective factors in both parenting behaviors and child development.

In another example, prior longitudinal research examining the joint role of parenting behaviors, parenting beliefs, and social-emotional outcomes in infants and toddlers focuses primarily on parental behaviors and the influences of primarily two negative dimensions of parenting beliefs: control and concerns of spoiling the child (Barnett et al., 2010). As Barnett et al. (2010) followed children and their mothers from 6 months of age until 30 to 36 months of age, results revealed that interactions between higher parental beliefs in control, concerns regarding “spoiling” the child, and more negative parenting behaviors are associated with elevated childhood externalizing and internalizing symptoms. Nonetheless, these studies are limited in the extent that they fail to incorporate other important and often simultaneous positive

parenting perceptions that may also influence parenting attitudes, behavior, and childhood behavior. Cognitions related to the importance of developing a relationship with the child through bonding, being responsive, and sensitive, as well as thoughts related to more practical parental obligations (e.g., discipline, education, and general welfare and protection) are important dimensions that also contribute to those behaviors prior research focuses on.

Parenting Stress

As children grow from infants into toddlers, they enter a new developmental stage commonly and colloquially termed the “terrible-twos” or “three-year-olds.” Here, children move from being an “angelical baby” to asserting their autonomy, exploring their surroundings, and learning to socialize with peers and adults while working towards regulating sometimes raw and powerful emotions. As a child ages, parents must adapt to any shifts in the parent-child dynamic, conflicts that arise, and new routines. The transition for parents to meet the parenting demands required to raise a strong-willed and energetic toddler may be a stressful adjustment, often placing parents at risk for experiencing parental stress and affecting the family system (Feinberg & Jones, 2018).

According to Abidin (1995), parenting stress arises when there are perceived discrepancies between the parenting role and the parent’s perception of available internal or external resources needed to fulfill childrearing demands. Discrepancies may exist, for example, at the parental and/or child level, result from environmental factors, or stem from the dyadic parent-child relationship. In addition, there may be other forces that contribute to a parent’s level of stress stemming outside of the parent-child dyad, relationship, or parenting responsibilities that can further impact parenting stress. Together, different levels of stress may impact the