



LESSONS IN LEARNING

Parenting styles, behaviour
and skills and their impact on
young children

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Prepared by the Early Childhood Knowledge Centre

Parents are vitally important throughout a child's life—as sources of love and security, as teachers and as role models—but they are particularly important in the earliest years.

Research shows that the early years are a crucial time in a child's life, when every moment brings a new experience, a new chance to learn and grow. These years are critical for developing the emotional, social, physical, language and thinking skills a child will need throughout life. Depending on their own attitudes and behaviours, parents have a major influence on a young child's social and emotional development.

Programs directed at helping parents to achieve better outcomes for their children have been in existence for decades and may provide a significant opportunity to increase positive parenting skills. However, few of the parenting programs currently offered in Canada have been adequately evaluated, which means we do not yet know exactly how effective they are.

Parenting styles

Parenting styles can be defined along two important dimensions:

1. Responsiveness: how well the parent is attuned to the child and able to respond to the child's needs and interests, and
2. Control: how much the parent supervises and disciplines the child and requires obedience and self-control.

These two factors help determine whether a parent is:

- Authoritative: demonstrating high levels of both control and responsiveness
- Authoritarian: demonstrating a high level of control and a low level of responsiveness
- Indulgent/permissive: demonstrating a low level of control and a high level of responsiveness
- Neglectful: demonstrating low levels of both control and responsiveness.^{1,2}

How parenting styles are linked to children's social and emotional development

In the very early years, responsive parenting helps create a mutually responsive parent-child relationship. This in turn encourages the development of a child who is both compliant (who cooperates and follows directions, for example) and has a moral conscience (the child understands the difference between right and wrong and feels guilt after misbehaving).³

As the child grows, authoritative parenting is linked to greater social and emotional competence (at least for white, middle-class children, with whom most of these studies have been conducted). The children of authoritative parents tend to be good at making friends in their early years, are less likely to

use drugs in their teens, and are emotionally stable as young adults.^{4,5,6,7} These children also tend to have good self-esteem and to be successful in school.⁸

Neither the authoritarian nor the indulgent/permissive parenting style shows the same kind of link with positive child development, possibly because they both may limit a child's opportunity to learn how to cope with stress. The child of an authoritarian parent may have few opportunities to make decisions on her own or to ask for what she needs, while the child of an indulgent/permissive parent may grow up without the direction and guidance he needs to develop his moral conscience and set appropriate goals for the future.

Parents who are neglectful or uninvolved, inconsistent (e.g. changing limits and types or levels of discipline unexpectedly) or inflexible (e.g. rigidly demanding obedience) are more likely to become involved in an escalating cycle of what the experts call coercive interactions with their children. The parent uses increasing coercion or force to get the child to do something, while the child responds to the parent in much the same way, with more and more aggression.⁹

Critical parenting skills

Parenting styles are only part of the complex picture of how parents affect—positively or negatively—their children's development. The skills parents bring to the job of being a parent also have a major role to play, and we now know that children benefit when their parents:

- interpret and explain events that their children are involved in or witness, such as a fight or an accident;
- establish regular routines or patterns in family life;
- make use of neighbourhood resources, such as community programs;
- negotiate with child-care centres to ensure their children's early childhood education meets their needs; and
- stay informed about what their children are seeing and doing and provide an open atmosphere that encourages communication.¹⁰

Helping parents become better parents

Recent research tells us that parenting is not necessarily a natural skill and most parents would benefit from some degree of instruction.¹¹ In Canada, there are a number of parent-support and parent-training programs designed to help parents learn and develop positive parenting styles, skills, attitudes and behaviours.

Parent-support programs

Parent-support programs, delivered either through home visits or through a community centre, generally:

- teach parents about how a child develops emotionally, socially and cognitively, and about effective parenting practices;

- provide a social network for parents, through staff and other parents; and
- help link parents to other services.

Parent-training programs

Parent-training programs—often one component of parent-support programs—teach parents methods they can use to improve their child’s behaviour, such as providing positive reinforcement for good behaviour and clear instructions so that the child knows exactly what he or she should be doing.¹²

Program evaluation

Only a few parent-support and parent-training programs have been thoroughly researched and evaluated (especially in Canada), which makes it difficult to determine which programs bring about lasting changes in parents and better outcomes for their children or to recommend a particular program or type of program to parents.¹³

Parent-support programs

There is some evidence from the few programs that have been well evaluated internationally that certain approaches or activities work better than others. The most effective parent-support programs:

- address a specific problem identified by a child’s parents, such as a behavioural problem (the child will not do as he is told for example), a developmental delay (the child is slow to talk, perhaps) or a developmental transition (the parents are new parents or the child is going through a stage, such as the “terrible twos”);
- teach clearly specified parenting skills—such as providing immediate consequences for good or bad behaviour—that are known to have a direct effect on a child’s development and learning;
- use professional and carefully trained staff;
- provide opportunities for parents to meet for peer support;
- educate parents about parenting and support them in reducing the risk factors that might make it harder to be good parents, including inconsistent outside child care, maternal depression, financial insecurity and marital problems;
- allow parents to make choices and actively participate in finding the best resources and supports, thereby enhancing the parents’ sense of self-efficacy;
- encourage parents to become even more engaged in parenting by emphasizing how important their skills as parents—and their ability to make healthy decisions for their families—are to their child’s development; and
- include intensive and repeated contact with parents over a long period, ranging from several months to two years.^{14,15,16,17}

Parent-training programs

Parent-training programs are most effective for children with conduct problems, such as temper tantrums and aggression. Some of these programs help reduce

the problem behaviour, in large part because they change the way the parents behave toward their children.¹⁸

Recommended programs

International research indicates that four parenting programs are particularly effective:

- The Incredible Years Programs – Basic Parent-Training Program

Designed by Carolyn Webster-Stratton in Seattle, the Basic Parent Training program is designed for parents of 2- to 7-year-old children with behaviour problems such as aggression and rule-breaking. It emphasizes parenting skills known to improve children's social abilities and reduce behaviour problems by teaching parents how to play with their children, praise and reward them, set limits and effectively address their misbehaviour.

- The Triple P – Positive Parenting Program

Designed by Matthew Sanders in Australia, this is a parenting and family support program that emphasizes the prevention of problems and can move from simply providing parents with information and advice to intensive family intervention, if required. The Positive Parenting Program is designed for parents of children from birth to age 16, and helps parents learn positive parenting attitudes, skills and behaviours to prevent and reduce child problem behaviour and foster positive family relationships.

- The Helping the Noncompliant Child Program

Developed by R.L. Forehand and R.J. McMahon of Seattle, this parent-training program is designed for parents of children 3 to 8 years old with existing behaviour problems. Over the long term, it aims to prevent the development of serious conduct problems in preschool and early elementary school-age children and juvenile delinquency in older children. Over the shorter term, it aims to improve parent-child relationships and the parents' parenting skills, as well as reduce the child's problem behaviour and increase good behaviour.

- The Nurse Family Partnership (NFP) Program

Developed by David Olds and colleagues, and evaluated in three separate studies in Elmira, New York, Memphis, Tennessee and Denver, Colorado, the NFP Program follows at-risk first-time mothers from pregnancy through the child's first two years. It promotes healthy maternal behaviours during pregnancy, helps parents create a healthy environment for their newborn child, and fosters positive parenting skills and quality parent-child relationships.

Canadian Program Implementation and Evaluation

While these programs are rarely implemented in Canada (most likely because they require more intensive and longer-term commitments by service providers than other programs¹⁹), the Incredible Years Program has been offered in Ontario for some time. A 1998 study, conducted at a community-based children's mental

health centre, found it to be more effective than other programs in reducing child behaviour problems.²⁰

The **Triple P – Positive Parenting Program** is currently used in Manitoba, Ontario and British Columbia and will be implemented in Alberta soon, but no information is available regarding its effectiveness in Canadian settings.

One of the few large-scale, Canadian initiatives to be evaluated is the Ontario Better Beginnings, Better Futures (BBBF) project. Established in 1991, BBBF operates in eight of Ontario's poorest communities. The BBBF initiative aims to mobilize disadvantaged neighbourhoods around early child development and prevention. By strengthening home visiting, child care, and in-school programs, it aims to prevent emotional and behavioural problems in children, promote healthy child development, and increase the ability of communities to respond effectively to the social and economic needs of children and their families.

Comparisons of BBBF neighbourhoods and matched control neighbourhoods reveal that children at several of the BBBF early childhood sites showed significantly lower rates of emotional problems (anxiety and depression) and improved social skills (self-control and cooperative behaviour). However, only one of the sites produced a significant improvement in parenting skills. Researchers believe that what distinguished this site from the others was the frequency, intensity and scope of the intervention provided to parents: parents at this site received regular home visits for four years to address child, parent and family issues, and were consistently encouraged to participate in programs and use other community resources.²¹

Conclusions

The evidence is clear:

- Parenting styles, behaviour and skills are significantly related to children's emotional and social development.
- Some parenting programs that have been thoroughly studied and evaluated have a positive influence on parenting skills and child outcomes.
- More high-quality research is needed to determine how effective parenting programs are for Canadian parents in Canadian settings.

Communities and organizations trying to support parents and foster improved parenting skills should:

- Implement parenting programs that have been evaluated and shown to be effective.
- Conduct these programs in the same way that the original program was implemented.
- Monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the program that is implemented.

Additional Resources: [in HTML](#)

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