

Parenting in Contemporary Society

second
edition

Tommie J. Hamner

Pauline H. Turner

Parenting in Contemporary Society

SECOND EDITION

Tommie J. Hamner

University of Alabama

Pauline H. Turner

University of New Mexico



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Preface

This book was written to acquaint upper-level and graduate students with parenting in three major areas: (1) concepts, challenges, and changes; (2) contemporary variations; and (3) risks and alternatives. While it is specifically designed as material for students who will enter a profession requiring them to work with parents directly, the book also provides useful information in developing life skills. It is our hope, then, that this book will be helpful to students preparing for teaching, social work, other human service professions, health professions, and mental health professions—and to parents themselves. The second edition, we hope, is even better than the first. We have made significant revisions to all sections and have included new topics of interest. This book does not take a “cookbook” approach to parenting. We believe that there is no “recipe” for effective parenting behavior, but instead that there are a number of strategies, skills, insights, and resources that can assist parents. Therefore, the topics selected represent those we believe to be the most relevant contemporary issues facing both parents and the professionals who work with them. We have included classical and current research, but we have attempted to emphasize the practical ap-

plication of research and the implications for parenting and parent education.

Part I, “Parenting: Concepts, Challenges, and Changes,” consists of the first five chapters. The first chapter introduces the concept of parenting, traces historical views from biblical times to the present, addresses the need for parent education, and explores the determinants of parenting behavior. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 are companion chapters that discuss the changing nature of parenting throughout the life cycle, from infancy through old age, emphasizing the reciprocal nature of the parent/child relationship. Chapter 4 includes a section on communication throughout the life cycle. Developmental needs of parents, as well as those of children, at all stages of development are examined. Chapter 5 describes, compares, and evaluates the major contemporary strategies of parenting that many parents utilize to assist them in becoming more effective parents.

Part II, “Parenting: Contemporary Variations,” is the unique feature of this book. Chapter 6 discusses parenting in diverse cultures and includes sections on socioeconomic differences, black families, Chicano families, and Native American families, with similarities and

differences among cultures noted. Chapters 7 and 8 examine parenting in nontraditional families. The structural variations—single-parent and blended families—are examined in relationship to adjustment for both parents and children, and the life-style variations include dual-career families, mobile families (military, corporate, and migrant), cohabiting families, and homosexual families.

Part III, “Parenting: Risks and Alternatives,” begins with Chapter 9, which addresses parenting in high-risk families with teenage parents or abusive parents. Parenting an exceptional child is the topic for Chapter 10. Because we believe that each type of exceptionality has different implications for parenting, relationships are discussed separately for children with physical handicaps, sensory impairments, mental handicaps, learning disabilities, emotional disturbance, and giftedness. A separate section on sibling relationships is included. Another unique section of the book is Chapter 11, which examines alternatives to biological parenthood, and includes adoptive parenthood, parenting via embryo technology (artificial insemination by donor, in-vitro fertilization, and surrogate mothers), and foster parenthood. The concluding chapter is devoted to child care, an extremely timely issue. It describes types of child care, addresses both infant care and children in self-care separately, identifies the components of quality care, discusses the effects of child care on children, and describes other preschool programs.

Keeping the book a manageable length was a monumental task for us. Some topics only

scratch the surface, and we regret that space limitations prevented a more in-depth discussion. Other sections are necessarily limited by a current dearth of relevant research, particularly the sections on cohabiting parents, homosexual parents, and embryo technology. We hope that the inclusion of these topics will stimulate further research.

We are indebted to all of the members of our family who so patiently endured the writing of this second edition, which often resulted in a neglect of other family responsibilities. Pauline is especially grateful to her husband, David Hamilton, who provided encouragement and support every step of the way, and who did far more than his share of household duties to permit sufficient writing time.

Two problems perplexed us in the preparation of this book. The first was how to use a nonsexist pronoun in referring to the child. Rather than using either he/his or she/her exclusively, we chose to alternate the use of the masculine and feminine. We hope this practice reflects our desire to treat all children equally.

Finally, since there was no senior or junior author, we wondered how to resolve the issue of whose name should appear first. Since we are sisters from a closely knit family, we worked together on this book in an unusually cooperative way. Neither feels she did more than her share. Therefore, we have chosen to have our names appear in alphabetical order, coincidentally in order of our birth.

Tommie J. Hamner
Pauline H. Turner

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Parenting in Perspective

A distinctive feature of our high-tech society is the growing recognition that parenthood can be a choice rather than an inevitable event. No previous generation has been as free to choose. Parallel to the development of this freedom has been the increasing realization of the necessity of choosing wisely. As the pressures and demands of the parenting role have become more complex, the decision to delay parenthood or to remain childless has become more realistic for some; for others it has become necessary to rely on formal and/or informal support systems once parenthood is assumed.

This book is aimed at assisting those students who are prospective parents and those who are already parents in exploring the concepts of parenting so that they might develop the skills necessary for effectiveness in their roles. In addition, the information should provide persons in, or desiring to enter, the helping professions with some suggestions for becoming more effective in working with parents.

A logical place to begin is to clarify the various concepts involved in the areas of parenting. We will then review what has occurred in the past, assess the present, and glimpse at the challenges for the future.

CONCEPTS OF PARENTING

Parenthood

To many, it would seem foolish to define the concept of parenthood. After all, it has been with us since Adam and Eve. But with the complexity of society and the many variant life-styles, the term *parenthood* has been expanded. Although in the past parenthood meant that a person was responsible for biologically reproducing a child, today many kinds of individuals can be called parents. The dictionary points out that a person is a parent if he or she has produced the offspring or has the legal status of a father or a mother. The term *parent* comes from the Latin word *parens*, meaning "give birth." The synonym for *parent* provided by the dictionary is *parenthood*.

Motivations for parenthood. Approximately 95 percent of the people who can become parents do so (Worthington & Buston, 1986). Economic contributions of children to the family may be ruled out, for children today are an economic liability rather than an asset. The estimated cost of rearing a child in an urban setting from birth to 18 years is about \$75,000 and

could be as high as \$250,000 if loss of income and a private college education are included (Edwards, 1981). Why, then, do so many individuals become parents? For some, pregnancy is planned—an overt decision is made. For others, while they plan sometime in the future to become parents, the pregnancy is an accident due to failure of, improper use of, or neglect to use contraceptives. Ignorance as to how and when contraception occurs also may be the reason for pregnancy.

Bigner (1979) pointed out two basic reasons why people become parents. The first explanation is theoretical. For example, Erikson's theory proposes that when an individual reaches adulthood, he or she feels a desire to care for others by having children and assuming the parenthood role. Even though some individuals can achieve this sense of generativity in other ways, such as teaching or engaging in social services, parenthood appears to be the primary vehicle.

The second explanation, that attitudes toward parenthood have significant early antecedents, is a more plausible one. These attitudes are present long before one is able to have children. The reasons individuals may verbalize regarding their desire for children are likely to be closely associated with the experiences they had as children. These psychological reasons may or may not be consciously known to the individual. Some of these reasons are as follows. *Fatalism* may serve as a reason if one believes that reproduction is the reason for his or her existence. This type of person, who believes that preventing conception is a sin, is motivated by religious beliefs. Another fatalistic motivation is to ensure the continuation of the family name after the parents are deceased. Of course, this can be achieved only if the child is a boy or if a girl maintains her maiden name after marriage. This reason for parenthood explains why some couples desire male over female children. *Altruism* also may serve as motivation for parenthood and may be a result of one's unselfish desire or need to express affection and concern, with children being the ideal persons to receive these feelings. This reason closely resembles Erikson's sense of generativity. *Narcissistic* motivations are those in which an individual believes that having children will reflect on his or her goodness and serve as

a concrete example of maturity, adequacy, and sexuality. Other reasons for parenthood are *instrumental* in nature. These include the expectation that children will achieve specific goals for the parent, such as obtaining a college education or being an outstanding athlete, as well as the belief that the parenting experience represents a second chance at life. Other instrumental reasons for assuming the parenthood role are to begin a marital relationship or to repair a troubled marriage. Although both of these reasons are invalid, they are still adhered to by large numbers of people.

Having children to appease one's parents or because all of one's friends have children represent an instrumental reason stated by some. Middle-aged people may indicate that they wish to be grandparents and want someone to look after them in old age. Some men view the fathering role as a source of power and a way to confirm their masculinity.

Social meanings of parenthood. In each society, predominant ideal roles exist, and the characteristics and functions of these roles are defined (Bigner, 1985). Individuals rarely question these roles; as the individuals grow and develop, the ideas tend to become so much a part of the personality that they shape one's thoughts, reactions, and behaviors. Parenthood is one of these ideal notions of our society. The cultural meanings of parenthood exert pressure on individuals, especially women, to assume this role. Bigner (1985) pointed out that there are six major classifications of the social meanings of parenthood:

1. Many individuals believe that it is their moral obligation to become parents. The source of this notion may be the Judeo-Christian belief based on the Old Testament, which says, "be fruitful and multiply."
2. Some see parenthood as a way of fulfilling a civic obligation, that is, continuation of government depends on replenishment of the population. If couples are financially and socially able to have children and do not, then they are believed to be selfish and irresponsible.

3. Becoming a parent is thought to be natural behavior. Conception is believed to be a natural result of intercourse; if individuals do not conceive, then some physical problem must be the reason.
4. Reproduction is thought to be a major way of achieving sexual identity by both males and females.
5. Children round out a marriage and make a family complete. Although evidence exists to indicate that birth of children decreases marital happiness and places stress on a marriage, this belief continues to be widely held. Many couples believe that the way to "save" a marriage is to have a child.
6. Individuals who want to have children are thought to be more mentally normal than those who desire to remain childless. For a woman, especially, bearing children fulfills a destiny. Childlessness by choice is seen as unnatural and abnormal.

Obviously these cultural pressures are greater for some people than for others. It is possible that socioeconomic status, membership in a minority group, education, and other factors mediate these pressures.

Transition to parenthood. From time to time throughout life, individuals enter a state of transition, moving from the developmental stage of childhood to adolescence, from youth to adult status, from single to married, from married to single, from a nonparent to a parent, and so on. Bridges (1980) viewed transition as a natural process with disorientation and reorientation as the turning points in the path of growth. The process is difficult. One must let go of an old situation, suffer the confusing nowhere of in-betweenness, and then finally launch forth again in a new way of life.

While Bridges did not write specifically about the transition to parenthood, in his work there are many implications that parallel the transition from nonparenthood to parenthood. To say the least, following the birth of a baby, life will never be the same. An old way of life must be ended and a new one begun. In early research on the process of becoming a parent, new parent-

hood was conceptualized as a crisis (Wilkie & Ames, 1986). More recent research has viewed the addition of a baby to a couple's life as a transition rather than as a crisis.

Research on the transition to parenthood has centered around a number of issues: the stresses experienced by couples resulting from the birth of a child, the effect on the marital relationship and the functioning as a couple, how couples cope with the stresses of parenthood, the differences between men and women in experiencing and dealing with stress, and the infant's role in the degree of stress parents experience.

Ventura (1987) reported four categories of stress described by parents of infants 3 to 5 months of age: demands of parent, spouse, and worker roles; infant care; interactions with spouse; and interactions with family members.

Both mothers and fathers reported stresses associated with multiple role demands: Mothers reported difficulties juggling parenting responsibilities with work and home responsibilities; fathers' concerns were primarily with career and work demands. Financial issues emerged as a common theme for many of the parents in the study. Parents reported stress due to infants' fussy behaviors in relation to feeding or soothing techniques. Mothers indicated feelings of guilt, helplessness, or anger when confronted with a fussy baby. Stress arose in relationship to the spouse. Men and women reported marital conflicts, lack of spousal support, and concerns about sexual relations. Finally, interactions with other family members and friends were the source of additional stress experiences reported by the new parents in this study.

McKim (1987) asked new parents to describe their concerns, problems, and needs. Infant illness was the most frequently reported problem throughout the first year. Infant crying, feeding, and nutrition concerns also were reported as problems. Parent-centered problems, such as role conflicts, were viewed as significant concerns. Working mothers and those with difficult infants were more likely to report problems than nonworking mothers and mothers with easy babies.

LaRossa (1983) reported that time was mentioned by parents as the most changed aspect of life following the birth of a baby. Parents com-

plained about their lives being more hectic and that sleep time, television time, communication time, sex time, and even bathroom time were in short supply. This researcher hypothesized that physical time (which is quantitative) and social time (which is artifactual) must be differentiated, and the manner in which the new parents perceive time is of utmost importance. For example, if new parents perceive time fatalistically, then time is conceptualized as a scarce commodity, and parents find themselves suffering the inconveniences. But if time is perceived in a humanistic manner, then time is within one's power. He concluded that the transition to parenthood makes family members more aware of their schedules. What has been taken for granted can no longer be. The new parents are much more aware of the clock, which, in turn, makes them feel that they are constantly running out of time. The degree of commitment to performing certain tasks also is a factor in how new parents perceive time. An overcommitment to motherhood, "being consumed" by the baby and the house, would cause the new mother to feel overwhelmed by a lack of time. Worthington and Buston (1986) concluded that the addition of a new child demanded a new balance among work, home life, social life, and married life.

The effect of a new baby on the marital relationship and the differences between the perceptions of husbands and wives has received considerable attention. Much research has indicated that becoming a family is accompanied by change, much of it negative, in various aspects of family life and in men's and women's overall satisfaction with their marriage (Cowan et al., 1985). Considerable research summarized by Worthington and Buston (1986) reported that the impact of having children is more stressful for the wife than for the husband. Numerous studies have found that wives' marital satisfaction significantly declines immediately after the birth of a child, and that this dissatisfaction continues into the second year (Cowan et al., 1985; Waldron & Routh, 1981; Worthington & Buston, 1986).

Many couples experience increased marital conflicts (Waldron & Routh, 1981; Worthington & Buston, 1986). Disagreements about finances,

sex, in-laws, career plans, household duties, and social life may occur. Couples who have established a balanced sense of power prior to the transition to parenthood will probably have fewer disagreements than those who have not.

Few studies have included the role of the infant in the transition to parenthood, but it has been assumed that the infant contributes equal stress to both parents. Infant crying, irritability, and colic have been linked to depression, helplessness, anger, exhaustion, and rejection of the infant (Isabella & Belsky, 1985; Wilkie & Ames, 1986). Clearly it is logical to assume that a passive, easy-to-soothe, cuddly baby elicits very different feelings and behaviors from parents than does a crying, difficult-to-satisfy baby. Interestingly, Wilkie and Ames found that infant crying had a greater effect on fathers than on mothers. Infant crying caused mothers to rate their infants more negatively, but crying did not affect mothers' feelings of adequacy. For fathers, however, infant crying was associated with greater anxiety, more concern about life-style changes, and rating themselves and their wives as low in potency.

Isabella and Belsky (1985) conducted an interesting study on the relationship of infant-parent attachment and the marital change during transition to parenthood. These researchers found that mothers of insecure infants experienced significantly greater declines in positive marital activities and sentiments and greater increases in negative marital activities and sentiments following the birth of their babies than did mothers of secure 1-year-old infants. This difference emerged between 3 and 9 months postpartum, the period during which the baby becomes increasingly social and generally positive in behavior. Another interesting finding of the study was that the mothers of insecure infants and mothers of secure infants differed in their marital appraisal prior to the birth of their babies. Mothers of secure babies based their prenatal marital satisfaction appraisals more on positive than on negative aspects of the marriage. The reverse was found for mothers of insecure infants. Although it was not a purpose of this study, support was provided for the contention that a positive marital relationship is important in the development of the infant.

Satisfactions with parenthood. As noted earlier, a large percentage of people desire to and do become parents. It can be assumed that those who deliberately decide to have children anticipate the rewards to outweigh the costs and the satisfactions to surpass the dissatisfactions, making the long, arduous, and challenging efforts of parenting personally worthwhile (Goetting, 1986). Nearly all Americans choose parenthood in spite of the continuous flow of evidence that suggests that the expected lofty satisfactions often remain unfulfilled.

A great deal of research has centered around the parent-child relationship, but there has not been consistent research attention to parental satisfaction. This is surprising since the issue of parental satisfaction is one of central importance to American society, as well as to the many individuals who invest a lifetime to parenting. Goetting (1986) provided an extensive review of this area, including research compiled from two national surveys that compared parental views in 1957 and 1976. While the 1976 parents were slightly but statistically significantly less positive toward parenthood and children than were the 1957 parents, parenting remained a central anchor of satisfaction for most parents. In the 1976 sample, 87 percent indicated that parenthood had provided them with a great deal or a lot of fulfillment. Only 4 percent reported little or very little satisfaction from the role. The variables investigated and the results of the research are identified in Box 1a.

In summary, the research seems to indicate that both mothers and fathers tend to emphasize the emotional benefits of parenthood, although mothers more often than fathers express satisfaction intrinsic to the parent-child relationship. The greatest dissatisfaction with parenthood tends to center around discipline, financial costs, the child's nonfamily adjustment, and the parents' loss of freedom.

Caution must be exercised when drawing conclusions regarding previous research on parental satisfaction because many of the findings have resulted from single studies that have not been replicated and have yielded conflicting results. Conceptual and methodological limitations also must be taken into consideration. These include a lack of standard conceptualization and meas-

urement of parental satisfaction; the oversimplification of the concept of parental satisfaction; the use of convenience and biased samples; and the presentation of measurement items so that social desirability, which tends to inflate parental satisfaction, is a major problem. Further, few longitudinal studies have been conducted, and data analyses in many cases have not been sound.

Delayed parenthood. In the 1980s the baby boomers of the years 1947 to 1964 began having the babies they postponed in the 1970s. The first births to women 25 years and older more than doubled between 1970 and 1982. Among women aged 30 to 34, first births more than tripled in these 12 years (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1987). With the help of contraceptives, women are delaying childbirth after marriage. The median interval between marriage and first birth for mothers older than 30 is now more than 5 years.

The trend for delayed childbearing is a response to recurrent recessions and the fierce competition in the job market as young people reach working ages. This trend also has coincided with the increase in women entering the work force and the new commitment to careers. Most delayed childbearers are white, highly educated, two-career couples. Even black college-educated women are twice as likely as their white counterparts to be mothers by age 25.

Parenting

The term *parenting*, which has become rather common, is one to which some object. Strict grammarians object because a noun has been made into a verb; others object because a social relationship is made to sound like a motor or technical skill—something that can be taught and practiced, that can be analyzed and improved—such as knitting or table manners. The concept of parenting has been defined as the process or the state of being a parent (Brooks, 1987; Morrison, 1978). Morrison defined parenting as “the process of developing and utilizing the knowledge and skills appropriate to planning for, creating, giving birth to, rearing, and/or providing care for offspring” (p. 23). Brooks pointed

BOX 1a SATISFACTIONS WITH PARENTHOOD

Variable	Findings
Gender of parent	Women may experience greater parental role fulfillment than men do, but they also perceive parenthood to be more restrictive and burdensome.
Educational attainment	This may be negatively correlated with parental satisfaction. The more educated tend to see both the positive and the negative aspects of parenthood than the less educated do. Parenthood does not appear to be the pivotal focus of life for the college educated as it is for the less educated.
Employment status	For women, preferred work or nonwork roles may influence the degree of satisfaction. If a woman achieves desired employment status, she may experience greater satisfaction with the maternal role than if she is unable to do so.
Premarital pregnancy	This has a negative effect on maternal but not paternal satisfaction. This effect is probably due to the fact that premarital pregnancy is nearly always unplanned and precipitates premature entry into parenthood. Since it is the mother who is more likely than the father to adopt parenthood as the pivotal role, she is more likely to be affected by premarital pregnancy than the father.
Single parenting	This yields greater satisfaction than marital parenting. Single fathering may be more rewarding than single mothering.
Age at parental onset	Older, more mature parents tend to report higher levels of parental satisfaction.
Gender of child	Research has yielded mixed results; therefore no conclusions may be reached.
Number of children	Mothers of small (one child) and large (four or more children) families report their maternal roles as more congenial than mothers of intermediate-sized families do.
Type of role (traditional or modern)	Parents who view themselves in the traditional parental role may experience greater satisfaction than those who evaluate their adequacy in terms of the more modern role, which emphasizes interpersonal warmth and tolerance.
Family setting during parents' childhood development	Only maternal satisfaction may be positively related to family setting during childhood. For women, a happy childhood in which mothers are viewed as having been good disciplinarians and fathers as having been too lenient may contribute to parental satisfaction.
Social network and support	Some evidence indicates the strength of the social network is associated with maternal competence. Other research has shown emotional support from friends to be significantly related to maternal satisfaction. Some researchers have found no relationship of support network to maternal satisfaction of single mothers.
Stage in life cycle	The first stage of parenting, representing the transition from nonparenting, is probably the most intense in terms of both positive and negative effects. Parents report the greatest degree of satisfaction during the earliest stage of parenthood and the least satisfaction in the stages when children are adolescents and adults.

Source: Adapted from Goetting, A. (1986). Parental satisfaction. *Journal of Family Issues*, 7(1), 83-109.