

THE SECOND CHILD

**FAMILY TRANSITION
AND ADJUSTMENT**

ROBERT B. STEWART, JR.

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON FAMILY

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the National Council on Family Relations

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To Andie, Ian, and Jessa, for having patience while Dad was a little crazy with this project, and to the two Bobs, for showing me how to think systemically.

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University of Wisconsin, Madison

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Series Editor's Foreword

Although most researchers know that they should be doing theory-based, multimethod, longitudinal work on whole families, few seem to have the courage or stamina to do it. Robert Stewart does it. The research project Stewart presents in *The Second Child* is exemplary: It offers readers important substantive findings and shows them how good research is accomplished. It is the powerful combination of Stewart's insightful information about the family's transition to the birth of the second child and his innovative, thorough way of doing research that makes this book worthy of sponsorship by the National Council on Family Relations.

Stewart's focus on the birth of the second child is rare and overdue after decades of research on the transition to first parenthood and a handful of studies that contrasts first-time parents with all other parents. Stewart followed 41 middle-class families from before birth through the first year of the second child's life. Mother, father, and firstborn child were all interviewed on five occasions. In a remarkable way, Stewart monitored the family system as it progressed from three to four members. Using a mingling of systems and stress theories for guidance in the study of family transition, he considered marital, parent-child, and sibling relationships. Stewart has something important to say about the development of men as fathers, division of labor between women and men, sources of stress and support for mothers and fathers, firstborn children as active family members, and much more.

The research design and process, however, are almost as remarkable as the content of this project. Stewart used many methods of data collection—observations of family interaction, interviews with each family member, assessments and questionnaires. I particularly liked the notion of interviewing firstborn children, whose average age was three. The

longitudinal nature of the project is also noteworthy. I was especially impressed by the sense of collaboration that pervaded the research project. Robert Stewart's colleagues were undergraduate researchers who were actively involved in every aspect of the study. And the final chapter of the book describes what happens when Stewart and his student colleagues present their interpretation of findings to the parents who participated in the study. The ensuing discussion between researchers and the researched is marvelous.

The New Perspectives on Family Series allows researchers to present their projects in all their complexity and detail. Authors do not have to reduce a larger vision to journal-size glimpses. Stewart's book illustrates how useful it can be for students and more seasoned scholars to read about whole projects and the process by which such work is achieved.

Robert Stewart traces the birth of this research project to the birth of his second child, Jessa. Although researchers are loathe to admit it, many research projects are born of similar personal experiences. Thanks, in part, to Jessa, we now have a book that helps us understand the mysteries and miseries of second-time parenthood.

—Linda Thompson
University of Wisconsin
Madison

Preface

A very wise mentor once taught me that a preface is not a casual before-the-fact statement—made after the fact, of course—describing what the following volume is about. Instead, he explained that the preface should be skillfully employed to *disarm most critics* by carefully and clearly stating what the book is not about. With his words in mind, I would like to indicate that this book is not intended as a conceptual bridge between psychology and sociology, between child development and family therapy, or even between the child development and family relations disciplines. Such bridges are sorely needed, and the contents of this book might be useful in encouraging others to work toward their construction, but what is offered here should not be viewed as a bridge over these long-existing chasms.

On the other hand, what is presented here is a description of the collaborative efforts between me and a number of undergraduate researchers who, at the time of their involvements, did not hold particularly strong allegiance to any discipline. These students viewed the relative insularity of social science disciplines as being maintained by artificial barriers that could be crossed easily if a common vocabulary and theoretical foundation were agreed upon. To them, the deep chasms seemed more like wide plateaus that could be traversed if one were willing to put forth the effort. These students were introduced to general systems theory before the comforts provided by our more traditional reductionistic methods had a firm hold on them. The notions of interlocking and interdependent social systems of influence and effect appeared to be a useful means for studying family development, and the transitions and adjustments the family experiences at the birth of a second child provided an interesting, and relatively unexplored, phenomenon to which we could apply our integrative efforts.

These students also were introduced to Robert McCall's (1977) "Challenges to a Science of Developmental Psychology." Our discussions of this article indicated that his arguments made intuitive sense to this group

of students, but they were somewhat surprised to find that interdisciplinary, multivariate, longitudinal studies were not the norm in developmental research. Although they quickly learned why many of us shy away from such designs, they recognized that answering McCall's challenges remains an important goal for the discipline.

It is customary for an author to accept full responsibility for whatever deficiencies and shortcomings his book may have, while at the same time asserting that the strengths and virtues of his work, if any, are the direct result of thoughtful colleagues, eager students, and a patient family. There are deficiencies in this work, and there are things that I certainly would do differently if only I could turn back the hands of time. Still, the contents of this work should be of interest to those seeking a systemic understanding of family development, and perhaps they will be able to avoid some of the pitfalls we encountered.

The research project presented here could not have been completed without the contribution of three of my students. Linda A. Mobley, Susan S. Van Tuyl, and Myrna A. Salvador contributed approximately two undergraduate years each to all phases of this project—from its initial planning to the final series of data analyses. When they graduated and left Oakland University they had more research experience and more refined research skills than many of the graduate students I have known. To say that their departures were bittersweet is indeed an understatement, and during the two years of preparing this manuscript I have realized repeatedly just how valuable their individual and collective contributions had been.

I would also like to thank Pauline Behmlander, Nanette DesNoyer, Carin Medla, Lori Oresky, and Deborah Walls for their assistance with data collection. These five women were responsible for maintaining the interest and cooperation of their respective subject families over the course of this project so that complete data might be obtained. The fact that no family withdrew from the project prior to its completion is evidence enough that these interviewers/observers were successful, and I am deeply indebted to them for their hard work and dedication.

I especially want to thank Wanda C. Bronson for her careful reviews and critiques of earlier drafts of this manuscript. Deborah Szobel's accurate and perceptive critiques of the final drafts of the manuscript, and her gentle suggestions for editorial changes, clarifications, and improvements are especially appreciated. Moreover, Laurie Gottlieb, Susan Haworth-Hoepfner, Debra Meyer, and Jennifer Rashid provided assistance during the preparation and revisions of this manuscript. Linda Thompson, editor

of the Sage New Perspectives on Family series, and her reviewers provided numerous insightful comments and suggestions that greatly improved the quality of this project; I am indebted to them for their assistance. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the 41 families who volunteered to participate in this project and thank them for their outstanding cooperation. This project was supported in part by a Faculty Research Grant from Oakland University, by a Biomedical Research Grant (S07RR07131) from the National Institutes of Health, and by an Undergraduate Research Grant from the Oakland Alumni Association awarded to Linda A. Mobley and Susan S. Van Tuyl.

—*Robert B. Stewart, Jr.*

PART I

The Problem

The events surrounding the births of our two children were quite different. My wife and I were calmly watching a movie on television when it became apparent that our first experience with labor and delivery was about to begin. We briefly continued our ongoing debate concerning just how one was supposed to time the contractions—from beginning to beginning or from beginning to end—as we wondered whether we would have time to finish watching the movie. My MG-B would not start, but very pregnant women probably should not even try to sit in such a car, so I drove my wife's car. To this day she teases me for driving so slowly to the hospital. Actually, I drove at exactly the speed limit simply because I did not want to be associated with the comic stereotyped scene of the slightly crazed, confused husband racing to the hospital only to pace the floor with other expectant fathers. Besides, the hospital was only a mile away.

The second labor and delivery, approximately two years later, was a nightmare. The pronouncement that it was time to go to the hospital came during dinner, and by then we had resolved our debate concerning the proper timing of contractions (it is from beginning to beginning). Because both of our families lived hundreds of miles away, we had prepared a list of names and phone numbers of people who had volunteered to come at a moment's notice to stay with our son. I began with the first name and worked my way down to the last without reaching a single one. My wife was growing more than just a little uncomfortable and anxious, and our son was showing clear signs of concern as his dad was beginning to lose his cool. I was later amused at the realization that the transition to parenthood certainly was not limited to the birth of a first child. Our second arrived safely, and with her the plans for this research project.

This project represents a synthesis of the methodologies of developmental psychology, family sociology, and systems theory to obtain detailed observational, interview, and assessment data describing familial role adjustments following the birth of a second child. Adjustments in

parent-child, sibling, and marital relations were analyzed using a longitudinal design. The first assessments were obtained during the third trimester of the second pregnancy, and subsequent assessments were made throughout the first year of the second child's life. Even though this project was not developed to test specific hypotheses, a number of questions guided its orientation. Among these were the following:

- (1) Is the birth of a second child perceived by parents to be a stressful event, and do mothers and fathers differ in their perceptions of the magnitude or sources of the stress associated with it?
- (2) How do the members of the family adjust to the new role definitions and demands incurred after the birth of a second child?
- (3) Do parents alter the division of their child-care, infant-care, or household maintenance responsibilities following the birth of the second child?
- (4) Do parents seek a wider social support network following the birth of a second child, and is there an intrafamilial pattern of preferred sources of support, or do mothers and fathers seek and utilize divergent support networks?
- (5) How do various aspects of the parents' support networks and their satisfaction with their adjustments to the second child act to mitigate the stress associated with this period of familial adjustment?

Chapter 1 presents a synopsis of the models serving as theoretical foundations for this project. First, a brief introduction to the central tenets of general systems theory is provided (e.g., Bertalanffy, 1968; Buckley, 1967). This introduction is followed by a more detailed presentation of the primary principles of systems theory (e.g., P. Minuchin, 1985). Examples are drawn from child and family development literature to illustrate these principles. Next, some of the ways other researchers have incorporated systems thought into their studies of families are briefly summarized (e.g., Belsky, 1981; Kaye, 1985; Sameroff, 1983). Finally, the chapter closes with an introduction to the classic ABCX model of family stress (Hill, 1949) and McCubbin and Patterson's (1982, 1983) elaboration of this model. This model will serve to guide our exploration of family transitions associated with the birth of a second child. Readers already familiar with general systems theory, its application to the study of families in general, and the study of familial adjustment to stress in particular may wish to go directly to Chapter 2, which provides a summary of empirical literature relevant to this project.

A brief summary of the literature concerning the transition to parenthood introduces Chapter 2 (e.g., Hoffman, 1978; Rossi, 1968), and then a detailed discussion is presented of six studies that were especially important in shaping this project. These studies include the Shereshefsky and Yarrow (1973), Grossman, Eichler, and Winickoff (1980), and Entwisle and Doering (1981) studies of the first pregnancy, and studies of early parenting conducted by Cowan and Cowan (1987), LaRossa and LaRossa (1981), and Belsky and his associates (e.g., Belsky, Spanier, & Rovine, 1983). Because these projects approached the transition to parenthood from different theoretical and methodological perspectives, a simple integration of their common findings is not appropriate. Instead, a detailed summary of their unique contributions is offered. Speculations concerning how familial adjustment to the birth of a second child may be qualitatively different from that of the initial transition to parenthood are then presented. Two primary themes are addressed in this section of the chapter: (a) the issue of potential increased paternal participation in the family (e.g., Baruch & Barnett, 1986; Crouter, Perry-Jenkins, Huston, & McHale, 1987; Kreppner, Paulsen, & Schuetze, 1982), and (b) the role of the firstborn child in familial adjustment following the birth of a second child who is also his or her sibling (e.g., Dunn, Kendrick, & MacNamee, 1981; Nadelman & Begun, 1982; Stewart, Mobley, Van Tuyl, & Salvador, 1987). The chapter closes with a summary of the primary research objectives of the project.

