



# *Parenting* in the 90s

Jane B. Brooks



# PARENTING IN THE 90s



JANE B. BROOKS

KAISER MEDICAL CENTER



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*To my grandparents and parents,  
my children and their children*

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# PREFACE

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Most Americans say they find their greatest satisfaction and meaning in life in their relationships within the family. It is a source of satisfaction that can last a lifetime. Although family is most significant in our lives, it also is most demanding. Caring for an infant or child requires more commitment, patience, control, and persistence than anything else we will ever do.

We receive little, if any, training or practice in parenting—or for that matter in living within the family unit. Trimming someone's nails for pay or driving a car requires a license to demonstrate the ability to perform the task to some standard. High schools now offer driver-training and vocational classes, yet they seldom provide the parent education that may matter most. Perhaps in the future, as the long-term significance of family relationships and the value of being trained for the parenting task is realized, a course in parenting may become part of the standard high school curriculum.

This book attempts to fill the present gap in our education by examining the tasks parents carry out as they raise children from birth through adolescence. It focuses on the core components of parenting, paying particular attention to rearing children who are comfortable with and able to express their feelings appropriately and who enjoy other people and are able to attend to others' needs and concerns as well as their own. The development of responsibility, self-esteem, and optimism receives special attention.

This book focuses on two basic tasks of parenting—creating closer emotional relationships with children and establishing effective limits for children. It shows how parents carry out these tasks with children of different ages and with changing life circumstances, for example, when both parents work outside the home or when divorce or trauma occur.

In addition to describing what parents do, the book describes how parents feel as they raise children. Stages of parenthood are identified, and interviews with parents provide information about what people wish they had known about parenting before they became parents. In 1948 Arthur Jersild said that most of the interest in parenting was focused on the problems parents experienced, and little attention was given to "the cheerful side of the ledger." This book addresses that imbalance and emphasizes the joys that parents experience.

*Parenting in the 90s* also describes how much has changed over time in response to changing social and economic needs. It examines the stresses that contemporary life places on parents and children alike and identifies supports that can enable parents and children to flourish when we as a society direct our efforts in the cooperative venture of rearing the next generation.

I write this book from the point of view of a parent, a clinician, a researcher, a teacher of parenting. I have the firm conviction that anyone who wishes to invest attention and effort in becoming a competent, caring parent can do so in his or her own way. The single prerequisite is the desire to succeed along with the willingness to invest time and energy, and the results are well worth the effort. My experience as a clinician has shown me that children face many difficult situations; with a loving, supportive caretaker, children can live life fully and happily even if temporarily engulfed by trauma.

Children are not the only ones enriched by adults' efforts to be effective parents. Helping children grow is an intense, exciting experience that brings special meaning for parents. Our physical stamina, agility, and speed increase as we care for infants and toddlers. Our emotional stamina grows as we deal with our own intense feelings with our children and help children learn to express and modulate their feelings. Our intellectual skills grow as we answer young children's questions and later, help them master school subjects. In helping new life grow, we gain for ourselves an inner vitality and richness that affects all our relationships.

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# PARENTING IS A COOPERATIVE VENTURE



## C H A P T E R 1

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*When you first realize that you are about to become a parent, a whole new role begins to take shape in your mind. What does parenting really mean? Is parenting like learning to ride a bike—a process everyone must go through to gain the new skill, responsibility, and freedom? Do most parents plan on becoming parents, or does it just happen to them? If one does plan for parenthood, are there advantages to early timing and later timing of births? How have family structure and childrearing practices evolved throughout the 1900s? As we explore the cooperative venture of parenting, these issues will be examined.*

Four million babies are born in the United States each year.<sup>1</sup> The challenge, for parents and for society, is to rear children to realize their full potential in adulthood. This book describes how parents help children grow to their full capacity. It shows how parents adapt broad guidelines to the age and temperament of a particular child and to the different life circumstances each family encounters. The book also describes the vital role society plays in providing resources and supports to parents as they go about the important task of rearing the next generation.

### WHAT IS PARENTING?

*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*<sup>2</sup> defines a parent in several ways—as a mother or father; as an organism that generates new life; and as a guardian or protector. Combining these definitions, one can define a parent as a person who fosters all facets of a child's growth—nourishing, protecting, guiding new life through the course of development.

The words *protecting* and *guiding* are vague. What do they mean in day-to-day life interactions? Saul Brown presents four main tasks of a family: (1) establishing *basic commitments* to family members, (2) providing *warmth and nurturance* for all members, (3) providing *opportunities* and encouraging the development of individuality, and (4) *facilitating ego mastery and competence*.<sup>3</sup> When these four tasks are related to the process of rearing children, we can describe the parents' main tasks

as establishing warm, nurturant emotional relationships with children and providing opportunities for the development of competence and individuality. Several studies have found that a child's effectiveness is related to a strong emotional tie with a caretaker who stimulates a positive approach to other people and the world and to a consistent set of reasonable limits within which the child is free to explore and to develop skills. The challenge of parenting, then, is to relate to children in ways that stimulate their potentialities for growth and provide appropriate opportunities for experiences that develop these potentialities.

These are researchers' definitions of family and its tasks. What do contemporary Americans think? In a recent survey,<sup>4</sup> 74 percent of adults define family broadly, as "a group of people who love and care for each other." They most value the emotional qualities of family life—the emotional support they get in families, the communication of feelings, the respect family members have for each other, and the responsibility individuals assume for their actions—just the qualities studies find important.

The relationship between parent and child is special, complex, and unique to each parent-child pair. Yet many factors influence the ways in which this highly personal, private relationship develops. A parent brings to the relationship all his or her experiences as a child and an adult as well as hopes and expectations for satisfaction in the relationship. The child, even when only hours old, brings to the relationship inborn characteristics, ways of reacting to the world, that will mold interactions with parents. The parent-child relationship is embedded in a specific family with other members of different ages, and the family lives in a social and cultural milieu that in turn exerts an influence on the family. The parent-child dyad is thus nested in a social group that expands as the child grows and comes into contact with school and other community activities.

## THE PROCESS OF BECOMING PARENTS

Each individual who becomes a parent does so within unique circumstances. Some plan enthusiastically; others become parents without deciding to. Factors including the parent's age, career and social status, economic situation, extended family and community support system make the process of anticipating, having, and raising a child special for each.

### Reasons for Having Children

Erik Erikson, a clinician and theorist who has described lifetime psychological development, believes adults have a basic need to create and nourish new life.<sup>5</sup> If they do not care for someone or something outside themselves, they become stagnant and unproductive. In the past, men gratified generative needs by working and women by raising children. With changes in men's and women's roles, both sexes are free to express creative energies in work and at home with children.

A large 1979 survey reported the most frequent reasons for having children cited by men and women of all ethnic backgrounds, parents and nonparents alike, was a desire for love, interpersonal satisfactions, and close ties to others.<sup>6</sup> A couple who

have a child become a family unit, which is seen as a defense against loneliness, isolation, and anonymity in our society. For women, particularly, children may be primary providers of affection and warmth. Children may be seen as compensation for difficulties between the parents and for lack of affection in the marriage.

The second most frequent set of reasons was desire for stimulation, the novelty children bring to marriage. Children are lively and they keep parents young; it is exciting to see them grow and change. In addition, children may help to keep a balanced perspective in a home because they impose a routine on family life and help parents to forget outside troubles.

A third common reason focused on parenting as a way of developing the self, linking oneself with the community. Rearing children stimulates the development of personal characteristics such as selflessness, responsibility, and sensitivity. In addition, as parents care for children, they express previously untapped talents and develop new abilities. Parents become skilled storytellers, superb negotiators, and spontaneous teachers. Parenthood also expands self-concept by linking the parent to other people in a close family setting and in the larger social community. It is sometimes only because of children that adults take active roles in community activities. Children are also a link with generations yet unseen, and for some parents they provide a sense of immortality.

A fourth reason cited in the survey was to establish that they are stable adults. More than work or marriage, parenthood is regarded as "proof" that an individual is a mature person. Parents, relatives, and friends expect that children will follow marriage, and adults oblige to meet social expectations.

A fifth reason was that children give parents a sense of creativity and achievement. Helping children grow, seeing them surmount the hurdles of childhood, gives parents a sense of accomplishment and competence.

A sixth group of reasons centered on parenthood as an expression of religious and moral beliefs. Many people equate motherhood with virtue and fatherhood with respect and authority. Children are viewed as manifestations of God's blessing and God's will. Individuals not connected with any formal church may consider having children a sign that they are more altruistic, less selfish, and less egocentric than those who remain childless.

A final reason for having children was economic utility. In the past, especially in agrarian societies, children were valued as laborers who contributed to the family's productivity. More recently, grown children have been the caretakers of aged parents and less fortunate relatives, but today these responsibilities are beginning to be assumed by governmental agencies. And now that the cost of raising a child through age eighteen is about \$125,000 for a middle-class family in San Francisco,<sup>7</sup> children are an economic burden rather than a utility.

In addition to the reasons cited in the survey, in some countries and in some North American subcultures, children bring power to the parent, particularly to the mother. Mothers who have been subservient in the marriage relationship may, at times, have the courage to make demands for their children. Both mothers and fathers may derive a sense of power from being responsible for their children. Some adults have few opportunities to achieve power; control over children may give them their only experience of it.