

SECTION 1

What Is Parenting?

OBJECTIVES

- Describe how parents and other caregivers can encourage a child's development.
- Explain the importance of giving children love and support.
- List techniques for communicating positively with children.

TERMS TO LEARN

deprivation
parenting

Many people spend large parts of their lives caring for children. They become parents of their own children, or they care for other parents' children—as teachers, child care workers, doctors, psychologists, or workers in other fields. All these people need parenting skills. These are skills that, unfortunately, no one is born with—but that, fortunately, everyone can learn.

Parenting: A Learning Process

Unlike parenthood, which is simply a state or condition, **parenting** is a process—the process of caring for children and helping them grow and learn.

Parenting is a complicated task. It requires an understanding of a child's needs in all areas, and it requires the family leadership to meet those needs. It involves providing physical care, encouragement, love, support, and guidance. All these should be provided with the goal of helping each child develop to his or her fullest capacity.

How do people qualify to undertake all these tasks? No one has to pass a test to become a parent. There isn't even one right method of parenting. To care for children well, however, a person needs many different parenting skills.

It takes time and practice to develop parenting skills. In addition, the skills a parent or caregiver needs change as children grow up. Infants' needs are different from those of preschoolers or teens. Parents continue to need to adapt their parenting skills at each stage of a child's development. For these reasons, effective caregivers continue to develop parenting skills all their



Parenting begins with physical care, but it does not end there. Love, encouragement, and positive guidance are just as important.

lives. These are some of the steps they take to expand and improve their parenting skills:

- They ask the advice of friends and family members.
- They read books and magazine articles about parenting.
- They observe other parents and children.
- They attend parenting classes.
- They gain experience with children.

Today there is a trend toward more formal training in parenting for those with children of all ages. Parents can take courses in hospitals, at schools, through community organizations, or from private instructors. Many communities have a variety of options for parents who want to learn more about children.

Most of the groups that offer parenting courses do so because they are interested in the healthy growth and development of children. They work to ensure that parents respect the rights of children and know how to nurture, discipline, and guide children in ways that respect these rights.

An important aspect of developing parenting skills is learning to nurture children. A parent or other caregiver nurtures a child by providing encouragement and enriching experiences. Nurturing also involves showing love, support, concern, and understanding.



Parenting courses, offered through hospitals, schools, and community organizations, enable people to learn more about child development and parenting skills.

ASK THE EXPERTS

Learning About Parenting Skills

Q. Where can I go to learn more about effective parenting?

A. You'll be glad to know that there are many different resources for learning effective parenting skills.

You can learn a lot about effective parenting by watching the parents of young children whom you consider healthy and contented, alert, and responsive. When you have the opportunity to observe such a family, notice how the parent responds to the child's words and actions, respects the child as an individual, and shows the child love and care. Notice how the parent comforts a sad child and offers protection and information to a frightened child. Notice, too, how the parent helps an angry child express and deal with his or her emotions. Notice how family members have

sit together, and watch as the parent helps a child celebrate being happy.

Another good way to learn about effective parenting is to discuss the topic with the parent of a child you admire. Ask that parent to tell you about his or her approach to parenting. You might also ask grandparents—yours or someone else's—to explain how parenting is different today from the parenting practices they remember.

If you enjoy reading, you can get ideas about parenting from books, pamphlets, and magazines. Audiotapes and videotapes can also be good resources. Libraries and schools often loan tapes, as

well as books and pamphlets, on many aspects of parenting.

You can also learn a lot about parenting by examining your own childhood. List the things adults did that were helpful for you as a child. Think about how you can do these things to help your own child, in your own way. Then list the things adults did that were not helpful. Consider how you can do things differently, without going too far in the opposite direction.

Learning about parenting is exciting, and it is an undertaking that can last a lifetime.

Jean Illsley Clarke

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Understanding Children

Have you ever heard an adult tell a child, “Act your age”? Children usually *do* act their age. The trouble is, parents and other caregivers often do not understand what to expect from children. Learning about children’s capabilities, interests, and needs at various ages is an essential first step in helping children develop.

Parents and other caregivers need to have realistic expectations. Giving a preschooler a puzzle that is too difficult will frustrate and discourage the child. An understanding parent or caregiver can help guide the child toward a more suitable activity.

Parents and caregivers who have learned about the various stages all children go through are better able to handle the difficult or unsettling stages when they occur. For example, Liz was bewildered at first because her nine-month-old daughter suddenly began crying whenever a stranger approached. As the crying episodes continued, Liz became more and more impatient with the baby. Then she learned from her own mother that all babies go through a stage of stranger anxiety—a development that indicates babies can distinguish new, strange people from their familiar caregivers. From then on, Liz looked on her daughter’s outbursts as a sign of healthy development rather than as a problem.

In addition to recognizing normal patterns of development, parents and other caregivers should learn to understand and respect the differences between children. Some learn to walk earlier than others. Some children need more encouragement to make friends. The more time parents spend interacting with and observing their children, the better they will be able to meet each child’s individual needs.

Providing Enrichment and Encouragement

Part of a parent’s job is to teach children. Parents are children’s first teachers. Children naturally learn by exploring their world, trying new things, and imitating others. Nurturing parents give children the freedom they need in order to learn. They provide positive examples, encouragement, and enriching experiences.

As much as possible, caregivers should eliminate barriers that might prevent children from discovering things on their own. For an infant or a toddler, this means putting away breakable objects, covering up electrical outlets, locking up poisons, and so on. For a preschooler, it might mean letting the child dig for worms without worrying about dirty hands and clothes.



Give children plenty of opportunity for exploratory play. That may mean letting a child get her hands and clothes dirty. The activities that provide the most learning, creativity, and fun are often the messiest.



Enrichment can be provided through everyday objects and experiences. Parents and others who hold and talk to an infant, play with the baby, and give him or her safe objects to look at and handle are stimulating the infant's growth and development. Caregivers can turn daily routines into learning experiences for a child of any age. In a supermarket, for example, a parent can help a three-year-old name objects and colors, smell a ripe pineapple, and learn about how onions grow. A parent might let an older child steer the cart, find certain products, and count change.

Parents should not push children to try activities they are not yet ready for. On the other hand, parents should not hold children back just because they are afraid a child might fail. Trying and failing are part of learning about life. A child's efforts should be acknowledged and praised. Mistakes should be met with understanding and patience. These responses encourage children to try again, no matter what the outcome.

When Children Are Deprived

Unfortunately, some children grow up with parents who have not learned parenting skills and who do not encourage learning. By the time they are four years old, these children are measurably behind others in development. They suffer from *deprivation, the lack of a healthy, nurturing environment.*

The words *deprivation* and *poverty* are sometimes mistakenly used to mean the same thing. Children who are deprived may come from families who are wealthy or poor—or anywhere between. To avoid depriving their children, parents need not money, but the know-how, the concern, and the willingness to make time for teaching.

Fortunately, the effects of deprivation are not irreversible. Development that has been delayed by deprivation can be improved once a child's environment is enriched.

Providing Love and Support

In many ways, nurturing is the same as loving. Love is the sum of the caring and positive things we do for the benefit of others. Children need love just as much as they need food to eat and a place to sleep.

Parents can show children their love in many different ways. Hugs, kisses, and smiles are clear indicators of a parent's love. Listening patiently and attentively is another effective way to show love. This lets children know that parents respect their feelings and are concerned about their ideas and interests. Parents can also show love and support by giving time and attention—helping a child fix a broken toy or discussing ways to get along better with a playmate, for example.

Some parents have difficulty showing affection for their children. They may be embarrassed or feel that displays of affection will make their children "too soft." Without a loving parent's recognition of their accomplishments, however, children feel insecure and worthless. They may resort to inappropriate behavior just to get attention. It is difficult for such children to form healthy relationships because they have never learned how to give and receive love.

Overparenting

Some parents become overprotective and overattentive. They tend to shower the child with too much attention, too many toys, and too many treats. Such a parent makes excuses for the child's inappropriate behavior and tries to shield the child from difficult or unpleasant experiences.

An overprotective parent forgets that children learn from trial and error and that mistakes are an essential part of the growth process. A child who has been overparented continues to seek out adult help. He or she lacks the initiative to try out new things independently. Because parents have always made choices for them, such children may have difficulty making decisions on their own.

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM

Think back to your childhood. What do you remember best about your parents and family life? For many people, it's the little things that mean the most. Going on camping trips, baking holiday cookies, riding bikes, watching a favorite television program, and participating in other daily rituals. These people feel that spending time together and sharing in the little things in life have been some of the most memorable and enriching family experiences.

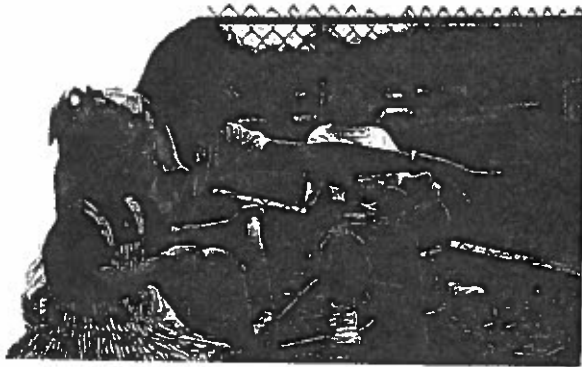
Some parents worry, however, that they don't have enough money to give their children the "fancy" things in life, a special trip, money for clothes, or a new car. Instead, all parents need to remember that the greatest gift for children can't be wrapped in a package or tied with a bow. It's the love that comes from a warm, nurturing, and caring parent—the greatest gift anyone can give to his or her child.



Communicating Positively

Good communication is an important part of the relationship between children and caregivers. Being a good listener is one way to show children that you respect them. The way you talk to children is equally important. Children are most responsive when you speak in kind, respectful tones and use simple language.

Techniques for good communication depend somewhat on a child's age, but include:



- Get on the child's level. Sit or kneel so that you are eye-to-eye with the child.
- Be simple. Use words the child can understand.
- Be clear. Think in terms of the child's point of view.
- Be positive and polite. Hearing a constant series of "don'ts" is discouraging. Try saying, "Please shut the door quietly."
- Give praise and love. Everyone needs to hear good things about themselves, but especially young children. Remember, a smile or hug often says more than words.

Using good communication skills has many benefits. It can help you avoid conflict and misunderstanding. When communication is based on mutual respect and love, children learn to value their own thoughts and ideas. They also learn to respect other people's opinions. Open, trusting communication is the foundation for a good lifelong relationship between parent and child.

SECTION 1 REVIEW

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

1. What is the difference between parenting and parenthood?
2. List four steps caregivers can take to expand and improve their parenting skills.
3. How does a parent or other caregiver nurture a child?
4. What is deprivation?
5. Why is it important for parents to show affection for their children?
6. What is overparenting? What negative effects can overparenting have on children?
7. List five guidelines to follow when communicating with young children.

DISCUSS AND DISCOVER

1. Do you know anyone who seems to be a "natural parent"? If so, what makes you consider that person such a good parent? What do you consider the most important influence on an individual's parenting skills? Why?

Observing & Participating

Observe adults and children in a public place, such as a park, a playground, or a shopping mall. Notice instances in which caregivers encourage a child's natural curiosity. How often do you see this encouragement happening? How successful does it appear to be? Describe other situations in which caregivers provide enrichment through everyday objects and experiences.

