



# Perspectives on the Parent-Child Relationship

## National Clearinghouse on Family Violence

### Preface

Parents and family clinicians alike know that being a parent is an enormous job. Ideally, it's also the most rewarding. Those who work with parents know that family life can be difficult at times: challenges arise, communication breaks down and children and parents need help.

This overview paper provides some of the current research findings that can help clinicians and parents think about how this most important relationship between child and parent can be supported.

Think of this overview paper as “food for thought.” Whether you work with parents and children, or you are a parent yourself, find out what researchers are saying about the parent-child relationship, and examine the needs of your clients or your own family in this light.

### Laying the Groundwork: Relationship Basics

#### The way it was

Until the 1970s, social scientists saw parents as the “socializing agents” who shaped a child’s personality and behaviour. Children were studied and assessed according to how well they complied with their parents’ wishes and demands. This model has been criticized on many fronts, and new research and thinking has contributed to new information to help parents, clinicians and others — including children — understand what is for most people, one of the most intense and important relationships of their lives: the parent-child relationship.<sup>1,2</sup>

## A new way of thinking — the *relational perspective*

New research into the parent-child relationship in recent years recognizes the complex nature of the relationship. In particular, it is clear that parents and children influence *each other*, and that the relationship is much more *dynamic* than was previously thought.<sup>3,4</sup>

A fundamental element of this new perspective – called the relational or bilateral perspective – is that children become socialized by participating in close, enduring personal relationships.<sup>5,6</sup>

The focus is less on specific parenting techniques, and more on the relationship between parent and child as the context in which parent-child interactions must be understood.<sup>7</sup>

The relational perspective raises and discusses new questions:

- What is the nature of the parent-child relationship, and how does it form and change over time?
- How does this relationship differ from other social relationships?<sup>8,9</sup>
- How do various aspects of the relationship influence the way parents and children interact with each other?<sup>10</sup>
- How can families work with this information to improve relationships, and how can family interventions be approached with this new understanding?

While there are not firm answers to all of these questions, examining the recent research can help parents, youth, social workers and guidance counselors deal with the challenging events and times in family life, especially as children grow, develop and become adults themselves.

## What is a personal relationship?

How many times have we heard a parent comment on how a child can be rude or angry at home with parents, but always pleasant to teachers, friends and relatives outside the home? Understanding the nature of the parent-child relationship and how it develops is useful for both practitioners and parents — especially when the relationship is not working well.

A good place to start is with the distinction between a *social interaction* and a *personal relationship*. Two people engaging in a

### *About relationships*

- A personal relationship is formed between two people as they accumulate a history of interactions.
- A personal relationship is constantly changing as new interactions occur.
- In a parent-child relationship, both people contribute to the formation and on-going development of the relationship — and each influences the other.
- Each parent brings a “history” to the relationship, and each child and parent has their own personality and temperament.
- The parent-child relationship has a past, a present and a future.

social interaction for the first time do not have a relationship. A relationship begins to form between them as they accumulate a *history of interactions* and *anticipations* of a future relationship. As they develop and grow, relationships are constantly changing because each new interaction adds to the relationship which, in turn, influences future interactions.<sup>11</sup>

### *Parents contribute . . .*

In the parent-child relationship, both parents and children actively contribute to the formation of their relationships. Each parent brings a history and memories of early experiences with his or her own parents into the relationships that they form with their children. As well, each parent has her/his own personality and character traits that affect (positively and negatively) their relationship and interaction with their child. So as parents are raising and caring for their children, they are also responding to their children's interactions with them.<sup>12</sup>

### *. . . and so do children*

While parents take the lead in creating the relationship with children when they are very young, children still play an active role. Even the youngest babies communicate with their parents — in fact, they are biologically prepared to do just that. Just as parents bring a personality to the relationship, so do babies.<sup>13,14</sup> Their unique temperaments affect how they relate to their parents. From the beginning, children work to make sense of the relationships they have with their mother and father, and to develop their own mental representations of the relationships.<sup>15</sup> The relationships develop a history from which children and parents anticipate the future.

Because each child will experience a unique history of interaction with each parent, the relationship a child forms with a mother will be different from the relationship a child forms with a father.<sup>16</sup>

## **The Nature of the Parent-Child Relationship**

Of particular interest are the elements or components of the relationship, and how they work together. A closer look at these components can foster awareness and understanding of how and why children and parents interact the way they do. As problems arise in the relationship they can be examined and handled in light of solid information about how this unique relationship works.

Taken together, the following key components of the parent-child relationship reflect its dynamic nature, as well as its complexities. They include the following:

1. the enduring nature of the parent-child relationship
  2. the interdependence of the parent and child
  3. the multi-dimensional nature of the parent-child relationship
1. **The enduring nature of the parent-child relationship**

As children grow older and the number of interactions between parent and child increases, the relationship is shaped by numerous discussions, events and activities. The great times, the bad times and the day-to-day conversations are blended to form the parent-child relationship. There grows enough "his-

tory” for both parent and child to be able to predict how each is likely to react and behave in a given situation. Both parents and children use that information in the relationship.<sup>17,18</sup>

For example, a parent and a 10-year-old child have had 10 years of experiences with each other — a history that enables the parent and child to know each other’s personalities, likes and dislikes and to predict how each will react and behave in a given situation. The parent may have a good idea of what will work for a particular child and, likewise, a child may be able to predict how to influence a parent. In contrast, think about a new step-parent with the same 10-year-old child. Without a shared history, their interactions may be awkward until the relationship has a chance to develop.<sup>19</sup>

Research shows that parents interact with children with two kinds of goals in mind: short-term goals such as getting children to cooperate with their instructions, and long-term goals that are made possible by the long-term relationship. These include promoting children’s development of skills and values and supporting children’s development of independence and appropriate self-expression. Parents also want to relate in a way that does not damage their future relationship with their children.<sup>20</sup>

## 2. **Interdependence — it’s a two-way street**

A second major component of the parent-child relationship is the interdependence of parent and child. A relationship is considered to be interdependent when there is evidence of *strong interconnections* and *mutual influence* between

two people.<sup>21,22</sup> What better example than the relationship between parents and their children? Parents’ behaviours, thoughts, and emotions depend on those of their children. Each person’s reactions *matter* to the other. Even though parents are more powerful and knowledgeable than children, it is difficult to determine who influences whom the most.<sup>23</sup> Research shows that children are more confident that they can influence their own parents than other adults with whom they are not as close.<sup>24</sup>

### *Good news, bad news*

Interdependence makes parents and children receptive to each other’s influence...it also makes them both vulnerable to their pressure.

Interdependence also means that parents and children have both shared goals and separate and conflicting goals. As a result, parents and children experience stronger emotions in their interactions, cooperate with each other to a greater extent, and have more frequent disagreements than people who do not have a close relationship.<sup>25</sup>

## 3. **The complex and multidimensional nature of the parent-child relationship**

Every parent knows that parenting involves everything from being a playmate, to providing moral guidance, to ensuring good eating habits and providing shelter and clothing. The varied and many responsibilities, and the demands they place on parents mean that the parent-child relationship is particularly complex — and parents follow different rules for interacting with their children than they do in other relationships.<sup>26</sup>

Of particular interest are the functions of *attachment*, *authority* and *intimacy* that form part of every parent-child relationship.<sup>27</sup> What form these functions take and how they interact are worth examining more closely as they provide useful information about what parts of a parent-child relationship are working well, and where improvements or adjustments might be made.

While there is no single “recipe” for achieving a good parent-child relationship, a rewarding relationship often includes the best of all three functions, as set out below:

*A secure attachment of child to parent . . .* is associated with a child’s healthy social development. Secure attachments are formed when parents reliably respond to their child’s need for comfort, care and communication.<sup>28</sup> The child comes to expect that parents will be a source of help, safety and comfort. Other, less healthy forms of attachment can be formed — including those that are characterized as anxious, avoidant or disorganized. These may form when parents habitually ignore or misunderstand their children’s needs.<sup>29</sup>

*An authoritative parenting style . . .* is formed when the parents’ knowledge and power are used flexibly so parents’ behaviour and action is adjusted to the temperament and developmental stage of the child, as well as to the requirements of everyday situations. The authoritative style is ideal, while three other styles are less desirable — authoritarian (parents use their power in a rigid and unresponsive manner), permissive (parents fail to use their authority when it is in the child’s best interests to do so) and neglectful (parents simply

ignore their responsibilities to the child).<sup>30</sup>

*An intimate relationship . . .* results when both parent and child contribute to a shared feeling of closeness and pleasure in the relationship.<sup>31</sup> It is based on mutual enjoyment, companionship and shared ideas.<sup>32</sup> Power tends to be used more equally — when parents and children play, talk and spend time together.<sup>33</sup> With young children, parents need to communicate and play at a level that their children can understand.<sup>34</sup> As children grow older, the relationship can evolve so that parents and children seek out each others’ company for its own sake. With this pattern of communication established, teenage children may find it easier to talk to their parents and to share a close relationship with them, even as they strive to become independent.<sup>35</sup>

*Bringing it all together . . .* Research indicates that what happens in one area of the relationship affects what happens in other areas. For example, associations have been found between children’s feelings of security and safety, parental love and nurturing, and children’s cooperation with parental demands when parents exercise their authority.<sup>36</sup> This research suggests that children’s willingness to cooperate and comply to parents does not solely depend on parents’ use of discipline techniques and control strategies. An important component of children’s willingness to cooperate comes from their experiences in aspects of the relationship outside of parental authority.<sup>37</sup>

Setting limits and enforcing rules, which is an important part of being a parent, often involves conflict and may intrude

on feelings of intimacy and closeness that a parent may wish to maintain in the relationship.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, what is lost during one interaction may be gained on another. With so many opportunities to work on and improve the relationship, no one interaction needs to be a concern.

## Five Things to Think About

What can clinicians, service providers and parents reading this overview paper learn from the emerging research? Five things stand out:

- *The parent-child relationship is extremely important, and unique.* Its enduring nature, the contributions of both child and parent, and the varied and complex functions of the relationship all make the relationship very different from other adult-child relationships. Children and their parents have a past, present and future relationship that continues to evolve as the child and parent develop and learn from their experiences with each other.
- *Above all, children want and need a close, caring relationship with their parents.* The relationship with their parents will shape their future family relationships, and will help determine how they relate to friends and teachers outside the home.<sup>39</sup> Children are socialized within close relationships.
- *When parents have good relationships with their children and are responsive to them, children are more cooperative and receptive to their parents' influence and*

the whole process of child-rearing is much easier.<sup>40</sup>

- *Parent-child relationships are important for parents too.* Parents around the world report that the main reason they wanted children in the first place was for the enjoyment, opportunities for growth, and companionship that these relationships would bring.<sup>41,42</sup>
- *A good relationship can last for a lifetime.* The quality of the relationship parents have with their children as they get older depends on the quality of their past experiences and interactions with them.<sup>43</sup>

Creating good, personal parent-child relationships can be challenging. The parent-child relationship incorporates elements of longevity, closeness, and interdependence and it combines the contributions of both parents and children. Creating good relationships takes effort — relationships have to be nurtured. To create good, strong relationships, which are secure, authoritative and intimate parents need to be responsive to their children's needs and respectful of their unique personalities and temperaments.

## A Note to Clinicians and Researchers

Increasingly, traditional child management approaches, which focus on children's compliance, are being challenged. New directions in therapeutic interventions attempt to integrate knowledge about the complexities of family life and, in particular, the long-term relationship context in which parents and children interact and develop.

The *relational perspective* presented in this overview paper takes into consideration how the parent-child relationship influences the ways in which parents and children interact with each other. Past and future dimensions of the relationship and the interdependent nature of the relationship may introduce dynamics into parent-child interactions that would not be expected in interactions between unrelated adults and children.

## Suggested Resources

The following provide ideas, tips and information on parenting through the ages and stages of childhood:

- [www.attachmentcrosscultures.org](http://www.attachmentcrosscultures.org) — information about attachment practices across cultures
- [www.babyparenting.about.com/cs/infantbonding/](http://www.babyparenting.about.com/cs/infantbonding/) — information about parenting babies and toddlers
- [www.parenthelpline.ca](http://www.parenthelpline.ca) — the Parent Help Line – toll-free: 1-888-603-9100
- Ready or Not — a parenting program, which can be borrowed through Health Canada’s Interlibrary Loan program. Visit: [www.hc-sc.gc.ca/nc-cn](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/nc-cn) and click on “library” under “Quick Links” or contact the NCFV at 1-800-267-1291. Ask your local library to arrange the loan.
- Health Canada’s Family Support Page offers a number of resources, including information about parenting younger children and teens. Visit: [www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/childhood-youth/cyfh/family\\_support/index.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/childhood-youth/cyfh/family_support/index.html)

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