



Joy D. Osofsky

This section of the *WAIMH Handbook of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health* focuses on Parenting and Caregiving, a topic that is crucial for infant and early childhood development. As Donald Winnicott shared many years ago, “there is no such thing as a baby... a baby cannot exist alone but is essentially part of a relationship” (Bonaminio & Fabozzi, 2016; Handling, 2023, p. 88). The quality of parenting that a child receives is one of the most important factors influencing development (Collins et al., 2000). In this section, a range of issues for parenting and caregiving are described beginning with the importance of the attachment relationship and ways to understand and enhance child and parent/caregiver interactions. Chapters also consider risk factors for the early relationship that influence infant development and the growing relationship including disorganized attachment, exposure to trauma, substance use, adolescent parenting, and other factors. Importantly, this section on parenting and caregiving includes fathering as well as mothering, a cross-cultural consideration of co-parenting and intergenerational parenting, and parents of diverse gender identities. We also learn about the importance of integrating infant and early childhood mental health into pediatric practice and pri-

mary care reaching out to young children and parents or caregivers using a population health perspective and behavioral health prevention.

In the first chapter, Thompson reviews central ideas and findings about attachment theory that are central for understanding parenting and caregiving. He shares information about caregiver sensitivity and relational security which are important to understand in relation to attachment including caregiver sensitivity and emotional availability that contribute to psychological well-being. He continues to describe attachment as a relational construct and considers multiple attachments and the impact of relationships on relationships. The chapter contributes to the reader’s understanding of both prevention and treatment programs by elaborating on attachment-informed early childhood mental health. Paquette and Puentes-Newman in Chap. 17 emphasize the important role of fathers and their children from the perspective of the Activation Relationship. While they agree that parent-child intervention has been guided by attachment theory, they also emphasize that the issue of parental competence has mainly been considered from the perspective of the mother-child relationship. They continue by stating that the absence of a theory-driven model of fathering has led to a lack of specific interventions focusing on the important father-child relationship. However, they assert that with the development of the activation relationship theory in 2004,

J. D. Osofsky (✉)
Departments of Pediatrics and Psychiatry,
Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center,
New Orleans, LA, USA
e-mail: jsofs@lsuhsc.edu

more theoretical ideas have been developed and research done about different ways to intervene with fathers. In this chapter, they share the emergence and development of the activation relationship theory and describe and consider an early intervention program involving father-child dyads. Expanding on understanding of attachment theory, Beebe in Chap. 18 provides a view from microanalysis by sharing drawings of the origins of disorganized infant attachment. Using microanalysis, her work provides more details of the process of mother-infant communication than can be seen using observational data. In her chapter, she illustrates this approach with drawings of the findings from research on the 4-month origins of 12-month disorganized (vs. secure) attachment. Using microanalysis of film frames that disguised the identity of the mothers, she illustrates how through emotional and bodily expressions, they were able to identify the origins of secure attachment and disorganized attachment. Beebe shares that this careful analysis can be used to guide a more thorough understanding of relational function and help develop clinical interventions.

The next chapter by Hennigar and Cabrera presents an additional perspective on the important influence of fathers on infant development. They synthesize the available empirical evidence, primarily from the United States, about the influence of fathers on children's development during the first 3 years of life. Using a careful theoretical and methodological approach, they share available evidence on theoretically based conclusions about father effects. Then they present empirical evidence on fathers' direct impact on children's social and emotional, language, cognitive, pre-academic, and physical development. An important component of their work is to share individual and family-level characteristics that explain variations in fathering behaviors. After the two chapters that focus on fathers, McHale in Chap. 20 discusses co-parenting theory, research, and practice emphasizing that around the world from different cultural perspectives, infants and toddlers are cared for and socialized in multi-person family collectives. The experiences of young

children in multi-person families may differ in relation to adult participation, containment, and teamwork in dealing with and responding to child-related conflict. A multiple family-level environment and atmosphere can be experienced by children as protective but also confusing at times. McHale emphasizes there is now further readiness of professionals to assess co-parenting and to pay more attention to its importance and developmental impact.

Parenting and caregiving also include high-risk situations such as adolescent parenthood that can bring multiple developmental challenges for mothers and young children described in Chap. 21 by Sydney Hans. While young mothers often experience economic hardship, difficulties with permanent housing, and social stigma, it is also important to understand the positive aspects of adolescents as young mothers. Hans examines the supports and stressors adolescent mothers experience with their families, in relation to the children's fathers, and from institutions designed to help them. Also described are infant mental health programs that have been successful in supporting young parents. Another topic considered about parenting and caregiving by Patterson in Chap. 22 relates to parents' sexual orientation and continues to be controversial. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) adults are also parents. Questions have been raised about whether LGBTQ adults can be capable parents and if their children grow up in healthy ways. Considered in this chapter are the factors that contribute to positive functioning and development for children with LGBTQ parents. Findings from social science research suggest that LGBTQ parents are successful in their roles as parents and their children grow up in positive ways. This work is important as research has shown that sexual orientation and gender identity do not in themselves influence success in parenting or child development. Implications of research findings for law and policy around the world are discussed.

Moving to understand a different perspective and approach to parenting and caregiving, Campbell and colleagues in Chap. 23 explain the

role of mentalization in infant development. Mentalizing caregivers respond with contingent and marked affective displays of their own experience in response to the child's subjective experience enabling the child to develop second-order representations of his or her own subjective experiences. Further, the development of mentalizing for the infant and young child may help them develop openness to cultural learning supporting social functioning. Another perspective on parenting is presented by Broesch in Chap. 24 focusing on mutual joy and socialization between caregivers and infants that occurs across cultural boundaries.

She shares that mutual joy and shared social interaction provide the foundation from which the infant develops a sense of agency, identity, and self-worth.

Although not always emphasized sufficiently, Briggs and colleagues in Chap. 25 describe the Healthy Steps model as a unique opportunity for prevention and intervention by sharing and integrating in the pediatric and primary care arenas principles of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) to reach a broad range of children and families. The Healthy Steps Model described in this chapter adapts the IECMH framework to the pediatric and primary care setting by using competencies aligned with the IECMH consultant work and principles from both population health and behavioral health prevention.

Returning to concern about high-risk populations, in Chap. 26, Jones Harden, Osofsky, and Alexander focus on the effects of trauma on parenting and caregiving which can range from a young child experiencing an accident to abuse and neglect. Evidence indicates that high rates of maltreatment have been associated with immediate and long-term impairments in mental and physical health and that experiencing trauma can have a deleterious effect on parenting. Further inequities are apparent related to available support which has been shown to be important to improve mental health and capacity to support children.

Tronick and Hunter in Chap. 27 emphasize the need to rethink early childhood trauma as a developmental process rather than having a dom-

inant psychopathological perspective. They argue that the lack of a developmental process diminishes the value of trauma theory and the effectiveness of trauma-informed processes. Rather, they suggest that a guide for therapy for both children and adults exposed to trauma would be to consider the development of meaning. Then a therapeutic approach following trauma would effectively let the individual control the process that is implemented in multiple ways that engage every level of functioning.

In Chap. 28, Kelm, Level, and Eiden address the important issue of parental substance use and abuse that impacts not only negative parental behaviors and exposure to different types of traumatic experiences for young children, but also the teratogenic effects of prenatal exposure on the young child's development. More positively, they consider current and future directions for early intervention.

Summary and Key Points

The section on Parenting and Caregiving begins with a consideration of the importance of the attachment relationship for the infant and young child's development that will impact whether development goes well or contributes to significant risk factors. We learn more about new ways to study secure and disorganized attachment using microanalysis. Risk factors are detailed in several chapters in this section, including the effects of trauma on development, substance use, and the increased risk factors of adolescent parenting. Another chapter also considers a reconsideration of early childhood trauma as a dynamic developmental process. This comprehensive section related to parenting emphasizes the importance of fathers, co-parenting, and the impact of intergenerational parenting on infant and early childhood development. As a part of the emphasis on the importance of early intervention, there is also a suggestion to expand the reach of infant and early childhood mental health by integrating mental health concerns in multiple disciplines including pediatrics and primary care. This section

emphasizes that broadening an understanding of parenting and caregiving in infancy and early childhood to support positive attachment relationships may be done in many different ways to benefit young child development.

References

- Bonaminio, V. & Fabozzi, P. (2016). *The collected works of D.W. Winnicott: 1946–1951*. Volume 3. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Collins, W. A., Maccoby, E. E., Steinberg, L., Hetherington, E. M., & Bornstein, M. H. (2000). Contemporary research on parenting: The case for nature and nurture. *American Psychologist*, *55*(2), 218–232. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.2.218>
- Handling. (2023). International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis. Retrieved November 15, 2023 from Encyclopedia.com: <https://www.encyclopedia.com/psychology/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/handling>