



Future Directions for Research, Policy, and Practice

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Introduction

The chapters in this book have covered some of the most important theoretical and empirical findings relating to parenting and the parent–child relationship in the context of child development across the lifespan. The topics have ranged from whether and *how* parents influence child development, to the *impact* of parenting on various domains of children’s development, to the varied tasks of parenting across the lifespan. While we have gained incredible insights into many aspects of parenting and child development in the past decades, it is clear that there are still many areas to work on. Each chapter provided an overview of key future research and policy directions, describing some of the central areas for development within each specific domain or topic area. In this final chapter, we wanted to share our thoughts on what we view as some of the most pressing areas which require additional work from researchers, practitioners, and policy makers.

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Future Directions for Research

Expanding the Lifespan Perspective on Parenting and the Parent–Child Relationship

As the chapters in this volume overwhelmingly demonstrate, parenting matters to children’s development, across a multitude of domains, and the effects are evident throughout the child’s life course. The effects of parenting begin in the earliest moments of a child’s life, while they are still a fetus in their mother’s womb. The choices, decisions, behaviors, emotions, and cognitions parents make in these earliest days influence their child’s development, and likewise the child influences the parent. While the tasks of parenting are vastly different in some respects when comparing a fetus in the womb, to a toddler, to an adolescent, to an adult child, there are also many commonalities over time. For example, while the form of the task may change over time and development, the importance of secure attachment, positive parent–child relationships, and effective communication are relevant, irrespective of the child’s age.

What is striking in Part IV of the book is that while it is clear that the tasks and challenges of parenting extend from pregnancy through to old age, there is a considerable paucity of research which captures the lifespan perspective on parenting and the parent–child relationship. We have

considerable, although still incomplete, understanding of parenting and parent–child relationships in the early years of life (Mihelic & Morawska, 2018; Staples & Bates, 2018; Kirby & Hodges, 2018), reflecting numerous calls in both research and policy about the importance of the first 3 years of life and early childhood development (e.g., see Berg, 2016). An emerging body of work on adolescent development, parenting of adolescents, as well as converging evidence from parenting intervention research (Ralph, 2018), have recently begun to expand the literature on parenting beyond early childhood. However, while the parenting role clearly does not stop when children become adults, the literature on parenting of young adults and beyond is sparse, and there is a significant gap in our understanding and knowledge of how parents influence their children during later life stages.

Another component that is missing in considering a life course perspective on parenting and child development, is the reciprocal influences between parents and children. The chapter by Sanson, Letcher, and Havighurst (2018) highlighted these influences in the early development of children, however, limited work has been done with older children and their parents. Crucially, what is important to consider here is not only how children and parents influence each other, but also how these effects evolve and change over time, and affect the development of *both* parent and child. Becoming a parent is known to affect various aspects of a parent's life both positively and negatively (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003), and while some of the effects are transient (e.g., sleep deprivation), others have potentially long lasting effects (e.g., changes in social support). As the child continues on their developmental pathway into adulthood and beyond, their parent continues to develop alongside, yet we know relatively little about this process of development or its effect on children or parents. While Sanson and colleagues (2018) noted in their chapter that these reciprocal influences appear to be small in effect, they also described a number of limitations in the literature which might explain why the effects are not more evident. We would add to these, that the absence of a life course perspective on child and parent

development may cloud the picture and hide important effects. Studies which examine the concurrent development of parent and child across longer periods in development, and which consider the ecological context within which development occurs are needed to address this important area.

The Cultural Context of Parenting

Only one chapter in this volume (Fung, Wong, & Park, 2018) explicitly examined the effect of culture as a determinant of parenting, and provided an overview of how culture influences children's development. However, many of the others chapters explored the influence of culture on specific areas of development (for example see Kirby & Hoang, 2018), and even more noted the considerable gap in the literature in our understanding of culture and its role in parenting and child development. A recent article by Nielsen, Haun, Kärtner, and Legare (2017) provided a critical review of the persistent and continuing bias in developmental research, with an overreliance on participants from high-resource settings, who represent a minority of the world's children and parents. Likewise in the parenting intervention literature, while considerable progress has been made in adapting and testing interventions across cultures (Gardner, Montgomery, & Knerr, 2016), much work remains to be done (Mejia, Leijten, Lachman, & Parra-Cardona, 2017).

Our knowledge of how child development and parenting is similar or different across cultures remains limited. More importantly, in our rapidly globalizing world, as the ecological context around families evolves and changes, parents and children are exposed to a variety of new ideas and practices, some of which may be inconsistent with their values and beliefs. How parents navigate these changes, how they integrate new ideas and balance these with their valued cultural practices and beliefs is likely to have important implications for children's development. Moreover, as children themselves grow up in a rapidly changing environment, where the knowledge, skills, and practices of their parents and grandparents

can appear to be outdated and inconsistent with the world around them, the importance of communication and relationships between parents and children becomes ever more important. Research is far behind in explaining the role of culture in development (Nielsen et al., 2017), and even more so in understanding how our changing environment influences parenting, and in helping parents respond effectively to this rapidly shifting world.

The Role of Fathers

This book is about parenting and its role in influencing child development across the lifespan. When we think of parenting, we mean it to reflect *both* mothers and fathers.¹ When we talk about parenting intervention, we believe it is relevant for mothers *and* fathers. However, as discussed by Keown, Franke, and Kaur (2018), the majority of the work in child development, parenting, and parenting interventions has been conducted with mothers. The evidence to date clearly indicates that fathers independently affect children's development (Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid, & Bremberg, 2008) and research on fathers is increasingly coming to the fore. However, there are still many gaps in our understanding of how fathers affect children's development; how children influence their fathers; how fathers' and mothers' parenting is similar or different and how it may complement each other; how fathers' parenting changes over the life course; and how fathers engage with and benefit from parenting interventions.

One of the important aspects to consider in any discussion of fatherhood is the fact that the role of fathers, and perceptions about traditional gender roles have changed dramatically in the past few decades. This is not to say that actual

¹We also recognize that parenting is more broadly defined, and includes a variety of family configurations such as single parents, LGBTQ parents, extended family and carers who are not necessarily kin to the child, and we certainly do not dismiss their role or importance. In this section, we simply want to focus attention specifically on the role of fathers.

gender roles or stereotypes have kept pace with these changing perceptions (Haines, Deaux, & Lofaro, 2016; Humphreys, 2016), and the notion that mothers are particularly suited to parenting and the concomitant primary responsibility for childrearing that mothers take on remains characteristic of many societies (Craig & Mullan, 2011; Tiitinen & Ruusuvuori, 2014). Likewise, mothers continue to be much more likely to attend parenting programs, and evaluations of the effects of such interventions for fathers are limited (e.g., Fletcher, Freeman, & Matthey, 2011). However, many fathers are very involved in childrearing and do see their role quite differently to their own fathers, yet societal perceptions, structures and services do not necessarily support their involvement. Sociological research (e.g., Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000; Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000) provides ample evidence of these changing perceptions and roles, and has potential to inform research and policy. Integration of sociological research with research on child development, and evidence based parenting interventions has the potential to provide a more grounded and father focused approach to parenting.

Research on parenting and child development needs to refocus and address these changing parental roles in order to ensure that adequate support and services are available to all families and children. A stronger emphasis on joint or coparenting, as compared to mothering or fathering, and more work on how families share parenting responsibilities in a changing environment are also likely to be important.

Parent and Child Self-Regulation

Self-regulation refers to the capacity to guide one's own goal-directed activities over time and across changing circumstances. Understanding self-regulation has been identified as "the single most crucial goal for advancing an understanding of development and psychopathology" (Posner & Rothbart, 2000). As discussed by Baker (2018), it is a multidimensional concept that includes emotion management, effortful

control, focusing and shifting attention, and inhibiting and activating behavior (Karreman, van Tuijl, van Aken, & Deković, 2006). Early differences in self-regulation are implicated in a developmental cascade leading to a range of short and long term outcomes. Self-control in early childhood predicts adult outcomes ranging from criminal convictions, poorer health and academic outcomes, and lower income (Moffitt et al., 2011). These differences are stable from toddlerhood into the preschool years and beyond (Kim & Kochanska, 2012).

Meta-analyses show that parent use of positive parenting strategies (e.g., guidance) is associated with better child self-regulation, while use of negative parenting strategies (e.g., coercive behaviors) is associated with weaker child self-regulation (Karreman et al., 2006). Early sensitive and responsive parenting may be particularly important for children with more difficult temperaments (Kim & Kochanska, 2012). *Changes in parental self-regulation* may trigger changes in parenting behaviors, and the capacity for self-regulation is seen as a fundamental process supporting the maintenance of nurturing, non-coercive parenting practices (Sanders & Mazzucchelli, 2013). It is assumed that a parent who has high self-regulatory skills is capable of changing their own behavior in a planned, self-initiated and deliberate manner in response to cues and information regarding the current needs of their children. The parent has confidence in their own ability to manage the day-to-day tasks of parenting and to problem solve when difficulties arise. However, parenting interventions have generally not directly evaluated parental self-regulation and how such interventions may improve this important capability in a way to best promote children's development.

Furthermore, interventions to improve child self-regulation are generally child focused and have shown limited effects (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Eggum, 2010), yet to date few parenting intervention trials have examined self-regulatory outcomes in either parents or children. Given the increasing focus on the importance of self-regulatory skills, effective interventions that enhance these capabilities in both parents and children are essential.

Mechanisms of Change in Parenting Interventions

Parenting interventions (described in Part V of this volume) are well-established, evidence-based prevention and intervention approaches for child behavioral and emotional problems (Chorpita et al., 2011). We know that they produce positive changes in both parent and child. A multitude of programs, with a variety of delivery modalities, targeting a range of populations and problems, have been evaluated and disseminated (Lundahl, Risser, & Lovejoy, 2006; Sanders, Kirby, Tellegen, & Day, 2014). Yet, after over 50 years of research, we do not know *how* they work. We do know that most parents do not engage with parenting interventions (Morawska, Ramadewi, & Sanders, 2014); many practitioners do not use them (Kazdin & Blase, 2011); and dropout rates are as high as 50% or more (Morawska & Sanders, 2006).

The majority of evidence-based parenting interventions are based on the same underlying principles (e.g., social learning theory) and are similarly structured, but vary dramatically in length (1–20+ sessions; Serketich & Dumas, 1996). But if a single session intervention leads to the same outcomes as an 8- or 20-session program (e.g., Sanders et al., 2014), why do we waste time and money on more intensive interventions? A big part of the answer is that we do not know *how and when* the desired change occurs. Without understanding how interventions work, we undermine our ability to maximize benefits to family and community well-being and deliver services in the most effective and efficient ways.

While recent meta-analytic work has identified specific effective elements of behavioral parenting interventions (Kaminski, Valle, Filene, & Boyle, 2008), this has largely focused on program content, not process. Understanding the process that accounts for change in parenting interventions will help optimize program targets, for example, should we place more focus on parental self-efficacy or specific parenting behaviors? Insight into the critical elements of parenting interventions will facilitate the development of briefer, more effective, less costly programs.

Many parenting programs have been evaluated, yet translation of research into practice remains a major challenge (Kazdin & Blase, 2011). To translate intervention research into service settings and therefore to generalize the effects into practice we need to know what is required to make programs work, what are the optimal conditions, and what components must not be diluted to achieve change (Eyberg, Nelson, & Boggs, 2008; Kazdin, 2007).

The Impact of Positive Parenting on Children's Biology

While in some ways the nature vs. nurture debate was long laid to rest, with the consensus that both our genetic endowment and the environment in which we grow up, play a role in our development, an understanding of *how* these factors interact to create a unique individual is only recently emerging. Spurred by developments in gene sequencing, neuroimaging technologies, and rapid and low-cost physiological assessment, our knowledge of how development plays out at the biological level is greatly increasing. Likewise, we are seeing how psychosocial interventions focused on parenting can lead to long-term neurobiological changes in children (e.g., Brody, Yu, Chen, & Miller, 2017; Miller, Brody, Yu, & Chen, 2014).

There is much we do not know. As discussed by Posner and Rothbart (2018), evidence for effects of parenting on children's brain development is currently lacking. Similarly, as briefly outlined by Morawska and Mitchell (2018), while there is emerging evidence on the links between parenting and biological markers of children's health, this is a new area of research which has not yet been conducted in a systematic way. Better understanding of the interacting biological and psychosocial mechanisms, placed within an ecological context, has the potential to not only expand our knowledge of normal human development, but also to apply this knowledge in providing interventions to enhance the capabilities of all children, and to provide tailored services in situations where children experience

difficulties in social, emotional, behavioral, or health domains. Furthermore, better integration across the various factors contributing to children's development is likely to allow for the development of more comprehensive, inclusive, complementary, and effective solutions to assist parents in their parenting role.

Future Directions for Policy and Practice

A Systems-Contextual Approach to Parenting Support

Throughout this volume, numerous individual authors have emphasized the critical importance of viewing parenting within a wider ecological context. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model has resonated with many and is a particularly useful frame of reference when considering how the various contexts that impinge on parents' lives can be used positively to design population level parenting interventions. A systems-contextual perspective views parenting as involving a socially embedded series of relationships within multiple interacting systems. As children develop, a parent engages with a wider range of social influence contexts that can affect parents both positively and negatively. These contexts include interactions with extended family, neighbors, media including social media, and formal contacts with health, education, and social service professionals. The quality of parent's social connections influences whether parents feel included or isolated, coerced, criticized, or supported in their parenting role. It is through these various contacts that parents are socialized into the role of being a parent and are exposed to new information, support, and role models about how to raise children.

Parenting programs can potentially use all of these settings or contexts to support parents and children to make them more accessible and easier to participate in. For example, successful parenting programs have been run in mental health facilities, primary health care settings, workplaces, childcare and school settings, neighborhood

centers, public libraries, online, via webinars, and videoconferencing. The main advantage of having parenting support accessible in multiple contexts is that parents have more options to fit around their lifestyles and hours of work and there is greater consistency of messaging about parenting across agencies.

Towards Integration of Prevention and Treatment Programs

Parenting interventions fall on a spectrum that ranges from universal, indicated, and targeted prevention programs through to programs that are part of the treatment, management, relapse prevention, and rehabilitation of individuals with specific mental health problems. These interventions in both the prevention and treatment space range in intensity from light touch or low intensity parenting interventions (e.g., one session parenting seminars and topic specific discussion groups) to more intensive multi-session treatment programs for children and parents with serious or chronic mental health problems (Sanders, Burke, Prinz, & Morawska, 2017). It is tempting to assume that parenting programs focusing on treatment are likely to be more intensive and complex than prevention programs. However, some targeted prevention programs involve intensive, multisession home visiting programs with at risk mothers of newborns and can involve many hours of intervention over a period of years with varied patterns of attendance (Holland, Olds, Dozier, & Kitzman, 2017). Conversely, some relatively brief, low-intensity interventions such as Triple P online have been successfully deployed with parents with chronic mental health problems undergoing online CBT intervention for bipolar disorder (e.g., Jones et al., 2017), and parents of children with complex problems such as ADHD (e.g., Franke, Keown, & Sanders, 2018). The main issue is that increasing evidence is emerging that complex problems can sometimes respond well to less intensive and expensive to deliver interventions.

Adopting a Population Approach

There has been increasing advocacy for the value of parenting programs to adopt a whole of population perspective, to both prevent child maltreatment (e.g., Prinz & Neger, 2017), and to reduce the prevalence rates of serious social, emotional, and behavioral problems in children (Sanders, 2012). Sanders and Prinz (2018) identified the key parent and child outcomes that a population approach to parenting support seeks to accomplish: (1) to increase the number of parents who have the necessary knowledge, skills, and confidence to parent their children and adolescents well, by increasing the number of parents who complete an evidence-based, culturally appropriate parenting program; (2) to increase the number of children and adolescents who are thriving socially, emotionally, and academically; (3) to decrease the number of children and adolescents who develop serious social, emotional, and behavioral problems; and (4) to decrease the number of children and adolescents who are maltreated or at risk of being maltreated by their parents. A population approach seeks to achieve these outcomes by making high quality, evidenced-based parenting support programs widely available to all parents. The population approach involves examining the effects of an intervention by tracking population level data on relevant child outcomes such as rates of child maltreatment, hospitalization and injuries due to maltreatment or out-of-home placements, or other relevant administrative data (Prinz, Sanders, Shapiro, Whitaker, & Lutzker, 2009).

A Consumer and End-User Driven Approach

There is ample evidence to show that parents and end users of parenting programs have valuable insights to offer that help improve the relevance, cultural appropriateness, and efficacy of parenting programs. Sanders and Kirby (2012) presented a model of consumer involvement that

argued that parents as consumers should be involved throughout the research and development, and dissemination phases of program innovation. This collaborative partnership process has been successfully applied in numerous studies seeking to adapt evidence based programs for particular cultural contexts or types of parenting concerns. For example, in New Zealand, extensive consultation through focus groups occurred in developing an adapted version of Triple P with the indigenous Maori population. The consultation involved the development of an additional resource that connected Maori cultural values to principles and techniques of positive parenting. The resulting adaptation was then tested in a randomized controlled trial (RCT) with Maori parents of preschool aged children and showed positive sustained intervention effects (Keown, Sanders, Franke, & Shepherd, 2018). A similar approach has been used to adapt Group Triple P for grandparents (Kirby & Sanders, 2014) and for fathers (Frank, Keown, Dittman, & Sanders, 2015), and Triple P Discussion Groups for parents of children with sibling conflict (Pickering & Sanders, 2017), and to develop a media series on positive parenting for parents with early onset conduct problems (Metzler, Sanders, Rusby, & Crowley, 2012). In each case, consumer survey information sometimes combined with focus group discussions helped identify consumer preferences for how parents would like to receive an intervention. This information is most valuable when programs are being first designed to gauge the degree of parent interest in participating, and capturing information about perceived barriers to engagement.

Multidisciplinary Approaches to Support Parenting and Parent Training

The adoption of a systems-contextual approach to parenting support at a population level, combined with evidence showing that parenting influences diverse areas of child development inevitably leads to practitioners from multiple disciplines

having an interest and a mandate to provide parenting support to promote better developmental outcomes in children. Parents seek advice from a wide range of people as children enter and leave different developmental contexts. These include psychologists and social workers, medical professionals (general medical practitioners, pediatricians), and allied health staff such as nurses, occupational therapists, speech therapists, counsellors, as well as teachers, educators, and family support workers.

Professionals from different backgrounds vary greatly in the quality of training and knowledge about parenting, child development and effective behavior change strategies. Those with advanced graduate level training in clinical or developmental psychology, social work, and nursing are best equipped to deliver parenting interventions to parents with complex mental health and developmental problems, including drug and alcohol problems. However, even these professionals require training in specific evidence based programs. Fortunately, professionals from a wide variety of backgrounds can be trained through structured, intensive professional training courses to deliver different types of parenting programs (Ralph & Dittman, 2018). Well regarded and widely used professional training courses that have been shown to work, tend to involve active skills training exercises, live and or video demonstrations, practicing skills through role plays, feedback from peers and trainers, and ideally some kind of accreditation or credentialing process and post training supervision.

Existing training models for most evidence based parenting interventions require a trainer to deliver a training course in person. In that context, skills can be modelled, practiced, and feedback provided to participants about dealing with common process problems encountered in delivering parenting programs (e.g., dealing with parental resistance, conducting behavioral rehearsal of specific skills). This type of active skills training involving in vivo coaching is difficult to simulate in online training programs that are designed to be delivered without a live trainer. Further research is needed to evaluate the efficacy of online professional training involving complex clinical skills.

If they prove as effective as in person training, the costs of training programs could be reduced substantially.

Enhancing the Social Ecology of Parenting

Increasing parental access to high-quality, culturally informed, and evidence-based parenting programs that can be delivered by well-trained and supported professionals is a crucial element in ensuring the parenting role is acknowledged and properly supported. However, ensuring access to parenting services interacts with other aspects of the social ecology of parenthood. Many other factors influence parental capacity to raise children. Professionals need to become social activists with respect to advocating for policies and practice by local, state, and federal governments to implement policies that work to ensure parents and children live in safe family environments free from family violence, can access stable employment, have adequate housing, live in safe neighborhoods with adequate play and recreational space, good schools and health and dental services. While some would argue that being resilient in the face of adversity is an essential life skill for all parents and children, there is a larger social obligation for all citizens to take reasonable steps to create communities that ensure children are safe, protected, and can thrive and reach their potential. This includes advocacy for and supporting legislative change that reduces risks to children, including supporting the global call to reduce family violence and to ban corporal punishment of children in homes and schools (Gershoff, 2010).

Integration of Parenting Intervention within the Broader Field of Parent and Child Development Support

As there is such extensive support for the conclusion that parenting is a crucial determinant of child development outcomes, it is tempting to conclude that all we need to do to fix children's

problems is to educate parents better. While this undoubtedly would make a substantial difference to children's development, poor or inadequate parenting or conversely highly competent parenting does not guarantee that children will do well or poorly. Other potentially modifiable determinants over and above the effects of genes, the child's biological makeup and quality of parenting children receive, include extended family relationships, peer relationships, school experiences, exposure to social media and cyberbullying, and exposures to natural disasters or to famine and war. Racial discrimination and racial vilification continue to marginalize and disenfranchise people, particularly minorities, refugee families, and indigenous people around the world and provide a social, cultural, and historical context where there are different parenting challenges for parents. Unfair employment practices that disadvantage women who continue to be paid less in some industries for the same work as male colleagues, and the lack of provision of paid maternity leave ensure that there remain large differences between parents both within and between countries, and that parents undertake their role on a very uneven playing field.

Conclusion

Developmental research into the effects of parenting on the development of both children and parents has made substantial progress over the past few decades. It is now clear that the quality of parenting children receive has a pervasive influence on children's development and its effects are experienced over a lifetime. With major disparities between the life course opportunities of children continuing in most countries, partly as a function of differences in life circumstances and the socioeconomic opportunities of families, increasing children's exposure to positive, nurturing family environments represents a clear pathway to positively influence developmental outcomes. Every generation of parents experiences new challenges (e.g., internet, cyberbullying) as well as the familiar and predictable everyday tasks of raising children. Parents'

capacity to learn, self-regulate their own behavior and emotions, support each other, and flexibly adapt to the changing needs of their children is one of life's greatest and most important challenges.

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