Parenting for the 21st Century

Introduction

Not all family therapists subscribe to the idea of teaching parents. Indeed, many of the most prominent of the systemic practitioners (Bowen, Whitaker, Minuchin, Haley, and the other strategic therapists) repeatedly have declined to specify what they believe would constitute adequate parenting—and the idea of actually teaching parents to function better would not fit within their models. Among those approaches that were willing to define good parenting, three models have provided the core of the most-used programs in the United States: These models are the Adlerian/Dreikursian model; the communications models (Ginott, Gordon, and Satir); and the behavioral models (Gottman, Krumboltz, Meichenbaum, Patterson, and Skinner). There are several reasons for including a chapter on effective parenting in a book on couples and family counseling: (1) Family practitioners working in schools, hospitals, community agencies, and clinics are expected to address parenting issues in one form or another with most of the families they see; (2) often, the most critical stress point in a marriage is when couples first become parents (Gottman, 1999, Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997); and (3) family coaching, an intermediate step between parent education and family counseling is fast becoming a growth industry in the United States, Canada, and Europe. In this chapter, I shall start with the development of parenting approaches over the last 100 years, and I will end with a presentation of the skills and techniques that more than 50 years of research have validated as useful (Allen, Thompson, & Drapeaux, 1997; Brooks, Spearn, Rice, Crocco, Hodgins, & Schaaf, 1988; Burnett, 1988; Campbell & Sutton, 1983; Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000; Croake, 1983; Hammett, Omizo, & Loffredo, 1981; Krebs, 1986; Landerholm & Lowenthal, 1993; Mullis, 1999; Nystul, 1982; Pilgrim, Abbey, Hendrickson, & Lerenz, 1998; Sharpley & Poiner, 1980; Snow, Kern, & Penick, 1997; Williams, Omizo, & Abrams, 1984).

A Short History of Parenting

**John Broadus Watson** was an unlikely candidate to become America’s Founding Father of Behaviorism and to make this model the basis for one of the first parenting manuals in the United States. Born in Greenville, South Carolina, to an alcoholic father and a fundamentalist, Baptist mother, John was actually named after a well-known evangelist in that part of the country (Hoffman, 1994). His mother wanted him to be a preacher, but John would have nothing of it. He did not do particularly well at school or in life until he was rescued by Professor Moore at Furman University, who got him interested in the psychological sciences and sent him on to the University of Chicago. Watson was heavily influenced in his early career by the classical conditioning theories advanced by the Russian neurologist/psychologist, Ivan Pavlov (1927/2003). Indeed, Watson conducted similar studies to those of Pavlov, using rats in mazes, and studying the capacity of rhesus monkeys to mimic what they saw. In 1913, Watson wrote what amounted to an academic manifesto, calling for behaviorism to become the basis for the psychological sciences (see Watson, 1925/1970).

Later, at Johns Hopkins University, Watson began to combine Pavlov’s conditioning theories with Thorndike’s Darwinism. He initiated a longitudinal study of mother–child bonding and child **development** that included a special observation chamber he built at a Washington, DC, hospital. He became convinced that Pavlov’s model could be applied to children, and he envisioned a kind of utopian world in which parents would use his methods to raise perfectly happy and healthy children (Hoffman, 1994).

It was during this period that Watson conducted his famous experiment with Little Albert and the rat. By pairing a loud noise (clanging cymbals), an unconditioned stimulus or US, with a white rat (a conditioned stimulus or CS), Watson taught Little Albert to be afraid of white mice. In this experiment, fear became the unconditioned response (or UR) and later the conditioned response (or CR). This learning could also be *generalized* by using a white rabbit and even a white beard to stimulate the fear response. This experiment appeared to demonstrate that phobias, for example, were learned responses. It is not clear whether Watson or others invented the “cure,” but eventually behaviorists demonstrated that reintroducing the white rat (or rabbit) at a distance while calming the youngster would end the fear. Again, reducing that distance in steps while continuing to calm the child was the key, and it had to progress over many, many trials before the child could hold the animal in his lap. This process is the basis for what we now call systematic desensitization (Wolpe, 1990).

Watson began to write articles on child rearing for popular magazines ranging from *Cosmopolitan* and *McCall’s* to *The New Republic*. In 1922, Watson was invited to offer a series of lectures on behaviorism at the New School for Social Research. His courses were popular with students, and he remained there until he was fired in 1926 for sexual misconduct.

In 1928, Watson produced a very successful series of articles for *McCall’s*, again on child rearing, that was published later that year as *Psychological Care of Infant and Child* (Watson, 1928). This was really the first widely read parenting manual available in the United States. His approach advocated treating children like little adults. He wanted parents to be objective and aloof. He was not in favor of mother–child bonding, cuddling children, or even kissing and hugging them, except in a perfunctory manner just before bed. Perhaps remembering his own mother–child experiences, he warned that too much closeness wrecked adolescents and as young adulthood approached, it could ruin a child’s vocational future. Watson was not even sure that children should grow up in families: He suggested that there might be some other environment in which children could be raised more scientifically with better results. In the 1930s, Watson returned almost exclusively to advertising. His children would later note that he was, as he preached, a distant father, who became quite self-absorbed in his middle years (Hoffman, 1994).

Alfred Adler reached the height of his popularity at about the same time that John Watson was experiencing his. Adler’s (1927) book, *Understanding Human Nature*, was the first popular psychology book to sell in the hundreds of thousands of copies. Adler’s (1930) approach to children was decidedly more phenomenological in orientation, and he advocated a much more personally engaged form of parenting and teaching than would be characteristic of behaviorism for years to come. Adler rejected a psychology built on instincts and biology, as in Freud’s model, or on reflexes and environmental controls, as in Watson’s model. He was more impressed with the capacity of even young children to form goals and to make individual choices in the service of reaching those goals. Adler conceptualized his theory as a **psychology of use**. While heredity and environment played their parts, it was what the person made of these building blocks that really shaped his or her life.

Even though Adler never used the language of behaviorism, in essence his approach placed an interpreting organism (the person or child) in between perceived stimuli and human response. He believed that stimuli, experiences, and activities all were perceived by individual humans and given meaning (or interpreted) before each person decided on (and chose) a response. In this sense, his learning theory is very similar to the cognitive-behavioral model we considered in the book.

Adler believed that all human behavior was goal-oriented. Sometimes the goals are immediate or short-term, but people also strive for the more long-term life-goals of actualization, completion, or even perfection. Such completion goals are not inherent in the environment: They are created by the very people who strive for them. Human beings anticipate the ends they choose, and accept or desire whatever consequences are associated with those ends. Indeed, it is those anticipated endpoints that frame the way in which human organisms interpret experiences and evaluate themselves in relation to all other stimuli to which they attend.

The fundamental goal for children—and indeed, for all of us—is to belong, to have a place, to feel that we have worth and count with the people in our lives. There are hundreds of ways for individuals to meet this goal through cooperation, contribution, connection, shared competence, caring, compassion, and courage. Those who lack some or all of these capacities will have a tendency to find ways of belonging that are not so useful: They will make mistakes in how they see self, others, and life, and they may even develop useless goals.

Rudolf Dreikurs (1940a, 1940b), a child psychologist and colleague of Adler’s, addressed the child’s mistaken attempts to belong when he developed a typology of mistaken goals for children’s misbehavior. These goals (attention-getting, power-struggles, revenge, and demonstration of inadequacy) were immediate, short-term motivations that accounted for misbehavior in young children. They are used to help parents understand the purposes for their children’s disruptive behaviors, as well as to give structure to family interviews (see Dreikurs, 1950). By 1948, Dreikurs had developed the first of many books on how to raise children effectively, basing his approach on the development of a democratic atmosphere and social equality between parent and child (Dreikurs, 1948/1992). His model stood in opposition to both **authoritarian** and **permissive** approaches to child rearing. Today, we would call this approach authoritative-responsive parenting (Baumrind, 1968, 1995). Dreikurs and Soltz (1964/1991) would eventually team up to write one of the most-used parenting books of all time, *Children: The Challenge*; they taught us that disturbing behaviors in children were a sign of **discouragement**, and the antidote was the application of **encouragement** and the use of **natural** and **logical consequences** (Dreikurs & Grey, 1968/1989).

In the chapter on Cognitive-Behavioral Family Counseling, I noted the importance of Skinner’s (1953, 1974) operant-conditioning model: Similar to Adler’s model, Skinner believed that it was the outcome, the endpoint, or the result that really controlled and determined behavior. Behaviors that were reinforced continued and developed while behaviors that were not reinforced diminished and eventually extinguished. Further, large, complex behaviors could be shaped by breaking them down into smaller, more achievable actions. Usually, **continuous primary reinforcement** is prescribed initially for the step-by-step shaping of new behaviors. Intermittent reinforcement, however, is the strongest behavioral motivator. Skinner shared with Adler a belief that authoritarian, aversive parenting was usually non-productive. The use of corporal punishment,1 coupled with aversive interactions, seldom worked and often made family life worse rather than better.

Bandura (1969) and Krumboltz and Krumboltz (1972) both noted that when a parent effectively administered reinforcements, they became another reinforcer, a *social* *reinforcer* who also could serve as a model for what was expected. It is this kind of social reinforcement that makes effective parenting both possible and enjoyable.

We know whether parents and children are functioning well by the way they communicate. Effective communication is not only important to family life: It is central to every aspect of shared living. John Dewey (1916), the great American educator and philosopher, noted that there was more than a linguistic connection between the words common, community, and communication. We are a community by virtue of the things we share in common, and we come to understand what we have in common through communication. What a person thinks is understood through talk: that is, through one person expressing thoughts and feelings to another. When our thoughts are rational and congruent with our feelings, the actions that follow tend to make human sense. Irrational or extreme thoughts tend to produce disturbing and extreme feelings that lead to ineffective and often pathological behaviors.

As I noted in the chapter on the human validation process model, Satir (1983; Satir & Baldwin, 1983) introduced the notion of a nurturing triad as a foundation for parenting: She hoped that two adults could form a team that would work in favor of the growth and development of the child. She believed that children needed a core of self-esteem if they were to become all that they could be (if they were to actualize their potential), and parents could bolster that self-esteem with positive attributions, encouragement, and by tending to the emotional development of young people. For Satir, congruent communication involved expressive clarity coupled with emotional honesty.

How many of us, when we were little, walked in on a heated argument between our parents and asked if they were fighting. If our parents responded that they were not fighting, that they were simply having “a discussion,” their communication told us that our eyes and ears were dysfunctional and could not be trusted. Clarity and emotional honesty would have been served much better if the parents had said, “Yes, we are having a fight, but it is not about you. We will be okay, and you will be okay, and Mom and Dad need some time alone to work this problem out.”

Satir (1987) noted that when distress increased in the family, each family member tended to adopt a communication stance that either facilitated problem resolution or exacerbated it. The four stress positions of blaming, placating, super-reasonable, and irrelevant have already been described (see the Satir chapter). They represent four ways in which individuals attempt to protect their self-worth when faced with difficult challenges; in actuality, these communication modes only make things worse. An Adlerian psychologist from Israel, Nira Kfir (1981), noted similar stances in relation to stressful situations, calling her positions **superiority, pleasing, control**, and **comfort** respectively. These parallel stances describe both the communication (Satir) and the goals sought (Kfir) in many parent–child interactions. Satir described congruent communications as ones in which the speaker took into account personal needs, the needs and positions of others, and the context in which communication would take place. Her use of congruent communication requires what Adler called social interest, paying attention to the welfare of others as well as self. Bitter (1987) linked these two models in terms of theory, and Main (1986) applied them to parenting styles.

Satir was not alone in her emphasis on communication in parenting. Both **Thomas Gordon** (1970), a student of Carl Rogers, and Haim Ginott (1965/1994, 1969/1971) built entire parenting programs around effective communication with children. Gordon’s **parent effectiveness training** would later be integrated with Dreikurs’ democratic approach and would serve as the basis for the two largest parent-training programs in the United States (Dinkmeyer, McKay, & Dinkmeyer, 1997; Popkin, 1993). Ginott’s communication model is now largely considered to be the foundation for John Gottman’s **emotion coaching** approach to parenting (Gottman & DeClaire, 1997).

In cases in which either parents or children exhibit extreme behavioral problems or children have special difficulties such as autism, effective parenting still requires carefully monitored programs based on operant conditioning. Gerald Patterson (1980; Patterson & Forgatch, 1987) was one of the first to develop modern behavioral parent training models, and we still refer to his approach when the severity of behavioral interactions warrants it.

We now shall consider how these merging models contribute to our understanding of parenting and child-rearing. We also shall consider the latest recommendations for effective parenting.

Key Concepts

Let’s start with a few questions: Where did you learn to be a parent? If you are not a parent yet, what will be your sources for learning effective methods? Will you do what your parents did with you? Where do you think they learned to be parents? Will you read a book? Will you become part of a parent study group? What methods of discipline were used on you? Will you keep any of those methods? Discard any? Design a whole new approach? What constitutes an emotionally/cognitively healthy child today? What can parents do that will make a significant difference?

There was a tribe of Native Americans from the northwest part of the United States that used to train their children not to cry within 3 days of being born. The method they used involved the parent holding a hand over the baby’s mouth and nose when it cried until the baby passed out. Although the process “worked,” it also caused brain damage as well as other difficulties. At one time, there was a purpose to the procedure: Perhaps crying babies would scare away wild game needed for food or give away the location of a camp during periods of war. The problem was that this method was still used by some parents into the 1900s, long after its usefulness had disappeared.

European heritage includes methods of parenting that are even more antiquated. We have to go back to the 16th century to find the societies in which current practices made sense. Those European societies were organized in strict hierarchies with kings, princes, and other nobility at the top and laborers and serfs at the bottom. Let us say that a child in a serf’s family awakened one day, no longer wanting to cut hay for the lord of the manor. Or perhaps the child wanted to run away or try to impersonate a nobleman. These ideas and positions could easily get the child killed, so parents had to teach that child to “know his place.” Two methods from that autocratic period remain today: One is called reward, used as an incentive or bribe for good behavior, and the other is called punishment,2 used to curtail bad behavior by imposing authoritarian control. Of the two, the latter was then and is now used more often by parents than the former. Both procedures, however, reflect a belief in the superiority of one person or set of people over others.

Again, these methods, though still in prominent use, are out of date by anywhere from 300 to 400 years. Most western cultures currently exist within democratic states where the principle of equality is prized, if not fully enacted. In these countries, there is increasing evidence that equal rights for all citizens will eventually be won. No single culture will be allowed to dominate all others. Women will be able to stand equal with men before the law. Age, creed, color, and even sexual/affectional orientation will no longer be barriers to full participation in community life and our legal systems of justice. As a set of western nations, we still are working on these developments, but change is coming. Perhaps the last group to gain equal rights will be children.

It is not lost on children, even today, that they have standing in a democratic society. Attempts at child-control and imposition of adult authority are met with rebellion, either overt or covert, from a very early age. It only takes a trip on Saturday mornings to a restaurant or shopping center to demonstrate quickly that authoritarian parents have been reduced to yelling, screaming, blaming, frustrated, and angry people who fluctuate between coaxing, pleading, or reminding at one moment and outbursts or even public spankings the next. To make matters worse, when things really get out of hand, these same parents then give in—in order to get a little peace and quiet. The myth of external control outside of laboratory conditions has long been known, but authoritarian models still permeate almost everything that parents do with children—and are even reinforced by some popular psychologists (see Dobson, 1996, 2004).

An authoritarian approach is what people in many different cultures have always done. It is what many of our parents did with us. It is “normal.” There’s only one problem: It doesn’t work, and it’s not effective.

So what does work? Actually, a whole range of ideas, once considered outrageous, works, including:

* Taking children in as partners;
* Providing guidance and leadership;
* Taking time for training;
* Treating children as growing, developing people with different needs at different times in their lives;
* Giving choices;
* Using natural and logical consequences;
* Providing encouragement, recognition, and positive attention;
* Listening and emotion coaching;
* Negotiations and compromise;
* Modeling respect, cooperation, kindness, caring, compassion, and courage; that is, becoming what Krumboltz and Krumboltz (1972) call *prestigious models*.

One way to characterize the range of current parenting styles is to think of them on a continuum from autocratic/authoritarian to permissive and neglectful. Somewhere in the middle of the continuum would be models that Adlerians call democratic and that Baumrind (1968, 1971, 1991, 1995) refers to as authoritative-responsive. We might draw the continuum like this:

Autocratic/ Democratic/  
Authoritarian Authoritative Responsive Permissive Neglectful

The autocratic/authoritarian model proceeds from the idea that adults are in charge of children, and that they should control them and demand that they behave. This model presumes that parents know the proper way for children to be and that they should use bribes and arbitrary punishments to keep children in line. Those of us raised in homes that believed in traditional discipline will be very familiar with the autocratic/authoritarian approach. It is characterized by high demand or control and low responsiveness. Here responsiveness refers to the level of warmth, emotional attunement, reciprocity, and attachment in the disciplinary relationship between the parent and child. Carried to an extreme, autocratic parents can be abusive to their hated children.

Toward the other end of the continuum is permissiveness. This approach had its heyday in the late 1940s and the early 1950s when John Dewey’s more progressive approach to education was force-merged with Freud’s concerns for the fragile ego of the child. Permissiveness assumes that it is either harmful or useless to say “no” to a child, and it is characteristic of parents who will do anything to avoid conflict—regularly giving in to whining and temper-tantrums throughout the day (see Crowder, 2002; Ricker & Crowder, 1998, 2000). Permissive parenting is characterized by high responsiveness and low demand.

**Diana Baumrind** (1991) notes that there are some parents who are both indifferent to and uninvolved with their children. She calls such parents **neglectful**. This parenting style ignores children and their needs as long as possible. When interacting with them, such a parent often will respond just enough to get the child to go away. They are the parents whom structural family therapists call *disengaged*, seeking a goal Adlerians call a demonstration of inadequacy so that the children will leave them alone. Neglectful parents are characterized by both low demand and low responsiveness.

The parents who have been most effective over the last half century are those who fall in the middle of the continuum, who prepare their children for living in a democracy by helping them to develop their own perspectives, develop their own voices and opinions, and learn from the natural and logical consequences of daily living. This model, most often called democratic parenting or authoritative-responsive parenting, asks parents to be true leaders and models in the family. It involves an active engagement of children based on (a) emotional attunement, (b) giving children choices, (c) listening to and acknowledging their thinking and feeling, and (d) guiding them in a non-threatening/non-punitive manner. This approach is characterized by reasonable demands and adequate responsiveness.

A story Oscar Christensen tells about breakfast will make this range of parenting styles clearer (Christensen, 2004). When he was little, his mother decided what he would have for breakfast each morning. She made oatmeal mush, cooked it to the consistency of paste. Needless to say, he wouldn’t eat it. He played with it: Sometimes, he swirled it in his bowl; sometimes, he would pack it in his spoon and shoot it at his sister. Then his mother would make the second decision for him that day: She would declare that he was a bad boy and send him from the table. When the phone would ring around 11:00 a.m., Christensen would run to the kitchen to get graham crackers. Worse, his mother let him get them, because she felt a bit guilty for sending him from the table earlier. So he ate the graham crackers, and then he wasn’t hungry at lunchtime.

Now, if you contrast that with the treatment his cousins got at his aunt’s house, it seems quite different—even though the end is the same. In that house, there were 20 different cereals, because the mother could never say “no” to what the children requested or wanted. And each child was allowed to sample as many different cereals each morning as she or he wished. When his cousins were very young, the sampling could last until almost 11:00 a.m., and these kids were not hungry at lunchtime either.

The parents who would be most effective in teaching their children how to handle life would offer the child a choice: “What’s it going to be: Captain Crunch or scrambled eggs?” Notice that this is not an unlimited choice in which anything goes. Even so, a child might say, “I want Frosted Flakes.” An authoritative-responsive parent could reply that he or she understands the child’s desire for Frosted Flakes, “… and maybe we can have them next week, but this morning we have Captain Crunch or scrambled eggs: Which is it going to be?”

Some parents worry that the child will choose not to eat at all, but that is also an acceptable choice to make—even for a 3-year-old. The natural consequence of not eating is that the child will get hungry and, perhaps, make a better decision about breakfast the next morning. Okay, let’s say the child chooses Captain Crunch. If this child plays with the cereal long enough, it will lose its crunch and taste worse than oatmeal mush ever hoped to taste. Once the milk is poured on, however, the decision is irreversible: There is no way to re-crunch a soggy Captain, so the child will play with it. Now the parent gives the child a second choice for the morning: “What do you want to do, eat properly or get down from the table?” If the child gets down from the table, as any kid with taste buds will do, then that’s it until noon. The parent does not have to feel guilty: The child made the choice. It is a logical consequence and, again, the child has the opportunity to make a different choice the next morning.

The authoritative-responsive or democratic parent also takes time for training. In these models, adults try to anticipate what the child will need to know and provide both experience and guidance. How do we train a child, for instance, that a stove is hot? Our parents probably slapped our hands away from the stove. My aunt, who had a degree in child development, would slap her child’s hand and say, “No, hot!” You can see what a difference an education can make. It’s possible, however, to realize when a child is big enough to push a chair up to the stove and get close to the burners. Wouldn’t that be a great time to, perhaps, try an experiment where she or he holds a hand over the burner as it gets hotter? In the end, the children still may burn themselves once or twice: Experience is a potent teacher. But when parents take time to train, some childhood pains can be avoided.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the child that parents need to train relates to the development and expression of emotions (Goleman, 1995; Gottman & DeClaire, 1997). When children are very young and just learning to talk, teaching them the actual words for different emotions is essential. Words link feelings to meaning. School counselors often use large charts with many faces attached to different emotions to help children identify emotions, but parents can do the same thing by drawing a feeling-face or set of feeling-faces on fingers and letting children choose what they feel inside. Noticing that children express different moods and experience different levels of emotions is the first step in attaching words to the emotional diversity within.

Emotion coaching (Gottman & DeClaire, 1997)—that is, when parents engage children and adolescents in teaching them to value emotional experience and language by actively listening for it and reflecting it back to them—has been demonstrated to have many positive effects. Children who are emotion-coached form better attachments with family and peers; they are better problem solvers and do better in both math and reading (even when adjusted for IQ); when faced with stressful circumstances, they stay calmer longer; and when they are at rest, their hearts actually function more efficiently (lower heart rates). Emotion coaching also seems to provide some protection from infectious illness. It also helps young people maintain better moods (with less swings), and it alleviates almost all of the negative effects of divorce, except sadness. And the good news is that parents who emotion coach tend to have more validating marriages and get divorced far less often than the rest of the population. Gottman and his colleagues have demonstrated all of this in longitudinal studies conducted in their laboratory settings in Seattle, Washington (see Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997).

A study by Jackson, Henrickson, and Foshee (1998) produced similar results for authoritative-responsive parenting, including high levels of academic success within European-American and Mexican-American youths. They also noted that this approach to parenting lowers levels of substance use or violence—especially in relation to the children of neglectful parents. In contrast, children of authoritarian parents were more obedient and almost never questioned authority, but they also had low self-esteem and less social competence in school. These children often reported elevated levels of psychological distress.

Earlier in this chapter, I noted that Rudolf Dreikurs (1940a, 1940b, 1948/1992, 1950) identified four goals for children’s misbehavior: attention getting, power struggles, revenge, and demonstrating inadequacy. Each of these immediate goals for children’s misbehavior is part of a larger goal: *to belong*. They are mistaken but common ways that children seek to count and be valued within the family and in their community. Parents without training tend to react to mistaken behaviors in ways that actually reinforce useless, negative patterns and lead to ineffective interactions. Indeed with some children, punishments (such as, spanking) can actually become a reinforcer of negative behavior (Krumboltz & Krumboltz, 1972). We see this happen when defiant children continue or increase misbehavior immediately after an aversive response has been applied.

With training and guidance, most parents can learn authoritative-responsive ways to raise their children effectively and actually prevent the emergence of more-difficult and destructive behaviors (and goals) as young people get older. Some of the most effective interventions include the use of *natural* and *logical consequences* (Dreikurs & Grey, 1968/1989), *encouragement* (Dinkmeyer & Dreikurs, 1963/2000), *active listening* and *reflection* (Ginott, 1965/1994, 1969/1971, 1975; Gordon, 1970), *giving choices* and guiding children through problem solving by asking questions. As I have mentioned already, all of these ideas and interventions are central to the most evidence-based parent-education programs in the United States: ***Total Transformation*** (Lehman, 2004)’ ***Positive Discipline*** (Nelsen, 1981/2006), ***STEP: Systematic Training for Effective Parenting*** (Dinkmeyer, McKay, & Dinkmeyer, 1997) and ***Active Parenting*** (Popkin, 1993). The latter two of these these video-based programs is also available in Spanish. For some of the most important research on these programs, see Abbey, Pilgrim, Hendrickson, and Buresh (2000); Abbey, Pilgrim, Hendrickson, and Lorenz (1998); Bernino and Rourke (2003); Ciurczak and Co. (2003); CLAS (Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services) Review (2001); Fashimpar (2000); and Mullis (1999).

Process and Interventions

Let’s look at two sets of interventions that have been proven effective in raising children. The first set is for families in which the parents are functional partners and need to understand psychoeducational approaches to child rearing. The second set is for families in which one or more of the children exhibit extreme and/or disturbing behaviors that threaten the development of the child, as well as the overall functioning of the family.

Positive Parenting for Functional Families

Parenting styles that are common in more harmonious families generally include the effective interventions that follow. These family processes are also encouraged when counselors are engaged in what behaviorists call functional family counseling or consultation (see Alexander & Parsons, 1973, 1982; Barton & Alexander, 1981) or trained leaders are engaged in *family coaching*: that is, using a psychoeducational model to provide essential information that otherwise competent people might need to be effective parents. These interventions are dramatically different from coaxing, reminding, bribery, yelling at children, spankings, groundings, and other efforts at control. These democratic, authoritative-responsive interventions can be learned, and they act as a preventative approach to child rearing.

One of the models that exemplifies positive parenting is Jane Nelsen’s (1981/2006) *Positive Discipline,* an approach that grew out of Adlerian theory as developed in the work of Rudolf Dreikurs. Here is the description of the model and its development in Jane’s own words:

I wanted to be a good mother and didn’t know how. I would vacillate between being too firm (lecturing and punishing) until I couldn’t stand myself, to being too kind (pampering and spoiling) until I couldn’t stand my children. I didn’t know there was something in between until I attended a class on child development where the professor said, “I’m not going to teach you a bunch of theories on child development, but just one theory (Adlerian/Dreikursian) that helps children learn self-discipline, responsibility, cooperation, and problem-solving skills. I thought that sounded intriguing until I heard that this theory did not include any form of punishment. None! No spanking, no yelling, no taking away privileges, no punitive time-out—not even nice lectures. Then my professor added, “No praise, and no rewards, and no permissiveness.”

Along with many of my classmates, I thought, “What else is there?”

During that semester, I learned many “what elses,” such as family meetings where we focused on solutions to problems; and the importance of being both kind and firm at the same time—that really takes practice; and the “courage to be imperfect” — that mistakes truly are opportunities to learn. The skills I learned did not create perfection, in me or my children, but I enjoyed being a parent and wanted to share what I had learned with others. Thus, Positive Discipline was born.

There were many Adlerian parenting programs that were helping so many parents learn skills to encourage children (and themselves). The main difference for Positive Discipline was the method of teaching—experientially. Lynn Lott and I first learned experiential activities from John Taylor and found it so helpful that we created many experiential activities that involved parents in role-plays to “get into the child’s world” and to “experience” what encouraged improved behavior, and what did not. We teamed up to create a parenting certification program that we called *Teaching Parenting the Positive Discipline Way*.

Many Adlerian experts (Dreikurs, Christiansen, Walton, Bitter) were doing their “magic” through “open forum” demonstrations with parents and children in front of an audience; they would discover the child’s “mistaken goal” and then make suggestions to parents for ways to “encourage” the child and thus inspire improved behavior. We Adlerian beginners would watch in wonder as we tried to figure out how they did it. Lynn Lott decided she would break it down into 12 steps that could be taught, even to beginning parent educators. We called it “Parents Helping Parents Problem Solving Steps” and it became a very important part of “*Teaching Parenting the Positive Discipline Way*”.

This method of teaching became relatively popular in countries all over the world (70 countries at present). We attribute the success to the fact that parents in other countries did not listen to lectures or watch videos or listen to tapes. Instead they participated in experiential activities where they learned and shared their role-playing experiences in their own language. We discovered that no matter how many cultural differences we experience, we also have so much in common: namely our love for our children and our desire to help them develop the characteristics and life skills we believe will serve them throughout their lives.

In Positive Discipline, we focus on “what and how to” tools/skills, and we created several decks of “tool cards.” All of them are based on the 5 Criteria for Positive Discipline:

1. Is it RESPECTFUL? (Kind and firm at the same time)
2. Does it help children feel BELONGING and SIGNIFICANCE? (Connection)
3. Is it effective LONG TERM?
4. Does it TEACH valuable social and life SKILLS for good character?
5. Does it invite children to discover how CAPABLE they are and to use their power constructively?

Not too long ago I heard a comment that some parents thought Positive Discipline tools were just tricks adults used to get children to do what they want them to do. I agreed that they could be used that way if they are not based on basic Adlerian principles. I even created an activity called “Tools or Tricks?”

The first part of the activity is to invite participants to come up with a list of basic Adlerian principles that they have learned during their class or workshop. The lists look something like this:

* Need for Belonging (Make sure the message of love gets through)
* Need for Significance (Teach Responsibility, Capability)
* Understand the belief behind behavior.
* Connection before Correction
* Dignity and Respect
* Kind and Firm (at the same time)
* Mistakes are opportunities to learn
* Focus on Solutions “with” children
* Encouragement (for long-term results)
* Modeling what you want to teach (controlling your own behavior)
* Improvement, not perfection

I then ask them to look at this list to see which of these principles might have been missing when the tool they tried did not work. I then ask them to imagine how the “tool” might be different if it was based on one or more of these principles. They then get together with a partner and take turns being a child as they role-play what the “tool” sounded like before basing it on the principles, and then what it would sound like when the tool was based on this foundation of principles. We then ask them to share the difference they felt and the decisions they made as the parent and the child in each version of the role-play.

Encouragement.

One meaning of encouragement is to build courage, and this courage is needed as family members face life’s problems and tasks. In one sense, encouragement is a reinforcement of strengths and capabilities. It is placing value on the child as she or he grows. Encouragement recognizes a job well done, but also acknowledges effort and improvement. Whether approached from a behavioral standpoint (Krumboltz & Krumboltz, 1972) or an Adlerian perspective (Dinkmeyer & Dreikurs, 1963/2000), this kind of reinforcement is directed more at the development of the child than the **shaping** and accomplishment of parent-desired behaviors. What encouragement is not is bribery, arbitrary praise, coaxing, reminding, or demanding. It is having faith that children can learn to handle life, thereby helping children have faith in themselves: Such faith, as the root to the word *encour*agement suggests, comes from the heart. It is expressed in phrases like, “Try it and see”; “You can handle this”; “I know you can work it out,” or “I believe in you.”

Accentuating the Positive.

In general, children—like the rest of us—tend to grow better in a positive environment. A positive environment is not the same as permissiveness; it is not the same as never saying “no” or saying positive things to children that even they know are not true. It does mean that children do better when they have at least one parent who enjoys having them around, values who they are, has faith in their abilities, and can communicate these to the child. This is what social workers often refer to as a strengths perspective. It is even measurable: If children receive approximately five positive attributions to every negative one, they simply have a better life and grow in more productive ways (see Gottman & DeClaire, 1997). Unfortunately, as Hart and Risley (1995) have noted, positive reinforcement of children tends to decrease as socioeconomic status goes down. That is, the children who most need positive reinforcement too often get it least. Accentuating the positive is (a) noticing what children and other family members do well; (b) appreciating unique talents and contributions; (c) paying attention to those things that families want to see continue; and (d) minimizing mistakes and frustrations.

Natural Consequence.

A natural consequence is what results when parents ask the question: “What would happen if I did nothing?” For instance, a child won’t eat breakfast: The natural consequence is that the child will get hungry. If no other food is served or allowed until noon, the child will most likely make a different choice the next morning (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964/1991). This idea can be used in many more circumstances than parents generally think. It can be employed when a child is about to go off to school in clothing that is less than adequate for the weather or the school rules. It can be used when children leave their lunches behind, forget their homework, or are late for dinner.

Logical Consequence.

A logical consequence is a parent-initiated consequence that is designed to help children learn the needs of a given situation when a natural consequence is either too dangerous or inadequate. If a family lives on a busy avenue, it may be necessary for children to learn to play only in the yard and not in the street. A natural consequence of playing in the street would be either that nothing would happen or the child might get hit by a car. Neither result will provide needed learning. So, in this case, the parent sets a limit (play only in the yard) and if the child goes into the street, the parent brings the child inside until she or he can remember to stay out of the street. Behaviorists like to specify a time that the child will stay in (say, 5–10 minutes), but it works just as well if the child says when he or she is ready to resume play. If a second movement to the street occurs, the parent brings the child in for twice as long, and keeps doubling the time for subsequent occurrences until the child either learns where to play or is inside until the age of 32. In either case, the child is safe, which was the real goal in the first place. This consequence follows directly from the needs of the situation and is therefore logical—as opposed to arbitrary. It is focused on what the child needs to learn, not simply on what the parent demands. It can be implemented with little or no talking, and requires no arguments, outbursts, or aversive interactions (Dreikurs & Grey, 1968/1989).

Active Listening and Reflection.

Thomas Gordon (1970, 2000) was Carl Rogers’ student, and he was the first person to coin the term active listening. Active listening is choosing to engage the child from his or her perspective, to see through a child’s eyes, experience life as the child does, and to mirror or reflect back the child’s ideas and feelings by paraphrasing them. Active listening is designed to communicate understanding to one’s child before helping the child with suggestions, advice, or problem solving. It is most important when it mirrors the child’s feelings in such a way as to affirm and acknowledge significant emotions in the child (Ginott, 1965/1994, 1969/1971, 1975): This is also the foundation for much of what we now call *emotion coaching*.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Child: | John hit me. |
| Father: | You were playing outside with John and something happened that led to John hitting you. |
| Child: | Yes, and I don’t even know why. |
| Father: | It surprised you when John hit you and hurt your feelings too. |
| Child: | I don’t want to play with John anymore! |
| Father: | You’re really angry at John right now. |

When children have problems, active listening tells them we understand. It acknowledges their feelings and lets them evolve until some new possibilities emerge and problem solving is then possible.

I-statements.

An **I-statement** states how the parent is feeling or what the parent needs in response to a specific problem. Perhaps an adolescent is playing extremely loud music when a parent is trying to talk on a phone, complete some work at home, or just resting. An I-statement might be something like: “I am feeling stressed, because I am trying to talk on the phone to my sister, and the music is so loud that I cannot hear. Is there a way you can still listen to your music and I can talk to my sister too?” An I-statement keeps the ownership of the problem with the speaker. It avoids blame, criticism, and power struggles, and asks the child to negotiate a win-win settlement to the problem.

Who Owns the Problem?

Gordon (1970) also provides a guide for determining who owns a family problem and what actions should be taken. If a child has some need that is not being met or that is actually thwarted, then the child owns the problem, and the parent is wise to engage in active listening. For example, a child does not like her teacher at school: This is unfortunate, but it does not stop the parents from meeting their needs. The problem belongs to the child, and active listening is the best response.

Let’s say that a child dresses for school in shorts in the middle of the winter in Canada. The shorts apparently are not bothering the child, not yet anyway, and they certainly do not interfere with the parents’ needs. In this case, there is no problem. The parents should stay out of it and allow natural consequences to teach the child whatever lesson is still to be learned.

There are times, however, when child or adolescent behavior seriously interferes with parental needs, as in the loud-music situation mentioned earlier. In these cases, Gordon suggests I-statements. I-statements invite and almost always are followed by negotiation.

Giving Choices and Negotiations.

When children are small, parents often have to decide what is best for them and let children have only limited choices. Sometimes, the choices are between or among a small number of options: Rather than “What do you want to do today?” a parent might say, “We can go to the park, go bike riding, or go swimming. Which would you like to do?” Even when a choice is so severely limited as to have no behavioral options, the parent can frame the situation as a choice of style or attitude. “It’s time for bed. Would you like to go up to bed on your own or would you like me to carry you upside down over my shoulders?”

If it hasn’t happened already, about the time a child leaves elementary school for middle school, it is time to start negotiating in good faith most of the issues that come up. The child will have certain needs and desires as will the parents, and sitting down to work out win-win situations is important for the wellbeing of the family. Negotiation is central to the development of good relations and positive decision-making in young people, from pre-adolescence until the child leaves home. The same behavioral agreements and mutual contingency contracts that have been effective with couples also have a place between parents and older children.

Emotion Coaching.

No one is currently more well known for applying science to couples and families than **John Gottman** (1994, 1996, 1999; Gottman & DeClaire, 1997; Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997). At the heart of his approach to parenting is an emphasis on raising emotionally intelligent children. This starts when parents first engage their infants, try to feel what the child is feeling, and begin to use words both to name the emotions and validate them. Of all the different emotions a child might have, it is by far easier to acknowledge happiness, joy, excitement, delight, and other positive emotions than it is to reflect and validate frustration, anger, rage, hurt, fear, or other negative and sometimes frightening emotions. It is these latter emotions, however, for which coaching and validating are most important.

With very young children, parents can start by drawing different emotional faces on a piece of paper or on the fingers of their hands. Asking little children to find a picture for how they feel is a good way to start teaching them about emotions. There are also relatively inexpensive charts available that have 50 or more faces and feelings on them and that can be used for the same purpose. As young people become adolescents, it is especially important to help them identify what they are feeling, first within family relationships and then within peer relationships. Using active listening to acknowledge and validate these emotions is often needed before inviting youngsters into problem-solving discussions.

Functional families focus on individual as well as family development: Freedom to grow is encouraged by giving children opportunities to experiment, contribute, challenge, and try new behaviors. Parents guide rather than control. They use the processes above to foster learning rather than compliance. The parents collaborate with each other, and they invite children into appropriate collaborations too.

A Word or Two about Blended Families and Stepfamilies

Everything that we have learned about family systems tells us that, like other systems, they are designed for self-maintenance (or **family homeostasis**), self-renewal, and creative evolvement. When a new person enters an existing system, there will be those parts of the system that try to get the family to return to its original form. We often see children of divorced parents who never quite give up the hope that their biological mothers and fathers will get back together. Still, there are also parts of the system that will engage in renewal and evolvement. Stepparents increase the possibilities of renewal and evolvement if they enter the system as an explorer. How does the system work? What are the rules and processes that help it work? A stepparent may be the new spouse of the children’s parent, but not their father or mother.

A stepparent might have an opportunity to be a friend, but that will require patience, caring, active listening, encouragement, accentuating the positive, and natural more than logical consequences—at least initially. Brady-Bunch families never function as smoothly as they appeared to do on television. Accepting that there will be difficulties, a long transition period, and two-steps back, now and then, for every step forward is an important awareness to bring to the process. At least initially, if a serious intervention or discipline is required, the original parent in the system should handle it, and the stepparent should be released by the spouse from any expectation that she or he should take the place of a missing or divorced parent.

A Chart for Growing Children Up.

It is possible to take the interventions listed above and place them in relation to desired learning outcomes for children and adolescents. In Table 14.1, I have provided a list of desired behaviors along with training processes and consequences appropriate for the different age levels in children. This is a guide that counselors and therapists can employ easily when engaged in functional-family counseling or consultation.

Table 14.1 Living in Harmony With Our Children:

Training and Growth Throughout the Day and Throughout Childhood

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Desired or Expected Behaviors in Children | | Age | Training Process and Consequences | |
| Can sleep through the night | 1–2 yrs. | Gradual and natural process (pay attention to child’s need for closeness or personal space. |
| Can sleep through the night | 3+ yrs. | If a pattern of waking or getting up at night develops (not due to sickness or other physical problems), let the child cry it out for a minimum of 15 minutes to see if she or he goes back to sleep. |
| Gets up when awakened | 1–4 yrs. | Call child once; have a morning routine. |
| Gets self up | 4+ yrs. | Get the child an alarm clock and make her or him responsible for getting up. |
| Gets self dressed | 4–6 yrs. | Choose clothes the night before *with* the child, and then leave the child to dress self in morning. |
| Gets self dressed | 6+ yrs. | Put clothes where child can get them, and stay out of it. |
| Eats a good breakfast | 1–2 yrs. | Breastfeed if at all possible and gradually introduce healthy solid foods. |
| Eats a good breakfast | 2–4 yrs. | Breastfeed as desired and give child a choice of solid foods: Once the choice is made, stick to it. |
| Eats a good breakfast | 4+ yrs. | Teach the child to make various breakfasts and then stay out of it. |
| Brushes and flosses teeth | 1–2 yrs. | Do it with them; make it fun; do not turn the process into a serious operation. |
| Brushes and flosses teeth | 2–4 yrs. | Make it a game; do it *with* them after meals; gradually increase the thoroughness of the cleaning. |
| Brushes and flosses teeth | 4+ yrs. | Make it the child’s responsibility; eliminate sweets and sugar from the house if the child fails to brush and floss regularly. |
| Cleans room | 2–5 yrs. | Make it a game; do it *with* the child initially; model a clean room in the adults’ bedroom. |
| Cleans room | 5+ yrs. | Give the responsibility to the child; keep adults’ rooms clean; close the door to the child’s room if it stays dirty. |
| Keeps the house clean | 2–4 yrs. | Ask the child for help; involve the child in daily chores; make it fun. |
| Keeps the house clean | 4+ yrs. | Have a family meeting; have everyone choose a chore or chores they will do for 1 week; then switch the chores around. |
| Has a good memory | 4+ yrs. | Never remind a child; let the child learn from the consequences of forgetting. |
| Is able to communicate well and effectively | 0+ yrs. | Talk as often as possible to the child, from infancy to adult life, using as wide a range of language in everyday contexts as possible. |
| Is creative and inventive | 1–4 yrs. | Involve child in daily play that gradually asks the child to think about what else a toy could be or another way to play a game. |
| Is creative and inventive | 4+ yrs. | Encourage children to try different things; to think in new ways; to solve problems in their own way; to develop a personal style; to dream; to follow and develop their talents. |
| Leaves on time for school | 5+ yrs. | Set a morning routine; don’t remind the child of the time or anything they will need for school; get child on the way when it is time to go. |
| Respects parent when parent says, “no” | 3+ yrs. | Say “no” once; don’t debate the issue; then act to implement “no.” |
| Does not talk back to parents | 2+ yrs. | Stop talking immediately; enact an appropriate consequence if needed; disengage from all conversation and leave room. |
| Does not whine at home (including temper tantrums) | 2+ yrs. | All whining results in an automatic “no”—even if the parent wants to say “yes”; *leave the child alone.* |
| Does not whine in public (including temper tantrums) | 3+ yrs. | All whining results in an automatic “no”—even if the parent wants to say “yes”; *take the child home*. |
| Does not whine or misbehave in the car (including temper tantrums) | 3+ yrs. | Pull over to the side of the road and stop until child is calm; get out of car if necessary. |
| Gets along well with other children | 1+ yrs. | As early as possible, involve the child in daily *peer* play. |
| Does not fight with other children | 0–2 yrs. | Remove the victim; say nothing else. |
| Does not fight with other children | 2+ yrs. | Stay out of the child’s fights; tell any complainers that they can handle it. |
| Does not tattle on other children | 2+ yrs. | Don’t listen to any tattling; do not respond; walk away. |
| Does not hit other people or animals | 0+ yrs. | Never spank or hit a child for any reason; if the child hits, say “no” and remove the child for a time-out; if pets are abused, tell the child that the pet will have to go to a new home, and then follow through with the consequence, if necessary (*threats never work*). |
| Puts dirty clothes in the hamper | 2–4 yrs. | Make a game of it; put dirty clothes in the hamper *with* the child; involve the child in washing the clothes. |
| Puts dirty clothes in the hamper | 4+ yrs. | Wash only once a week if at all possible; only wash clothes that are actually in the hamper. |
| Handles homework | 5–10 yrs. | Work with PTA or PTO and the principal and teachers at your child’s school to eliminate homework, since it has not been shown in 50 years to serve any educational purpose in the primary grades. |
| Handles homework | 5+ yrs. | *With* the child, agree on a time and place for homework; establish a no-noise zone during that time; help the child with homework only if you are asked to help; otherwise, don’t ask about it (*it is the child’s responsibility*). |
| Reads books and other written materials | 0+ yrs. | Read to the child every day until the child can read to you; then share the reading. |
| Is able to do arithmetic and mathematics well | 0–2 yrs. | Play recordings of Mozart’s string concertos and other classical music on a daily basis. |
| Is able to do arithmetic and mathematics well (continue with music) | 2+ yrs. | Never do for the child what the child can do for self; allow the child to solve problems and learn from consequences of behavior; allow the child to make and correct her/his own mistakes; if possible, teach the child to play a stringed instrument. |
| Enjoys history and geography | 5+ yrs. | Tell the child stories; have the child interview the grandparents and listen to their stories; take a walk every day; travel as much as possible (start with the child’s town, then the state, then places beyond the state; and in each place ask about the history and development of this location). |
| Comes home on time | 6–12 yrs. | Negotiate a time to come home and then expect the child fairly close to that time; late arrival results in not going out the next time. |
| Comes home on time | 12+ yrs. | Ask: “What time can I expect you in?” and then, once established, leave it up to the child. |
| Has good friends | 3+ yrs. | Invite your children’s friends into your home as often as possible; make your child’s friends welcome; discuss the value of friendship with older children; have friends yourself and invite them into your life often. |
| Is emotionally well developed | 0–3 yrs. | Name different emotions you see or experience with your child; vary your expression of emotion; talk about emotions; don’t yell or scream at the child. |
| Is emotionally well developed | 3+ yrs. | Listen to your child’s expression of emotion and reflect (paraphrase) it back to her or him; ask the child to tell you as much as possible about what the feeling is; ask additional questions to help a child problem solve around feelings of sadness or anger (especially those aimed at the parent) *emotion coaching*. |
| Sets the table for dinner | 1–3 yrs. | Make it a game; encourage the child. |
| Sets the table for dinner | 3+ yrs. | When the child chooses this chore for a week, serve dinner only if and when the table is set. |
| Cooks dinner/supper | 2–4 yrs. | Involve the child in the preparation of meals; have fun and be patient. |
| Cooks dinner/supper | 4–8 yrs. | Have the child be responsible for parts of the dinner. |
| Cooks dinner/supper | 8+ yrs. | Have the child take a night in which she or he cooks the dinner or supper. |
| Cleans up the dishes after eating | 2–6 yrs. | Make clearing the table a game and win the child’s help. |
| Cleans up the dishes after eating | 6+ yrs. | When the child chooses this chore for a week, prepare food the next day only if the kitchen and the dishes are clean. |
| Does daily or weekly chores | 0–3 yrs. | Involve the child in daily work; make it fun. |
| Does daily or weekly chores | 3+ yrs. | Have a family meeting once a week; allow the child(ren) to choose the chores they want to do for 1 week. |
| Takes a bath | 0–4 yrs. | Make it fun; take it slowly; gradually give the cleaning over to the child. |
| Takes a bath | 4+ yrs. | Establish a bath-time routine; then stay out of it. |
| Goes to bed on time | 0+ yrs. | Establish a bedtime routine, including a constant bedtime; if the bath is finished and pajamas are on, then read them a story. |
| Stays in bed at night | 2+ yrs. | Once the parent has said “goodnight,” that’s it; no more talking until the next morning except in a parent-perceived emergency. |
| Stays in bed at night | 3+ yrs. | If the child gets up at night *on a regular basis* and comes to be with the parent, the parents should lock their bedroom door and not respond. |

Sources: © James Robert Bitter, 2004; Dreikurs & Soltz (1964/1991); Glasser (1969); Gottman & DeClaire (1997); Main (1986); Nelsen (1981/2006); Ricker & Crowder (1998, 2000).

Parenting Difficult Children

While programs like *Positive Discipline* will work wonderfully with almost all children in a wide range of families, a similar program based on direct communication and consequences is specifically advertised to parents who are raising difficult children. That program, developed by James and Janet Lehman, is called *Total Transformation* (Lehman, 2004)*.* The program teaches parents exactly what to say to stop arguments instantly, to eliminate backtalk and “acting out” in public, and to teach children to stop blaming others and take responsibility for their own actions. The Lehmans rely on as full set of consequences for almost any misbehavior along with specific instructions on how to enact them. For more information on *Total Transformation*, go to <https://www.empoweringparents.com/product/total-transformation-program-subscription/>

Behavioral counselors also have processes for working with difficult children. When problems in the family and/or the behaviors of children become severe and extremely disturbing, these family practitioners almost always rely on highly structured operant-conditioning processes, as well as the behavioral management practices developed by **Gerald Patterson** (1985; Forgatch & Patterson, 1998) and his associates at the Oregon Social Learning Center. Taken together, these techniques are central to cognitive-behavioral family therapy and include:

* Primary Reinforcement. Primary reinforcement involves the use of candy and other physical rewards with young children to shape and condition desired behaviors. For example, if a child likes chocolate pudding, the parent can use this reward as an incentive for the child to act in a certain way or learn a new behavior.
* Social Reinforcement. Behaviorists quickly learned that the people providing primary reinforcement are, themselves, also reinforcing. The attention, praise, encouragement, and caring that the person provides are often more important than any physical reward. Pairing words like “good job” or “you were great” or “what a nice effort you made” with a child’s actions not only reinforces the child, but also makes the parent a prestigious reinforcer and positive influence in the child’s life.
* Continuous Reinforcement. In the early stages of shaping new behaviors or maintaining current ones, reinforcement has to be applied at the same time that the desired behavior occurs and, initially, the reinforcement should happen every time the desired behavior occurs. When a child is ready for bed on time every night, the parent plays a game with the child. As long as the child likes playing the game with the parent, getting ready for bed is reinforced. It also takes on the power of being a family routine: It is normal and expected.
* Intermittent Reinforcement. The strongest kind of reinforcement is intermittent; that is, the reinforcement is applied at intervals rather than every time. In child rearing, it is used to teach patience, persistence, and more complex behaviors. Children who are reinforced intermittently tend to produce the behavior more often in an effort to keep the reinforcement coming. Most intermittent reinforcement is related either to behavioral production (a fixed or varied ratio) or to a (fixed or varied) amount of time between reinforcements. If I would like my child to learn to play happily with others rather than to get upset and angry, I might start by using continuous reinforcement, noticing every time the child achieves this goal for 10 or 15 minutes. As the child starts to get the hang of give-and-take and happy engagement, I might recognize it only every so often or after a number of different play situations. At such times, an effective reinforcement might be giving the child a big hug and saying, “It was so neat to see you playing happily with John. The two of you were having such fun.”
* Shaping. Shaping is the process of teaching a larger, more complex behavior by starting with small, gradual steps that lead in successive approximations (Bandura, 1969) to the desired endpoint. Shaping involves providing reinforcement for each approximation in the behavioral sequence that the child makes. Commonly used in potty-training children, it is also the basis for using allowances to help children learn to handle money. Young children might get a small allowance every week just to get used to having money. Later, parents might want children to have a plan (or budget) for their money and provide additional funds as the child is able to demonstrate planning and responsible money management. When dealing with complex school problems and educational requirements, shaping makes progress possible when the more complex learning seems overwhelming. Helping children break a complex school assignment into separate tasks and acknowledging their efforts and achievements at each step along the way is another example of shaping.
* Behavioral Extinction. Behaviors that are ignored and/or not reinforced tend to stop or extinguish rather quickly. This is especially true when continuous reinforcement is discontinued. When intermittent reinforcement is discontinued, the behavior is likely to increase for a short period of time before extinguishing altogether. I often recommend that parents leave the room when a child starts to whine. Whining is often the first step to a temper tantrum. Both whining and temper tantrums demand an audience to be effective. When we stay and engage a child with a temper, we reinforce the temper tantrum. When we walk away, we remove the audience, and even though the temper may get a little louder initially, it will eventually stop and extinguish if we do not reinforce it. It is important to remember that when parents remove themselves, they must stay removed: Re-engaging every so often is intermittent reinforcement, the strongest kind.
* Punishment and Other Aversive Interventions. Strictly speaking, behaviorists use the word punishment to mean any stimulus that suppresses or decreases undesirable behaviors. In this sense, a time-out is a behavioral form of punishment. Although effective in some cases, punishment is, however, an intervention to be used sparingly. The problem with punishment and other aversive interventions is that they actually can begin to reinforce destructive behaviors. We see this all the time in families in which spanking3 is used. Generally, children perform the same negative behaviors over and over and get spanked for them regularly with no improvement expected by either the parent or the child. When this happens, spanking is an aversive stimuli, but it is not suppressing or decreasing unwanted actions; rather, it is actually reinforcing them. Some behaviorists use processes like dirty deeds (assigned difficult tasks) and withholding privileges (Horne & Sayger, 2000) as punishment for severe misbehaviors, but even these efforts at control often lead to further power struggles and even revenge. Focusing on behavioral exchange agreements or contracts, positive reinforcement, the Premack principle, and controlling the situation rather than the child is almost always better.
* Modeling. Based on the social-learning theories of Albert Bandura (1969, 1971a, 1971b), parents are encouraged to become prestigious models for their children (Krumboltz & Krumboltz, 1972). Modeling provides children with cues for what is expected and augments the power of social reinforcement that comes from the model. Modeling is often paired with role playing so that new behaviors can be observed, tried, and practiced with support and feedback.
* Self-Control and Self-Monitoring. Before parents can be taught to be effective in helping children change, they must learn cognitive-behavioral methods of self-control and self-monitoring (Cormier & Nurius, 2003). Disturbing behaviors in children tend to invite disturbing behaviors and feelings in adults, and vice versa. Cognitive-behavioral therapists ask parents: “What are you doing and how are you feeling?” If the answer is: “I am about to blow up,” then the therapist will ask: “And will it actually help if you blow up and get into an argument with your child? Has that worked before?” When parents want to know what else they can do, the answer is that first they must calm themselves down. Reframing their position as “I don’t like what my child has done, but exploding has not helped in the past and probably won’t now” is the first step to self-control. In the chapter on cognitive-behavioral family therapy, Dattilio (1998) used his pad-and-pencil method to analyze irrational, negative thoughts and taught this method to parents so that they could learn to self-monitor and calm themselves. Helping parents gain a sense of self-control and communicate effectively almost always entails a certain amount of coaching by the counselor or therapist.
* Communication. The more that some families and behaviors seem out of control, the more effective communication becomes necessary. Effective communication includes turning toward the person with whom you are speaking, listening, acknowledging, and validating, tapping into emotional language, giving clear directives and polite requests, setting clear and reasonable limits and expectations, and using I-statements in relation to personal and family needs (Christensen & Jacobson, 2000; Gottman, 1999; Gottman & Silver, 2000).
* Contracting. Designed to renegotiate severe levels of hostility in families, contracts spell out rewards for behaving in a certain manner. Contracts delineate specific behaviors required to gain specific rewards and usually are written and signed by all parties. A form of contracting called contingency contracting speaks to a mutual exchange of behaviors in which each party gets something they want from the other person if both agree to deliver it (Stuart, 1969). For example, the parent agrees to fix specific foods the child likes if the child agrees to show up for dinner on time.
* The Premack Principle. When children fail to comply with required expectations, the Premack principle (Premack, 1965) is designed to reinstate the importance of necessary behaviors. The child is told that she or he must complete less-enjoyable activities before being allowed to do desired ones. “You will need to complete your homework before you watch TV.” The use of a positive reinforcement to achieve an outcome the child may not be ready or want to do is central to Premack principle. I mentioned earlier the game that a parent might play with a child or a book that might be read if and when the child is ready for bed on time. It also follows that the child forfeits the pleasurable reinforcement if the desired behavior does not occur.
* Time-out. Time-out is the removal of a child, adolescent, or adult from a setting in which negative or undesirable behaviors are occurring and are perhaps even reinforced. The time away must be sufficient to break the behavioral pattern, stop any reinforcement of it in the environment, and provide the person with a fresh start. We often think of time-out in relation to children, but it is also useful when one parent relieves the other in the middle of stressful or ineffective adult–child interactions. Parents now and then need time-outs from the stress and difficulties associated with raising a family.

Contributions to Multicultural Parenting and Gender Issues

Many of the skills and interventions associated with effective parenting and functional families were developed originally within the cultures of European Americans: They now have been extensively tested and used in different cultures, including African-American, Hispanic-American, some Asian-American cultures, and families with disabled children (Gillette, 1989; Hammett, Omizo, & Loffredo, 1981; Krieg, 1985; Larrivee, 1982; Levenson, 1994; Lifur-Bennett, 1982; Maez, 1987; Mullis, 1999; Villegas, 1977). In North America, almost all effective parenting programs are available in Spanish as well as English, with special supplements that also address some religious orientations. Since the early 1990s, some excellent parenting books addressing specific populations also have begun to surface (Abner, Villarosa, & Beal, 1992; Cormer & Poussaint, 1992; Martin, 1993, Mathias & French, 1996, Rodriquez, 1999).

Effective family goals also must allow the individuals within the family to function within the communities in which the family resides. What individuals and families think and what they find reinforcing is influenced heavily by the cultural norms of the community. In this sense, understanding and working with culture should permeate every aspect of our efforts to train parents. I long have hoped that various ethnic communities might identify the parents in their communities who are recognized by their peers as models for effective parenting within the culture. Through the use of long interviews and other qualitative assessments, perhaps coupled with indirect observation, guidelines for effective parenting could be developed that are specific to various ethnic communities. The differences that we might discover could lead to a greater appreciation of diverse family life, as well as to an enhanced set of skills applicable across cultures.

We still have a long way to go in learning to parent and educate little girls and young women effectively in a patriarchal society. Faber and Mazlish (1974) were one of the first set of authors to see the advantage of applying Haim Ginott’s communication model in a non-sexist way: Their book, *Liberated Parents, Liberated Children*, focused on relationships and feelings. It is still extremely useful 30 years later. Still, parenting young women requires a focus on realities we would rather not have to consider. Girls and young women are molested and raped more than boys or young men: We need to keep them safe while still providing opportunities for freedom and exploration. Young women still hear that they won’t be able to compete in mathematics and the sciences at the same level as young men, a belief that is disputed easily when young women are given a **context** in which these skills can be developed. We also have a long way to go in terms of fulfilling the promise that little girls can grow up to be anything they want to be. In education, business, government, and religion, there are still glass ceilings imposed on women and areas of access they are denied.

The feminist author, Peggy Orenstein (2016, 2020) has provided an important picture of young people and their experiences with sexuality, identity, and social pressure. I highly recommend that parents of young adults of all sexes read her work and learn how to have conversations with their children about sexuality, self-awareness and self-pleasure, and sexual relationships that involve closeness, caring, respect, and consent.

Perhaps the prejudice of greatest focus today is against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered community. The war raged against them by religious conservatives strikes at the very nature of what constitutes a family. And even though children raised by lesbian or gay parents often have to experience unwarranted prejudice and oppression, the evidence over many years is that children of lesbian or gay parents are raised as well or better than those raised in comparable heterosexual families (Ainslie & Feltey, 1991; Bailey, Bobrow, Wolfe, & Mikach, 1995; Baptiste, 1987; Bigner & Jacobson, 1989).

Last, I should note that Hart and Risley (1995) demonstrated in their studies that families in poverty often engage in parenting processes that (a) reflect the almost constant stress and pressure experienced by the adults; (b) lack the language development and emotion coaching necessary for growth; (c) engage children in negative communications that often reinforce low self-esteem; (d) use higher amounts of aversive and arbitrary interventions with children than occur in working-class and professional families. To say the least, such children start life with multiple deficits. Bringing positive parenting models and skills to low-income families is one way to begin to break these negative cycles.

Summary

The early history of parenting is tied closely to the need for survival. It is highly probable that the long period of development needed by human children led in some way to the emergence of agrarian life, a beginning of farms and farmland—homes and homeland. Well into the 20th century, children were needed to keep family farms going. As late as the 1920s, 66% of the population in the United States still lived in rural areas. Sixty years later, 80% percent of the population would live in urban and suburban areas (Rockefeller Commission Report, n.d.). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, infant mortality for both white and black families was still relatively high (Bideau, Desjardins, & Perez-Brignoli, 1997). Although parents grieved the loss of their children, losing a child in childbirth or shortly after was neither unusual nor unexpected.

Watson’s early admonitions to parents were not the imposition of one man’s thoughts on the rest of the country. Rather, his distant, somewhat aloof stance and program for parents reflected the common sense of his culture at that point in history. It was in line with the rather autocratic family systems that had emerged in many different cultures. Even the advent of democracy in the Americas had done little to establish the *social equality* for all that it had promised. Women continue to struggle for equal rights even today. So do those people who have been relegated to marginalized cultures through discrimination and oppression. So does labor with management. The promise of social equality is not lost on children and adolescents either. Because they are often less educated, less experienced, and always younger, children carry no illusion that social equality means *being the same*. They do believe, however, that they have the same right to be valued and respected as everyone else: This is what social equality means to them, and they seek to enact it every day.

It was not until the middle of the 20th century that psychology began to adopt a developmental view of children. It was during this time that Erikson (1950), Kohlberg (1981), Piaget (1971), and others would demonstrate that children were growing and developing human beings who gained skills and capacities for thinking and living over time. This was a radically new conceptualization of childhood and adolescence. Even this new **perspective** was limited, however, since almost all of the developmental theories were normed on boys—with a wishful aside that suggested “girls were probably the same.” It was 30 years later that Carol Gilligan (1982) showed us that girls do not develop at least morally in the same ways that boys do: She set in motion an entire set of studies related to young women (for example, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule (1986/1997) on *Women’s Ways of Knowing*) that is still going on. In the last decade, we also have added brain research to our understanding of how children grow and develop (Ratey, 2001; Strauch, 2003).

The modern world in which we live has a decidedly postmodern bent. There are multiple perspectives and multiple approaches to almost everything, including parenting. Our models are no longer singular and provided within closed, often cloistered, communities: Rather they come to us through television, travel, books, newspapers, magazines, religion, schools, and cultures. There is much more diversity than could even have been imagined 100 years ago, but there is also a lot more confusion. Being an effective parent is no longer automatic, if it ever was, and it almost always requires some training and coaching if evidence-based approaches are to be used.

Parent study groups that started in the 1950s child guidance movements have now been systematized and programmed into kits, complete with videos, parent manuals, leadership guides, and posters (see Dinkmeyer, McKay, & Dinkmeyer, 1997; Lehman, 2004; Popkin, 1993). Two of these programs come in Spanish as well as English; with manuals adapting them to Christian life; and all of them have differing programs for early childhood, late childhood, and adolescence as well as programs for schools. These psychoeducational programs are among the most researched products in use, and they continually are updated to incorporate new findings in effective parenting methods.

In this chapter, I have presented the skills and interventions associated with effective parent education in Western cultures, as well as the more structured and precise techniques required for change within families experiencing severe behavioral problems. In both cases, the list of skills and interventions are among the most empirically tested and researched of any of the models in this book. Whether helping families through a psychoeducational approach or with cognitive-behavioral, systemic family therapy, the role of the counselor is that of an educator who assists families in employing methods that actually work.

If you are interested in a more in-depth study of parenting, I recommend the following sources: Abner, Villarosa, and Beal (1992); Cormer and Poussaint (1992); Crowder (2002); Dinkmeyer and Dreikurs (1963/2000); Dinkmeyer, McKay, and Dinkmeyer (1997); Dreikurs (1948/1992); Dreikurs and Soltz (1964/1991); Gilligan (1982); Ginott (1969/1971, 1965/1994); Gordon (1970); Gottman and DeClaire (1997); Krumboltz and Krumboltz (1972), if you can find it; Main (1986); Martin (1993); Mathias and French (1996); Nelsen (2006); Popkin (1993); Ricker and Crowder (1998, 2000); Rodriquez (1999); Satir (1987); Schwebel and Fine (1994); and Strauch (2003).

Where to Go From Here

People interested in parenting will find a great deal of help and support at:

Positive Discipline

PO Box 9595

San Diego, CA 92169

Phone:

1-800-456-7770

Fax:

1-801-762-0022

<https://www.positivediscipline.com/>

or

CMTI Press

Box 51722, Bowling Green, KY 42102-6722

Web site**:** [**http://www.cmtipress.com/index.**](http://www.agsnet.com/parenting.asp)**htm**

or

Active Parenting Today

1955 Vaughn Rd. NW, Suite 108 Kennesaw GA 30144-7808

Phone: 800-825-0060

Website: <http://www.activeparenting.com>

or

Total Transformation

**EmpoweringParents.com**  
325 Main St Ste 114  
Waterville, ME 04901

1-800-460-2253

For Parent Effectiveness or Family Effectiveness Training, see:

Gordon Training International

531 Stevens Avenue West

Solana Beach, CA 92075-2093

Phone: 800-628-1197 or 858-481-8121

E-mail:[**info@gordontraining.com**](mailto:info@gordontraining.com) **or** [**workplace@gordontraining.com**](mailto:workplace@gordontraining.com) **or** [**family@gordontraining.com**](mailto:family@gordontraining.com) **or** [**schools@gordontraining.com**](mailto:schools@gordontraining.com)**.**

Some additional websites are dedicated to special interests. Parents looking for support and help with children while going through a divorce might find the following website helpful: [**http://positiveparentingthroughdivorce.com**](http://positiveparentingthroughdivorce.com). And an excellent multicultural parenting web page can be found at: [**http://www.csun.edu/~vcpsy00h/parenthood/culture.htm**](http://www.csun.edu/~vcpsy00h/parenthood/culture.htm). Feminist parents might find the web page [**http://www.feminist.com/resources/links/links\_fam.html**](http://www.feminist.com/resources/links/links_fam.html) useful, as well as [Feminist Mom’s Center of the Universe](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/5262/). The APA has a website in which they summarize and list research related to gay and lesbian parenting. You can find this web page at: [**http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbc/**](http://www.apa.org/pi/parent.html#I. SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS)**publications/lgsummary.html**.

One of the older parent education programs in the country is located in Kensington, Maryland. The Parent Encouragement Program (PEP) has developed a complete curriculum that integrates play, learning styles, early childhood education, and effective discipline through a variety of workshop-type courses. PEP can be franchised to various parts of the country by contacting:

PEP: Parent Encouragement Program

10100 Connecticut Avenue

Kensington, MD 20895

Phone: 301-929-8824

E-mail: [**PEPoffice@aol.com**](mailto:PEPoffice@aol.com)

Recommended Readings

Dinkmeyer, D., Sr., McKay, G., & Dinkmeyer, D., Jr. (1997). *STEP: The parent’s handbook.* American Guidance Service. The STEP programs come in kits complete with parent handbook, videos, leader’s manuals, and other support materials. There are separate programs for early childhood, late childhood, teens, and advanced parenting programs.

Dreikurs, R., & Soltz, V. (1991). *Children: The challenge*. Plume. (Original work published 1964) After forty years, this is still one of the most practical and used parent education books in the United States. It is also available in multiple languages and used throughout the world.

Gottman, J., & DeClaire, J. (1997). *The heart of parenting: Raising an emotionally intelligent child*. Simon & Schuster. This is Gottman’s most readable presentation of emotion coaching and scientifically-based parenting in which he emphasizes the importance of feelings, emotion and problem-solving coaching, and authoritative-responsive parenting.

Krumboltz, J. D., & Krumboltz, H. B. (1972). *Changing children’s behavior*. Prentice Hall. This is a classic work that is rather hard to find, but it is an excellent guide for both parents and practitioners who want to use behavioral techniques in everyday life with children. The book is loaded with examples that highlight the principles involved, and the focus is on good process as much as desired outcome.

Main, F. (1986). *Perfect parenting and other myths*. The Main Press. A delightful book to read, filled with funny stories, as well as wisdom about the imperfect art of parenting. This is also the only parenting book that actually applies Kfir’s (1981) personality priorities to understanding parenting styles.

Nelsen, J. (2006). *Positive discipline.* Ballantine Books. (Original work published 1981) There are about 10 different books on Positive Discipline, but this is the one with which to start. This model brings the principles of positive parenting into the real life experiences of the people using the approach. It is one of the most used models around the world.

Popkin, M. (1993). *Active parenting today*. Active Parenting. Active Parenting is one of the fastest growing parent training programs in the country. It, too, comes with a parents’ manual, videos, and guidelines for leadership and parent programs for various developmental levels and teacher training programs too.

Ricker, A., & Crowder, C. Z. (1998). *Backtalk: 4 steps to ending rude behavior in your kids*. Fireside. A short, to-the-point, best-selling book that presents the Adlerian/Dreikursian approach to working with difficult children. Carolyn Crowder has appeared on countless television shows, including *20/20* and *The Today Show*.

Satir, V. M. (1987). *The new peoplemaking*. Science and Behavior Books. This is Virginia Satir at her best. Her book provides parents with a sense of what it was like to listen to her in person, highlights the importance of self-esteem and how to create it in children, and delineates her communication stances so that parents can assess their own communication and consider the power of congruence.

DVD Reference

Most of the interventions you will see in the parenting video can be found in the works of Rudolf Dreikurs, Thomas Gordon, Haim Ginott, and John Gottman. The interventions are based on the use of natural and logical consequences; clear, emotionally honest communication; and encouragement. In this particular session, Dr. Bitter focuses on helping Joel control himself rather than trying to control his children. He teaches Joel how to act rather than talk, because the latter only feeds one child’s need for negative attention and the other child’s desire for power. This video also demonstrates a mutually respectful process by which therapist knowledge can be shared while a collaborative relationship is still maintained.

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Endnotes

1It is important to note that behaviorists have a special definition of punishment that does not quite coincide with the everyday use of the term. The lay person understands punishment to be any negative action taken by one individual (usually the parent) against another (usually the child) that is intended to “teach the person to behave.” Behaviorists agree that punishment is aversive, but it is the outcome that defines it: To behaviorists, a punishment is any action that suppresses or decreases an unwanted behavior—at least temporarily. Corporal punishment may do this initially, but some children get used to the pain, and they then see, for example, a spanking as a badge of courage: It actually becomes a *reinforcement*, increasing negative, undesirable behaviors.

2My use of the terms reward and punishment do not sit all that well with caring and conscientious behaviorists who have given a special, technical meaning to these terms. Behaviorists think of rewards as a form of positive reinforcement applied immediately after desired or target behaviors for the purpose of maintaining or increasing those behaviors. Similarly, behaviorists describe punishment as any action that suppresses or decreases an unwanted behavior (as in the use of time-out). Most parents—and, I would guess, most readers—do not give such technical meaning to these terms. In their common, everyday meanings, rewards are given often haphazardly and capriciously “because the child has been good,” and punishment is applied to “teach the child a lesson,” generally about who is in charge, who is in control (see Dobson, 2004).

3The negative effects of constant and/or severe spanking have been well-documented and include an increase in disturbing or anti-social behavior (even violence); lowered IQ, mood disorders, and anxiety in children, as well as later in their lives; and substance abuse. Although spanking young children has been shown to get immediate compliance in them, it is also strongly associated with parental abuse of children. Given that there are so many better ways to discipline children, it is hard to understand what benefit there might be to continuing this practice at all. The recommendation that a parent learn to spank young children dispassionately, just enough to make them cry (see Dobson, 1996), seems lost on parents who tend to use spanking when they are angry and frustrated. For more on this, see the web page created by the APA at <http://www.apa.org/releases/spanking.html>