By the end of the first year, most infants who are cared for in families develop an attachment relationship, usually with the primary caretaker. This relationship is central to the child’s development.

Developmental psychologists have studied attachment in infancy mainly by watching how infants react when they are separated from, and then reunited with, their caregiver (usually one of the infant’s parents). An experimental laboratory procedure called the Strange Situation is the most common assessment. Researchers have been particularly interested in understanding individual differences in the quality of attachment is inferred from behavior in the Strange Situation. The majority of children develop a secure attachment: when reunited with their caregiver after a temporary absence of several minutes, they greet her in two distinctive ways. If distressed, they want to be picked up and find comfort in her arms; if content, they smile, talk to her, or show her a toy. In contrast, some children with an insecure attachment want to be picked up, but they are not comforted; they kick or push away. Others seem indifferent to the caregiver’s return, and ignore her when she returns.

The quality of the infant’s attachment seems to be predictive of aspects of later development. Youngsters who emerge from infancy with a secure attachment stand a better chance of developing happy, competent relationships with others. The attachment relationship not only forms the emotional basis for the continued development of the parent-child relationship, but can serve as a foundation upon which subsequent social relationships are built.

Researchers disagree about the origins of a secure attachment relationship. One account focuses on the way caregivers behave toward their infants. According to this view, the key element is the caregiver’s sensitivity in responding to the infant’s signals. Secure infants have mothers who sensitively read their infant’s cues and respond appropriately to their needs.

Another perspective emphasizes the temperament of the infants. A secure attachment is more easily formed between a caregiver and an infant with an easier disposition, or temperament, than between a caregiver and an infant who is characteristically negative, fearful, or not especially sociable. In this respect, security of attachment may reflect what the infant is like rather than how the caregiver behaves. Most likely, the early parent-child relationship is the product both of what the infant and caregiver bring to it.

**Toddlerhood**

When children move from infancy into toddlerhood, the parent-child relationship begins to change its focus. During infancy, the primary function of the parent-child relationship is nurturance and predictability, and much of the relationship revolves around the day-to-day demands of caregiving: feeding, sleeping, toileting, bathing. The attachment relationship develops out of these day-to-day interactions.

As youngsters begin to talk and become more mobile during the second and third years of life, however, parents usually attempt to shape their child’s social behavior. In essence, parents become teachers as well as nurturers, providers of guidance as well as affection. The process of socialization—preparing the youngster to function as a member of a social group—implicit during most of the first two years of life, becomes explicit as the child moves toward his or her third birthday.

**Socialization** has been an important focus of research in child development for well over 60 years. Initially, researchers focused on particular child-rearing practices—including types of discipline and approaches to toilet training and weaning—in an effort to link specific parenting practices to aspects of the child’s development. Findings from this research were inconsistent and not especially informative. Over time, such efforts gave way to research that emphasized the overall emotional climate of the parent-child relationship, instead of discrete parenting practices.

A number of studies conducted during the past 30 years have pointed to two overarching dimensions of the parent-child relationship that appear to be systematically linked to the child’s psychological development: how responsive the parents are, and how demanding they are. Responsive parents are warm and accepting toward their children, enjoying them and trying to see things from their perspective. In contrast, parents who are low in responsiveness tend to be aloof, rejecting, or critical. They show little pleasure in their children and are often insensitive to their emotional needs. Demanding parents maintain consistent standards for their child’s behavior. In contrast, parents who are insufficiently demanding are too lenient; they exercise minimal control, provide little guidance, and often yield to their child’s demands. Children’s healthy psychological development is facilitated when the parents are both responsive and moderately demanding.

During toddlerhood, children often begin to assert their desires for autonomy by challenging their parents. Sometimes, the child’s newfound assertiveness during the “terrible twos” can put a strain on the parent-child relationship. It is important that parents recognize that this behavior is normal for the toddler, and that the healthy development of independence is facilitated by a parent-child relationship that provides support and structure for the child’s developing sense of autonomy. In many regards, the security of the initial attachment between in-
Involving children in leisure activities, like fishing, can build stronger parent-child relationships. (Photo by Susan D. Rock. Reproduced with permission.)

Parent-child relationships
Involving children in leisure activities, like fishing, can build stronger parent-child relationships. 

Affection, rather than power, and they are likely to explain rules and expectations to their children instead of simply asserting them. Authoritarian parents are also highly demanding, but they are not less responsive; authoritarian parents tend to be strict disciplinarians, frequently relying on physical punishment and the withdrawal of affection to shape their child’s behavior. Indulgent parents are responsive, but not especially demanding; they have few expectations of their children and impose little discipline. Disengaged parents are neither responsive nor demanding. They may be neglectful or unaware of the child’s needs for affection and discipline.

What makes a parent more likely to use one style as opposed to another? Ultimately, the parenting style a parent employs is shaped by many factors: the parent’s developmental history, education, and personality, the child’s behavior, and the immediate and broader context of the parent’s life. Thus, the parent’s behavior vis-à-vis the child is influenced by such things as work, marriage, family finances, and other factors likely to affect the parent’s behavior and psychological well-being. In addition, systematic comparisons of parenting practices among families living in different circumstances teach us that parents in...