different cultures, from different social classes, and from different ethnic groups rear their children differently.

Nevertheless, research has shown that aspects of children’s behavior and psychological development are linked to the style of parenting with which they have been raised. Generally speaking, preschoolers with authoritative parents tend to be curious about new situations, focused and skilled at play, self-reliant, self-controlled, and cheerful. Children who are routinely treated in an authoritarian way tend to be moody, unhappy, fearful, withdrawn, unsponsive, and irritable. Children of permissive parents tend to be low in both social responsibility and independence, but they are usually more cheerful than the conflicted and irritable children of authoritarian parents. Finally, children whose parents are disengaged tend to have a higher proportion of psychological difficulties than other youngsters.

**School age**

During the elementary school years, the child becomes increasingly interested in peers, but this should not be taken as a sign of disinterest in the parent-child relationship. Rather, with the natural broadening of psychosocial and cognitive abilities, the child’s social world expands to include more people and settings beyond the home environment. The parent-child relationship continues to remain the most important influence on the child’s development. Generally speaking, children whose parents are both responsive and demanding continue to thrive psychologically and socially during the middle childhood years.

The parenting styles that first become apparent during the preschool years continue to influence development across middle childhood. Over the course of childhood, parents’ styles tend to remain the same, and their effects on the child quite similar. Children of authoritative parents tend to be socially competent, responsible, successful in school, and high in self-esteem. The authoritarian style, with its perfectionism, rigidity, and harsh discipline, continues to affect children adversely, with these youngsters generally rated lower than their peers in appropriate social assertiveness, cognitive ability, competence, and self-esteem, but higher in aggression. Children of permissive parents also tend to be more aggressive than their peers, but also more impulsive, less self-reliant, and less responsible. Children raised in disengaged homes continue to have the most difficulty, and show more behavior problems.

The natural tendency is to think of the parent-child relationship as a one-way street, with the parent influencing the child. But in actuality the relationship is reciprocal and bi-directional. During the school years especially, the parent-child relationship is influenced not only by the child’s parents but by the child. In most families, patterns of interaction between parent and child are well established by the elementary school years. Overly harsh parenting, for example, often leads to aggressive behavior in children, leading children to join antisocial peer groups, further heightening their aggressiveness. This, in turn, may provoke harsher parenting, leading to further aggressiveness in the child, and so on. Authoritative parenting, in contrast, helps children develop self-reliance and social competence, which, of course, makes it easier for parents to rear their child in an authoritative, reasoned fashion. Continued authoritativeness on the part of the parent contributes to increased competence in the child, and so on. Rather than trying to solve the “which came first” puzzle—the parenting or the child’s characteristics—it is more useful to think of parenting as a process and the parent-child relationship as one part of an intricate social system.

Much research has examined how the child’s development is affected by such factors as divorce, remarriage, and parental (especially, maternal) employment. As a rule, these studies show that the quality of the parent-child relationship is a more important influence on the child’s psychological development than changes in the structure or composition of the household. Generally speaking, parenting that is responsive and demanding is associated with healthier child development regardless of the parent’s marital status or employment situation. If changes in the parent’s marital status or work life disrupt the parent-child relationship, however, short-term effects on the child’s behavior are likely to be seen. One goal of professionals who work with families under stress is to help them re-establish healthy patterns of parent-child interaction.

**Adolescence**

Early adolescence marks an important turning point in the parent-child relationship. As the child enters adolescence, the biological, cognitive, and emotional changes of the period spark transformations in the parent-child relationship. In many families, the transition into adolescence coincides with the parent’s transition into mid-life, and this, too, may introduce additional challenges into the family system that spill over into the parent-child relationship.

Early adolescence is a time during which the child’s urges for independence may challenge parents’ authority, as the young adolescent strives to establish a sense of emotional autonomy, or individuation. And much like toddlerhood, many parents find early adolescence to be a difficult period requiring a fair amount of adaptation. But, as is also the case with toddlerhood, research shows
that most families are able to cope with these adaptational demands successfully. Adolescents fare best, and their family relationships are happiest, in households in which parents are both supportive and are accepting of the child's needs for more psychological independence.

Although the significance of peer relationships grows during adolescence, the parent-child relationship maintains its importance for the psychological development of the child. As in previous eras, authoritative parenting—parenting that combines warmth and firmness—seems to have the most positive impact on the youngster's development. Research shows that over time, adolescents who have been reared authoritatively continue to show more success in school, better psychological development, and fewer behavior problems than their counterparts from other types of homes. Youngsters whose parents are disengaged continue to show the most difficulty.

It is widely assumed that conflict between parents and children is an inherent feature of family life in adolescence, but systematic research on the so-called "generation gap" indicates that the phenomenon has been exaggerated in the popular media. Early adolescence may be a time of heightened bickering and somewhat diminished closeness in the parent-child relationship, but most disagreements between parents and young teenagers are over fairly mundane matters, and most teenagers and parents agree on the essentials. Nevertheless, the increased frequency with which these squabbles occur may take its toll on parents' mental health, especially on the mothers'. This period appears to be temporary, however, and most parents and adolescents are able to establish a comfortable working relationship by the beginning of high school. Indeed, by late adolescence most children report feeling as close to their parents as they did during elementary school.

**Adults**

Many adults maintain an active relationship with their parents. As adults, they can now relate to each other as equals, although the feeling of one being the parent and the other a "child" (even though the child is now an adult) endures in some relationships. Increasingly, adult children are sandwiched between the demands of caring for their own children and their aging parents, who may need more assistance as they get older and physically weaker. In some families, the adult children take care of their parents, much in the same way that their parents took care of them when they were younger. This situation has brought both stress and joy as parents and adult children struggle to redefine their relationship.

Laurence Steinberg Ph.D.

**Further Reading**


**Parkinson's disease**

A relatively common degenerative disorder of the central nervous system.

Parkinson's disease is a degenerative disorder of the central nervous system named for James Parkinson (1755-1824), the physician who first described it in 1817. This disorder is also called paralysis agitans, shaking palsy, or parkinsonism.

Typically, the symptoms of Parkinson’s disease begin to appear in late middle life, and the course of the disease is slowly progressive over 20 years or more. In its advanced stages, Parkinson’s disease is characterized by poorly articulated speech, difficulty in chewing and swallowing, loss of motor coordination, a general tendency toward exhaustion, and especially by stooped posture, positioning the arms in front of the body when walking, caution and slowness of movement, rigidity of facial expression, and tremor of the hands. Mental ability and the senses are not directly affected by this disease. Parkinson’s disease is believed to be caused by a deficiency of dopamine in the basal ganglia of the brain.

**Further Reading**