

# Family Relationships and Development

JOAN E. GRUSEC

## Abstract

Family relationships take different forms, with each form affecting development in a different way and requiring a different kind of parenting intervention. In this essay I begin by reviewing different approaches that have been taken to understanding social and affective outcomes of parenting and how each focuses on one particular kind of relationship. I then discuss central concepts including the importance for successful socialization of the internalization or the taking over of parental values and attitudes as one's own. Some current research is addressed, including (i) the investigation of control and how it can be exercised in such a way that it does not threaten children's autonomy and, therefore, their willingness to comply with parental directives; (ii) investigation of the many interactions between parenting and variables having to do with characteristics of the child and the context in which socialization takes place; and (iii) concern with the impact of different kinds of parental sensitivity on specific aspects of children's behavior. Finally, some key issues for future research are discussed. These include increased attention to the direction of effect between child and parent behavior, continuing attempts to understand how control is most effectively administered, and a focus on understanding the nature of interactions between genes and parenting in the developmental process.

## INTRODUCTION

Much of children's development, both social, emotional, and intellectual, is influenced by the experiences they have in their family. As a result of socialization experiences with parents and, to a lesser extent, with siblings, children learn the values, standards, and beliefs of their cultural group. Also, they learn to regulate their own behavior and emotions as well as how to problem solve. These socialization experiences are embedded in the relationship between parent and child. In fact, there are several forms of relationships that children can have with their parents. Thus, at different times, different kinds of relationships are activated and different forms of socialization are therefore required. This entry will be organized around these different relationship forms or domains of socialization. It will also focus on parents as

the primary socializers and particularly on the role of parenting in socioemotional development.

The first relationship involves parents as caregivers or protectors who respond to the child's distress and fear and who keep the child from danger. In the second form, parents assume the role of authority figures and use their greater resources to modify the child's behavior. The third form entails the parent as a teacher and the child as a student. Here, the parent must scaffold the child's learning, working within the area of the child's comprehension level or zone of proximal development, but gently pushing for a higher level of understanding. The fourth is one of joint membership in the same social group, with socialization occurring through the child's observation of parents and a desire to be like them as well as through parents' management of the child's environment to avoid examples or models of antisocial behavior. In the final form, the relationship is one of equality. Parents comply with their children's reasonable requests and children, in turn, reciprocate this compliance. These relationships or domains of socialization have been labeled, in turn, protection, control, guided learning, group participation, and mutual responsiveness (Grusec & Davidov, 2010).

## FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

Psychological theories about socialization begin with the writings of Freud. Freud had a particular interest in how children introject or internalize their socialization experiences so as to be better able to function in the social community. In the 1950s, developmental psychologists, guided by the basic concepts of research-based learning theory that had been combined with the clinically based hypotheses of psychoanalytic theory, began to explore empirically how children learn the norms of society, including such outcomes as resistance to temptation, conscience, and sex roles. One focus was on the role of identification or striving to model the actions and cognitions of parents. (Another focus was on discipline, a topic that is addressed subsequently.) Explanations for children's identification with their parents and the internalization or taking over of their parents' values became highly convoluted, however, as reinforcement theorists struggled with trying to understand why children would imitate the behavior of their parents in the absence of some kind of reward. These difficulties led Albert Bandura and Richard Walters to propose that the primary or basic form of human learning was observational, and that children learned how to perform appropriate or inappropriate behavior regardless of anticipated rewards or punishments. Indeed, a great many studies conducted in the 1960s and 1970s demonstrated how easily children mapped behavior such as aggression, self-regulation, sharing,

and delay of gratification onto that of others, independent of the response consequence.

Somewhat different approaches to understanding socialization appeared in the late 1960s. First, Diana Baumrind proposed that there are different styles of parenting and that each is associated with different child outcomes. The basic styles were authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive, with authoritarian parenting characterized by rigid control and inflexibility, authoritative by firm control and responsiveness to the child's wishes, and permissive by lack of control. In yet another approach to the study of socialization, some developmental psychologists elaborated on the interest in discipline shown by social learning theorists, demonstrating that a modest level of punishment accompanied by reasoning was most effective in teaching children to comply with societal rules. Particularly emphasized was the use of reasoning that called on children's empathic capacity and understanding of the impact of their misbehavior on others. In keeping with ideas about identification, internalization, and introjection, it was emphasized that successful socialization involved children being able to control their own behavior even in the absence of surveillance by socialization agents. One way in which this could occur was through their attribution of conformity with parental dictates to internal reasons as opposed to fear of external consequences, an outcome more likely if punishment levels were minimal and reasoning salient.

In a quite separate avenue of research, John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth were studying the way in which children become securely or insecurely attached to their parents, an outcome that depended on the parents' level of appropriate responsiveness when their children were in danger or upset. Secure children generally showed more positive social and emotional outcomes including peer competence, prosocial behavior, and better regulation of emotions. Bowlby argued that security was, in fact, the foundation of positive personality development, enabling children to have a protective base from which they could move out into the world. Ainsworth devised the Strange Situation, a methodology that was used by many researchers to build on the basic ideas of attachment theory. The fact that Ainsworth and her colleagues argued that children whose crying was responded to quickly in the first three months of life would cry less when they were one year old was at striking odds with the basic tenet of learning theory that would predict more crying because the behavior had been reinforced. This disagreement provided a strong hint that socialization might indeed occur in different contexts or domains with different underlying mechanisms.

Taking a cue from attachment theory, Eleanor Maccoby and her colleagues argued that psychologists who studied socialization and, particularly, those who studied discipline and control, were putting too much emphasis on the role of conflict between the wishes of parents and the desires of their children.

They suggested that socialization could also occur in the absence of conflict if parents were sensitively responsive to and compliant with their children's needs and wishes because this would set the stage for reciprocal compliance on the part of the child. Thus, the importance of sensitive responsiveness was moved from the context of distress to a wider context that included a greater variety of child concerns.

Each of these four approaches—discipline and control, observational learning, attachment, and mutual reciprocity—map onto the domains of socialization described at the beginning of this entry—control, group participation, protection, and mutual reciprocity. Interestingly, there was little interest among socialization theorists in the domain of guided learning, although the approach was certainly used in the teaching of moral development in schools. In the case of moral education, researchers found that teaching that occurred at one level above the child's current level of thinking (i.e., within the child's zone of proximal development) was most effective. The use of reasoning in combination with power assertion (use of rewards and punishments) can also be construed as an example of guided learning, particularly when that reasoning is seen to be appropriate to the child's current level of thinking.

#### CHANGES IN THINKING ABOUT SOCIALIZATION PROCESSES

During the 1970s and 1980s some changes in the basic thinking of researchers occurred. One had to do with the direction of effect in socialization and the role that children themselves might take in the process. It was argued that children do not incorporate or take over as a whole the ideas of their parents. Instead, they are selective, accepting some ideas and rejecting others. They were also seen to influence their own environments, either triggering the responses of their parents or actively seeking out experiences or environments of their own. For example, aggressive children would be more likely to elicit harsh punishment from their parents as well as look for peer groups that supported their aggressive predispositions. In these ways, they would be responsible for eliciting ineffective parenting as well as exposing themselves to models of aggressive behavior.

In addition to the idea that children influenced their parents, as well as vice versa, developmentalists also began to see socialization as situation specific. Instead of positing general processes that operated across all ages, settings, and cultures, as was the case with learning approaches or approaches involving styles of parenting, researchers began to consider that socialization could be controlled by mechanisms specific to a particular response system or type of social relationship. Some kinds of learning are "privileged," that is, they occur very easily. One example is food aversion which can be acquired

with one negative experience. Other kinds of learning are very difficult to effect when they interfere with species-specific responses such as crying in response to distress. Eliot Turiel and his students identified domains of social knowledge and judgment, noting that individuals from an early age and across cultures distinguish between moral issues involving physical and psychological harm to others, social conventional issues relating to customs and rules for organized social functioning, and prudential issues having to do with health and safety of the individual. Although all these domains are understood to be legitimate areas for regulation, it is moral issues that are perceived to be obligatory and unalterable by agreement or consensus. Given these different perceptions, then, it is clear that different approaches to socialization are needed for each of them.

## CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

### ISSUES INVOLVING THE CONTROL RELATIONSHIP

Parents have greater power than children: They control material goods and privileges as well as having the advantage of greater wisdom and experience. They use their power to influence their children's behavior, but how best to exercise that power is a major concern. Noted earlier was Baumrind's distinction between rigid control and responsive control. Although these distinctions are still currently central, other forms of control have been suggested. Psychological control, for example, includes guilt induction, withdrawal of love, and parental intrusiveness, all of which are focused on the child's emotional state. Behavioral control includes monitoring of children's activities and the setting and enforcement of rules in a way that is not threatening to the child's sense of autonomy or individuality. Psychological control generally has negative consequences in the form of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, whereas behavioral control has positive consequences in the form of reduced levels of antisocial behavior (Barber & Harmon, 2002). In a meta-analysis, Hoeve, Dubas, Eichelsheim, Smeenk, and Gerris (2009) compared the various forms of control with respect to delinquent behavior, finding that the strongest links with delinquency were for psychological and behavioral control and the weakest for authoritative and authoritarian control. They also found that parental neglect, hostility, and rejection were strong predictors of delinquency, a finding that highlights the importance of the context in which control is imposed. Interestingly, communication and warmth did not predict delinquency nor, indeed, did the use of physical punishment. If one assumes that neglect and rejection reflect impaired parenting in the protection domain these findings suggest that setting and enforcing rules for a child who feels secure is an important feature of successful parenting.

Another approach to the issue of control is provided by self-determination theory. Its proponents argue that inhibition of antisocial acts as well as displays of prosocial behavior are not intrinsically rewarding to perform and so they must be encouraged through the socialization process. Successful internalization occurs when control is nonintrusive and offers choice, that is, when the child's autonomy is preserved. It must also include structure, that is, the setting of clear expectations. And, finally, it must occur in a context of caring acceptance (Grolnick, Deci, & Ryan, 1997).

*Monitoring and Disclosure* An important feature of behavioral control is monitoring, that is, awareness of a child's activities and whereabouts. Monitoring becomes especially important as children move into adolescence and parents have less opportunity for direct oversight of their actions. Awareness of children's activities and whereabouts can come from setting rules (controlling children's behavior) or soliciting information from children and other knowledgeable individuals about children's activities. Kerr and Stattin, in a series of papers (e.g., Kerr & Stattin, 2000) pointed out that many studies had used parents' knowledge about their children's whereabouts as an indication of monitoring. However, they argued that a major source of this knowledge comes not from control or solicitation of information, but from children's willingness to disclose information about themselves. Moreover, these researchers found that the most important determinant of children's refraining from antisocial behavior was their disclosure, and not parents' enquiry or management. Of course, the relation between disclosure and prosocial behavior could simply reflect the fact that better-behaved adolescents have less to hide. In a longitudinal study, however, Kerr, Stattin, and Burk (2010) provided evidence that disclosure and accompanying increases in knowledge did indeed lead to improvements in positive social behavior. It is evident that exchange among family members of relevant information is central for successful socialization, particularly as children spend more time in settings outside the family.

## INTERACTIONS

Given that socialization occurs in different domains, it is clear that the same parenting strategy will have a different impact depending on the domain currently activated. Punishment for an antisocial act, for example, will not alter behavior if that behavior was motivated in the first place by feelings of insecurity and fear, or if the recipient does not understand what the punishment is actually for, or if parents perform that antisocial action themselves. In addition to interactions as a function of domain, researchers have identified many

other kinds of interactions. These include, but are not limited to, features of the child such as temperament, age, and sex and features of the situation such as the cultural context in which parenting takes place. Children who are easily frustrated or irritated, for example, are generally more adversely affected by problematic parenting. And temperamentally fearful, as opposed to fearless, children's coping abilities can be undermined by parents who are too protective when their children are in stressful situations. With respect to interactions with age, adolescents are more likely to feel their autonomy has been threatened by parental attempts at control than are younger children. And, with respect to cultural context, researchers have shown that negative effects of corporal punishment are less in countries where this form of discipline is more normative and where, therefore, the corporal punishment is less likely to be seen as a sign of parental rejection (Lansford *et al.*, 2010).

All these interactions mean that the impact of parenting depends very much on how that parenting is perceived. Effective socialization thus involves parents' understanding of the way a child perceives the socialization situation and knowing the meaning the child attaches to specific parenting actions.

#### THE NATURE OF PARENT RESPONSIVENESS

Effective parenting is often characterized as involving sensitivity to a child's needs and wishes and appropriate responsiveness to those needs. The importance of responsiveness has been particularly stressed in the protection domain where sensitivity to a child's distress is key in the promotion of a secure attachment relationship. Not infrequently, however, the notion of sensitivity has been extended beyond events involving children's distress to encompass warmth and other positive parent-child interactions. It is becoming clear, however, that parent responsiveness is situation-specific rather than a general feature of positive parenting behavior. Acknowledgment of this specificity is important in making sense of apparently confusing research results, where sensitivity and responsiveness have been treated as general features of parenting.

Demonstrations of specificity have come from several sources. Leerkes, Weaver, and O'Brien (2012), for example, distinguish between sensitivity to distress in infants that centers around comfort and safety (protection domain) and sensitivity to nondistress that centers around reciprocity and learning (that is, the mutual reciprocity and guided learning domains). Sensitivity to distress and nondistress both require attending to an infant's cues and taking the infant's perspective and so, not surprisingly, are moderately related. However, only sensitivity to distress, involving teaching self-soothing behaviors, distracting, and encouraging problem-oriented responses, predicts attachment security, fewer behavior problems, greater

affect regulations, and greater social competence. Sensitivity to nondistress cues, on the other hand, predicts cognitive abilities such as attention and symbolic play (Bornstein & Tamis-LeMonda, 1997). In addition, Leerkes *et al.* report that the two kinds of sensitive parenting have different antecedents, with prenatal empathic and understanding responses to videos of crying infants a positive predictor of sensitivity to distress and demographic variables such as maternal youth, lower SES, and lack of father involvement a negative predictor of sensitivity to nondistress cues. Moving to a consideration of warmth, Davidov and Grusec (2006) found that parental responsiveness to distress predicted children's ability to regulate their negative affect as well as their empathy and consideration for others. Warmth, in contrast, was related to the ability of children to regulate their positive affect as well as (for boys) acceptance by peers. Furthermore, warmth did not predict regulation of negative affect or empathy and consideration of others, whereas responsiveness to distress did not predict regulation of positive affect or acceptance by peers.

## KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

### DIRECTION OF EFFECT

As noted earlier, developmental psychologists are sensitive to the fact that socialization is a bidirectional process. In spite of this awareness, however, the natural predisposition of at least some is to think in terms of the influence of parents on children. There is good reason for this: As well as being interested in the mechanisms underlying the socialization process, developmentalists have a genuine interest in improving the parenting process and identifying conditions that facilitate socialization. Moreover, parents are more likely to seek advice about how to raise their children than adolescents are to seek advice about how to cope with their parents and so theory is oriented toward satisfying its consumers. Nevertheless, a greater focus on how children influence their parents is needed, and not just to achieve a better understanding of how parent-child relationships affect the back-and-forth nature of the developmental process. Parents also need to be alerted or prearmed concerning the negative effects children's behavior might have on them as well as to be sensitized to the importance of altering their interventions when children do not respond well to initial attempts.

To address the problem of direction of effect, longitudinal studies are becoming the norm, with data collected at different time points so that the trajectory of socialization can be mapped. These studies provide considerable evidence that the direction of effect in socialization research is very often from parent to child or at least transactional between parent and child.



Recently, however, Kerr, Stattin, and Ozdemir (2012) have argued that even the apparently well-established belief that parenting styles have an effect on children's externalizing behavior may not be that robust a finding. In a longitudinal study of adolescents, they found greater support for the position that adolescents have an impact on their parents' behavior than for the position that parents have an impact on their adolescents' behavior: As adolescents became more antisocial in their behavior, parents became more authoritarian in theirs. Of course, it would be a problem if parents did not modify their behavior when it was apparent that what they were doing was not effective. Parents who did not change their level of control, for example, would seem to be rigid or even neglectful in their approach to socialization. On the other hand, it is important to understand that at least in some points of the developmental process, children may become more and more resistant to parenting interventions: Adolescents, for example, increasingly believe that they have the right to control their own actions and this obviously interferes with the parent's ability to do so (Smetana & Daddis, 2002). The issue of direction of effect, then, is still a key one for future research.

#### CONTROL, PUNISHMENT, AND INTERNALIZATION OF VALUES

Remarkably, in spite of the long history of research interest in the most effective way to control children's behavior, as well as repeated attempts to describe and assess its different forms, the picture with respect to control is still not very clear. It is evident that control that is too harsh and restrictive of the child's autonomy can have harmful effects. A child's perceptions of what is harsh and restrictive, as noted earlier, depends however on a myriad of facts that range from that child's developmental status to the cultural context in which the child functions.

Few socialization theorists would deny that socialization involves the reigning-in of children's impulsive actions and the development of self-regulation. The challenge, then, is not whether or not control should be exercised but the way in which it should be exercised. Taking a lead from self-determination theory, Grolnick and Pomerantz (2009) have argued that socialization theorists should think in terms of structure, or the setting of rules and limits on behavior, and control—the how of enforcing these rules. Thus, the argument is not whether children should have limits set on their behavior but, rather, how those limits should be enforced.

This conclusion leads naturally to a discussion of modes of enforcement or discipline. It also leads to a discussion of the best ways for instilling values and attitudes that are internalized or seen as being part of the self or of one's identity. First, with respect to discipline, one generally accepted position is that severe punishment is counterproductive. Researchers have argued,

for example, that pressure should be minimal and just sufficient to gain the child's compliance. Only under these conditions will children attribute their compliance to their own beliefs about what is right rather than to external pressure in the form of fear of parental anger and discipline. What constitutes "just sufficient discipline" remains a question, of course. Certainly, punishment needs to be reasonable in kind and severity with respect to the nature of the child's misdeed. And the same level of punishment can be administered in different ways. The authoritarian parent, for example, can administer punishment in a hostile and arbitrary way. In contrast, an authoritative parent can administer it in a way that is accepting of the child if not the act, that allows room for negotiation, and that even allows the child to decide not to obey.

A second concern with discipline has to do with whether it is even the best context for instilling a sense of moral identity in the child. Although researchers emphasize that punishment or power assertion must be accompanied by reasoning that is appropriate, it is also the case that information delivered in the context of punishment is less easily processed by the child. In the discipline situation, levels of emotional arousal are high, both in the child whose cognitive capacity is occupied with trying to regulate emotion and in parents who are trying to manage the child's emotions as well as their own. Moreover, fear and anger that are aroused in discipline situations signal threat and the resulting narrowing of thought-action repertoires. It might, therefore, be more productive to wait until high levels of arousal have dissipated and attention can be better focused on reasons and explanations. Such separation of deed and discipline moves the socialization encounter into the domain of guided learning where affect levels are more neutral. Indeed, guided learning, especially when it is not linked to a specific misdeed, can occur in a more positive emotional context and there is evidence that when their emotional state is positive the thinking of individuals becomes more creative, flexible, and integrative. One might expect, then, that in the guided learning domain internalization of values would be greater than in the control domain, even when conditions in the latter domain were improved with the addition of reasoning.

These are but a few of the questions that still remain to be addressed about control, punishment, and the internalization of societal standards. They remain central issues for understanding the socialization process.

#### SOCIALIZATION IN THE FAMILY AND GENES

It is not possible to understand the developmental process without a discussion of the way in which genes and experience interact to produce behavioral,

affective, and cognitive outcomes. Behavior geneticists have contributed significantly to this understanding. These researchers assess the similarity of individuals with known differences in genetic composition such as monozygotic twins who have all their genes in common and dizygotic twins who have, on average, half their genes in common. By assuming that the family experiences of these sets of twins are shared to a similar extent, behavior geneticists are able to estimate the extent to which a trait or characteristic is inherited or genetically mediated as well as the extent to which it is a reflection of shared environmental experiences and nonshared environmental experiences such as differential treatment by parents or participation in different peer groups. Behavior genetic approaches have proved very useful not only in identifying the extent to which characteristics are heritable but also in demonstrating that experience is also a powerful predictor of outcomes.

Behavior genetics studies have their limitations. Heritability coefficients include the effects of gene by environment interactions and so they include cases in which the effects of genetic predisposition are moderated by experience, thereby overestimating the role of heredity. Second, the heritability coefficients obtained refer to a population at large, not individuals: thus, a given pair of dizygotic twins can share very few or very many genes. Third, the nature of the sample under study affects the size of the heritability coefficient: The less variation in the environment, the more variation is left to be assigned to heredity. Nevertheless, these studies have been useful not only in identifying the heritabilities of certain behavioral traits which are typically about 50% but also in demonstrating the importance of environmental events in explaining the remainder of the trait.

The successful mapping of the human genome has led to tremendous optimism with respect to identifying genes or combinations of genes that are associated with a wide variety of physical and psychological outcomes. The linking of specific genes or groups of genes to specific outcomes is a significant improvement over the yield of behavior genetics with its conclusions applying only to populations at large and not individuals, as well as its production of information applicable only to the population from which data were obtained. Yet, in what is known as the missing heritability problem, there is an extremely large gap between the extent of heritability identified in this direct way and that identified by behavior geneticists. There are several possible reasons for this gap. One may be that heritability has been overestimated. Given the fact that gene by environment interactions are included in the heritability coefficient, this could well be the case. Additional complexity is added by the fact that there are gene by gene interactions and that these are missed in molecular genetics studies that usually identify only additive effects. Another explanation involves the fact that gene expression is affected

by environmental events and that these so-called epigenetic effects can be transmitted from one generation to the next.

## CONCLUSION

Direction of effect, the nature of parental control, and gene by environment interactions are just a sampling of areas in which future research will be directed as developmentalists attempt to understand family relationships and development. Many questions remain to be answered. Nevertheless, there has been a substantial increase in our knowledge about a very complex topic since the 1950s and 1960s when significant interest in the process of socialization first appeared. We now know a great deal about how to raise children who are happy and productive members of society, and who have a finely honed sense of moral integrity and respect for other members of the social group. However, there is still much to learn.

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#### JOAN E. GRUSEC SHORT BIOGRAPHY

**Joan E. Grusec** is a Professor Emerita in the Department of Psychology at the University of Toronto. Her research interests have focused on the development of prosocial behavior, socialization processes, and discipline, as well as the impact of parenting cognitions and affect on parenting behavior. Recent research focuses on the development of moral identity and on the antecedents and correlates of children's empathic capacity and

concern for others. She has authored two books, *Punishment* (with Gary Walters) and *Social Development* (with Hugh Lytton), as well as edited books (*Foundations of Psychology*, with Robert Lockhart and Gary Walters, *Parenting and Children's Internalization of Values*, with Leon Kuczynski, and *Handbook of Socialization*, with Paul Hastings). In addition she has published many chapters and research papers.

Outside of university research, teaching, and administration, Grusec has chaired the History Committee and been a member of the Publications Committee of the Society for Research in Child Development. She was Chair of the Examination Committee of the Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards from 2004–2012.

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