

Challenges to Parenting: The Local Scene

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It is an honour to be invited to share with the paediatricians about my views on parenting. Paediatricians play a very important role to influence the parents, as they are ready to take their advice on ways to promote their children's physical as well as psychological health.

I. Defining Parenting

Parenting can be simply defined as "the process or the state of being a parent".¹ Once you have a child, you are involved in the process of parenting. However, it is not that simple and Morrison² defined parenting as "the process of developing and utilising the knowledge and skills appropriate to planning for, creating, giving birth to, rearing and/or providing care for offspring". This definition implies that parenting starts when there is a plan for it and it involves not just bringing up the children but also providing care for them.

There are several characteristics of parenting. First of all, with the advance of medical knowledge and technology, parenting becomes a choice in life. Secondly, being a parent is a life-long commitment. Thirdly, it involves responsibilities as parents are responsible to take good care of their children physically as well as psychologically. Lastly, parenting involves not just the couple but all the family members since the birth of a child affects the whole family.

The quality of parenting depends on several factors. Firstly, the mature personality of the parents is the basic factor of good quality parenting. It also contributes to the stable and intimate marital relationship, which is the second factor of high quality parenting. Thirdly, the parents' motivation of having a child would affect their way of parenting. Fourthly, whether the pregnancy is planned or not is also an important factor as planned pregnancy implies better preparation to be a parent. Whether the parents' level of expectation on the child is appropriate will certainly affect their parenting quality. Parents' unrealistic expectation will exert pressure on children. Lastly, the child's temperament and physical attributes is also a factor. A difficult child with physical handicap will make the parenting task more difficult than an easy baby with adorable attributes.

II. Defining Parent-Child Well-Being

In a study by Shek,³ psychological well-being was defined ".....in terms of the absence of manifested psychiatric symptoms or presence of positive mental health attributes or coping resources.....indicators such as life satisfaction, meaning in life, hope, or self-worth should be the focus." (p. 55) In this seminar, we will take this definition for the word "well-being". Parent-child well-being refers to the state of the relationship in which both the parent and child enjoy and feel satisfied.

III. Summary of Some Local Newspaper Cuttings in Recent Two Years

<u>Date</u>	<u>Newspaper</u>	<u>Content</u>
4-4-2000	Apple Daily	香港家庭福利會一項「兒童眼中的父母」調查顯示有接近一成八至十歲兒童在家中感到不快樂，不快樂的兒童與父母關係欠佳。
7-10-2000	Apple Daily	城市大學社會科學部與屯門仁愛堂社區中心一項有關「暇娛活動」與「精神健康」的研究發現一成受訪兒童自覺處於高壓力及精神健康欠佳，而困擾主要來自家庭及學習方面。
23-10-2000	Ming Pao	城大商學院與一間市場策略研究中心的一項調查顯示，超過半數受訪者表示生活得開心，不開心只佔四份之一。其中發現，與父母的關係是影響學童情緒的主因。
15-2-2001	Ming Pao	一項名為 R.O.A.R.亞洲 2001 的問卷調查顯示：本港只有百份之五的青年人認為自己快樂，這個比率非但是八個亞洲國家與地區最低，相比排在榜末第二位的台灣，更相差四十多個百分點。
2-4-2001	Apple Daily	香港中華基督教青年會一項「兒童及青少年情緒智能問卷調查」結果顯示，有百份之四受訪者每月會出現三十次或以上感到擔憂，抑鬱及憤怒等負面情緒。

The above newspaper cuttings suggest that some children are unhappy. It seems that their unhappiness is related to:

- the unsatisfactory parent-child relationship;
- pressure from academic study and
- pressure from the high parental expectations

<u>Date</u>	<u>Newspaper</u>	<u>Content</u>
3-1999	Ming Pao	Study carried out in Eastern District in March 1999 Major Sources of Stress of Parents: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Children's academic problems: 44% - Entry and selection of schools: 34.4% - Abilities in child-rearing: 34.3% - Economic difficulties: 32.6%
25-3-2000	Apple Daily	家庭與學校合作事宜委員會一項家長訪問調查顯示，每十名家長中，只有一人認為自己做到以身作則，為子女樹立好榜樣。 Most parents did not feel they perform the job of parenting very well.
2-6-2000	Ming Pao	社會實錄個案：教養不得其法 家長易頭痛，情緒不穩。 Some parents felt stressful in parenting.
18-6-2000	Apple Daily	由民建聯深水埗支部及深水埗居民聯會合辦的一項調查顯示，有超過五成受訪父親每天與子女只傾談約十五分鐘或以下，同時約四成受訪父親自評對子女的了解只有一至二分。
30-5-2001	Ming Pao	親子時代網絡 雜誌在全港街頭訪問調查顯示，九成以上受訪者家長表示管教子女有困難。 Most parents had difficulties in child discipline.
4-6-2001	Ming Pao	民主黨一項問卷調查發現家長對子女缺乏了解。 Some parents had inadequate understanding of their children.

24-9-2001	Apple Daily	循道衛理楊震社會服務處過去一年，共處理一百零五宗因管教子女而出現問題的求助個案，結果發現有三成即 32 名父母均採用「過份保護」的模式管教子女。 Some parents were over-protective leading to the children's behavioural problems.
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IV. Review on Some Local Studies on Parenting

In the study by the Boys' and Girls' Club Association of Hong Kong⁴ on "Why are some parents more irritable?" Five factors were identified to be related to parents' irritability. They were:

- 1) Irrational belief.
- 2) Parental empathy which is sympathetic understanding of child's thought and feelings.
- 3) Parental efficacy which is the ability to maintain composure in face of stress and frustration.
- 4) Social support to parents.
- 5) Children's influence on the mothers.

The study findings suggested that a supportive social environment was vital for the successful performance of the parenting role. The importance of social support was echoed in both the study on parenting stress and anger by Lam⁵ and that on mental health of parents by Kwok and Wong.⁶ The study on Hong Kong adolescents by Lai and McBride-Chang⁷ also suggested that a positive family climate might act as a buffer against developing suicidal ideation in adolescents.

The implications of the study results include: firstly, more community support would help to reduce the stress of parenting. Secondly, educational programmes on child development and parenting skills which include skills in communicating with children, dealing rationally and effectively with children's undesirable behaviour as well as methods of rewarding desirable behaviours were recommended. Lastly, parents should be helped to identify their irrational beliefs and negative thinking as well as stress coping strategies.

V. Paediatricians and Parenting

In Hong Kong, professional help from social workers and psychologists is not so easily "accessible" to parents. The professional that would be easily and willingly approached by parents for help is a medical doctor including the family doctors and paediatricians.

Paediatricians can certainly help by giving advice on helping parents understand children's needs and behaviours, parenting skills and correction of parents' irrational beliefs and negative thinking. They can also help by referring the parents who are in need to appropriate services, which include family services, Family Life Education programmes and mental health services etc.

References

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Need for Early Identification and Intervention: Paediatricians' Role

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When a child leaves the mother's womb, he/she is intricately involved in a network of social relations. Family is the major social force that influences children's well-being – what happens in the family often have more impact on the child's development than the disease he/she is having. A few studies were highlighted about the influence of the family on children's illness. Maternal reactions are reportedly of major importance in consultation behaviour, demands for medication and negotiation for treatment.¹ Need for paediatricians to adopt a psychosocial perspective to patient care is emphasised. Many physical diseases generate psychological problems for patients; so do many investigations, treatment and health care procedures children undergo.² When paediatricians avoid dealing with patient's emotional and other psychological needs, they are defeating their own best efforts.

The intention to help the family to cope with disease of its members should start with an understanding of the possible factors affecting children's health in a holistic sense before moving toward recommending appropriate intervention or support. A number of family variables: parental disagreement on child discipline, frequent change of primary caregivers in the early years, maternal and paternal parenting qualities, depression and social isolation of the parent were examined on their effects on children.

Worldwide statistics estimate 20% of children and adolescents suffer from mild to severe mental disorders that compromise their functions. By conservative estimate 2-5% of children have a diagnosable mental disorder requiring treatment to allow meaningful participation in the community. Paediatricians are urged to be aware of the possible risk and protective factors that affect the parent-child relationship. They need to assess the severity and potency of these factors before they decide that the child and/or parent need assistance and promote their help-seeking behaviour.

Medicine in modern society has defined its mission in curing disease – the medical disorder while often overlooking illness – the patients reaction to and experience of disease. However, medicine is expanding its view of health to include the emotional realities of illness. It involves treating the physical, psychological and social aspects of a person. I believe that the medical value of an empathic