

Parenting in the Context of the Child: Genetic and Social Processes

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Abstract The focus on the role of parenting in child development has a long-standing history. When measures of parenting precede changes in child development, researchers typically infer a causal role of parenting practices and attitudes on child development. However, this research is usually conducted with parents raising their own biological offspring. Such research designs cannot account for the effects of genes that are common to parents and children, nor for genetically influenced traits in children that influence how they are parented and how parenting affects them. The aim of this monograph is to provide a clearer view of parenting by synthesizing findings from the Early Growth and Development Study (EGDS).

EGDS is a longitudinal study of adopted children, their birth parents, and their rearing parents studied across infancy and childhood. Families ($N = 561$) were recruited in the United States through adoption agencies between 2000 and 2010. Data collection began when adoptees were 9 months old (males = 57.2%; White 54.5%, Black 13.2%, Hispanic/Latinx 13.4%, Multiracial 17.8%, other 1.1%). The median child age at adoption placement was 2 days ($M = 5.58$, $SD = 11.32$). Adoptive parents were predominantly in their 30s, White, and coming from upper-middle- or upper-class backgrounds with high educational attainment (a mode at 4-year college or graduate degree). Most adoptive parents were heterosexual couples, and were married at the beginning of the project. The birth parent sample

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was more racially and ethnically diverse, but the majority (70%) were White. At the beginning of the study, most birth mothers and fathers were in their 20s, with a mode of educational attainment at high school degree, and few of them were married. We have been following these family members over time, assessing their genetic influences, prenatal environment, rearing environment, and child development.

Controlling for effects of genes common to parents and children, we confirmed some previously reported associations between parenting, parent psychopathology, and marital adjustment in relation to child problematic and prosocial behavior. We also observed effects of children's heritable characteristics, characteristics thought to be transmitted from parent to child by genetic means, on their parents and how those effects contributed to subsequent child development. For example, we found that genetically influenced child impulsivity and social withdrawal both elicited harsh parenting, whereas a genetically influenced sunny disposition elicited parental warmth. We found numerous instances of children's genetically influenced characteristics that enhanced positive parental influences on child development or that protected them from harsh parenting. Integrating our findings, we propose a new, genetically informed process model of parenting. We posit that parents implicitly or explicitly detect genetically influenced liabilities and assets in their children. We also suggest future research into factors such as marital adjustment, that favor parents responding with appropriate protection or enhancement. Our findings illustrate a productive use of genetic information in prevention research: helping parents respond effectively to a profile of child strengths and challenges rather than using genetic information simply to identify some children unresponsive to current preventive interventions.

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When parents raise their own biological offspring, it is difficult to tell whether their impact on their child's development arises from parenting or from genes they share with their child. To clarify this distinction, we report on a longitudinal study of birth parents, children they have placed for adoption, and the child's rearing parents. Families (N = 561) were recruited through United States adoption agencies between 2000-2010. Data collection began when adoptees (males = 57.2%; White 54.5%, Black 13.2%, Hispanic/Latinx 13.4%, Multiracial 17.8%, other 1.1%) were 9 months old. We found that parenting does matter for children's development, and that in some cases children's genetic makeup influences the parenting they receive, and in others parenting effects depend on the child's genetic makeup. These results may have implications for early interventions with children and their families, suggesting they focus on helping parents optimize their responses to the uniqueness of their child, some of which reflects their genetic makeup.