



Parents and Caregivers Are Essential to Children's Healthy Development



Parents and caregivers make sure children are healthy and safe, equip them with the skills and resources to succeed as adults, and transmit basic cultural values to them. Parents and caregivers offer their children love, acceptance, appreciation, encouragement, and guidance. They provide the most intimate context for the nurturing and protection of children as they develop their personalities and identities and also as they mature physically, cognitively, emotionally, and socially.

Infancy and Childhood

Babies whose needs are met quickly and warmly (e.g., feeding, changing, holding/cradling, and soothing them) achieve a crucial developmental task – *attachment*. This bond of affection between parents and children is necessary for a healthy parent-child relationship, and also extends to relationships between children, their siblings, and other family members (e.g., grandparents, aunts/uncles, etc) and caregivers. When infants attach successfully to their parents and caregivers, they learn to trust that the outside world is a welcoming place and are more likely to explore and interact with their environment. This lays the groundwork for further social, emotional, and cognitive development.

Research has found that relationships between parents and caregivers and youth that:

- Are warm, open, and communicative;
- Include appropriate limits, and
- Provide reasoning for rules for behavior

are associated with higher self-esteem, better performance in school, and fewer negative outcomes such as depression or drug use in children and teenagers.

In addition, cross-cultural differences in parenting are strongly related to the attitudes, beliefs, traditions, and values of the particular culture or ethnic group within which the family belongs. These parenting practices are also related to the social and economic context in which these families are situated. For instance, a recent study comparing the parenting practices of immigrant Chinese-American parents with that of White American parents found that the Chinese-American parents exhibited greater control of their children's behavior, which was linked to fewer behavior problems in their children.

Adolescence

As children reach adolescence, parents and caregivers face a whole new set of tasks that require new approaches to deal with the changing needs of children. Children are changing on a physical as well as cognitive and social basis. Parents and caregivers must prepare for the upcoming changes in the parent-child relationship; teens will begin to detach to a greater degree from existing family bonds and focus more on their peers and the outside world. This quest for greater independence and autonomy is a natural part of the developmental process in adolescence. Parents and caregivers must find the delicate balance between maintaining the familial bond and allowing teens increasing autonomy as they mature. Teenagers who feel connected to yet not constrained by their families tend to flourish. Research has found that parents and caregivers that maintain a warm, communicative and reasoned style of parenting raise teenagers who have higher rates of socially competent behavior, take fewer drugs, and exhibit less anxiety or depression.

Coping with Adversity

Parental, family, and caregiver support is very valuable in helping children and youth cope with adversity, especially if they encounter stigma or prejudice associated with factors such as their race/ethnicity, gender, disability, sexuality, weight or socioeconomic status.

For example, research has found protective outcomes for children of color when their parents and caregivers educate them about racism and prejudice and transmit positive cultural values and beliefs to them about their racial and cultural heritage. This process of *racial socialization* has been shown to boost self-esteem and academic achievement and reduce depression in ethnic minority youth.

In a similar manner, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth who receive caring and acceptance from family members and caregivers are more likely to exhibit healthy development in adolescence, e.g., participating actively with peers, showing personal autonomy, and looking forward to the future.

Grandparents

The role of grandparents in the rearing of healthy and happy children should not be overlooked. A recent study concluded that spending time with a grandparent is linked with better social skills and fewer behavior problems among teenagers, especially those living in single-parent or stepfamily households. This study found that children and teenagers whose parents have separated or divorced see their grandparents as confidants and sources of comfort. In fact, supportive relationships with other family members outside the immediate family may lead to better adjustment for all children and teenagers.

Family Rituals

Family rituals are also instrumental in the healthy development of children and teenagers. Family routines and rituals are an important part of contemporary family life. In fact, there is emerging evidence that children's health and wellbeing is compromised when family members spend less time with each other. For instance, good communication between family members at family mealtimes are associated with reduced anxiety symptoms and respiratory conditions. Family mealtimes may also provide the settings in which to strengthen emotional connections. Lastly, how the family conducts its mealtimes, the regularity of family mealtimes, and the value that the family places on regular family mealtimes may improve nutrition habits and healthy weight in youth.

Families are often the first to notice mental health problems in children due to their intimate involvement in and monitoring of their children's lives. Parents and caregivers in particular serve as critical advocates and essential partners in the prevention and treatment of children's mental health concerns. Psychologists treating behavioral problems in children and teenagers always make engagement of the family a priority as this has been shown to boost positive outcomes for children and families as a whole.

Sources:

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Please find below a list of APA resources for parents and caregivers:

Public Information Pieces

- <http://www.apa.org/pi/cyf/abuse.html> - Protecting our Children from Abuse and Neglect
- <http://www.apa.org/pi/cyf/develop.pdf> - Developing Adolescents
- http://www.apa.org/pi/cyf/tips_for_talking_with_adolescents.pdf - Tips for Talking with Adolescents
- http://www.apa.org/pi/cyf/yes_its_normal_for_adolescents_to.pdf - Yes... It's Normal for Adolescents to
- <http://www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualizationpar.html> - Sexualization of Girls: What Parents Can Do
- <http://www.apa.org/pi/parent.html> - Lesbian and Gay Parenting
- <http://www.apa.org/work-family/families.html> - Recommendations for Working Families
- <http://www.apa.org/pubinfo/girls/connect.pdf> - Staying Connected: A Guide for Parents on Raising an Adolescent Daughter

APA Help Center

- <http://apahelpcenter.org/articles/article.php?id=1> - Parenting: The Teen Years
- <http://apahelpcenter.org/articles/article.php?id=154> - Parenting: Being Supermom Stressing You Out?
- <http://apahelpcenter.org/articles/article.php?id=48> - Parenting: Communication Tips for Parents
- <http://apahelpcenter.org/articles/article.php?id=156> - Parenting: High Expectations, Dads, and Stress
- <http://apahelpcenter.org/articles/article.php?id=41> - Families: Making Stepfamilies Work
- <http://apahelpcenter.org/articles/article.php?id=16> - Families: Single Parenting and Today's Family
- <http://apahelpcenter.org/articles/article.php?id=195> - Healthy Habits for Healthy Families
- <http://apahelpcenter.org/articles/article.php?id=15> - Raising Children to Resist Violence

APA Books

<http://books.apa.org/books.cfm?id=4441003> – Parenting That Works: Building Skills That Last a Lifetime

<http://www.maginationpress.com/441A313.html> - Wishing Wellness: A Workbook for Children of Parents with Mental Illness

<http://www.maginationpress.com/4317460.html> - Solving Your Problems Together: Family Therapy for the Whole Family

<http://www.maginationpress.com/4414509.html> - Homemade Books to Help Kids Cope: An Easy-to-Learn Technique for Parents and Professionals

<http://www.maginationpress.com/4417173.html> - Make-Believe: Games & Activities for Imaginative Play: A Book for Parents, Teachers, and the Young Children in Their Lives