

**Attachment Parenting International® (API)  
Support Group Attendance and Mothers' Parenting  
Attitudes, Values, and Knowledge**

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An infant's first love relationship is designed to begin, ideally, with his or her mother. This most important of all relationships provides the foundation for the

psychological and emotional template that is later applied to all future relationships--for better or worse. We call this emotional template an attachment relationship, which is a process that is first established even prior to birth and continues to be established during the next 3 years (Bowlby, 1986). During and after the first 3 years, the attachment relationship is open to change, depending on environmental circumstances, but changes less so as time goes on. Similar to non-human primates and other mammals, human infants are born with a biological predilection to stay close to their mothers. The close mother-infant relationship meets infants' needs for survival, for comfort, for love (Bowlby, 1986). According to Dr. Bruce Perry, psychiatrist and developmental neuroscientist,

The most important property of humankind is the capacity to form and maintain relationships. These relationships are absolutely necessary for any of us to survive, learn, work, love and procreate. Human relationships take many forms but the most intense, most pleasurable, and most painful are those relationships with family, friends and loved ones. Within the inner circle of intimate relationships we are bonded to each other with 'emotional glue'- bonded with love. (Perry, 1999, p.1)

The role of being a parent has changed dramatically over the last couple of hundred years in terms of parenting knowledge, parenting beliefs and parenting attitudes. Couples enter into parenthood with attitudes that have been formed throughout their lifetime. These attitudes reflect the morals and values of their parents and the culture at large (Bavolek, 2001a). Parenting beliefs and attitudes are often learned through one's own childhood experiences or by what was taught to their parents by the educators of their day. Some of these experiences were extremely harsh, if not abusive.

Much of what has been advised and practiced for centuries in the Western world in terms of the treatment of children was under the guise of good religious and moral training. Though still practiced in some pockets of Western society, these and other practices are considered abusive by most of today's child development research. Certainly parents of the past strongly believed they were doing the right thing for their children and felt the cultural pressure to conform to rigid forms of child training, not consciously aware of how they were damaging their children.

Most researchers agree that child abuse and maltreatment is due to poorly trained parents and/or those who experienced abuse as children and are continuing the intergenerational pattern of abuse (Bavolek, 2003a; Perry, 2001). In 1979, Dr. Stephen Bavolek, a widely known researcher in parent education and child abuse prevention, along with his colleagues, reviewed the literature, talked with professionals and were able to ascertain five constructs of abusive parents. These constructs are (a) inappropriate parental expectations; (b) the lack of empathy for children's needs; (c) strong value for physical punishment; (d) parent-child role reversal; in other words, parents expected their children to be sensitive to their needs and responsible for the parents' happiness. (Abused children find themselves parenting their parents rather than experiencing normal childhood development.); and (e) oppression or restriction of their children's will and independence.

A growing number of parents and doctors have adopted a philosophy and style of parenting that actively promotes the value of children and support for families called Attachment Parenting (AP). Attachment Parenting refers to a philosophy of childrearing that incorporates but is not limited to, specific parenting practices that are believed to satisfy basic biological needs as well as optimize a child's physical growth and cognitive development in conjunction with strengthening the emotional bonds between parent(s) and child. These practices were first identified as "The Baby B's" by author and pediatrician, William Sears, M.D., and his wife Martha Sears, a registered nurse. These were later amended by the non-profit organization, Attachment Parenting International, and called "The Eight Ideals of AP." They include but are not limited to (a) preparation for childbirth, (b) emotional responsiveness, (c) breastfeeding, (d) baby wearing and nurturing touch, (e) sharing sleep, (f) avoiding frequent or prolonged separations, (g) positive discipline, and (h) maintaining balance in family life. The cornerstone of Attachment Parenting is that of sensitive responsiveness to the infant, based in the belief that an infant's cry is a means of communicating his/her emotional or physical needs.

Attachment Parenting International® (API), a non-profit organization since 1994, is committed to educating society about the critical emotional and psychological needs of infants and children, while at the same time educating parents in research-based parenting behaviors that support these needs. API provides support to parents in the form of affiliated community-based support groups facilitated by parent-leaders. Group members range from new parents seeking parenting information and support to those who have self-selected Attachment Parenting as their philosophy and parenting style and seek support of other like-minded parents. Currently, API has nearly 80 support groups in the US and in nine other countries. Support groups meet, on average, at least once per month. However, some groups have one meeting during the day and one meeting in the evening to accommodate working parents. Many groups include social events, such as playgroups or potluck dinners throughout the month as a mean of building a sense of community within the group.

### **Purposes of the Study**

The purposes of this study were threefold:

To examine mothers' motivations for attending API parent support group meetings;

To examine relations between mothers' attendance at API parent support group meetings and their parenting attitudes, values, and knowledge; and

To compare API support group mothers' parenting attitudes, values, and knowledge with those of typical parents who have not attended a parent support group, and to those of at-risk parents receiving an intervention called the Nurturing Parent Program.

### **Sample**

The API sample consisted of 176 mothers who currently attend API parent support group meetings. These mothers were white, married, well educated, and had a

mean age of 33 years. Two additional samples were used for comparisons: a) 1,427 nonabusive, non-neglectful parents who never attended a parent support group or received formal parent training (this group is referred to as Typical Parents), and b) 90 mothers who were referred to child welfare agencies for being either abusive, neglectful, or at high risk and who completed an intervention program called The Nurturing Parent Program (this group is referred to as the Intervention Group).

### **Procedures and Measures**

API leaders administered surveys to participants and then mailed the completed surveys back to the lead investigator. The survey contained a demographic questionnaire, a questionnaire regarding mothers' motivations for attending API support group meetings, and the AAPI-2 (Bavolek & Keene, 2001). The AAPI-2 contains 40 items that comprise 5 subscales: a) developmental expectations, b) empathy, c) corporal punishment), d) family role reversals, and e) power vs. independence.

### **Results**

#### **API Mothers' Motivations for Attending API Parent Support Group Meetings**

API mothers reported that the top three reasons they attend API parent support group meetings are as follows: a) the information received during meetings influences their parenting attitudes and knowledge in a positive way, b) the information received during meetings affirms their beliefs and ideas about Attachment Parenting, and c) the information received during meetings was very useful.

Additional findings revealed that mothers who attended more API meetings held more developmentally appropriate expectations for their children and they more strongly valued alternatives to corporal punishment than mothers who attended fewer API meetings. Additionally, mothers with less knowledge about AP philosophy attended more frequently than mothers with more knowledge about AP philosophy.

#### **API Mothers' Parenting Scores Versus Typical Parents' Parenting Scores**

A comparison of API Mothers' parenting scores to Typical Parents' parenting scores on the AAPI-2 revealed no large differences between the two groups. For each subscale on the AAPI-2, scores that reflect the attitudes, values, and knowledge of the majority of nonabusing parents (68.8%) fall within a sten scale range of 4 to 8. API Mothers' mean parenting scores fell within that range which represents the 68.8% of the sample population on whom the AAPI-2 was norm referenced. In short, API Mothers were no different from Typical Parents in their developmental expectations, empathy, values of alternatives for corporal punishment, role reversal, or use of power vs. granting independence. Although API Mothers' scores fell within the range of most Typical Parents' sten scores, the mean API Mothers' score on each subscale was slightly higher than the respective score for Typical Parents. This indicates that there was a trend for API mothers to score higher on each of the AAPI-2 subscales than Typical Parents.

#### **API Mothers Versus Intervention Mothers**

Comparing API Mothers' parenting scores to Intervention Mothers' parenting scores revealed significant differences on four of the AAPI-2 subscales. Specifically, API Mothers scored higher than Intervention Mothers in their developmental expectations, empathy, values of alternatives for corporal punishment, and use of power vs. granting independence to children. No difference was found between the two groups' scores for role reversal.

**Table 1. API Mothers' Parenting Scores Versus Typical Parents' Parenting Scores**

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**API Mothers**

**Typical Parents**

<b>Developmental Expectations</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>4-7</b>
<b>Empathy</b>	<b>6.63</b>	<b>4-7</b>
<b>Alternatives to Corporal Punishment</b>	<b>7.67</b>	<b>4-7</b>
<b>Role Reversal</b>	<b>5.82</b>	<b>4-7</b>
<b>Power vs. Independence</b>	<b>6.85</b>	<b>4-7</b>

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**Table 2. API Mothers' Parenting Scores versus Intervention Mothers' Parenting Scores**

	<b>API Mothers</b>	<b>Intervention Mothers</b>	<b>t</b>
<b>Developmental Expectations</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>5.7</b>	<b>9.8*</b>
<b>Empathy</b>	<b>6.6</b>	<b>5.7</b>	<b>3.9*</b>
<b>Alternatives to Corporal Punishment</b>	<b>7.7</b>	<b>5.8</b>	<b>8.8*</b>
<b>Role Reversal</b>	<b>5.8</b>	<b>6.0</b>	<b>-1.7</b>
<b>Power vs. Independence</b>	<b>6.9</b>	<b>6.3</b>	<b>2.0*</b>

**p < .05**