

## **Parental "Presence": Quantity, Quality and Types of Parental Involvement**

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Given that Attachment Parenting International recently celebrated Attachment Parenting Month with the theme of promoting "parental presence," it is appropriate to look at the research literature on parental involvement and its effects. Oddly enough, some of the most recent solid data collected on this issue comes from the large multisite NICHD longitudinal study of early child care. Many articles based on the NICHD study have focused on the impact of child care, but a broader view incorporating parental measures was published in the 2006 issue of the *American Psychologist* (NICHD, 2006). The NICHD researchers reported that although quality child care was influential, parenting variables were two to three times more powerful in predicting outcomes for the children, emphasizing the important role of parents even when children spend many hours in the care of others. Recommendations from the study included increasing the quality of child care, especially for infants and toddlers, but also, importantly, reducing the amount of time that children need to spend in child care through promoting paid parental leave and flexible working hours, and funding programs that support sensitive and responsive parenting.

So what comprises parental involvement? This paper will highlight issues of quantity, quality, and types of involvement in the research literature.

### **Quantity of Involvement**

Few observational studies track the amount of time that parents spend with their children. Recently, studies have focused on the amount of time that children spend away from parents with nonparental caregivers in various types of child care. Again, the NICHD data is informative (NICHD, 2006). Out of over a thousand children enrolled in the study prenatally without regard to parents' postnatal work plans, 25% of children stayed at home full-time with their mothers in the first 15 months, and this percentage decreased to 5% by 4 1/2 years of age. A major question addressed by the study was whether attachment security would be affected by the time spent in child care. Attachment security in the first 3 years was found to be more positively related to the quality of the home environment than to the experiences of child care. However, children in poor quality child care who had insensitive mothers had the highest risk for parent-child relationship difficulties. In addition preschool-aged children who spent more time in child care (more than 30 hours a week) had three times more problem behaviors, such as aggression, than children who spent less than 10 hours a week in child care. Though the NICHD researchers do not all agree on the implications of these findings, some argue that spending a large amount of time in nonmaternal care can be a risk factor for later problems (Belsky, 2002).

Research on the amount of father involvement suggests that paternal involvement is less than maternal involvement across cultures and other primate species (Geary, 2000). In European cultures such as Sweden where generous paternal leave policies allow fathers to take time off work to look after their children, mothers remain the primary caregivers even when both parents work. In a central African traditional culture frequently cited in the literature for high paternal involvement, fathers were observed to hold their 1- 4 month old babies only for an average of 57 minutes a day compared to the average of 490 minutes that mothers held their babies.

Although fathers are typically less involved than mothers, the research suggests that children growing up with both biological parents have fewer social and other problems and better emotional well-being than those growing up in single-parent households (Amato, 2005). This is likely due to the ability of couples to share parenting tasks and thereby be less stressed and more effective than single-parents. In fact, some argue that what is important is that there are two caring adults who co-parent, regardless of whether they are the biological parents (Silverman & Auerback, 1999).

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## Quality of Involvement

A large body of literature on the quality of parental involvement concerns parental behaviors that promote secure attachment in infants and toddlers. Attachment refers to an enduring reciprocal emotional bond between parent and child that transcends space, time, and even death (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1969). During infancy, children develop expectations for the quality of care they receive from parents. These expectations develop into internal working models that the child has for parent, self and relationships. Children who experience sensitive, synchronous (i. e., well timed), warm caregiving develop a sense of security and are able to explore the environment. In contrast, children who experience parental responses that are either intrusive, inconsistent, or ill timed for meeting the child's needs develop a sense of insecurity (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). The quality of the parent-infant attachment relationship serves as a prototype for the quality of relationships that children expect to experience throughout the lifespan (Ainsworth, 1989). Thus, children in secure attachment relationships with their parents expect to experience positive, rewarding relationships with others. In contrast, children in insecure attachment relationships come to expect negative or unfulfilling relationships with others.

There are three types of insecure attachment relationships. Children in *insecure-resistant* relationships tend to be clingy, whiney, angry, and very dependent upon their mothers. This attachment quality is generally associated with inconsistent caregiving in which the parent is sometimes responsive and sometimes not. Children in *insecure-avoidant* relationships show little distress when separated from their mothers and often ignore their mothers during times of reunion. Mothers of insecure-avoidant children have been observed to be either disengaged from their children, rejecting, or overly intrusive such that the child has to turn away. A third insecure category, *disorganized* attachment (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985), describes children who are the most distressed upon separation, confused upon reunion and exhibit behaviors that appear to be a combination of resistant and avoidant. Children who have experienced abuse or other frightening behaviors from their parents frequently have disorganized attachments. By contrast, children in *secure* relationships are usually upset when separated but they are easily comforted during reunions and return quickly to playing. Mothers of secure children serve as both a secure base for exploration and a haven of safety in times of distress (Marvin, Cooper, Hoffman, & Powell, 2002).

## Other Types of Parental Involvement

As children grow older, parents begin to assume additional roles beyond that of providing nurturance through warm and responsive parenting. Some of these other types of involvement include: discipline, teaching, modeling language, providing stimulating materials, monitoring, and managing of schedules (Brooks-Gunn & Markham, 2005). Discipline involves parental efforts and strategies to guide children so that they behave in culturally acceptable ways. Teaching includes attempts to encourage children to master the knowledge and skills valued in the culture. Parents serve as language models and also provide materials to stimulate thinking and language skills. Monitoring involves being aware of how children are spending their time and with whom. Finally parents serve as managers of family routines and schedules. The research literature suggests that positive outcomes for children result from warm and sensitive responding, discipline that is not harsh or punitive, teaching that follows the child's lead, a language environment that includes many stimulating conversations, provision of materials like books to encourage learning, monitoring and keeping track of children, and providing consistent routines for family mealtimes, bedtimes, etc. (Brooks-Gunn & Markham, 2005).

## The Bottom Line: Keeping the Child in Mind

The thread that runs through this literature is that the child's emotional security and even other aspects of competence (cognitive, linguistic, etc.) are fostered by the ability of the parent to recognize, as early as the prenatal period, that the child has feelings, thoughts, and intentions of his or her own, separate from the parents. The parent can then hold the child in mind and reflect upon and understand the child's internal experiences and external behaviors (Slade, 2002). This allows parents to be emotionally available, empathize, and respond in a sensitive manner. Parents can then show respect for the child's initiatives, viewing the child as

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an independent being, rather than provoking conflict by restricting and thwarting the child's activities (Hoffman, 2002).

Parental presence that keeps the child in mind is a thread that courses through all parental roles and types of parental involvement. When parents keep their child in mind, they can respond sensitively and thereby promote a sense of security; guide and discipline positively and thereby promote self-regulation; follow their child's interests and thereby promote rich and elaborated dialogue, and a love of exploration, mastery, and learning; provide developmentally appropriate materials and thereby encourage developmental advances; monitor their child's activities in and away from home and thereby promote a sense of connection; and manage the child's schedule of activities and thereby provide the security that comes with a sense of consistency, order, and routine. The bottom line is that being present for the child means keeping the child in mind.

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