

# Parenthood and Parenting



Being a parent is one of the most rewarding and difficult tasks you will ever undertake. Whatever made you a parent — giving birth, adopting, raising a grandchild, being a foster- or stepparent — the role generally becomes a part of your waking and sleeping hours.

In this country, we train people for many jobs and roles. We train drivers, dog owners, and home builders. But when it comes to our most valuable resource — our children — we require no training, no prior knowledge, and no experience.

One of the most important things you can do to become a better parent is to learn about parenting. Thoughtful study will help you become the best parent you can be. Research provides you with many interesting concepts to consider. This fact sheet, which is based on research, gives you information about parenting practices, stages of parenting, and the ways parents and children interact. This information will also be useful to people who help with parenting, such as teachers, coaches, grandparents, and neighbors.

Parenting is an active process. You use your skills and knowledge to plan, create, give birth, raise, and provide for your children. The parenting process includes nourishing, protecting, and guiding. It is a series of interactions between you and your child.

## Critical Parenting Practices

You can strengthen your parenting skills through learning and experience. Consider, first, what influences you as a parent. Your temperament, your child's temperament, your childhood experiences, your relationship with your mate and your own parents, your family and work situation, your community and

your support networks all can affect your parenting.

To become the best parent possible, you need to learn about:

- **caring** for yourself,
- **understanding** yourself and your child(ren) at various stages,
- **nurturing** your child and your relationships,
- **guiding** your child through each life stage,
- **motivating** your child to do his or her best, and
- **advocating** for your child's best interests.



## Caring for Yourself

Learn first to take care of your own needs. Then you can better focus on the needs of your child and learn more about parenting.

In caring for yourself, learn the skills you need to handle your stress, manage your household, ask for and accept support from others when needed, and realize the strengths you can offer your child. Think about your sense of purpose in setting goals for raising your child and think about how to work with your child-rearing partners.



## Understanding

Understanding children, their development, and their needs is important. Each child is different, not only in his or her abilities, but also in the way that he or she sees the world. If you understand children and their needs, there will be less conflict in helping your child to grow up to feel safe, secure, happy, and healthy. Children learn to be caring, loving people if the people they are close to are understanding.

To develop your skills, learn to watch and understand your

child's development, and see how he or she reacts to what is happening. Know and understand yourself, and manage your own life well. As you grow in understanding, also decide what it is you hope to be as a parent. What kind of person do you hope your child will grow to be? What kind of parent do you want to be? Write down your answers to these questions. Reread your goals and revise them from time to time. This will help you choose ways to help your child learn to understand others.

## **Nurturance**

Nurturing is very important to children. Nurtured children usually grow up to be competent and healthy adults. Children have different needs and ways they need to be nurtured. When you meet your child's needs by building a positive relationship and by sending consistent messages of love and support, then you are an effective nurturer.

To develop your nurturing skills, learn comfortable ways to express love, build your child's hope and self-respect, learn to listen and hear your child's feelings and ideas, teach kindness, provide for your child's nutrition, shelter, clothing, health, and safety needs, celebrate life, and help your child feel connected to his or her family history and cultural heritage.

## **Guidance**

Guidance means helping your child develop his or her personal strengths. You do this by expressing steady but warm authority. You face a difficult balancing act with authority, using your power to identify, introduce, and enforce reasonable limits while gradually giving freedom to your child by encouraging him or her to be more and more responsible. Use good judgment to set limits that protect your child and show concern for the welfare of others.

Children need guidance and structure. They must be taught to engage in meaningful activities and use their time in a positive way. Their growth as individuals depends on practice

making choices and facing the consequences of their own decisions.

To develop your skills in providing guidance, you must model how you want your child to act. Set reasonable limits and give him or her opportunities to learn responsibilities. Choose appropriate opportunities, teach problem-solving skills, and monitor your child's activities with other children and adults.

## **Motivation**

You are motivating when you teach your child to think and learn. Parents who take their responsibilities seriously, and look for ways to teach throughout their children's lives, are more likely to have children who become confident, skilled learners who reach high educational levels.

The most successful motivators nurture and guide their children. You can learn how to foster learning as you can learn to motivate and to nurture. If you are motivated yourself, you will be more capable of motivating your child. And if you feel nurtured, you will find it natural to nurture your child.

To develop your skills to motivate your child, you will need to learn how to teach your child. Children need to learn about themselves, others, and the world around them. To be a good teacher, you need to let your child be curious, develop an imagination, and search for knowledge. Work to create positive learning settings and help your child think about new information.

## **Advocating**

Effective parents locate helpful community resources and work to meet their children's and family's needs. Seek out programs and people to provide services important to your child and family. Notice and speak up about your child's needs. When something in the community becomes a barrier to your family's functioning, speak up for change.

Children of advocate parents are less likely to get lost between the cracks. Parents who weave a thread between home and the community increase the quality of the community for all children. To advocate for your child, learn to find, use, and create community resources that help your own and other children. Encourage supportive environments for children and families. Build relationships with family, schools, neighborhood, and community groups.

By reading, enrolling in parenting classes, being active in a child's schooling, and continuing to learn throughout the life of your child, you can develop these critical parenting skills. Depending on your child's age, you should study one or more of the following North Carolina Cooperative Extension publications: *Infant Development*, FCS-459; *Preschool Development*, FCS-454; *The Childhood Years*, FCS-465; and *Appropriate Limits for Young Children, Parts I and II*, FCS-455 and FCS-456.



## Stages of Parenthood

Just as children go through stages of development, you as a parent will go through stages of parenthood. One researcher (Galinsky, 1987) has named them: *image making stage*, *nurturing stage*, *authority stage*, *interpretive stage*, *interdependent stage*, and *the departure stage*.

## Image-making Stage

***Before the baby comes***

You form an image of the parent you want to become before your baby is born or brought into the family. In this "self-centered" stage, you are thinking more about yourself than your new child. All sorts of people provide advice — friends who are parents, grandparents, and others. During the waiting time before the baby, you go through multiple emotions. You make judgments about the parent you will be, saying such things as "I'll never yell at my child," or "My children will have everything they need."

You may have images and dreams about the birth. During this stage parents tend to think about death. If this is your first child, you may wonder if this is the end, or death, of a life phase — life without children. Parents think about their past, their own parents, and their partner in parenting. Fathers may worry about the mother dying during childbirth and women may be fearful of dying before knowing their child. Parents who adopt also go through the image-making stage.

## **Nurturing Stage**

### ***Birth to 18 months***

This is a time of forming attachment with the child and identifying yourself as a parent. You will find out what kind of parent you really are. Others (in-laws, child care providers) also will find out how the parents will handle this new role.

The trust that builds between the parent and the child is the basis of close attachment and is critical. Trust emerges as you meet your child's basic needs for warmth, food, dryness, and safety and as you make eye contact and offer gentle touches. Your child's trust and attachment to someone he or she can depend on early in life lays a foundation for all relationships for the rest of his or her life.

You must give up your fantasy to deal with wet diapers, a baby who cries when you want to sleep, and awkward schedules.

During this stage, the new parent is born. You may begin to question yourself and worry about what is right for your child.

"Are we spoiling our child?" "Are his grandparents spoiling him?" You may feel doubt, uncertainty, jealousy, and competitiveness with everyone else in your child's life. Parents worry that others may not care for their child as well as they do or that their child will love the caregivers more than them.

## Authority Stage

### *18 months to age 5*

Beginning when your children is about 18 months old and developing language, you are figuring out how to be an "in charge" parent. Inconsistency is typical as parents are trying to decide when to say yes when to say no. You must decide when to follow through on new rules and how to set up a framework to guide your child's behavior.

Many parents may seek out information, go to parenting classes or read books, and hope it will all be okay. This is a prime time for educational programs. You are facing a balancing act with decisions such as "Should we do something as a family, or should I use this time to catch up on my work?" You may question working outside the home as you try to figure out how to fit your child's needs with the household chores.

You may have to deal with separation from your child. If your child attends preschool, you may wonder if you prepared him or her well. What the child wears feels important to you. If anyone says anything about the child, you may feel it is a direct reflection on you as a parent. You may feel terrified about what teachers will say about your child.

Parents are defining what it means to be a *good enough parent*. Decisions may range from allowing or not allowing candy in the grocery checkout line to explaining violence in the world. Your child may question why you have to be away from him or her. You have to resolve being *perfect* with being *good enough*. Once you think through this, separation will become easier on you, and having your child attend child care and school will be easier.

# Interpretive Stage

## *Age 5 through elementary school*

During the interpretive stage, you must explain yourself to your child. The questions will grow as your child's language and understanding expands. Having brief answers ready will be helpful. You will have to respond to more whys and hows. Topics may range broadly . . . from war to lying . . . natural disaster to violence . . . having babies to divorce.

During this stage, children can be harsh judges. Your child may call you names as he or she struggles to understand relationships and become his or her own person. "You're mean," or "I hate you," are hurtful, but your child does not understand the deeper meaning or realize that other people also have feelings.

During this time, parents and children become involved in a new way. You must decide how to interact with your child and his or her friends. You need to revise your parenting definitions as your child enters a new developmental stage. Your child may become more materialistic and may experiment with unique clothing, appearances, and behaviors, so you may need to rethink expectations about manners, rules with friends, sibling contact, and schoolwork. Pick the most important battles on which to use your energy.

# Interdependent Stage

## *Teen years*

The challenges of the interdependent stage are similar to the authority stage in preschool years but the stakes are higher. Your child is figuring out how to be a teenager. Fights over authority arise again but this time with bigger decisions. Although they are taught to say "No," teens have a need to experiment. Many teens will experiment in the absence of parents and then think about those learned behaviors when we are not there.

During this time, you will need to guide your child closely through some tough choices. Some parents question their own choices and lifestyles as their children begin to make their choices. Your child is beginning to "break-up" with you. He or she may say things like, "You're not understanding," or "I can't talk to you." Many parents say it seems like our children have to learn to "hate us" in order to leave us. Again, there is a theme of distancing and separation.

## Departure Stage

### *Age varies*

During the departure stage, again there are images of death, separation, and distancing. Parents imagine where their children will go and who they will be with. They reflect on their parenting and how they affected the people their children have become. Parents judge themselves. Again, parents fear death as their children are leaving home. You must decide how to define yourself as a family without children in the home. Couples become reacquainted. Rituals are important to children and parents during this separation time. Holiday phone calls and celebrations become important. Recognizing that you and children have stages may help you learn to get through this stressful time while guiding and nurturing your child and still caring for yourself.

## Parenting Types

One researcher (Baumrind, 1991) characterizes parent styles as *authoritarian*, *permissive-indulgent*, *authoritative*, and *disengaged*. You may not fit neatly into any one category, since your parenting knowledge comes from many sources and you combine many styles depending on the given situation. Also, parenting tends to change over time with experience and the age and maturity of the child.

The descriptions below may allow parents and caregivers to think about their basic style. These styles influence the way in which children develop. Basically, parents react with high or low responsiveness, high or low demandingness, or a

combination of both aspects.

**Permissive-indulgent parents** respond by giving the child too much and are low on making demands. They give little punishment, set no guidelines, have little structure, and avoid taking charge. The parent, often referred to as "uninvolved," spends little time and effort with the child. These parents sometimes use stress and work to excuse themselves from spending time with their children. Parents who use drugs or are immature may also show little involvement.

The child of this parent learns little self-control, is immature, may be aggressive at home, and may behave irresponsibly. These children tend to have low self-esteem, delayed emotional development, and little ability to handle frustration. They may be school skippers, turn to drugs, or even break the law in their search for attention.

**Disengaged parents** are low in responding to a child's needs and low in making demands. These parents are also referred to as "permissive-indifferent," "neglectful-ignoring," and "rejecting-neglecting." They may be rejecting, hostile, or neglectful. This behavior is not clearly abusive but may be close, and it has a severe effect on the child. Disengaged parents raise the least competent children.

**Authoritarian parents** are demanding but not very responsive. They are strict, use punishment, and generally don't allow choice or freedom of expression. These parents value obedience, tradition and order, and discourage independence and individuality. These parents dislike having their authority questioned. They may use physical punishment and resort to yelling and threatening.

What kind of child comes from this parent? An authoritarian parent may produce a child who lacks spontaneity, curiosity, and creativity, and often has limited independence and assertiveness. These children don't learn how to decide for themselves. They are not sure how to behave and depend instead on others for their sense of control. They may have low self-esteem and be aggressive and defiant.

**Authoritative parents**, although not perfect, have better balance in discipline style, setting high standards and

expectations for mature behavior, firmly enforcing rules, and encouraging independence and individuality. The authoritative parent makes high demands and is also highly responsive to children's needs. Children's individual rights are recognized and choices are given. There is better communication and listening and more give and take.

Children of these parents generally are responsible, independent, have higher self-esteem and confidence, and are better able to control their aggression.

## Summary

There is so much to learn about being a parent. Learning about each stage of your child's development and the stages that you as a parent also go through can help you understand this very important role. As you think about your important role in helping your child grow and develop to their fullest capacity, consider these things:

- Think about what you want to accomplish as a parent. Write it down. Think about it again with each new stage you and your child go through.
- Think about the aspects of guiding, nurturing, motivating, understanding, advocating, and taking care of yourself. Are there areas you would like to learn more about? Seek out more information.
- Take advantage of parenting education opportunities in your community. You may find workshops where you can share with and listen to other parents. Some organizations offer parenting newsletters or lend books and videotapes. Also, watch the television guide and search on the World Wide Web for helpful parenting programs. The Department of Family and Consumer Sciences is <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs>.

Parenting will always be difficult, but the job is much easier with training and experience. There are many things you can do to prepare yourself and continue to learn about better ways to interact with your children while taking care of

yourself.

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