

Parental Influence

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An adequate level of parenting—providing enough nutrition, shelter, exposure to language and peers, or not harshly punishing children (punching, kicking, striking with a weapon)—seems to not have a long-term effect on cognitive development in children. Twin and adoption studies have found that intelligence is accounted for almost entirely by genes and non-shared environment, which includes peers, teachers, and unique experiences. However, there are parenting styles and types of home environments that are correlated with better school performance, stronger school engagement, and more words spoken at certain ages.

For example, Hart and Risley (1995) controlled for socioeconomic status and found that children in families who were on welfare and exposed to 600 words per hour produced 500 words by age three, children in working class families who were exposed to 1300 words per hour produced 700 words by age three, and children in professional class families who were exposed to 2100 words per hour produced 1050 words by the same age. Of the four main parenting styles—Authoritative, Authoritarian, Permissive, and Indifferent/Uninvolved—Authoritative Parenting, which is comprised of high acceptance, supervision, and granting autonomy, is correlated with stronger adolescent school performance and better school engagement. Prior to kindergarten, there is some early evidence that increasing exposure to high quality child care for low-income children is associated with reducing the achievement gap between socioeconomic classes.

Even though, there are strong associations between temperamental qualities at age two to three and future behavior later in life, there are still parenting styles and responses that can

exacerbate the symptoms of temperamentally difficult children. For example, unresponsive parenting can worsen behavior in children with temperament issues, but responsive parenting can protect against many of these risks. Authoritative Parenting has been found to be a protective style and is correlated with higher self-esteem, competence, popularity with peers, and internalized control. Indifferent or Uninvolved Parenting has been linked with behaviors such as impulsivity, aggression, and low self-esteem. As for Authoritarian Parenting—high demands and low responsiveness—there was early evidence that low-SES children were benefited by this style, but more recent studies have concluded that Authoritative Parenting correlates with more positive behavioral and cognitive outcomes, regardless of ethnicity or socioeconomic status. Children turn out to be more or less the same regardless of whether mothers work or stay at home, whether parents have a conventional or open marriage, or whether their birth was expected or unexpected.

Physical punishment, including spanking, is associated with increases in externalizing behavior problems. The most recent study of a nationally representative sample (N = 12,112) found a correlation between spanking at age 5 and behavior problems at age 6 and 8 (Gershoff, Sattler, and Ansari, 2017). Additionally, harsh physical punishment (punching, kicking, use of an object) has significant association with behavioral and emotional outcomes, even after controlling for genes.

Though the vast majority of these findings are merely correlational, the consistency of certain results (e.g., the benefits of Authoritative Parenting and behavioral problems linked to physical punishment) should be seen as important findings. Some of the most important benefits that parents can provide for their children are a safe environment in which to grow up, early knowledge (e.g., reading material), and helping filter their peer group.

Further Reading

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