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A Commentary on the Parenting of Adolescents in Diverse and Multicultural Contexts

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Abstract

This commentary on the Special Issue on Parenting Adolescents in Multicultural Contexts discusses key concepts addressed by the authors in this special issue. The connecting themes of parenting styles, relationships, and the need for relevant research methods and measures are discussed. The commentary concludes with reflections on these themes for the field of developmental science and important questions for developmental scientists to ponder to advance the research in this important area of inquiry.

Keywords

Adolescents; Parenting; Diverse Family Contexts; Research Methods and Measures

It is well documented in the literature that adolescent development is a time of profound social, emotional, biological and physical change (Grotevant, 1998; Institute of Medicine, 1999; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2006). This period is characterized by a host of seemingly contradictory and contrasting attitudes and behaviors. Adolescents may seek independence from their parents, preferring the wisdom of their peers and other idealized role models over the values, belief systems and perspectives of parents or other authority figures. Yet in contrast, many youth rely on their parents to supply basic needs of shelter, food, clothing, financial and other resources as they undergo these processes of development. Adolescence is also characterized by biological maturation with the onset of puberty and the ability to father and bear children; however, youth may not have the psychological and cognitive maturity nor the economic means to take on child rearing and parenting responsibilities. This period is also associated with exploration, experimentation and engagement in risk taking behaviors which could have deleterious consequences and significantly impair the adolescent's ability to successfully rebound from these experiences (Lightfoot, 1997; Steinberg, 2007, 2008). However, research suggests that adolescent brain development and regulatory capacities may not be fully developed during this stage to foster the kind of decision making, and self-regulation and control associated with positive social and behavioral outcomes (Steinberg, 2007, 2008).

How to parent adolescents during this period of contrasts and contradictions is a question as old as time itself. As new knowledge is generated by research in the developmental sciences to shed light on this age-old question, the continuously shifting social, economic and demographic landscape require that contemporary perspectives are brought to bear on the art and science of parenting adolescents. Moreover, changing social realities have important implications for how we study parenting and how we understand the unique challenges parents experience in conveying family values, attitudes, and beliefs regarding these realities to adolescents. Other important considerations include how we apply theoretical and conceptual frameworks to examine family structure and function, and how we incorporate new theories into existing frameworks to disentangle relationship dynamics between and among the individuals whom adolescents refer to as family. Thus, it is imperative for developmental science to keep pace with these changing realities to better understand how they impact the health and well-being of children, parents and families. The timely series of papers in this special issue is devoted to the exploration of the state of the science and of new considerations to inform and advance theories of adolescent development and the role of parents and families in helping youth navigate these tumultuous waters. What follows are reflections on three areas that matter in parenting adolescents in a diverse society and thoughts on research directions and questions for developmental scientists to ponder in advancing this important field of inquiry.

Parenting Still Matters

It is a common perception that parenting an adolescent can be challenging and the relationship at times can even seem adversarial. However, despite the normative adolescent quest for autonomy and independence, *what* parents say and do and *how* they say and do it matters, even at this stage of development. This is a connecting theme in all of the papers in this issue. While parenting may take on different forms and functions during adolescence, the various styles and dimensions of parenting are essential in understanding adolescence and in promoting their health and well-being. Positive parenting dimensions such as warmth, nurturing, acceptance, responsiveness, consistency are important factors in fostering well-being throughout development and indeed throughout adolescent development.

These concepts seem to hold in international comparisons. Lansford, et al., (2018) test whether relations between parenting and youth outcomes vary based on cultural context and found that across the cultures they studied, positive parenting behaviors in conjunction with parental warmth appeared to promote adolescents' self-esteem and served as a protective factor, buffering them from life stress.

Similarly, parenting matters in terms of racial and ethnic socialization messaging and practices as well. Stein and colleagues (this issue) point out that racial and ethnic socialization messaging in the context of positive parenting may lead to better outcomes than if this type of messaging were to occur in the context of lower levels of warmth, or harsh parenting practices.

Relationships Matter

Relationships take on a particularly central role in adolescent development. The complex nature of relationships and their multi-directional influences in families of adolescents as well as in peer and romantic relationships are areas ripe for further exploration. These include the bidirectional relations and influences between the adolescent and parent and the contemporaneous relationships and influences of siblings, and other individuals residing or transitioning in the home.

It is important to point out, that it is not just the relationship itself that is important, but that the history and quality of the relationship also matter a great deal in understanding how and in what ways parents can help foster optimal adjustment and behavior during this period in development.

This is important because, research highlights, for example, the links between adolescent self-regulation and parent-adolescent relationship quality (Farley & Kim-Spoon 2014). Adolescents with poor self-regulatory abilities may be associated with poor relationship quality with parents, while adolescents with high-quality relationships with parents may be better able to develop good self-regulatory capacities (Farley & Kim-Spoon 2014).

Romantic relationships are a hallmark of adolescent development. Technological advances have made it possible for youth to have relationships that were once socially and logistically unobtainable in previous generations. Adolescents may now have more means and opportunities to pursue romantic relationships outside of their racial, ethnic or cultural upbringing and may develop different views regarding these issues. Indeed, the history and quality of the parent-child-adolescent relationship are essential in fostering a safe space for youth to express interest in exploring interracial or cross-cultural dating relationships or to reveal their sexual or gender identity to parents. This may prove challenging as adolescents try to negotiate parents' expectations and at the same time protect their sense of self and identity from judgment or rejection by parents.

As peer relationships become increasingly more important during adolescents, LGBT youth may or may not have confidence to reveal their preferences and identities to classmates, coaches or other key figures outside the context of familial relationships. Thus, parents' messaging around how their LGBT adolescent should manage peer pressure both positive and negative, deal with bullying, and social victimization or express romantic interest becomes all the more sensitive and challenging. Even a supportive parent may not have the knowledge or relevant experience to help their adolescent navigate these difficult contemporary social contexts. So, the question becomes to whom do adolescents turn to find support, knowledge and guidance?

A theme that was touched upon in all the papers in this issue is social media as a facilitator of relationships. Social engagement is an important developmental task as children prepare to negotiate the social world, transition into adolescence and into adulthood. However, the context for social engagement has shifted at a rapid pace in the past decade with the proliferation of various forms of social media giving youth direct access to social and

cultural worlds and influences outside the familial cocoon, often without knowledge of or monitoring by the parents.

Traditional theories of development highlight the importance of friends and friendship and underscore the prosocial impact of high quality friendships on child outcomes (Hartup, 1993; Gaertner, Fite, & Colder, 2010). These friendships are often monitored by parents and may be protective and ameliorative (Rubin, et al., 2004). However social media has redefined the traditional concept of friends and friendships giving rise to a kind of “anonymous popularity” in the sense that youth can be free to seek advice or share intimate thoughts and feelings with someone that they have an affinity toward, but may never meet face to face. In contrast, adolescents can also take on an identity that they might not necessarily adopt in day-to-day life to gain more “friends” and “likes” and become more popular (Sherman et al., 2016).

The role of social media must be considered as an important mediating and/or moderating factor in adolescent uptake and internalization of parental socialization messaging. How do adolescents determine appropriate role models in this context? How might role models adopted through social media influence adolescent uptake of parents’ socialization messaging or shape aspirations and visions of life which differ from their current family or socioeconomic circumstances? For youth who transition within and across different family contexts, in what ways does social media and technology become an important means of maintaining connections and relationships with non-residential family members.

Measures and Methods Matter

To fully understand the nuances of families and to disentangle relationship dynamics, more sensitive and specific measures of parent-child relationships, and family structure are needed as well as broader methodologies to include other family members or “actors” in the family context who are not typically included in family studies.

The changing dynamics of the family, its structure and levels of complexity, and the ways in which adolescents develop in these households, are all important areas for research and study. Well-designed studies of family context are needed that include data about the biological and non-biological relations as well as the social, interpersonal relationships between residential household members and all other households in which the adolescent transitions. This perhaps is a new frontier in developmental science and family studies. The diversity of the family and household contexts experienced by adolescents may not be well captured in the current research designs and data collection protocols. Thus, the way we theoretically conceptualize adolescent living arrangements, how we collect data and measure family life in all of its forms and functions and how we recruit adolescents and family members into research studies matter a great deal in telling the complete story of parenting adolescents in diverse family contexts.

There is clearly a need for measures and methodological approaches that are more sensitive to socio-cultural as well as racial and ethnic cultural dynamics within families. Presumably, there will be many social, technical and logistical barriers in shifting to these approaches.

These barriers can be overcome by attending to such questions as: Who asks the research questions? What assumptions about race, gender, sexual identity, culture, or family structure are embedded in less adaptable, less sensitive theoretical frameworks and how might these frameworks be modified? Who gets recruited into the studies and whose experiences and voices are not included due to sampling convenience, ethical and regulatory issues, availability of funding? Efforts to obtain the best and most informative data given some of these barriers and constraints are worthwhile pursuits for developmental scientists and for training the next generation of researchers to pursuing independent research in this area.

Summary and Considerations for Developmental Science

As we come to understand the socio-cultural changes taking place in society, and how these changes are reflected in families and the relationships among family members, so must the theories of race, ethnicity, culture, and gender and sexual identity and the intersections of these constructs in families change to reflect societal realities.

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) has had a long history of supporting research to better understand families, and the intersections of economics, poverty, family functioning and child development (Maholmes and King, 2012). For example, the Fragile Families Study (McLanahan, Garfinkel, Mincy, & Donahue, 2010) sought to understand patterns of change in families of unwed mothers, and the effects of these changes on children, parents, and society as a whole. Another example of funded research is The Family Life Project (Vernon-Feagans & Cox, 2013) focused on young children in poor rural communities with a goal to observe different aspects of parenting as mediators and moderators of risk in predicting child outcomes. The Science and Ecology of Early Development Initiative (SEED) was launched as a trans-agency initiative in 2000 to call attention to the shifting sociodemographic landscape within families and communities at the turn of the twenty-first century. A major goal of the initiative was to foster research on the multiple contexts of development and their impact on the developmental trajectories of children in low income families. (accessed May 5th from <https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/pa-files/PAS-00-108.html>). Notably, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health Study (Add Health), is a study of a nationally representative sample of more than 20,000 individuals that began with in-school questionnaires administered to adolescents in grades seven through 12 in the United States in 1994–1995, followed by waves of in-home interviews to investigate the ways in which social contexts influence adolescents' health and risk behaviors. This agency supported initiative, had as its main premise that relationships with families, friends, and peers, influence adolescents' health-related behaviors and understanding that social context is essential to guide efforts to modify health behaviors in the short and long term. (accessed May 11, 2018 from https://www1.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/documents/dbsb_council_2007_historical.pdf#search=national-longitudinal-study-of-adolescent-health and <http://www.cpc.unc.edu/addhealth/>)

Developmental science has a unique opportunity to continue to build on this work and to observe and document contemporary family structure and the current shift from the traditional two-parent nuclear family to more diverse family configurations. More empirical work is needed to shed light on the ways in which adolescents negotiate all of the

individuals who play a role in their lives, including siblings (both biological and non-biological), extended family members, grandparents, as well as foster or adopted parents, their children and extended families. What does parenting look like in these contexts? What does parenting during adolescent development look like in such household situations when the adolescent is both a parent and a child of the head of the household? How does parenting evolve and change as these contexts change? What new theories need to be tested? Finally, how do parents negotiate, discuss or even appreciate milestones in adolescent development given the various transitions and disruptions in the parent-child-adolescent relationship?

The authors in this issue aptly point out that research on families has traditionally relied on objective measures of socioeconomic status. These measures are insufficient to tell the story of perceived or actual inequality. They argued that in order to fully understand the meaning of social class and perceived inequality that constructs and subjective measures which capture nuances of perceived powerlessness as it relates to real or perceived lack of access and loss of resources may shed light on how attitudes and behaviors of poor and working-class families are conveyed to adolescents and transmitted across generations. More research is needed on how these perceptions translate into parenting practices and socialization messages and the extent to which adolescents internalize these messages and incorporate them into their world view, help seeking behaviors and sense of future orientation.

In addition, there might be some benefit to applying theories of implicit bias and examining this phenomenon not only from the position of perceived power to discriminate, but from the position of perceived lack of power, victimization and reverse discrimination. What are the implicit biases that parents may hold? How are these biases communicated indirectly to adolescents and to what extent do these biases influence parenting practices? What impact do these types of socialization messages have on adolescents' persistence in school? Aspirations for a different life? Other important questions include to what extent is there acceptance of differences in others even within their own communities—for example, what social and psychological challenges might there be for an LGBT youth in a low income white community? Theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches are needed to better understand how these attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors affect child outcomes.

Risk-taking behavior is a well-documented task of adolescent development (Braams, van Duijvenvoorde, Peper, & Crone 2015). Research on adolescent brain development with regard to executive functions, self-regulation and inhibitory control suggest that adolescents are still maturing and continue to need parental guidance and support during this stage to help make good decisions that will foster positive outcomes (Fuligni, Dapretto, & Galván, 2018; Morris, Squeglia, Jacobus, J. & Silk, 2018). Jones and colleagues (this issue) put forward the notion that poor white adolescents have a live fast or die young attitude and that this is born out of scarcity decision making. This attitude gives rise to substance misuse and abuse, suicide ideation and other health risk behaviors. Studies that test interventions to help refocus this kind of decision making and to shift away from short term rewards to rewards that are more beneficial in the long term are needed.

Concerted efforts to include underrepresented groups in studies of parenting and adolescent development are sorely needed. The authors in this issue call attention to the need for more

research on such groups as never married mothers and divorced mothers. There is also a dearth of research on diverse families in which there might be an adolescent with special health care or other needs or if a family is caretaking for a child or adolescent of incarcerated parents. We have very little research on these groups and their particular parenting practices during adolescent development. What emotional or psychological toll might these contexts place on the adolescent and on the family more broadly?

More research is needed on the complex and profound influence of parenting on LGBT youth's physical and mental health outcomes as they move through the stages of adolescence. To whom do LGBT youth go if they are unable to access parental support for stressors related to their identity and for stressors related to their development in general? How do adolescents cope in a family context where parents remain unaware of the youth's sexual or gender identity and may espouse negative views regarding the LGBT community? What is their source of support?

Finally, there are numerous barriers to conducting this research including ethical and regulatory issues related to recruitment and to the need to obtain parental consent, especially if youth have not made their sexual or gender identity known to their parents (Mills-Koonce, Rehder, & McCurdy, 2018). Despite these barriers, Mills-Koonce and colleagues (this issue) call for the community of child and adolescent researchers to take advantage of opportunities to advance knowledge on this topic to help design parenting and family interventions that will help adolescents navigate the choppy waters of this phase of the development.

A hallmark of developmental science is its focus on examining the dynamic interplay of the range of risk and protective factors that shape the course of development across the lifespan. Inherent in the work of this field is the interdisciplinary lens through which developmental scientists investigate the social, psychological, emotional, cultural, and biological complexities of development in childhood and adolescence. Toward that end, researchers who study adolescent development are poised to advance this field of science and to inform other fields such as economics, housing, and public health to name a few. All of the papers in this issue point to the need for more contemporary research on family structure, its various shapes and forms and improved understandings of the ways in which development is characterized and unfolds in this diverse society. This indeed is a new frontier in developmental science research.

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