



PARENTAL INFLUENCE ON CHILD MENTAL HEALTH

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ABSTRACT

If there's something all parents can agree on, it's wanting to see your child succeed and live a long, healthy life. Life comes with challenges, though. Many are uncontrollable, while others are a result of actions or experiences your child faces.

As part of Children's Mental Health Week, we explored how parenting styles and a parent's mental health impacts their children. This covers how a parent can pass down mental health disorders to children and which behavioral and emotional patterns can have a lasting impact on childhood development.

KEYWORDS-parent, child, mental, health, influence

I. INTRODUCTION

Each time a child faces a difficult challenge, whether it's family turmoil or emotional distress, it takes a toll on them in a variety of ways. There's even a dedicated term for these types of negative events — adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). In short, they're potentially traumatic situations children face, such as violence at home or divorce. Here's a full overview on ACEs from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Situations that are typically considered ACEs include the following.[1,2,3]

- Being a victim of violence, abuse or neglect at home
- Witnessing violent acts in your home or community
- A family member attempting or committing suicide
- Substance abuse
- Mental health problems
- Having parents who are separated/divorced
- A household member who is incarcerated

One in three children under the age of 18 deal with at least one adverse childhood experience, while 14 percent experience two or more ACEs, according to data from the National Survey of Children's Health. About a quarter of the time, divorces or separations are responsible for ACEs.

An adverse experience doesn't guarantee a future problem, rather, it heightens a child's future risk of mental health problems, injury, risky behaviors, infectious or chronic disease and lack of income or educational opportunities. Most notably, as it relates to this topic, ACEs can increase the risk of depression, anxiety, suicide and PTSD. The CDC estimates as many as 21 million cases of depression could have been potentially avoided by shielding children from these adverse experiences.

In our state, it's imperative to identify and fix these issues before they become greater problems. Why? Oklahoma is No. 2 in divorce rate behind only Nevada, according to the CDC, and it has the second-highest incarceration rate behind Louisiana.



As parents, you can do your part by providing a stable home, ensuring your children understand social norms and provide them with the skills necessary to tackle difficult emotions when they surface.

Parenting style and your child's mental health

While you never want to be guilty of underparenting and neglecting your children, you'll want to avoid overparenting as well.

How so? Repeatedly protecting your children will limit their opportunities to deal with stressful, anxiety-driven situations. An inability to properly handle situations can lead to developing anxiety disorders down the road. For more information, read our blog on mental health and brain development in teens.

In certain scenarios, the inverse can happen. Your children may be so used to being protected and numb to certain situations, they feel more independent by doing the opposite of what their parents preach. For example, parents who overprotect their children from drugs and alcohol could lead to children being overly curious and eventually lead to substance abuse.[4,5,6]

Meanwhile, parenting with a critical, dismissive tone can dampen children's self-esteem and lead to anxiety or depression. The same can be said for judging your children by their body image or self-worth. Children already have enough emotions to deal with and being too rigid can affect their development.

In general, parents fall under four types of parenting styles. Here is a summary of each.

- **Authoritarian.** There are clear rules and punishment when those rules aren't met, but there is little warmth involved. In this structured environment, it's more of a my-way-or-the-highway type attitude. Without needed support, children may never feel they're good enough and can develop depression when raised by authoritarian parents.
- **Authoritative.** Parents develop clear standards and are responsive to their children's needs in a democratic way. Instead of being the boss, they are open to communication and will listen to their children. Growing up in an authoritative household provides a child with a solid foundation, but they're also likely to maintain a strong connection with their parents through adulthood.
- **Permissive.** Expectations are low, and permissive parents generally are more lenient and have few rules to abide by. Even when rules are broken, permissive parents tend to avoid conflict. Without much grounding, children raised like this may be more impulsive and prone to seeking risks. Anxiety and depression risks are also in play.
- **Uninvolved.** The least restrictive of the four, uninvolved parents are simply that — they're uninterested and invest little time in their children. Parents who are uninvolved generally have little communication or involvement with their kids. Rules matter little to them and they don't enforce misbehaving. Children in these types of households are more at risk of struggling in future relationships due to withdrawal and fear of abandonment. Relationships, in general, may be anxiety-provoking due to the nature of their upbringing.[7,8,9]

There isn't a definitive right or wrong way to parent, as each situation presents different challenges. Regardless of how you parent, this isn't a blame game. Ultimately, parenting style isn't the only indicator of how a child turns out.

Take this psychological study, for example. The researchers found a family history of mental health and other adverse experiences led to higher levels of anxiety and depression. They also discovered people who struggled with coping, rumination and blame — either toward themselves or their parents — were more likely to deal with mental



health problems. In other words, children who didn't blame themselves or others for negative experiences had better outcomes.

Impact of parental mental health on child development

Like many illnesses and diseases, mental health disorders tend to run in the family and can be passed down from parent to child. This risk increases even more if both parents have a mental health disorder.

A study by the American Journal of Psychiatry followed children of depressed parents over a 20-year period to gauge how they fared in adulthood. They found the children were three times more at risk for mental health and substance abuse disorders than children whose parents weren't depressed.

It's important to know just because a parent has a mental health condition doesn't necessarily mean it will have an impact on their children. Instead, it's more about how a parent's mental health affects their behavior. Many people with anxiety, depression or other disorders receive treatment and go on to live long, healthy and successful lives.

Dealing with depression as a parent could inadvertently impact how you interact with your child. For example, you may not be as expressive or form an emotional connection, which can impact the bond between parent and child.

It may also impact physical aspects of your child's life. Struggling to find enough energy to leave the house or being habitually late when dropping off your child for school or appointments could jeopardize their standing in school. In turn, academic struggles may lead to negative feelings often associated with mental health disorders.

These situations are often stressful for both parent and child and can deteriorate a relationship, leading to abandonment issues or problems with trust. [10,11,12]

Be upfront with your children and talk to them about mental health. Explain what it is and how treatments exist. Use your words carefully and avoid labels. The word "sad" is softer on the ears than "depressed" just as much as "scared" or "fearful" is more digestible to a child than "anxiety."

You should also be open and honest with how you both verbally and nonverbally communicate. Children are smarter than we give them credit for and can pick up on cues. Don't feel selfish if you need to prioritize getting help over caring for your family. Without you at full strength, your family will struggle to get by even if you're physically present.

II. DISCUSSION

Parents have an undeniable influence on their children. Parents have an affect on their child's values, choices, behaviors, and overall health. Mental health is no exception. Parents play a key role in how their child perceives the world, reacts to certain situations, and feels about themselves and their own self-worth. This, in turn, can play into their child's mental health and development long-term.

There are two key ways that parents affect their children's mental health, that we will discuss today:

1. Parents' own mental health can influence their children's mental health.
2. Parenting styles and approaches can also affect their children's mental health.



If you are a parent and concerned about your child's mental and emotional health, there are steps you can take to create a positive environment for your child to thrive. Even if you are struggling with your mental health, there are ways you can mitigate its effect on your child's well-being.

How Does Parental Mental Health Affect Children's Mental Health?

Studies have consistently shown that there is a connection between parents' mental health and the mental health of their children. Children with parents facing anxiety disorders are four to six times more likely to develop an anxiety disorder in their lifetime, as well. Children of parents facing depression, similarly, are three to four times more likely to develop depressive conditions.

However, this does not guarantee that your mental health will negatively affect your children. This does not mean that your child will struggle with a mental health disorder, too. There are steps you can take to mitigate this risk.

For example, one of the best things you can do as a parent is communicate when you are struggling. We are not all, by any means, perfect. Feeling sad or fearful is inevitable, and some days will be worse than others. It is okay to let your child know (in age-appropriate language) when you are having a hard day—and, even more importantly, to let them know that it is not their fault. As Eli Lebowitz, director of the Yale Child Study Center's Program for Anxiety Disorders, explained to CNN:

"It is scarier for a child to have a parent who is struggling and doesn't talk about it, versus a parent who is struggling and does talk about it. Just make sure to use words they understand." [13,14,15]

This level of communication can help create a more positive environment for conversations about mental health. It can show your child that sad and scared feelings are normal, and it's okay to acknowledge them. On top of this, talking to your child provides you the opportunity to tell them how much you love them, and assure them that these feelings are not their fault.

Parents who are struggling with their mental health should also model good coping behaviors and take time to take care of themselves. As much as you may feel that self-care is selfish, it is so important for yours' and your child's mental health. This might mean going to therapy, calling a friend, taking time off work, or going for a run outside. When you model positive coping techniques, your child will learn from them. Your child will learn healthy ways of dealing with hard feelings on their own. As Lebowitz told CNN, "Parents are like the mirror children look into to learn about themselves."

You can also encourage healthy coping behaviors if you see your child struggling. For example, if your child is feeling anxious or scared, you may show them outlets like journaling or getting outside. Parents should also validate their child's feelings and encourage them to do something positive. If your child is scared to go to school, for example, you could say: "I understand you are feeling scared, but I know you can do it." Showing your child that you are confident in them, can help them build confidence in themselves.

Part of taking care of yourself, as a parent, means seeking professional help if and when you need it. Sometimes, bouts of anxiety or sadness can be managed without professional help. However, some anxiety and depressive symptoms are strong enough to warrant professional treatment. Getting yourself help will ensure you can positively influence your child long-term. And remember, therapy is for everyone. You do not need to be severely depressed to attend therapy. There are many benefits involved, and can allow you to be an even better parent.

How Can Parenting Styles Affect a Child's Mental Health?

Parenting is no easy feat, but the way in which you parent can have an affect on your child's mental health. Specifically, the way in which you engage with your child, handle conflict and punishment, and encourage your child in life can all play a role in your child's mental health long-term.



There are various styles of parenting, each with their own impact on a child's mental health. In general, parents who play an authoritative yet nurturing and communicative role often see the best success with their children. These are parents who encourage structure and moderation in their child's lives, provide guidance and constructive feedback when needed, but also encourage their children to share their feelings, express emotions, and ask questions. This parenting approach can help children develop a sense of happiness, self-esteem, independence, cooperation, and respect.[16,17,18]

Parents who take on a fully authoritarian style of parenting, however, may see negative impact on their child's mental well-being. Studies show that harsh punishments, including spanking, can trigger aggressiveness, anti-social behaviors, and low self-esteem, among other mental health issues. These children may have trouble addressing their emotions, and might assume their needs are not important. According to a 2014 study, children who grew up with parents who yelled, shouted, or verbally humiliated them may had a greater likelihood of experiencing depression, aggression, anger management problems, delinquency, and trouble maintaining relationships in adulthood.

On the opposite spectrum, permissive parenting can also have negative effects on children's mental health. Permissive parenting means that there is less structure in children's lives, and rules are rarely enforced. Parents might be nurturing and compassionate, but their children may have issues with self-control, self-regulation, and authority longer-term.

Uninvolved parenting is another style that can, perhaps more obviously, harm a child's mental health. Parents who provide the basics for their child, but who are not actively involved in their child's life, often means that the child lacks structure, guidance, mentorship, and nurturing. Children growing up in this type of environment—where they are not attached to a primary caregiver, or where they do not have the safety and security of a caring family—can cause them to develop anxiety, feelings of hopelessness, low self-esteem, and other psychological effects.

Of course, outside of parenting styles, there are other factors that can negatively (and positively) affect a child's mental health. For example, constant pressure from parents to succeed can create anxiety and stress-related problems in children, adolescents, and young adults. Pressure might be on children to get straight A's in school, excel in sports or extracurriculars, and uphold certain social and cultural standards. While parents want what is best for their children, too much pressure to succeed can have negative implications. A 2013 study found that pressure imposed by family members can be the most impactful form of stress on teenagers' mental health.

Other ways in which parents can negatively affect a child's mental health include:

- Focusing too heavily on body image, or teasing a child about their weight
- Criticizing children and engaging in negative self-talk (e.g. using words like "stupid")
- Failing to address potential traumas at home, such as divorce, death, or abuse
- Enabling a child by doing things for them, including school work
- Dismissing a child's feelings

So, what can parents do to positively affect their children's mental health?

How Parents Can Positively Affect a Child's Mental Health:

More than likely, you have good intentions and want the best for your child. But again, parenting is not easy and there are times you might question your approach. Here are some of the best ways you can create a positive environment for your child, and encourage positive mental health at home:



- Use more praise than criticism. This means acknowledging what your child does well, more often than criticizing your child for their mistakes. This can boost their confidence and self-esteem, and motivate them to be successful.
- Validate your child's feelings, always. Always acknowledge your child's emotions, even if you might not agree with them. Help them feel heard and understood. Keep open conversations about emotions going in your home.
- Set rules, not ultimatums. As PsychCentral suggests, overly controlling parents can cause children to not believe in themselves, trust their own feelings, or develop self-worth. Set rules in your home, but allow there to be ongoing conversations about them.
- Showcase healthy coping techniques. As noted above, children mirror what their parents do. If you are feeling sad or overwhelmed, show your child how you can positively cope with those feelings. Practice self-care and teach your child to honor themselves, too.
- Keep conversations open. Parents who are open about their feelings, and who communicate with their child frequently, will establish the greatest form of trust with their children. This can set the stage for a healthy child long-term. Even if your child is facing mental health struggles already, open and honest conversations can enable you to understand them, and get them the help they truly need. There is too much stigma around mental health—but having discussions in your home about it, can help to normalize your child's feelings and make them feel supported.
- Get help when you need it. If you are a parent and struggling with mental illness, do not hesitate to seek the help you need. Professional support can show you ways to cope, and ways to support your child through it all. If your child is struggling with their mental health, do not hesitate to get help. It is never too early to seek professional treatment for a mental health disorder. In fact, the earlier you seek treatment, the more success your child is likely to see into adulthood. There are dedicated mental health treatment centers for youth.

At the end of the day, mental health issues are very common—and they often start in adolescence. As a parent, it is important to remember that no one is to blame for this disease. Mental illness can happen to anyone. If your child is struggling with a mental health condition, you are not to blame. Even if you too have a mental illness, it is not your fault. No one is at fault—not your child, not your spouse. Mental illness is a disease. As Marcy Burstein, clinical psychologist at the National Institute of Mental Health, explains: “Mental health issues should be considered like any other illness. We don't blame someone for having diabetes.”

However, as a parent, you do hold a power to positively influence your child. By being a communicative, compassionate, and supportive parent—while also setting boundaries and rules for your child—you can affect your child's mental health positively and help them to thrive.[17,18,19]

III. RESULTS

Children's behavior and psychopathology risk can be influenced by parental characteristics, including socioeconomic position [1–4], migrant status, [5] and mental health [6–9], as well as parenting skills and sensitivity to children's needs [10]. Identifying characteristics that are most strongly associated with children's outcomes, and in particular those that are amenable to change, may benefit child mental health. As shown by interventional research, improving parenting practices is one way in which mental health problems can be addressed.

Two articles published in this month's issue of ECAP specifically highlight the importance of considering children's mental health in the context of their parents' characteristics. In a study conducted among 757 children referred to mental health clinics set in Amsterdam and in Rotterdam, Middeldorp et al. examined the prevalence of mental health difficulties among parents of consulting children. Among children, the most frequent diagnoses were Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (35 %), anxiety (21 %) and autism spectrum disorders (22 %), behavioral disturbances (10 %), with some children presenting more than one disorder. Overall, 25 % of parents had



high levels of psychological difficulties with internalizing problems and symptoms of ADHD being the most frequent (respectively 20 and 10 %) [11]. One of the important findings of this study is that paternal characteristics—particularly symptoms of depression and ADHD—were systematically associated with offspring outcomes to a similar extent as maternal mental health difficulties, bringing forward the importance of involving fathers as much as possible in studies as well as interventions aiming to improve children’s mental health [9, 12].

Another original observation is that parental anxiety (particularly the mother’s) is a key predictor of offspring outcomes. An emerging literature shows that maternal anxiety identified as early as pregnancy predicts maternal long-term mental health [13] and offspring development [14, 15]. However, while depression tends to be investigated and addressed in future parents, symptoms of anxiety receive much less attention. Overall, this study suggests that parents of youths who receive mental health treatment have high levels of frequent mental health symptoms. Even though the direction of this association is unclear, and children’s behavior can influence parents’ mental health, addressing parents’ mental health needs can benefit offspring outcomes. To date, this has been shown in randomized controlled trials testing the effectiveness of depression treatment [8]. Data provided by Middeldorp et al. as well as other authors [16] suggest that interventions addressing parental anxiety should also be systematically evaluated.

As stated above, offspring characteristics may also shape the parent–child relationship, further influencing children’s well-being [17]. Nevertheless, evidence from controlled trials indicates that positive changes in parenting can lower levels of behavioral difficulties in the offspring [18], implying parent–child interactions can be modified independently of children’s behavior. In a randomized intervention trial conducted among 151 parent–child dyads, Schwenck et al. ask whether parent training can be effective in improving outcomes among high-risk children who receive inpatient psychiatric treatment [19]. The intervention, designed to be easily implemented and universal (open groups for parents of children with different types of difficulties) was delivered over the course of five sessions over 5 weeks. Overall, the authors found no effect on offspring behavior, however parents reported better mental health and parenting skills than the control group. Importantly, a proportion of parents of hospitalized youths themselves had mental health problems: 25 % had symptoms at the time of the study, and approximately 40 % had a history of psychotherapy and pharmaceutical treatment. Over a longer follow-up period, such improvements in parental mental health and family interactions—if sustained—could contribute to improvements in children’s well-being. Additional intervention studies rigorously testing different components of parenting interventions with regard to children and adolescents’ long-term outcomes are much needed.

This issue of ECAP also includes a Letter to the Editor that highlights the need for diagnostic and treatment tools for migrant and refugee children fleeing situations of conflict or extreme poverty with (or sometimes without) their families [20]. As highlighted by the authors, in Europe the needs of children who are resettled in the context of an armed conflict or who migrate in traumatizing conditions, are largely overlooked. This is in part because of insufficient mental health treatment opportunities for this particular population, but also because of contextual barriers to care. In a study we recently conducted among a population of homeless parents and children living in Paris—many of whom were migrant and came from areas of armed conflict—families’ residential instability and difficult access to translation services made appropriate mental health care unlikely even when it was in principle available [21]. As a result, the most vulnerable children are those least likely to access treatment in case of psychological difficulties, in a health system that aims to be universal [22]. Moreover, in situations of conflict and severe material deprivation, parents are also at high risk of experiencing mental health problems, putting children from these highly vulnerable groups at additional risk of emotional and behavioral difficulties [21, 23].

Strengthening families may be one of the most propitious ways of preventing psychological difficulties in children and their parents, as well as improving symptoms among those who already experience emotional or behavioral problems. This is not an easy task, requiring intersectorial collaboration of mental health specialists in different areas (across child and adult services) with professionals in the fields of education, social work or rehabilitation. Much remains to be uncovered about the characteristics of parents and children at risk as well as optimal ways of addressing their needs in a timely manner. Articles published in this month’s issue of ECAP give some lead on ways to move forward: search for parents’ frequent and subclinical symptoms (e.g. anxiety), evaluate fathers, and pay special attention to children who are migrant.[19]



IV. CONCLUSION

Authoritarian Parenting

Have you heard of the phrase “spare the rod and spoil the child?” In short, that’s what authoritarian parenting is all about. Here, parents make a set of rules and expectations that the children strictly have to follow without question. For instance, if a parent asks the child to go to his/her room, the child is expected to obey quietly without asking the reason why. If the child talks back or disobeys, then that action is treated with punishment, and those punishments are pretty harsh.

Along with the parent’s I-told-you-so attitude, their children have to face their list of demands too. They expect them to get all “A”s in their test scores, be good in sports, and make no mistakes whatsoever. Additionally, the parents give little to no direction when the child makes a mistake. As a result, the child is left in the dark as to how to rectify them or progress from there onwards.

Although you will get the child’s obedience through this method, the mental implications the child suffers are not pleasant. They usually grow up to have self-esteem issues, feelings of being undervalued and are at risk of anxiety and depression.

Authoritative Parenting

Like authoritarian parenting, authoritative parents also have fixed rules and expectations from their children. But the catch is, they’re democratic. Here, children have the freedom to voice their opinions, share their feelings, and ask questions. There’s a healthy rapport between child and parent, which brings warmth and closeness to the relationship. When the child fails to meet those expectations, the parent is more forgiving and nurturing than harsh. Instead of leaving the child to figure out answers to their own mistakes, the parent offers constructive criticism and feedback on how to do things better next time.

This style of parenting has the most positive impact out of the four. With the child’s self-esteem boosted, they grow up to be cooperative, happy, self-reliant, and successful.

Permissive Parenting

Permissive parents don’t have many expectations from their children. Although they might establish a set of rules, they rarely enforce them. Plus, the parents will rarely meet bad behavior with any sort of correction. Nevertheless, permissive parents are communicative and nurturing. They take on the role of a friend rather than a parent.

Since there’s not much parental moderation, children from this style of parenting have problems with authority and fare poorly in school. They also rank low on happiness and have issues with self-regulation.

Uninvolved Parenting

Out of the four, this parenting style ranks the lowest. The parents will provide the necessities, but there is no involvement in the child’s life. In some extreme cases, those necessities aren’t even provided. There is no structure, no rules, no guidance, and no moderation. Hence, children of this style grow up to lack self-control, self-esteem and might develop behavioral issues.

Other Implications Seen In A Child’s Mental Health

Development Of Stress

Raising a child in an unstable environment can cause a lot of stress-related issues in the child. Without the proper love and care from a parent, feelings of insecurity will develop that can lead to anxiety or chronic stress.

Children enduring chronic stress due to their family’s choices suffer from a lot of side effects. The cognitive functions of the child reduce, impacting memory and attention span. This can lead to other side effects such as hyperactivity and poor emotional management.

Issues Of Co-Dependency

A child who hasn’t felt the warmth and love from a family hasn’t experienced what true relationships are. By being in a distant and detached family, the child is deprived of nurture and is unaware of how to sustain a healthy relationship. This often leads to codependency which is seriously detrimental to the child’s future relationships. Also known as “relationship addiction”, this harmful emotional and behavioral state will completely alter their ability to have healthy, fulfilling relationships.

As your child grows into an adult, codependency will make them want to control the people around them. This often leads to one-sided, abusive relationships. Worse still, codependency is a learned behavior, which means their children will likely end up just like them.

Develop Mechanisms To Hide The Past



People unconsciously cope with traumatic experiences by developing defense or coping mechanisms. These mechanisms make the person feel protected for a short time from the remnants of that experience. But, that's the problem: coping mechanisms are not long-term! A child battling with adverse childhood experiences such as violence at home or divorce is subject to childhood trauma. When a child deals with traumatic experiences with coping mechanisms, it can lead to identity issues, disillusionment, and other physiological disorders as well. Be mindful of what you say to your children since they're impressionable. As parents, it's important that you support your child and always offer them the love and warmth they deserve. To ensure their overall wellbeing, you also need to keep a track of their immunizations.[20]

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