
Conceptual Development of the Nurturing Programs

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A parenting program designed to change dysfunctional and abusive parenting behaviors must be developed from a sound theoretical basis. The objectives of the instruction must be directly related to the target behaviors. To change abusive parenting patterns, an understanding of what constitutes abusive behavior is required. The known parenting behaviors of abusive parents serve as the basis from which program development and instruction in appropriate parenting emanate. This essay summarizes the theoretical underpinnings of the Nurturing Program and the five sets of parenting attitudes and related behaviors which the program was designed to ameliorate.

Inappropriate Parental Expectations of the Child

Beginning very early in the infant's life, abusive parents tend to inaccurately perceive the skills and abilities of their child. Steele and Pollock (1968) found that parents in their study group expected and demanded a great deal from their infants and children, and did so prematurely. Galdston (1965) concurred that abusive parents misperceived the particular stages of development and abilities of their children. These inappropriate expectations stem from a lack of knowledge about the capabilities and needs of a child at each stage. Treated as if they were older than they really are, the children are often left to care for themselves, or are left to take care of younger siblings. Children are expected to be toilet trained by six to twelve months of age; to be able to talk before two years of age; and to help with the washing, housecleaning, food preparation, and serving at a very early age (Martin, 1976).

The effects of inappropriate parental expectations upon their young child's development are debilitating. Martin (1976) suggested that when expectations of their physical or intellectual performance are impossible to meet, children perceive themselves as being worthless, as failures, and as unacceptable and disappointing to adults.

A second common trait among abusing parents is their inability to be empathically aware of their children's needs, and to respond to those needs in an appropriate fashion (Steele, 1975). Melnick and Hurley (1969), in their study of personality variables of abusing parents, found mothers to have severely frustrated dependency needs and inability to empathize with their children. It has been reported that not only did abusing parents have high demands and expectations for their infant's or child's performance, but also a corresponding disregard for the infant's or child's own needs, limited abilities, and helplessness (Bain, 1963; Gregg, 1968; Helfer & Pollack, 1967; Hiller, 1969; Johnson & Morese, 1968; Korsch, Christian, Gozzi & Carlsonm 1965; Morris & Gould, 1963).

Parental Lack of Empathic Awareness of Child's Needs

Empathic awareness of a child's needs requires a parent to be able to understand the condition or state of mind of the child without actually experiencing his/her feelings. To empathize is to participate in the child's feelings and ideas; abusing parents often exhibit an inability to do this (Rowen, 1975). Because they fear "spoiling" their child, abusing parents often ignore their child, which results in the child's basic needs being left unattended (Steele, 1975). They place a high premium on the child being good, acting right, and learning to be obedient, seldom, however, clarifying what constitutes "good" behavior. Erickson (1950) and Havighurst (1951) outlined developmental tasks which must be mastered at each stage of life if the child is to develop normally and experience a healthy adjustment as an adult. They suggested that each of these tasks is a prerequisite for successful development in succeeding stages.

These tasks are grouped around several poles: physical skills, intellectual growth, emotional adjustment, social relationships, attitudes toward the self, attitudes toward reality, and formation of standards and values. To successfully accomplish these developmental tasks, the child needs to steadily increase his/her competence and understanding, as well as a sense of responsibility, a realistic outlook, and a capacity for self-direction.

In the first stage of infancy and early childhood, ages 0 – 6, children learn to take solid foods, walk, talk and control elimination. Children develop a sense of trust in themselves and others, learn respect for rules and authority, to control emotion, and to distinguish right from wrong. In addition, children master simple concepts of time, space and safety, explore the immediate environment, and develop their skills through play. Finally, children identify with their own sex primarily through interactions with their parents (Erickson 1950).

The effects of inadequate parental empathy during the early years of an infant's and child's life are profound and enduring. Children who are ignored and whose basic needs are neglected fail to develop a basic sense of trust in themselves and others. A world in which parents pay little attention to children aside from insisting that they "act right" and learn to be obedient provides little or no basis for learning respect for rules and distinguishing right from wrong. As a result, these children fail to develop confidence in themselves and their competence. "Acting their age" usually means being pliable to the demands of the parents – not testing their true abilities. These children do not consider violence, cruelty, and causing pain to others to be bad. The parents with whom these children identify model violent, cruel and physically/psychologically abusive behaviors under the aegis of teaching, helping, protecting and controlling their children. The results are observed in children with a tragically low sense of self-esteem and distorted sense of guilt (Steele & Pollock, 1968).

Parental Value of Physical Punishment

Closely associated with the misperceptions of a child's abilities and the lack of empathy for the child's needs is the abusing parent's strong belief in the value of physical punishment.

Abusive parents generally believe babies should not be "given in to" now allowed to "get away with anything;" they must periodically be shown "who is boss" and to respect authority so they will not become sassy or stubborn (Steele, 1975). Wasserman (1967) found that abusive parents not only considered punishment a proper disciplinary measure, but strongly defended their right to use physical force.

Physical attacks by the abusing parents are seldom a haphazard uncontrolled, impulsive discharge of aggression onto a child. On the contrary, studies appear to indicate that abusive parents consciously utilize physical punishment as a method designed to punish and correct specific bad conduct or inadequacy on the part of the child (Devoren, 1975; Wasserman, 1967). Much of what abusive parents find wrong in their children are the same things for which they were criticized and punished for as children, hence the punishment carries the weight of traditional family authority and an aura of righteousness (Steele, 1975).

A review of expert opinions about the personality and motivational variables of abusing parents shows agreement that there is a defect in the abusing parent's personality that allows aggressive impulses to be expressed too freely (Kempe, Silverman, Steele, Droegemueller, & Silver, 1962; Steele & Pollock, 1968). However, disagreement arises in describing the source of aggressive impulses and is, in part, traced to the experts' philosophical views about aggression and its origins (Lefkowitz, Eron, Walder, & Huesmann, 1977).

Parent-Child Role Reversal

A fourth common behavior among abusive parents has been described by Ackley (1977), Martin (1976), Morris & Gould (1963), and Steele (1975) as a "role reversal." Where this phenomenon exists, children are expected to be sensitive to and responsible for much of the happiness of their parents (Martin, 1976). Essentially, the parents behave like helpless, needy children looking to their own babies as if they were adults who could provide parental care and comfort (Steele, 1975).

Ackley (1977) states that potential abusers often both desperately seek or ultimately avoid intimate adult relationships. They seek them in order to obtain what was missing in their childhood relationships with their parents. This lack leads them to define a close relationship as one in which – like a child – they can obtain emotional support and warmth without giving much in return and depend on their partner to solve the problems of living that adults are called upon to solve. They ultimately avoid intimacy, because their first childhood attempts were such failures. It is these initial failures that now lead them to believe that close relationships are dangerous – doomed to produce disappointment and threats to self-esteem – because people cannot be trusted.

Ackley further states that the behavioral result of this complex set of feelings is that the potential abuser marries an individual who is less able than most to provide the emotional support sought. Not surprisingly, potential abusers then find their marriages deeply disappointing, because their relationships with their spouses do not provide the desired emotional supports. The solution is to have children: the expectation being that, with children, they will finally have someone who truly loves them. These adults soon learn that parenting – especially in the early months and years – involves giving, not taking. As a result, they experience only more disappointment. They see their children as "inadequate" and, in their frustration and neediness, beat, chastise, belittle, or ignore them. The effect of this role reversal upon abused children is to further reinforce their feelings of inadequacy.

Oppressing Children's Power and Independence

Closely aligned with the value of physical punishment and the lack of an empathic awareness of children's needs is the belief that children's independence and power need to be oppressed. The age-old phrase "the terrible twos" most adequately describes this construct. Parents fear that if children are allowed to challenge parental authority, they will become "acting-out" and disrespectful. Hence, obedience and complete compliance to parental authority is demanded. When children's power and independence are oppressed, they are not allowed to challenge, to voice opinions, or to have choices, but rather are told to "do what they are told to do" without question. This demand for compliance to parental authority has many limitations.

1. **Obedience breeds powerlessness.** When independence is not fostered as a state of growth, the feeling of dependence becomes a dominant personality trait. Independence fosters power – a sense of self in comparison to others and one's environment. The young child who explores is learning about cause and effect, relationships between concepts: the "if – then law" of logic and nature. For young children, the ability to say "no" is a way of establishing boundaries and developing a sense of power, both necessary for success in life. Obedience to parental rule, however, breeds a sense of helplessness and dependence at a time when learning to be a separate being is critical.
2. **Obedience breeds inadequacy.** Inadequacy is the perception that self or others are "less than, incapable, or inferior." By demanding obedience, parents model that power is something to be used on others to get them to do what you

want. Power is equated to control. The sense of powerlessness described earlier fosters a personal sense of inadequacy, as being a decision maker for your own life is not an option. Powerlessness, excessive dependence, and a sense of personal inadequacy are common traits of many obedient children.

3. **Obedience also breeds rebelliousness.** History teaches us over and over again that the oppressed will rise up to be recognized. It's inevitable. The human spirit cannot be denied its existence. Power struggles, acting out behavior, disobedience are all common behaviors resulting from years of obedience and complete yield to parental rule.
4. **Obedience breeds compliance – to all.** Doing only what one is told to do often teaches children a generalized learned response of compliance. When those in perceived power make a demand, like a child's peer group, once again, the learned response is to comply. In the experimental world of teenagers, common sense to stay away from drugs and alcohol, vandalism, and crimes against the community are overwhelmed with the compliance of peer pressure. Simply, children who have been raised as obedient to authority lose their ability to withstand peer pressure. Saying "no" to drugs and other inappropriate behaviors will remain only a concept, not a practice.
5. **Obedience breeds followers, not leaders.** Thinkers, problem solvers, visionaries, and leaders are made from early home environments that foster those traits. Obedience as a dominant parenting practice to oppress children's power and independence often has long-lasting, devastating consequences as observed in children and adults unable to make wise choices, take the initiative, and provide the leadership critical to nurturing parenting.

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