

Assessing Parental Beliefs in Early Childhood

Trinity Crosby, McNair Scholar, Penn State

Dr. Douglas M. Teti, Professor, Human Development and Family Studies
Penn State

Abstract

Assessing parental beliefs in early childhood is significant because of its ability to properly understand parenting as an adaptational process along with child development. Sigel and McGillicuddy-De Lisi (2002) stated, “What parents believe about parenting is related to their own parenting and to virtually every aspect of children’s developmental accomplishments.” The purpose of this study is to identify maternal beliefs about competent parenting in early childhood. The present study will look at maternal beliefs relating to parenting with a six-month old as well as parenting as an adaptational process.

INTRODUCTION

Every mother has her own belief on what competent parenting consists of. Assessing mother’s beliefs on competent parenting is part of measuring parental competence. What mothers believe parenting to be is directly related to their competence, and how they parent their child. Teti & Huang (2004) suggest, in order for a parent to be competent they must be able to change their style of parenting as it applies to their child’s development. According to Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth et al. 1978), competent parenting during infancy consists primarily of love and nurturance. This parent is sensitive to their child’s needs and answers to them in a timely and effective manner. Teti & Huang (2004) also states that parenting competence should change qualitatively in transition from infancy to preschool years. These researchers felt that parents who were competent during infancy would remain so throughout their child’s development. The purpose of this study is to identify maternal beliefs about competent parenting in early childhood.

In most cases, the first few years of a child’s life are spent at home with their parents or legal guardians. Since a child is constantly developing and changing, it is important that the parent as the primary caregiver is also changing in their parental styles and making the proper adjustment in order to help the child develop most effectively.

The Problem

Parenting is a dynamic adaptational process, which develop in accordance to the developing needs of the child. Not all parents may understand how imperative it is to adjust their parental behavior to the development of the child. Some parents may feel that parenting behavior should be consistent and it is not necessary to change as the child develops. Other parents may understand the importance of adjustment; however, they do not adjust their parenting in a manner that promotes healthy parent-child relationships

and child development. As a result, the child is being negatively affected in their socio-emotional and intellectual competence.

Significance of the Study

In today's society, the phenomenon "Children are the future" is widely known across the nation. The children of today are the leaders of tomorrow. They will be the future doctor, lawyer, and even president to whom we depend. Therefore, it is the parent's job to shape and mold their child in a way that will promote positive development so that the child will become a positive influence and role model as they grow older. The way in which a child grows and develops is dictated and influenced in part by the beliefs of the parent, which in turn is expected to influence actual parental behavior. Studying parental beliefs in early childhood is part of the foundation to understanding parental behavior and children's social and cognitive development.

Research Questions

This study will answer the following questions:

1. What are mother's beliefs on good parenting as it applies to their child?
2. Do mothers feel it is imperative to adapt their parenting style and behavior as their children grow and develop? If so, how?
3. How knowledgeable are mothers as it applies to parenting their child?

Conceptual Framework

This study relies on the work of McGillicuddy-De Lisi and Sigel, who have studied parental beliefs and parental beliefs system for quite some time. Their research assumes that every parental belief leads to the parental behavior, which then yields a particular child outcome (McGillicuddy-De Lisi & Sigel 1995). Additionally, their research has defined eight beliefs, which applies to all parents when it comes to their particular parenting style. The eight beliefs are described below.

1. "Beliefs are knowledge based and are constructions of experience. The cognitive processes involved are assimilation and accommodation (k)" (McGillicuddy –De Lisi & Sigel, 2002, p.499).
2. "Beliefs are organized into categories of knowledge domains of which are bounded. The internal coherence of the domains may vary and the boundaries may vary in permeability (D)" (Mc Gillicuddy-De Lisi & Sigel, 2002 p.499)
3. Beliefs may be held as absolutes or as probabilities (A/P)" (Mc Gillicuddy –De Lisi & Sigel, 2002 p. 499).
4. "Beliefs serve comparable functions for everyone irrespective of culture, although the content and experiential bases from which beliefs are constructed within a culture milieu are different (C)" (McGillicuddy –De Lisi & Sigel, 2002. p.499)
5. "Beliefs are influenced by affect to varying degrees of intensity and quality of influence (A)" (McGillicuddy –De Lisi & Sigel, 2002, p.499).
6. "Beliefs are expressed in behaviors that may have one or more goals (G)" (McGillicuddy –De Lisi & Sigel, 2002, p. 499).
7. "Beliefs vary in the degree to which they are valued (i.e. deemed important) (V)" (McGillicuddy –De Lisi & Sigel, 2002, p. 499).

8. “There is a subset of beliefs derived from core beliefs as to how and under what conditions to instantiate actions to express the core beliefs. These are the praxis beliefs about how and in what form beliefs should be enacted. One important category of praxis beliefs is beliefs in one’s ability to effectively generate and implement a parenting strategy, as well as other aspects of parenting self-efficacy (SE)” (McGillicuddy –De Lisi & Sigel, 2002, p. 499)

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The purpose of this study is to identify maternal beliefs about competent parenting in early childhood. In addition, the present study will identify the mother’s belief on parenting as an adaptational process, and whether or not they feel that this is something that they will practice as a parent. One of the elements to assessing parental beliefs is to identify where these beliefs may come from and how they are influenced. In addition, the assessment of parental beliefs can lead to the prediction of what parenting style is going to be used by certain parents.

Sources of Parenting Beliefs

Parental beliefs can be influenced and determined by a variety of different factors. Parental beliefs may be determined by one’s environment, age, ethnicity, and even his/her experience of just being a parent (Scott & Hill 2001). According to Meriam and Webster, environment is defined as “the circumstances, objects or conditions by which one is surrounded (Meriam-Webster Online 2004). Some parents may find their own particular beliefs to be altered by advice from their relatives; such as a parent or aunt and uncle. Other parents may define their beliefs according to what they see other parents are doing (Smetana 1994). In a previous study, Cohen (1981) found that some parents, who are inexperienced, actually tend to look to other parents’ beliefs and what they practice in order to help identify their own beliefs. It is also evident that parental beliefs may be determined by one’s age. In today’s society, there are a number of mothers who are having children at a young age and who are therefore limited when it comes to parenting. These particular mothers may exhibit different beliefs about parenting opposed to older mothers due, to the fact that they are much younger. Fry (1985) conducted a study on maternal beliefs with younger mothers and compared them to older mothers. In conclusion his study found that younger teenage mothers compared to older mothers actually showed less knowledge of child development. Additionally, the younger mothers did not believe it was necessary to show a lot of verbal interaction with the child.

Ethnicity and culture seem to play a huge role in parental beliefs (Cote & Bornstein 2000). For example, Latino cultures are believed to place high value on interpersonal relationships but retain significant independent qualities (Parke & Buriel 1998). Although Asian cultures value independence they place more value on interdependence with others. This culture strongly believes in the family unit and depending on one another as a family. Therefore, when it comes to raising children, they will instill beliefs of interdependence with the family (Markus & Kityama 1991). Uba (1994) compared maternal beliefs between Japanese-American and European-American mothers in early childhood. Results have shown that Japanese-American

mothers value social competence, and, therefore engage in more social interactions with their infants as opposed to European American mothers. When studying maternal beliefs, it is very important to take into consideration all of the determinant facts that will cause individual differences. Because of the cultural difference in parental beliefs many children are raised differently and learn to appreciate different values.

Parenting Styles

Parental styles differ for each individual and are congruent to their own circumstances and parental beliefs. There are four different styles of parenting, which were first defined by Diana Baumrind: authoritative parenting, authoritarian parenting, permissive parenting, rejecting-neglecting parenting (Smetana 1994). In her research Baumrind believed that these four different styles of parenting all followed under two different dimensions. The first dimension was demandingness, which is defined, by how demanding a parent is with their child as applied to child's behavior or actions. The second dimension was responsiveness, which is defined by how responsive the parent is when making rules (Smetana 1994). For example, if a parent tells his/her child to stop doing a particular activity, this demonstrates their level of demand. Some parents may go a little bit further once they give a child a demand and actually respond with a reason as to why he/she should not do a certain thing. The four different styles that Baumrind defined are based upon these two different dimensions.

The first style of parenting defined by Baumrind is the authoritative parenting style. This parent exhibits consistent firm regulations and control, however, they give clear explanation to their child for their standards. Authoritative parents are very loving with their children and are supportive of their child. In addition, these parents are also strong believers of autonomy for their child (Baumrind 1998). Secondly there is the authoritarian parenting style. In this style of parenting parents are very demanding of their child and are not strong believers of giving their child a response and providing them explanations. They discourage give-and-take feedback with their child. A parent with this particular style believes that it is "his/her way or no way. They tell their child what they should do and do not expect them to give any feedback. Thirdly, there is the permissive parent. This parent seems to show very little demand when it comes to following rules, and they pretty much allow their children to do what they want. Finally, the rejecting-neglecting parent is one who does not monitor their child's behavior and tends to be much disengaged with their child. They do not set any limits for what their child does. Also, they are not at all responsive, so they do not provide any type of warmth to their child (Baumrind 1988). Judith G. Smetana (1994) believes that the style of parenting will not change too dramatically over time because parenting styles are defined by parent's values, attitudes, and beliefs, and should be consistently stable over a long period of time. Teti & Huang 2004 also believed this to be true as well in the sense of competent parenting. They have stated in their research that parents who are competent in the

early years will remain so in the later years. They also feel that these parents will be very effective in making the parenting transition from infancy to preschool years.

Clinical child psychologist, Anne O'Conner (2004) states that each style of parenting has a different effect on the child and that one style of parenting is recommended as the best of the four different types. The style of parenting that produces the most positive result is the authoritative style. Children, whose parents employ this approach, have been found to be happy, self-reliant and able to cope with stress. They also tend to be popular with their peers and have good social skills and confidence. They tend to set their own standards and are achievement oriented. However, children of authoritarian parents tend to be obedient, orderly, and not aggressive. They lack the self-esteem and self-control of their peers brought up by authoritarian parents. These children do not get praised often, and as they grow older, they tend to be motivated to do things for reward or punishment, rather than for reasons of right or wrong. In contrast to other types of parenting, children raised by permissive parents do not cope with stress very well and get angry if they don't get their own way. Also, they can be aggressive and domineering with their peers and do not tend to be achievement oriented (O'Conner 2004).

METHODOLOGY

Population Sample and Recruitment

In order to assess maternal beliefs about parenting this particular study looked at mothers living in State College, Pennsylvania, and the surrounding areas. First, names and addresses of the mothers were obtained from the birth announcements in the Centre Daily Times. After receiving a list of names, an interest letter was sent out to all of the mothers, which stated the purpose of the study and who the mothers would need to contact if they were interested. Within a week of sending each mother a letter, research assistants followed up with phone calls to ascertain if the mothers received the letters and if they would agree to participate. Mothers who chose to participate in the study had to be at least 18 years of age. It was also required that their child was the first-born and was six-months old. The sample included a total of nine Caucasian mothers. All participating mothers were given a \$60.00 stipend to compensate for their time.

Instrumentation

Each mother was given a demographic sheet to be filled out prior to the parenting interview. The demographic sheet consisted of different questions that asked about the mother's marital status, age, race, employment status, highest level of education completed, estimated yearly family income, how many children the mother had, and if the child currently lived with her at the present time.

In addition to the demographic sheet, each mother answered a total of nine open-ended questions in interview form, and was asked to answer each of the questions to the best of their ability. The questions related to their idea about good parenting and

what a parent should be doing when it came to feeding and playing with their baby. This paper will only focus on two of the questions that the mother's were asked. First, "What do you think good parenting is to a six-month old like your infant is?" Second, "Right now your baby is only six-months old, but it won't be long before he/she will be a toddler, and soon after that a preschooler. Do you think your parenting will need to change, as your child gets older? If so, how?" In addition, this paper will also look at some of the beliefs and ideas that different mothers had about parenting that may be significant in helping to determine their parenting style.

RESULTS

There was a good deal of variation in mother's beliefs on parenting. First, when mothers were asked what good parenting would be for their child, some mothers seemed to emphasize one particular issue as opposed other mothers. Mothers one, two, four, five, and seven remarked that good parenting to them is showing their child a lot of love and care. In addition, it was very important to interact with their child and develop a bond between them. These mothers felt that at the age of six-months it is important for their child to develop a sense of trust with them. Mothers three and ten remarked that their idea of good parenting is exposing their child to new and different things and allowing their child to meet new people. These mothers felt that it was very important for their child to start to develop a sense of socialization. Mother six remarked that her idea of good parenting was just taking care of her baby's basic needs. Finally, Mother eight remarked that her idea of good parenting is trying to encourage her son's independence. This mother is very significant because she is the only mother who is single and not receiving any type of help in raising her child. Therefore her belief's about parenting is different from the other mothers specifically because of her circumstance of being a single mom. Also, mother eight remarked that she loves to spend time with her son and she thinks it is important, however, because she is a single mother, she tries to encourage him to do things on his own.

When asked if parenting should change when their child got older and how; mothers three, seven, and ten said that once their child got older they would practice more discipline with them. Somewhat similar, mothers two and eight said that as their child got older they would be more consistent and structured with them. These mothers felt that as a child reaches his/her toddler years they will try to test their limits and see what they can and cannot do. As a result, mothers two and eight said that it is very important to set rules and to be consistent with their child once they get older. Also, they felt that it was important to be structured and have their child on a schedule when it came to certain things, such as bedtime. Mothers four and five believed that their parenting would change because they would be considered more of a role model for their child. They also felt that it was very important to show the same amount of love, however, just try to be an example for their child. Mother one remarked that as her child gets older she will be learning and communicating differently. Therefore, this mother felt that it would be important for her to change her parenting in a way that seemed to fit with her child. Finally, mother six had a very interesting and honest response. She remarked that her parenting would have to

change when her child got older, but she had no idea how it should change because she had no type of experience with children and did not know what to expect.

The participants were also asked what a good parent should be doing when playing with an infant. Mother five believes in engaging in more one on one activities with her baby instead of relying on toys. Although, she would have toys for her child to play with, when she played with them him, she said she would do different things with him like peek-a-boo, sing songs, and other games that allowed for her and her son to develop a physical bond. On the other hand, Mother eight remarked that it was important for her to play with her son and spend time with him however, because she is a single mom, she does try to encourage him to play by himself. Also, there may be times when she may have to clean up or do some paperwork and cannot entertain her son. Therefore, this mother remarked, it is okay for her to put on baby Einstein videos to occupy her son until she is done doing what she is doing. This was a very interesting response because it does reiterate how one's own personal situation can dictate their parenting beliefs and even their behavior.

According to Baumrind's work none of the mothers that participated in the study would seem to be rejecting-neglecting parents. One of the mothers that participated could definitely be defined as one who would take on the authoritative parent due to her response on what she would do if her child made a mess. Mother eight was the only mother that said if her child makes a mess such as writing on the wall she would tell her child to clean it up but she would give her a reason. She would explain to her child that they want their house to look nice because they live there and they should take good care of it. This response is clearly one of an authoritative parent.

Limitations

As stated earlier, previous researchers have found parental beliefs to change according to one's culture, ethnicity, age, educational background, marital status, as well as their experience in being a parent. As a result of the previous findings on parental beliefs, this study has a few limitations. First, the sample size of this study consisted of nine Caucasian mothers living in State College, Pennsylvania and surrounding areas. Because of this, the results obtained from this study may or may not be applicable to mothers who are of a different race and who live in a different type of environment such as a city. Judith G. Smetana (1994) suggests that parenting styles and behaviors are partly influenced by one's environment. Second, all of the participants were over the age of 25 and had some type of college education. According to Fry (1985), the age of the mothers along with the amount of education that they possess may influence their knowledge in child development as well as their maturity level when it comes to parenting. All participants in this study were married and living with their partner, except for one mother. Some researchers have found that spousal support is very beneficial when it comes to parenting, because each spouse can share the role of what it takes to be a "competent parent", unlike single parent homes where the responsibility of caretaking is focused only on the mother or father of the child. Additional research of this particular study would need to be done in a more diverse population setting in order for the results to be generalized to all populations. This study was limited because it only looked at maternal beliefs. Although every mother had their own ideas and beliefs about parenting, it does not

mean that they would or would not necessarily practice something different. For example, in relation to ideas about good parenting, some mothers mentioned love and interaction while, other mothers just mentioned meeting new people. It would not be accurate to assume that the mothers who did not mention love felt that it was not important. These mothers may have just felt that showing love was automatic and there was no need to mention it. As a result of this, there would need to be additional research done that looks at the emotional aspect of parenting. In looking at the mother-child interaction, one can actually assess maternal behavior and emotional availability of the mother and the child and then see if it correlates with the mother's belief on parenting.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In the near future, the present study will expand to a total of 45 mothers, inclusive of the nine mothers that have already participated, all living in State College, Pennsylvania and the surrounding areas. The final study will include 15 mothers with a six-month old baby, 15 mothers with an 18-month old baby, and 15 mothers with a 36-month old baby. All of the participating mothers will be expected to fill out a demographic form to help researchers understand their backgrounds. The researchers will conduct a total of three visits at the mother's home. The mothers will be divided up into two different groups. For group one, the first and second visit will be 10-14 days from each other, and the third visit will be 3-5 days after visit two. For the second group, the first and second visit will be 3-5 days apart, and the third visit will be 10-14 days after visit two. During these visits, the researchers will record 25-30 minutes of the parent-child interaction during feeding and playtime. In addition to the feeding and playtime, there will also be a 25-30 minute recording of clean-up time for those mothers with an 18-month or 36-month old baby. At the end of the third visit, each of the mothers will be given a questionnaire interview that asks about their belief on parenting. The researchers will be looking at the different beliefs that mothers have on parenting and compare it to their actual interaction to assess the emotional aspect of parenting. The purpose of this expansion will be to gain an understanding of parental beliefs and how they correlate with a given behavior. It is important to assess emotional availability of the parent-child interaction in addition to assessing parental beliefs in order to identify parental competence. As stated before, some researchers believe that parental belief determines the parental behavior (McGillicuddy –De Lisi & Sigel 1995). However, it may be true that belief and behavior is actually a bidirectional entity that is, beliefs influence behavior in some instances but in other instances any given behavior will alter a particular belief.

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