POSITIVE PARENTING AND POSITIVE CHARACTERISTICS AND VALUES IN CHILDREN

Marc H. Bornstein

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development

Address correspondence to:

Dr. Marc H. Bornstein
Child and Family Research
National Institute of Child Health and Human Development
Suite 8030
6705 Rockledge Drive
Bethesda  MD  20892-7971
USA
TEL: 301-496-6832
FAX: 301-496-2766
EMAIL: Marc_H_Bornstein@nih.gov
What are the prominent features of the adolescent landscape and of schools of today? What frequently come to mind first are problems -- of aggression and bullying, prejudice and substance abuse, inferior intelligence and underachievement. Society is largely oriented to healing these ills. The helping professions attempt to understand individual functioning largely through the lens of a disease model. We are all too preoccupied with “disorders, deficits, and disabilities” in development. Unfortunately, too, as professionals dispense the language of deficit, people can come to see themselves in those terms.

Armed with the knowledge that things do no always go well in child development, policy makers, parent educators, and parents share the laudable and well-intentioned goal to develop interventions, remediations, and preventions in the service of children. And, the main mode of intervention has been to repair broken childhoods. But, treatment is not just fixing what is broken; it might be nurturing what is best. Pathologizing is not the only path to preventing or remediating disorders. A re-orientation in our thinking would turn the spotlight instead on the development and promotion of things that are positive. Developmental success might be ensured by building a foundation of individual competencies. Human strengths (I’m talking about courage, optimism, interpersonal skill, work ethic, hope, honesty, and perseverance) are not only desirable in themselves, but they can also buffer against adversity and illness, and compensate for deficiency. Competencies promote resilience: for example, optimism broadens our thought-action repertoires, and serves as a powerful antidote to negativity, which narrows our thought-action repertoires. In lieu of a prevailing focus on “disorders, deficits, and disabilities,” we might promote a science of human strengths.
whose mission is to foster positive characteristics and values in our offspring.

Such a strengths-based vision and vocabulary has been gaining momentum and is beginning to supplant other long-held beliefs, such as the “storm and stress” view of adolescence, bequeathed to us by Goethe and Hall, Freud and Erickson, and perpetuated in today’s daily newspapers. Problems beset children, of course, but youth is actually a sizeable and dynamic collection of strengths and assets. From this perspective, youth are not broken, in need of psychosocial repair, they are not problems to be managed, they are not immature adults who need to be controlled or re-educated. Rather, youth can be seen as resources to be cultivated, active and equal participants in their development.

My talk takes this “Positive Youth Development” perspective as its starting point. In the first part, I look to the literature to define positive characteristics and values in children. In second part, I address the important goal of how we can best help our children achieve those positive characteristics and values.

**POSITIVE CHARACTERISTICS AND VALUES**

In the “business plan” I propose to develop, it is critical for us to have a clear idea of the goals to which we are headed, followed by an analysis of how best to achieve those goals. What are the positive characteristics and values we like to see and promote in children, and just how can parents and family, community and environment, foster their development?

The study of positive youth development is fast emerging, but to be fair, it is still critically in need of development itself: in terms of defining positive outcomes, enhancing the research base for positive constructs, undertaking longitudinal
assessments of their evolution, and policing the psychometric adequacy of positive constructs. However, several social commentators and scientific investigators have made a start. Diener and Lucas (2004) asked more than 10,175 respondents from 48 countries what they most wanted for their children. They found the obvious: people universally most desired high levels of happiness for their offspring. More specifically, however, Bennett (1993) enumerated a set of desired outcomes for youth that included perseverance, faith, friendship, courage, responsibility, and compassion. The Search Institute likewise identified a set of key “internal assets” such as commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity. Lerner, Fisher, and Weinberg set down “5 Cs” of positive development: competence, confidence, connections, character, and caring. And Patterson and Seligman listed six overarching strengths (wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence).

In considering these positive developmental attributes, of course, we need to keep in mind that they are always “in the parental eye”: Some parents may want to see control of emotionality in their children, others career success, and for still others (I’ve noticed) eye-hand coordination in batting seems to matter quite a lot. More broadly, different ethnic groups here in the U.S., and different cultures around the world, espouse and promote different values.

Although there is diversity in specific vocabularies used to describe thriving on a more abstract level, there is also growing evidence for a consensual understanding of exemplary youth development. At the Center for Child Well-Being, in Atlanta, GA, my colleagues and I have identified three domains of positive youth development, each defined by a series of closely operationalized elements. Positive development
Positive Parenting encompasses physical, social and emotional, and cognitive domains.

In developing this system, we avoided overly abstract or idealized strengths that we would have difficulty operationalizing. Further, the elements in each domain may not be exhaustive, but they represent a core set of “essentials” that help to define that domain and positive development in children overall. Let’s look at each, before we go on to explore how these specific characteristics and values can be promoted in children. Also, see if you agree with this list.

The Physical Domain of Childhood Positive Development Includes several requisites to a healthy life.

- Good nutrition is essential to growth and optimal; healthy eating habits means avoiding excesses (obesity), as much as deficiencies (anorexia).
- Health care is critical to positive development, which we can’t deny also includes maximizing desirable physical attributes.
- Physical activity and sleep; that is, both exercise as well as adequate rest are fundamental to a healthy lifestyle.
- Children’s felt safety and security not only in the home but at school, in their neighborhood, and in the surrounding community all exercise an impact over children’s positive development.
- In adolescence, reproductive health and sexuality become significant issues. We need to promote a positive constructive approach to sexual development, safe sexual practices, and accurate reproductive knowledge. While teens everywhere are sexually active, the United States leads the industrialized world in teen pregnancy.
The Social and Emotional Domain of Childhood Positive Development encompasses multiple elements related to self and social intercourse.

- **Possessing a positive temperament**, including an approach orientation, an adaptive style, and in general having an “easy and winsome personality” is a positive trait in development.

- **Emotional intelligence**, that is emotion expression, understanding, and regulation, is essential to social and emotional positive development in childhood and adolescence.

- **Coping** implies the ability to interact with the environment positively, constructively, and adaptively (especially under conditions of stress, threat, or harm). Relatedly, **resilience** implies the ability to recover and regain equilibrium in the face of negative environments and experiences.

- **Trust** in children is a hallmark of a secure attachment, and the ability of the child to use the caregiver as a secure base from which to explore the environment.

- Near to the core of social and emotional positive development is children’s sense of **self**, including a positive self-concept, identity, and regard as well as possessing self-efficacy, being able to self-regulate, and having a sense of self-determination.

- **Character** includes values and moral behaviors (altruism, courage, honesty, duty, and responsibility) that constitute much admired human strengths and virtues.

- Good **social competencies** include understanding one’s place in the social world and navigating interpersonal dynamics well, so as to develop quality, warm, and
trusting relationships with others, notably parents, siblings, and peers.

The Cognitive Domain of Childhood Positive Development includes thinking, communicating thought, and the products of thought in everyday life.

- Cognitive science has identified two interrelated general mechanisms that are implicated in children’s mental performance across a wide range of tasks. One is *information processing* (the execution of fundamental mental processes), and the other is *working memory* (the ongoing cognitive processing of that information).
- *Curiosity* can be defined as the desire to learn more, and *exploration* as the behavior that is energized and directed by curiosity.
- *Mastery motivation* underlies the person’s drive to learn; it is a psychological force that leads individuals to master tasks for the intrinsic feeling of efficacy, rather than for extrinsic reward.
- *Thinking* involves basic processes, such as perceiving objects and events in the external environment, and high-level mental processes, such as reasoning, symbolizing, and planning. Traditional global measures of thinking are assessed by *intelligence* tests, but a more encompassing contemporary view of intelligence embraces understanding oneself and others, logic, spatial relations, even bodily-kinesthetic adeptness.
- *Problem-solving* is the sequence of steps that attempt to identify and create alternate solutions for both cognitive and social problems, including the ability to plan, resourcefully seek help from others, and think critically, creatively, and reflectively.
- *Language* and *literacy* constitute a set of particularly verbal elements of positive
cognitive development that are key to the child's entering the social community and to success through schooling.

- **Educational achievement** is commonly measured by (1) children’s readiness to learn, that is the state in which the capacities and competencies of the child match the expectations and requirements of adults and school; (2) by achievement test scores; (3) and by report card grades, which directly assess children’s mastery of specific skills.

- Cognitive ability is strongly related to several components of **morality**: moral judgment, moral emotions, and moral action.

- Finally, central elements of positive cognitive development are **creativity** and **talent**, whether intellectual, artistic, or other.

Following our “business plan,” now that we have answered, first, what goals we desire, we need, second, to define better how we should achieve those goals. There is no formula, unhappily, no “magic bullet,” to promoting positive characteristics and values in children, the way the antibacterial compound sulfanilimide once seemed to treat against a broad band of infectious diseases.

However, developmental science points to three general origins of such psychological phenomena: Children themselves, child effects, and parenting broadly conceived.

First, of course, children can contribute directly to their own positive development. Stability describes consistency in the relative ranks of individuals in a group with respect to the expression of a positive characteristic over time. A stable positive characteristic would be one that some children possess in greater degree when
they are very young and continue to possess when they are older. The notion of stability often entices developmentalists toward the belief that endogenous processes are at work, that stability is already in the child. Of course, this is not necessarily or always the case.

Second, children contribute to their development indirectly by the influence they exert on others, notably their caregivers. Over and above stability, transaction means that children influence parents and reciprocally parents influence children through time.

Perhaps these so-called “child effects” are part of the message behind Rene Magritte’s striking exchange of mother and infant.

Stability and child effects place great weight on little shoulders, and realistically, we need to ask: how much can we intervene to change stable endogenous processes and even some child effects?

I want to focus, rather, on the things we can affect and that make a difference. Beyond stability in children and child effects, environment and experience contribute to children’s positive growth, and manifestly influence human development at all levels ... from cells to cradle to culture.

What aspects of experience and environment can we manipulate in order to attain our goals for children? Here I turn to consider parents and parent programs.

PARENTS

Despite the fact that most people become parents, and all children who ever lived have had parents, parenting is a somewhat mystifying process, about which almost everyone has opinions, but about which few people appear to agree. Yet, one thing is sure: It is the principal and continuing task of parents in each generation to prepare children of the
next generation for the physical, economic, and psychosocial situations in which their children must survive and hopefully thrive. Urie Bronfenbrenner has shown us, in the contextual ecological model of human development, that many factors influence the growth of children -- culture, and social class, media and family, schools and peers -- but in this nested system of distal to proximal influences, parenthood is really the “final common pathway” to childhood oversight and caregiving, development and stature, adjustment and success. Parents are children’s primary advocates and their front-line defense. Parents are the corps available in the greatest number to lobby and labor for children. They are the ones who also have earliest and continuing access to children.

The fit is neat to the task, of course, because, not only is the sheer amount of interaction between parent and offspring greatest in childhood, but childhood appears to be a time when human beings are particularly susceptible to external influences. Indeed, the opportunity for enhanced parental influence, and prolonged learning, is thought to be the evolutionary reason for neoteny B the extended duration of human childhood.

It is a fact of biology that human children do not B and cannot B grow up as solitary individuals; infants are totally dependent on parents for survival. Childhood is the time when we first make sense of and understand objects in the world, forge our first social bonds, and first learn how to express and read basic human emotions. It is the time that individual personalities and social styles first develop. It is normally parents who escort children through all those dramatic “firsts”. In the view of many social theorists notably Freud and Bowlby, the influence of these developments then reverberate through time; the child’s first relationships with parents set the tone and
style for the child’s later social relationships.

Commenting on the American experiment, Alexis de Tocqueville observed at the turn of the 19th c that, in the absence of a social hierarchy with clearly defined roles, so true of his Great Britain, the family is the most important and effective transmitter of culture.

Thus, parenting constitutes an all-encompassing ecology of the child’s development, a metaphor beautifully rendered in Milton Avery’s (1950) “Madonna and child”. Parenting is defined in terms of its propensity to move children toward those goals that the culture deems important. Mothers and fathers (as well as siblings, other family members, and even children’s nonfamilial daycare providers (they all gather under the “big tent” of parenting) guide the development of children via many direct and indirect means.

Direct effects of parents on children are of two kinds: genetics and experience. Of course, it is biological parents who endow a significant and pervasive genetic makeup to their children ... with its beneficial, or other, consequences for the growth of children’s proclivities and abilities. In this way, parents are ultimately, if passively, responsible for some childhood stability and for some child effects.

In addition to genes, however, all prominent theories of human development put experience in the world as either the principal source of individual growth or as a major contributing component. It falls to parents (and other caregivers) to shape most, if not all, of young children’s experiences, and parents influence child development both by the cognitions they hold and by the practices they exhibit. These, then, are the logical targets of positive interventions: Parents’ cognitions and parents’ practices.
Parenting cognitions include perceptions about, attitudes toward, and knowledge of all aspects of parenting and childhood; and each plays a telling part. How parents see themselves vis-à-vis children leads them to express one or another kind of affect, thinking, or behavior in childrearing. More extraverted mothers and fathers express more positive affect toward their children and are more sensitive and cognitively stimulating at home.

How parents see childhood functions in the same way: Parents who believe that they can or cannot affect a child’s temperament, intelligence, or what have you will modify their parenting accordingly. Unfortunately, one in four parents in the U.S. thinks that a baby is born with a certain level of intelligence which cannot be increased or decreased by how those parents interact with the baby.

Finally, how parents see their own children has its special consequences: Parents who regard their child as being difficult are less likely to pay attention or respond positively to their child’s overtures. Their inattentiveness and nonresponsiveness can, in turn, foster further temperamental difficulties and cognitive shortcomings.

Perhaps more salient in the phenomenology of childhood are parents’ practices, the tangible experiences we provide children. The contents of parent-child interactions are varied of course; nonetheless, a prominent and perhaps universal “core” of central domains of the childcare repertoire meets the tasks of child development and is geared to promote the positive characteristics and values in children I listed at the start.

Nurturant caregiving meets the biological and health requirements of children, in other words, the physical domain of positive development. Parents are responsible for
Positive Parenting promotes children's wellness and preventing their illness. A recent British study found that children’s fruit and vegetable consumption is shaped not just by children’s taste preferences, but also by their mother’s nutritional knowledge, her attitudes about the health benefits of eating more produce, and by her own consumption of fruit and vegetables. Support from parents during childhood is thought to have significant and lasting health implications because the parent-child relationship serves as the context within which important health-enhancing social and psychological development takes place. “From a common-sense point of view, anything which increases children’s physical activity, makes healthy food more available, and limits children’s access (to) and marketing of unhealthy foods is likely to be a step in the right direction”. This year nearly 1.5 million Americans will learn they have cancer. And the more than 570,200 cancer deaths expected to occur in 2005 will be related to poor nutrition, physical inactivity, obesity, and other lifestyle factors. According to the American Cancer Society, more than 60 percent of all those cancer deaths could be prevented if we stopped smoking, exercised more, ate healthier food, and so forth. These are all behavioral choices learned in childhood and not reducible to DNA.

Social caregiving includes the variety of visual, verbal, affective, and physical behaviors parents use to engage children emotionally and manage their interpersonal exchanges – this is the social-emotional domain. Early parental support -- acts of caring, acceptance, and assistance – constitute important long-term influences on adult health. A nationally representative sample of 3000 adults, ages 25-74, from the National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States found that parental support during early childhood was a principal factor associated with decreased levels of
depressive symptoms and decreased levels of chronic illnesses in adulthood; furthermore, the associations between early parental support and adult health persisted into peoples 70s. During early life, parents are the primary source of the child’s developing a sense of self-worth and learning effective ways of exercising personal control.

Didactic caregiving consists of the variety of strategies parents use to stimulate children to engage and understand the environment and to enter the world of learning; that is, the cognitive domain. Activities as simple as reading books to children, for example, promote the development of language skills as well as later literacy. Didactics means introducing, mediating, and interpreting the external world to the child; teaching, describing, and demonstrating; as well as provoking or providing opportunities to observe, to imitate, and to learn. For example, a history of shared work and play activities with parents predicts children’s smooth transition into school, and afterward parents’ involvement with children’s school-related tasks is an outstanding predictor of children’s school performance. Parents providing information and guidance, direct teaching, connecting children to other people and institutions foster children’s social skills, and problem solving strategies. Even children exposed to violence benefit from such types of parental involvement as giving general advice, spending free time, and helping with homework.

Nurturing, social, and didactic behaviors constitute direct parenting experience effects. Mothers and fathers indirectly influence their children’s positive development in several ways as well:

First, by virtue of their influence on one another, for example by marital support
and communication. Women who report having supportive relationships with husbands (or grandparents or lovers) feel less harried and overwhelmed, have fewer competing demands on their time, and as a consequence can be more attentive, sensitive, and responsive to their children. By contrast, quarreling parents are likely to convey confusing messages to their children, have less time for and become less involved in their children’s lives, and engage in more hostile relationships with their children. It is easy to forget that children in the back seat of the car overhear everything parents say to one another in the front seat.

Second, parents co-construct their child’s environment; if we return momentarily to Renoir, material caregiving includes the ways in which parents provision, organize, and arrange their child’s home and local environments. Adults are responsible for the number and variety of inanimate objects (toys, books, tools) available to the child, the level of ambient stimulation, and overall safety and physical dimensions of children’s experiences. The amount of time children spend interacting with their inanimate surroundings rivals or exceeds the time children spend in direct social interaction with parents or others.

Third, parents are citizens. Through their politics, parents influence the social health or social toxicity of the environments their children inhabit. In turn, the contexts and environments parents make contribute in critical ways to augment or depreciate children’s positive characteristics and values. Children need adult mentors in their homes, schools, and communities who live what they preach. As the writer James Baldwin observed, children do not always do what we say, but they almost always do what we do. If we don’t vote, they will not fulfill their civic responsibilities as adults. If we
are violent and tolerate the glorification of violence, we should expect they will also. And if we plunk down in front of the tube every night and snack mindlessly ... well, you get the idea. Ultimately, citizens shape the quality of daycare, the adequacy of schools, and the availability of opportunities in their community.

All these efforts begin and end around the dinner table and with grassroots institutions that labor in the good cause of children.

**NATURE AND NURTURE**

With the idea of effective positive interventions in mind, it is important to recognize that adult influence on children is not straightforward, but operates on several additional complicating principles.

Sorrowfully, it is not the case that overall level of stimulation directly affects children’s overall level of functioning and compensates for selective deficiencies: Simply providing an adequate financial base, a big house, or the like does not guarantee or even speak to, a child’s development of healthy eating habits, an empathic personality, verbal competence, or other positive characteristics I’ve mentioned.

The specificity principle asserts that “specific experiences specific parents provide specific children at specific times exert specific effects in specific ways over specific aspects of child growth.” This principle is apparently counterintuitive, because (by one recent national survey) a majority of new parents in the U.S. simplistically think that the more stimulation a baby receives, the better off the baby is. In fact, parents and caregivers need to carefully match the amount and kinds of stimulation they offer to their child’s level of development, special interests, temperament, mood at the moment, and so forth. It is not, simplistically, that more or positive is best, but the fit must be
right: between temperament and environment, for example; inhibited children do less well by some social criteria, but they may also get into fewer dangerous scrapes.

Second, the transaction principle asserts that experiences shape the characteristics and values of the child through time, but by the other side of the same coin, the characteristics and values of children shape their experiences. The transactional effects model postulates reciprocal and recurrent interactions over time between the organism and the environment. Children often influence which experiences they will be exposed to; children always interpret their experiences, and therefore ultimately how those experiences affect them. Child and parent bring distinctive characteristics and values to their mutual interactions, and child and parent alike change as a result of those interactions.

The intersection of the transaction principle and the specificity principle is a degree of uncertainty in how we can intervene, and what we can predict, about positive characteristics and values in children. There are many pathways to success: Some populations we expect to fail miserably, just as those we think should have it made, almost always show a surprising amount of diversity of outcome. Think of teen parents or children born to crack-cocaine mothers who make it, or high-SES kids who suffer from “affluenza” – the sickening sole-minded pursuit of material goods. Recent studies show that upper-class suburban children manifest elevated levels of substance use, anxiety, and depression -- and two sets of factors seem to be implicated: (1) excessive pressures to achieve and (2) isolation from parents -- both literal and emotional. Children with very high perfectionist strivings -- those who see achievement failures as personal failures -- suffer high depression, anxiety, and substance use, as do children
who indicate that their parents overemphasize their accomplishments and value them disproportionately more than their personal character. As I said earlier, family wealth does not automatically confer either wisdom in parenting or equanimity of spirit. Children who are advantaged by virtue of their parent’s wealth are undoubtedly privileged in many respects; however, they, too, clearly suffer nontrivial threats to their psychological well-being. A common assumption is that parents are more accessible to high- than to low-income youth, but the data show otherwise: Inner-city and suburban children’s perceptions of multiple aspects of parenting, like felt closeness, are quite similar. In order to detect regular relations between experience and environment as parenting antecedents, and positive characteristics and values as outcomes we need to seek and to find the right combinations of independent and dependent variables.

Moreover, we need to support parents. About 1 month after giving birth, almost 80% (79%) of mothers are proud of their new status; and 72% have no disappointments about motherhood. So, we start off pretty high. However, to parent effectively means not only being attitudinally predisposed to being a parent, it means knowing how children develop, and understanding and effecting appropriate parenting practices. Spock assured the post-war generation of new parents “You know more than you think you do.” Well, maybe, or maybe not. Many parents today need help. How can we best support positive parenting?

First of all, data from two recent national surveys show that nearly half of parents report feeling they have too little time with their children. Longer work hours mean fewer family hours. We apparently suffer a chronic undersupply of family time. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, that’s 2 hours per day for moms with young
children, and about 1 hour for dads. Time with children is a precious commodity to parents, who rate talking with, caring for, taking trips, and playing games with their children as their four most enjoyable activities -- higher than paid work, talking with friends, and many leisure past times.

Beyond time, over which we may have little control, there are abundant avenues for interventions aimed at promoting positive parenting and children’s well-being. The goals of most parent-based strategies are to enhance either parenting skills or economic resources in hopes that parents will be better able to nurture, teach, or in other ways provide for their children, and in so doing enhance their children’s well-being. There are generally two types of parenting programs—parenting education and parenting management training. Many parenting education programs seek to boost parents’ general knowledge about parenting and child development. They consist of a range of activities, including the provision of information, prevention strategies, empowerment initiatives, and training. Some programs directly work to promote child development (such as efforts in early reading); others focus on activities that influence child development indirectly through improving parents’ lives (such as providing emotional support that might alleviate parental depression). Perhaps the most familiar examples are home visitation programs (for new mothers) and parent-teacher programs.

Management training programs are designed for parents of children with problem behaviors. Parent support and education has established itself as an important branch of human services. Some programs are universal; others target groups defined as being in special need. In the final analysis, parent intervention decisions are best made
according to local circumstances, specific needs, and the opportunities available. However, it may be that the ideal situation is to have both targeted and universal approaches running side by side.

Moreover, what seems to work best in the face of the complexity of parenting is a “process” focus in parent education that attempts to work with the complexity of parenting, focusing on the interaction of a particular program model or approach, a particular program staff member, or a particular family, all in a particular community context. It assumes that families will respond to a program and its staff in specific ways based on their specific characteristics, motives, and needs.

Parent support is very hard work, and children cannot wait long for their parents’ life situations to change. They need the things they need -- love, protection, consistent attention, and regular structure -- when they need them.

In this respect, the successes of parenting intervention programs are noteworthy. Most famously, the experimental evaluation of an intensive 15-year follow-up study of nurse home visitation conducted by Olds and his colleagues (1999) in Elmira, New York (and now elsewhere) found lasting effects on important indicators of children's well-being: unmarried mothers assigned to the program group had fewer verified reports of child abuse and neglect than mothers assigned to the control group. Treatment group children had fewer emergency health-related visits, fewer reported arrests, and fewer lifetime sex partners, and they reported less tobacco and alcohol use than did children in the control group. (Would that these investigators had assessed positive outcomes as well!) Parenting education and training programs make demands on the time and effort of parents. However, a review of 24 parent-focused home interventions (for low-SES
children) showed, remarkably, that 19 produced favorable effects on parenting, including more sensitive parenting and a higher-quality home environment.

To fathom the nature of effective interventions and parent-child relationships requires of us a multivariate and dynamic stance. It is only by taking multiple factors into consideration that we can appreciate individual, dyadic, and family level contributions to child development and accurately reflect the embeddedness of the family within its many relevant extrafamilial systems. The dynamic aspect involves the different developmental trajectories of individuals in the family. As all parents know, childrearing is akin to trying to “hit a moving target”, the ever-changing child developing in fits and starts at his or her own pace. In order to exert appropriate influence and guidance, parents must constantly and effectively adjust their interactions, cognitions, emotions, affections, and strategies to the age-graded activities, abilities, and experiences of their children. Parenting is challenging: Sigmund Freud listed bringing up children as one of the three “impossible professions” (the other two being governing nations and psychoanalysis). From the start, parenthood is a 168-hour-a-week job.

The multiple pathways and dynamic systems of parenting and child development also make for really a quite messy situation. They say the “perfect parent” is one with plenty of theories, and no actual children. Practitioners and researchers, for their part, have to develop paradigms and methodologies to accommodate the chaos; this perspective makes the development and implementation of intervention programs and policy “nightmarish”. Some will fail. Yet, it is only by addressing this complexity and chaos, process research, that we can hope to understand more that is valid about families and parenting, children and development.
The good news is there is ample evidence that we can improve all of the positive characteristics and values I listed at the start. Contemporary research in life-span developmental science bioecological development, and life-course sociology demonstrates that we can optimize individual and group change by altering bidirectional relations between individuals and their ecologies to capitalize on developmental plasticity. Contemporary models of human development eschew the reduction of individual and social behavior to fixed genetic influences, and instead stress plasticity of human beings and the adaptability of human development. They argue that the potential for systematic change in behavior exists as a consequence of mutually influential relationships between the developing person and his or her biology, psychological characteristics, family, community, culture, physical and designed ecology, and historical niche.

To be concrete, intelligence is inherited in part, but to be inherited does not mean to be immutable or nonchangeable. Longitudinal studies of intelligence show that individuals definitely change over time. It is fallacious and downright wrong to promulgate the view that intelligence is fixed. Even heritable traits depend on learning for their expression, and they are subject to environmental effects.

Yes, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is partly biologically determined. But if parents say I’m going to make certain that my child receives skills training, I’m going to be sure he has the appropriate medications, and I’m going to get him tutors, then they will change the trajectory of their child’s life. Parents like that make the difference between ADHD children who drop out of school and ones who go to university.

If we are fatalists, we accept the environment we live in and live up to Holden
Caulfield’s dictum that all adults are “phonies.” If we are not, we take the personal, social, and political steps to construct environments with appropriate stimulation for our children, to organize our children’s daycare, to promote their associations with positive peers, to make sure our community affords good schooling, and to enroll our children in growth promoting extracurricular activities (church or temple, boy or girls scouts, little league or soccer).

Let’s get down into the trenches and talk about homework. Parenting is an inherently affective endeavor, and homework is affective (that is: emotion-laden) as well. It’s undeniable: Many children experience heightened negative affect when doing homework. Mothers too report increased negative affect on days their children have homework. But they do not report decreased positive affect – positive and negative affect are independent.

Homework needs to get done. And, when parents bridge the gap between home and school, children experience benefits in their psychological functioning as well as achievement. Mothers’ assistance with homework benefits children’s grades, just as parents’ participation in school events, such as parent-teacher conferences and school open houses, foreshadows children’s academic attainment.

But parents’ negative affect while assisting children with homework is detrimental for two dimensions of children’s functioning. First, it undermines children’s motivation. When parents become irritated and frustrated while providing assistance, they convey to children that schoolwork, and the challenges that accompany schoolwork, are distressing. Children come to view learning as a threatening process they need to avoid. Consequently, parents’ negative affect may undercut children’s desire to master
their schoolwork, and it undermines their intrinsic interest in school. Second, when parents express negative affect, they also convey that children are unworthy.

Let’s instead put a positive spin on homework. Parents’ involvement in children’s homework can afford a structured context in which to spend time with their children, gain knowledge about a significant area of children’s lives, and work together with children to overcome obstacles. Mothers who frequently assist children with homework report that it is a gratifying process that strengthens the bond between them and their children. Parents’ who express positive affect also convey to children that -- although schoolwork can be frustrating -- it is also a positive endeavor that is not threatening. Positive affect further signals to children parents’ support during times of difficulty.

Of course, parents’ assistance with homework may vary as a function of children’s gender, parents’ education, ethnicity, household income, and so forth. However, so long as parents stay positive on days they provide homework assistance, their irritation and frustration is not problematic for children. The take home message: When you get involved in your children’s homework, a key goal is to keep the interaction fun, loving, and positive, despite any irritation and annoyance you experience.

**SCIENCE, POLICY, AND VALUES**

Social science can be a positive force for understanding and promoting the highest qualities of personal and civic life. A new science of strength and resilience is geared to making normal people stronger and more productive as well as actualizing latent human potential.

Policy needs to focus on interventions that attempt to cure sick individuals, of
course; but policy also needs to provide for experiences that are valuable in their own right because they improve current conditions and optimize strengths. In short, “Models of care” are just as important as “models of cure.”

Are these views new? Are they parochial? I think not. We all readily recognize the Tipi of the North American Plains Indians. However, it’s the meaning of its architectural symbolism is less well known. The Indians’ conical-shaped dwelling embodies a system of positive developmental science. Each of the 14 poles of the traditional Tipi represents a positive characteristic or value: In other words, Indian parents of that era enveloped their children with positive messages. The Tipi structure was ever present symbol in their lives. Similarly, parents in Korea are intent to promote 12 virtues of “filial piety” (효) or “Hyo” in their children. The history of this concept goes back more than 1,500 years. "Hyo" reflects bidirectional, interpersonal responsibility between parents and children, and traditionally in Korea, “Hyo” has been the basis of children’s education. It is “the foundation of all virtues and all lessons come from it.” These are the 12 Virtues of Children’s Filial Piety. In short, historically and across cultures, people have felt the need to identify and promote positive characteristics and values in children. Rearing a child with positive characteristics and values is a challenging human activity, and it will be as complex, demanding, and fulfilling tomorrow as it is today. This mystical process cannot be reduced to a single essential ingredient, but we know of at least one crucial factor that determines whether a child succeeds or fails in life: It is the presence of caring adults.

I want to conclude on a positive note. The fact is that parenthood is (nearly) a
voluntary status. More than that, becoming a parent is a time of joy, and presents a developmental opportunity for significant personal growth. Several international surveys show that interactions with one’s children top the list of enjoyable activities among parents. One recent study reported that feelings of competence as a parent constitute a highly common aspect of the “self” desired by adults.

CONCLUSIONS

As your children go off on their own, conjure in your mind what you most want for them. Parenthood ultimately means facilitating a child’s happiness and optimism, self-confidence and purpose, capacity for intimacy and friendships with peers, adaptive choices and achievement motivation, pleasure in play and work and continuing academic success and fulfillment – all positive characteristics and values. Optimists tend to do better in school than pessimists; optimists also perform well at work and in sports. Their physical and mental health tends to be better, and they may even live longer than pessimists. Optimists tend to cope with adverse situations in more adaptive ways. Adolescents who are optimistic tend to be less angry and abuse substances less often. It is only through complex, responsive, and sophisticated parenting and interventions that parent and family, community and environment can be brought to bear on the route and terminus of a child’s acquisition of positive characteristics and values, like optimism. That they challenge us does not mean we should shrink from them. Effects have causes.

The positive social science of the 21st century I have described will have, as a salutatory indirect effect, the prevention of illnesses, for there are human strengths that most likely buffer against, and compensate for, “disorder, deficit, and disability”: 
optimism, courage, interpersonal skill, hope, responsibility, future-mindedness, honesty, and perseverance, to name several. But this positive social science will have as its direct effect promoting the practice of civic virtue and pursuit of those positive characteristics and values we most desire to see in the next generation.