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**PARENTAL INFLUENCE: NEW SUBTLETIES FOUND**

By DANIEL GOLEMAN \*Subtleties – not readily apparent

PSYCHOLOGISTS are discovering new subtleties in the ways parents influence their children's intellectual and moral development as researchers increasingly shift their attention beyond emotional growth.

The research is pointing, for example, to the corrosive role of constant parental irritability, even the familiar sort that causes a parent to snap at a child, in children's learning and intellectual growth. Other findings suggest that a parent's competence in solving the dilemmas of daily life helps shape a child's problem-solving abilities. Still other research indicates that heavy stress on obedience tends to discourage curiosity and that some discipline methods can discourage compassion.

''Parents very often just do not realize what they are actually communicating to their children,'' said Gerald Patterson, a psychologist who is directing a study of more than 500 families at the Oregon Social Learning Center in Eugene, Ore. ''Most of us simply can't track very well what the real message is that kids get from us, let alone what our net influence on a child is.'' **STOP/Chart.**

Irritability becomes destructive in families where it is the dominant tone rather than when it occurs, say, for a few minutes at the end of a wearying work day. ''Most people do not feel that there is any real harm done to children by a parent who is given to irritability,'' said Dr. Patterson. ''But we find there can be a huge effect, not just on the emotional well-being of the child, but on his ability to reason.''

In a study comparing the families of children who caused trouble at school by fighting, temper tantrums, stealing, vandalism and the like with families of children who did not have such problems, Dr. Patterson's research found that the parents of disruptive children were three times more likely to display irritability to their children than were the parents of the other children. He said he has found that when parents learn to use more constructive approaches, their children misbehave less.

There is nothing unusual about scowls, frowns and sarcasm, Dr. Patterson said, ''but there is a very strong relationship between the amount of such irritability and a child's aggressiveness at school.'' **Stop/Chart.**

In the Oregon study, each family is observed at home by a researcher, who uses a portable computer to record close to 2,500 pieces of information hourly about the family. The analysis of what parents do and how their children respond shows that there are many crucial interactions in which the outcome is precisely opposite of that intended by the parent.

In one of the more frequently observed patterns, the researchers found that in the act of disciplining their children, the parents actually taught them to be disobedient.

''If you ask a child to pick up toys and he starts whining and says he's too tired, you've got to follow through until he does what you tell him,'' said Dr. Patterson. ''If there's no follow-through by the parent, you teach the child that next time he doesn't want to do something all he has to do is whine. And he's taught you to back off or he'll escalate the confrontation. He learns to be coercive, and you learn to be ineffective.''

The parents who are especially irritable with their children, the Oregon researchers have found, are typically poor at resolving such conflicts, and seem to pass on these inabilities to their children. **STOP/Chart.**

Earlier research has amply documented the impact of the emotional exchange between parent and child on the child's emotional well-being. But now, said Irving Sigel, a psychologist at the Educational Testing Service in Princeton, ''we're seeing that it's not just being a warm and supportive parent that helps a child bloom, but also the ways of thinking that are transmitted to the child.''

Elaine Blechman, a clinical psycologist at Albert Einstein Medical College in the Bronx, said, ''Children learn basic problem-solving skills in the family.''

In the Journal of Abnormal Psychology and in Child Development, Dr. Blechman reported a relationship between how well children do in their social and academic life, and how effectively their families work together to resolve conflicts. In some families, the research showed, a dispute is handled by all members' speaking out, exploring the problem jointly, and, finally, finding a solution that everyone more or less likes.

But in other families, one person -generally a parent - would immediately impose his idea on everyone else, often within the first 10 seconds of discussion, leaving everyone else dissatisfied.

The children of the families with open discussion were far more likely than the children from the other families to be well-adjusted socially and to do well at school.

''The effective family gives a child numerous chances to learn to be a good problem solver,'' said Dr. Blechman. ''It's like being in the best school every minute of the day.'' **STOP/Chart.**

The research also contradicts the old-fashioned notion, regaining popularity in some circles, that children should be taught to be unquestioningly obedient with teachers and other adults, particularly the parents themselves. That sort of passivity, the studies show, squelches curiosity, stunting a child's ability to think.

Parents who subscribe to traditional beliefs, including the ideas that that it is of paramount importance to teach children to obey whomever is in authority and that children learn best when they just listen to what they are told, seem to impair their children's cognitive growth, according to research done at the University of North Carolina.

In a study of more than 100 children and their parents, Earl Schaefer and Marianna Edgerton found that those parents who subscribed to such beliefs had children who were distractable and uncreative, had little intellectual curiosity and did poorly on tests of basic intellectual skills, compared with children of parents who were more modern in their outlook, believing, for example, that children had a right to ask questions and express their own views.

Moral development is one of the realms where parents are frequently oblivious to what their children are actually learning from them, the research is showing.

''If a child hurts a playmate, the way that child's parent intervenes at that moment is a crucial moral lesson,'' said Martin Hoffman, a psychologist at New York University and an expert on moral development. **STOP/Chart.**

His research, and that of others, has identified three major approaches to discipline - reasoning, assertion of power and withdrawal of love - each leaving a distinctive imprint on the moral outlook of children. Most parents use a mix of all three, but the effects are best when reasoning is dominant, the experts say.

When the parent points out to a child the consequences for others of what the child has done, particularly when the child has injured someone else, the child seems to learn such positive moral lessons as empathy and compassion.

In experiments, children raised in this way were more likely than others to help or comfort other distressed children. And when such children do hurt others, they tend, in Dr. Hoffman's words, to ''feel an appropriate non-neurotic guilt.''

With preschool children, this approach may simply mean making them notice that their actions have made another child cry or suffer hurt feelings. For older children it means a more sophisticated discussion that would, for example, help them see how their actions might have led to an escalating misunderstanding.

Because it is sometimes difficult to get a child to pay attention so that the lesson registers, Dr. Hoffman says, this method is most effective when used in tandem with parental assertion of power. Thus, a parent may have to hold a toddler firmly and calm him before they can talk about the consequences of the child's actions. **STOP/Chart.**

Power alone, without reasoning, can be harmful, the research shows. Using or threatening raw physical force, depriving a child of a possession or privilege, or simply giving him a direct order may solve the immediate discipline problem, but may also impart an unintended moral lesson. The children of parents who rely on force or threats, research shows, tend not to console or help another distressed child or even to notice they have caused distress. And they are ''much more likely than others to start fights or otherwise engage in unprovoked aggression,'' said Dr. Hoffman.

Withdrawing love, the other approach to discipline, can have equally negative, though less apparent, effects. Children raised this way, researchers say, show few signs of caring. But, unlike those disciplined through power, these children are also likely to be somewhat passive and withdrawn, according to Dr. Hoffman.

Parents may not realize that withdrawal of love is the message they are sending. ''Some parents are quite crude about withdrawing love,'' said Dr. Hoffman. ''They will tell their children things like, 'I won't talk to you until you apologize,' or, 'I don't like you when you do that.' The notion that your parent does not love you is terrifying to a child. It can leave him so anxious and inhibited that he is afraid to do most anything.''

The feeling of being loved is one of the most basic influences on a child's moral development.

''If the parent is generally kind and caring, the child takes that as a model of how to treat people,'' said Ervin Staub, a psychologist at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

Such a sense of being well-loved, he says, makes children more open to influences from other sources like friends, teachers, and television programs,that fit their positive moral orientation. **STOP/Chart.**

*Source: http://www.nytimes.com/1986/07/29/science/parental-influence-new-subtleties-found.html*