1

Understanding the Lives of Parents

Why Do They Do Those Things They Do?

Scenario: "If the Parents Would Just . . ."

The teacher workroom was buzzing with early-morning preparation for the day's classes. Janice, an eighth grade science teacher, shared her frustration about her class with a colleague. "I have worked so hard this year to increase the hands-on lab experiments with my students. To have it work, though, they need to have done the reading. Every day, the same kids come in without their homework done. I have called home and sent messages, but nothing seems to happen. If the parents would just . . ."

"If the parents would just . . . , then there would be no problem." I have often heard this phrase when listening to teachers—even good ones—complain about a child or teenager doing something wrong or not doing something right. Lots of people say it. I have said it too. But I don't say it anymore. I have learned that taking the fast track to blaming

parents rarely captures the whole truth of a situation and almost never is helpful. If teachers and others who care about children—and that means most of us—are truly interested in providing the best kind of world for young people, then they—we—need to appreciate the complexity of parenthood and the demands made of those who parent.

Adults who work with children and families can improve interactions, collaboration, and necessary interventions, if they first understand and respect the nature, dynamics, and complexities of parenting. The purpose of this chapter is to help build that understanding. In this chapter, we examine what parenting entails and what "good parenting" *may* look like. We explore the messages that parents receive and some of the demands that they must meet. All of this information adds to the teacher's knowledge base for success in building relationships.

DEMANDS AND DECISIONS

Parenthood is hard. In my work with teachers, my first and foremost goal is to help them see and understand the difficulties of parenting—even for relatively happy, healthy, and "normal" parents. Parenting involves responding to a constant stream of demands and making decision after decision. Parents may not even be aware of the constancy of the decision-making process. But they most certainly feel the demands. Take, for example, the times when children "loosen their belts." That is what I call what happens when parents pick up their children at day care or greet them as they come home from school. Most children—even teenagers—save up their concerns for the people with whom they feel safest and the place where they feel they can "let it out." Galinsky (2001) calls it the "arsenic hour," and the demands made of parents are high. Parents must decide how to accept their children's right to be comfortable and safe at home, and at the same time maintain and model self-respect and a healthy environment. Cassidy (1998) reminds parents that they can't let their children walk

all over them just because they feel safe. There are always competing needs and goals, demands and decisions.

If we were to list the dimensions and demands of parenting, how long would the list be? What would we include? Parents certainly need to feed, clothe, and shelter their children. What is the best way? They need to encourage both independence and kindness toward others. How do they do so? They need to praise and give constructive criticism. When and where? The goal of parents, even in different times and different places, is to protect and prepare their children (Fuller & Olsen, 2003). How they go about meeting that important goal differs from parent to parent, and some attempts are more successful than others.

Most parents worry, for example, about how best to discipline their children. They consider rules, consequences, beliefs about physical punishment, verbal responses, work expectations, behavior in public, behavior at home, and scores of other things. Any parenting element would also have subcategories. What does this mean for parents? Mostly it means that, whether or not they think about it all the time (and they can't), they are managing and functioning within a complex context.

In addition to the type of decisions, we have to understand the *number* of decisions that parents must make. Every day there are hundreds. Some are little. Anna didn't put away her crayons. Some are big. Tonya said she was going to Marie's house, but she went to the movies with Isaiah instead. And some are frighteningly huge. Maria is talking about suicide. Yes, parents make hundreds of decisions every day. Most of them are based on their children's well being, and some are geared to the safeguarding of the children's very souls.

WHAT EXPERTS HAVE TO SAY

Parents have a seemingly unlimited supply of advice, suggestions, tips, and how-to information available from a variety of sources. Different parents will at different times solicit information from experts, and they also will receive unsolicited

information from sources and agencies. In this section, we examine samples of this information to see the picture of good parenting they paint. Finally, we explore a theoretical look at parenting styles. In each case, we usually see that parenting well is easier said than done.

Quick Tips on Important Issues

Brochures, pamphlets, and flyers provide critical and concise information about how parents can work with their children through normal stages or special problems. Available from schools, churches, community organizations, and both state and national agencies, the brochures are often mailed to the homes or displayed on tables at various school functions. They often include reasonable advice.

One sample pamphlet is *Another Ten Tips for Parents to Help Their Children Avoid Teen Pregnancy* (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 1998). The organization encourages parents to be clear in their own attitudes and to talk with their children about sex. Parents should supervise their children's behavior, including what they watch, read, and listen to. They should know about their children's friends and families. When guiding their children through adolescence, parents should discourage early steady dating and dating someone much older or younger. Parents should share their valuing of education and help their children see future opportunities. These clear statements are unarguably good ideas. They are important and project an image of parents who know what they believe, know how to communicate articulately and sensitively with their children, and apparently exercise a reasonable amount of control and influence over their children.

In the tenth tip, the authors recognize the "largeness" of the task. They say,

These first nine tips for helping your children avoid teen pregnancy work best when they occur as part of strong, close relationships with your children that are built from an early age. Strive for a relationship that is warm in tone,

firm in discipline, and rich in communication, and one
that emphasizes mutual trust and respect. There is no single
way to create such relationships, but the following habits
of the heart can help. (p. 4)

The helpful habits include expressing love and affection,
paying attention, and listening carefully. Parents should spend
time with their children and should be supportive and inter-
ested in what interests them. And parents should be courteous
and respectful toward their children.

Other brochures follow similar patterns of presentation. They
are easy to read, typically contain accurate information, and are
readily available. They also suffer from a high concept load in that
the many quick suggestions included usually entail a great deal
more knowledge and skill than provided in the materials.

Popular Literature

Many parents actively seek the advice of experts. Visiting
the parenting section of any bookstore or entering *parents* as a
search term for online shopping will yield hundreds of selec-
tions for interested readers. Some good ones by physicians
or child development experts focus on the specific needs of
children at different stages and seem to provide good answers
for questions that some parents have. A generation ago, many
parents were reading Dr. Spock. Currently, the work of Brazelton
(Brazelton & Sparrow, 2003) and Leach (Shore, Leach, Sears,
Sears, & Weininger, 2002) are especially popular.

Other books focus less on the children and more on par-
enting behaviors. Author Donna Corwin (1997), for example,
offers five categories of parenting. *The fixer*, *the controller*, and
the avoider are styles that are self-explanatory. Style four is *the
modernist* who focuses on psychology and therapy. The fifth
style is *the old guard*, who is a throwback to previous genera-
tions and may not understand the experiences and expecta-
tions of modern children. Corwin states that the styles aren't
meant to label, but rather to help understand "parenting traps."
The traps she defines are the habits, behaviors, and attitudes

that can interfere with effective parenting. Examples include parental attitudes towards sports, beauty, and academics. For each trap, she offers do's and don'ts, which—though not wrong or bad—are simplistic and certainly belie the difficulty of parental success in all areas. They are, of course, easier said than done. Corwin, like others, believes that problems can be rooted in parents' own upbringing and goes on to suggest confronting one's own parents in order to repair and reattach.

That is only *one* book. Others offer advice for helping children as they begin elementary school. Still others guide and comfort parents as they send their children off to college. The experts instruct parents on how to raise successful daughters and caring sons. Parents can read about steps or programs or coping skills to lead them through an array of ordinary and extraordinary parenting situations. I tend to support the ideas of much of the literature—as long as the ideas are considered tools in the parenting toolbox. I am reluctant to say, "This is it. Here's the one. This is what will work for me, for my family, and forever!"

A Theoretical Look at Parenting Styles

Parents strive to protect and prepare their children for life in the world. Of course, how that goal is approached and achieved varies greatly. Diana Baumrind (as cited in Darling, 1999) established categories of parenting that many child development experts analyze and report (see also Harris, 1998; Moore, 1992; Robertson, 1997). She developed the categories by looking at parents' child-rearing behaviors and interactions on two dimensions: nurturance and control. Highly nurturing parents tended to be very child centered and responsive to the special needs of their children, whereas low-nurturance parents tended to focus more on their own expectations for their children's behavior. Parents who were very controlling tended to be quite demanding and quick to confront their children if disobedient, and parents less concerned with control were, as one would expect, less likely to make demands, establish rules, or use confrontational approaches to problems.

Baumrind described three main parenting styles: authoritative, permissive, and authoritarian. According to Harris (1998), these three styles can be characterized as "too hard, too soft, and just right" (p. 47). The "too hard" authoritarian parents are strict. They provide structured environments, enforce clear and rigid rules, and are less responsive to the changing demands of their children. Always directive in dealing with their children, they may also (but not necessarily) be intrusive and autocratic. The children of these parents tend to perform moderately well in school. Though they reportedly exhibit few problem behaviors, they have also shown poorer social skills.

Permissive parents are "too soft" in that they are child centered but undemanding. They can be unclear and inconsistent in establishing structure or expectations. The children of permissive parents tend not to fare as well academically and behaviorally in school. Interestingly, they show better social skills and lower levels of depression.

Authoritative parents are those some consider to be "just right." They can be distinctly supportive while expecting their children to behave. In their attention to the children, they provide clear and careful explanations so that the children can understand expectations. The children of authoritative parents tend to exhibit high levels of academic achievement and social competence and have fewer behavioral problems (Darling, 1999).

Categorizing parents on the two dimensions of nurturance and control, as shown in Table 1.1, actually creates four parenting styles. A fourth style, in which the parents exhibit both low nurturance and low control, is called *uninvolved* (Maccoby & Martin, as cited in Darling, 1999). Uninvolved parenting, with few demands and little responsiveness, results in detachment and lack of commitment to the children. The children of these parents demonstrate the lowest levels of performance in all areas.

The parenting style research, then, suggests that the best parenting involves setting reasonable limits in a child-centered and nurturing environment. When carried out, this style results in increased levels of confidence and achievement for children.

Table 1.1   Styles of Parenting

	Moderate to High Control	*Low Control*
High Nurturance	Authoritative (Moderate Control) • Respond with affection and consideration to child's needs • Provide support and encouragement • Set, explain, and provide rationale for behavioral standards • Avoid extremes	Permissive • May be nontraditional • Allow child self-regulation • Avoid conflict • May be very conscientious and engaged • Are lax in rules and monitoring of behavior
Low Nurturance	Authoritarian (High Control) • Set absolute standards • Stress obedience • Tend to model more aggressive responses to conflict or problems • Make high demands based on child's maturity	Uninvolved • Show little interest or attachment • Provide little or no direction • May be neglectful

So, What's the Problem?

Despite its ubiquitous nature and well-intended purposes, information about parenting suffers from at least three problems. As they think about what parents know and do, teachers need to consider carefully the quality of the information parents receive, how it is delivered, and finally the difficulty parents may have in applying it.

The *quality* of much of the information available to parents and about parents is good. But it is not *all* good, and even the good material has flaws. That is to be expected, because parenting is complicated by multiple and conflicting purposes, contexts, expectations, and demands. Some of the best, most thoughtful information fails to provide a level of specificity

that some people may need or want. Like the best suggestions in the teen pregnancy information (e.g., creating communication-rich environments), many of the practices parents are encouraged to follow are more difficult than they sound. On the flipside, we find suggestions that may be easy to do (e.g., asking about homework each day), but the influence of which depends on the underlying characteristics of the parent-child relationship already established through more complex actions and practices.

We also have evidence that there may be cultural bias present in the analysis of parenting styles. Harris (1998) suggests that the "just right" or authoritative style of parenting, with its use of reasoning to establish a balance between love and limits, is "exactly what end-of-the-twentieth-century middle-class Americans of European descent think that parents *ought* to be" (p. 47). Others have also described differences in how parenting styles correlate with key variables among subpopulations (Darling, 1999). The authoritative style and its correlation to academic performance are largely associated with European Americans. The control factor appears to be more influential for boys than for girls.

There is also the problem of *delivery.* Parents do not have equal access to helpful information. Even when information provided is of high quality, some parents may have limited experience, education, and skills that affect their openness and understanding of material. They may not seek information on their own and may not know to pick up pamphlets in the cafeteria. Mass mailings of materials about specific issues or problems may not reach the parents who could benefit and may irritate those who do not need it. Most teachers know that good feedback is positive, specific, and immediate. It is hard to deliver supportive and useful information that can meet those criteria. Then there is the problem of unsolicited advice. I opened a fortune cookie once that read, "Unsolicited advice is seldom welcomed." Though I must plead guilty to continuing to give unsolicited advice, I recognize the truth in that statement. I remember a loving, nurturing, limit-setting parent of two successful children who once said, "I just wish

the schools would leave me alone for awhile." Too much advice—not needed and not welcomed.

Finally, individual parents must *apply* information in their own unique contexts. Even with full comprehension and access to the best information available, parents have their hands full in working with their own beloved and *individual* children. Much of the advice is—as expected—easier said than done. And then there are the experts who caution parents to avoid the other experts! Cassidy (1998) reminds parents that no expert knows a child better than the parents do and that parents need to trust their instincts. Jeffers (1999) encourages a balanced approach to parenting and says that good parents "do not live their lives following the advice of childcare books" (p. 149). Instead, they recognize that parenting is tricky business and work hard to muddle through it with their children.

> "I used to believe my father about everything but then I had children myself and now I see how much stuff you make up just to keep yourself from going crazy."
>
> —*Brian Andreas (1993, p. 22)*

Experts offer advice; but it may be confusing, conflicting, too complicated, or too simple. Most parents turn to people they know for advice. They often look to other parents, including their own, for information about what to do with their children. Sometimes, parents may ask their children's teachers for information or encouragement. When *asked,* I found the following information helpful to share with parents as I empathized with their struggles.

WHAT'S A PARENT TO DO?

I think parents need to do three things: Avoid the extremes, focus on target goals for parenting, and keep trying. Though I know that this advice falls in the "easier said than done" category, I firmly believe in its logic, respectfulness, practicality, honesty, and potential for success. Let's look first at how

trying hard and avoiding extremes can help parents stay on target.

Avoid Extremes

This is good advice for a number of reasons. First, it is an important component for healthy actions and relationships. Therapists Friel and Friel (1999) tell us that extreme behaviors and reactions are dysfunctional, and thus the "opposite of dysfunctional is dysfunctional" (p. 11). Consider, for example, a family whose members almost never spend time together versus families who spend almost all their time together, excluding nearly every outside relationship and interest. That's a big example.

Parents need also to avoid extremes in the little challenges. Think about how a parent might react to his eight-year-old's rude and disrespectful response to a request. What would be "off the line" at opposite ends of possible parental behaviors? I think one end would be an immediate, excessively angry physically or verbally abusive comment. On the other end would be a total lack of awareness of the child's need for discipline, which might take the form of agreeing with the child, encouraging the behavior, or believing that the parent deserved the rude response. In the center, we might find a variety of behaviors. One response might be to allow the child to finish before calmly and patiently explaining the rules of the house, the importance of respectful behavior, and the fact that disrespect to anyone will not be tolerated. Another middle-of-the-road approach might be showing hurt and anger, firmly invoking the consequences that have been established—perhaps the child will be sent to his room. Other responses are possible.

Think now of the variables that will apply to this one situation. Where are they at the time? What time is it? How typical is this for the child? What kind of day has the child had? What kind of day has the parent had? Are there people watching the interaction? Is the child embarrassing himself? Are others embarrassed? Is this a new behavior? Is anybody hurt by the

remarks? Does the parent have a headache? The answers to these and other questions will explain a variety of responses by the parent. The answers help us to understand that there are times when parents won't be consistent when they should and times when they maybe *shouldn't* be consistent. Some responses will always be wrong, and some responses will always be better than others, *but* there are multiple, acceptable possibilities that, if not the best, are at least acceptable in the given circumstances. This is important for parents and everyone else to understand. There are more right ways than wrong ways; if we can stay in the middle, we're usually okay. Parents appreciate it when teachers understand this important idea.

Focus on the Target Goals of Parenting

I find it helpful to see the visual image formed by the concept of "staying in the middle." If we could take each concern, interaction, decision, worry, plan, and issue that parents face and place them like spokes around a wheel, it would soon look like the *prickly mess* shown in Figure 1.1, and parents know what that feels like. It's chaotic, confusing, sometimes good, and sometimes painful. We know that the extremes are bad and that somewhere in the middle is best. If we draw circles around the areas, we can begin to see just where the target goals are: right in the center. Parents—avoiding the extremes—should aim for the middle.

If a parent could be perfect, the center would be completely filled with correct decisions, appropriate and well-timed feedback, ideal limit setting, and model nurturing. No misses would escape that small area right in the center of the target. Wouldn't that be great? Yes, but impossible. Actual parenting looks different. There would be a larger center that accurately represents the limits of parents, children, and other people. The larger center also acknowledges a variety of legitimate response due to differences in style, culture, gender, and other variables. Some marks would be a bit off the center, but still on the target. And it might look different on different days—and different for different kids! There would be the admission and acceptance of imperfection.

Figure 1.1   Target Goals for Parents

a. The Prickly Mess

b. Finding the Center

c. Perfect Parenting

d. Actual Parenting
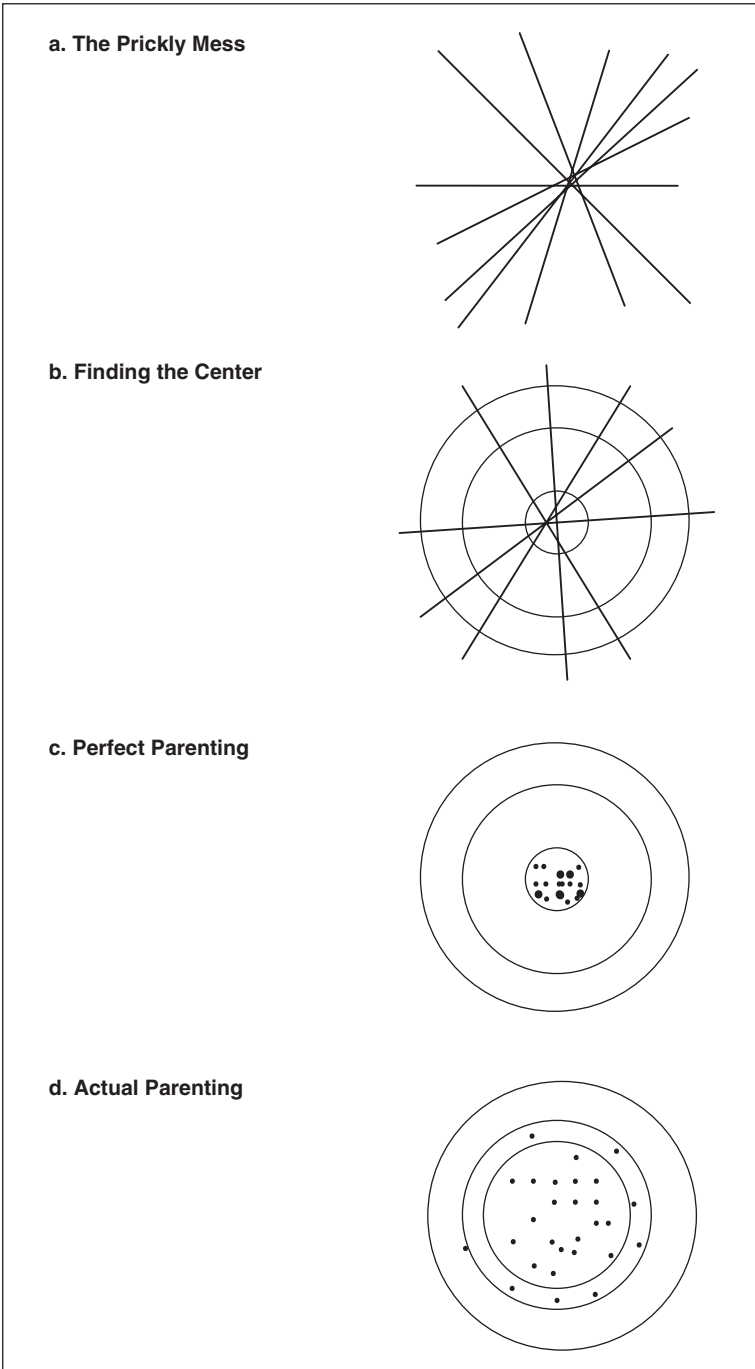
Try Hard . . . and Keep Trying

Jeffers (1999) affirms what most parents know soon after a child is born: It's harder than we thought. And parents may wonder why no one told them. Perhaps they do hear it and think it will be different for them—or maybe it is just instinct.

> What's a Parent to Do?
>
> - Avoid Extremes
> - Focus on the Target Goals
> - Try Hard and Keep Trying

Jeffers suggests that there is a conspiracy of silence. Parents don't want to tell how hard it is because they may, among other things, be fooling themselves, feeling ashamed, or feeling confused. "It is the very blessed parent who breezes through the parenting process without too many knuckle taps to the heart. If you are one of them, I suggest you kneel and kiss the ground and have compassion. Many aren't that lucky" (Jeffers, 1999, p. 103).

Parents have to try hard, and they are not the only part of the equation. Coontz (1992) suggests that there is a myth of parental omnipotence. Parenting, she says, is both easier and harder than we may think. First, it is easier because it turns out that children are more resilient than we realize and can survive and sometimes benefit from our mistakes. It is harder because there are simply too many forces—out of parental control—that affect children's growth and development. For example, it is the "fit" between child and parenting style (just like between student and teaching style) that seems to explain success more than the style itself.

Other forces affecting parenting include class, background, income levels, conditions at work, and the pervasive presence and images of television. In addition, peer influence and pressure is a powerful force. Many people talk about the peer pressure that teenagers experience. Harris (1998) suggests that peers are the preferred models for children of *all* ages. She believes in group socialization theory and explains that it concerns learning how to behave in the presence of others. Children can determine what social categories they belong to at a young age. Early in life, they can categorize according to

age and gender. They look for their peers and want to be like them. A child's goal is to be successful at being a child. Indeed, if children too carefully imitate the behavior of *adults,* they are likely to get into trouble.

We need to understand that there is not a simple, unidirectional, cause-and-effect link between a particular parent behavior and the reaction in the child. In fact, Coontz (1992) describes a long-term study in which researchers' predictions of which youths would be happiest and most successful as adults were wrong two thirds of the time—a worse result than if they had predicted at random. They had overestimated both the negative effects of family stress as well as the positive effects of a trouble-free childhood. Parental power and influence have limitations, but parents are still responsible for their children's health and safety. Some decisions and actions are better than others, and parents have to assume responsibility, meet demands, and make decisions *despite* the factors out of their control.

Parents are working to meet the target goals every time they think about or deal with their children. Rain or shine, day or night, big or little: They try to reach the target goals even when they have had a long day and are tired. Or when the kids have had a long day and are tired. They have to try hard to hit the middle, and they have to understand that they are not always going to be perfectly successful. Sometimes, it's a success just to be on the target.

Hewlett and West (1998) say, "Being a 'good-enough' parent requires providing a child with the gifts of love, attention, energy, and resources, generously and unstintingly over a long period time of time" (p. 30). Parents continuously and tirelessly aim for the target's center, and most of them somehow manage to hit consistently somewhere around the middle. And that, for the most part, is *good enough.*

THE KIDS HAVE A ROLE

Most parents can remember times when they did *everything* right and yet everything still seemed to go wrong! That happens

because parents are not alone when it comes to parenting. The *children* are part of the equation, and they keep changing. Parents may have perfected exactly the right combination of food, timing, rules, and ambiance for a calm and successful dinnertime. But what happens when their beloved toddler simply changes his mind about his plastic dinosaur plate, the orange cup for milk, corn as his favorite food, and sitting next to his sister? Some children seem to change from day to day, and all children change as the months and years pass.

Children Grow and Change

Teachers and most others who work with children have studied child development. Most professionals understand stages of cognitive development and have an idea of what to expect from children at various ages and stages. When related to their fields of expertise, professionals also understand physical and moral development of children, adolescents, and even adults. Many theorists have analyzed the stages that humans go through as they mature. Countless textbooks have explored the subject and are available for extensive reading and study (see, for example, Santrock, 2004).

I think that Erikson's (1993) theory of human development, shown in Table 1.2, is a very useful way to understand how people change as they mature psychosocially and as they encounter new and different social interactions, expectations, and experiences. It is, of course, important to remember that theories of human development are culturally devised and thus should always be interpreted and applied carefully as one lens through which to view and understand behaviors (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001).

Unlike professionals, parents may not have learned about the expected changes in their children throughout different stages of physical, cognitive, psychosocial, and moral development, but they know their own children and—consciously

Table 1.2   Stages of Child Development and Related Stages of Parenthood

Child's Stage in Erickson's Stages of Psychosocial Development	Age of Child	Parents' Stage in Galinsky's Stages of Parenthood
	Prenatal	**Image-Making Stage** Parenthood is an idea, a dream. Parents prepare.
Trust Versus Mistrust Babies find consistency, predictability, and reliability.	**Birth to 1**	**Nurturing Stage** Parents reconcile reality and image. Bonding occurs. Parental feelings of control/lack of control begin.
Autonomy Versus Shame and Doubt Children explore and make choices. They face dilemmas and learn what is acceptable.	**1 to 3**	
Initiative Versus Guilt Children make plans, set goals, and persist in reaching them. They respond to physical and social changes. There is frustration.	**3 to 6**	**Authority Stage** This is the *peak* of control/lack of control. Communication is critical. Parents and children negotiate child's rights and power. Parents determine and accept scope of authority.
Industry Versus Inferiority Children acquire and extend skills to wider culture; perform work; might fail; need to feel competent. They construct things and relationships.	**6 to Puberty**	**Interpretive Stage** *School* begins. Parents evaluate themselves. They interpret the world to children. They experience separateness, connection, and conflicting emotions.

(Continued)

Table 1.2 Continued

Child's Stage in Erickson's Stages of Psychosocial Development	Age of Child	Parents' Stage in Galinsky's Stages of Parenthood
Identity Versus Role Confusion Adolescents attempt to bring together experiences, identity, and place in society. They focus on self. They turn to peers.	**Puberty to Adulthood**	**Interdependent Stage** Another reconciliation between image and reality occurs, and parents shape new images. They experience less control and confront differences in power and control due to differences in ages.
Intimacy Versus Isolation Young adults are less self-absorbed. They can share with another, and the inability to do so is problematic. **They may become parents and enter the stages of parenting.**	**Young Adulthood**	**Departure Stage** Parents again adjust images of what actually happened. They take stock of whole experience. They build a new and separate relationship.
Generativity Versus Stagnation Adults work—producing things and ideas. They take care of others. They need encouragement from others.	**Middle Adulthood**	
Integrity Versus Despair Each person reviews and reevaluates life's worth. Acceptance of their imperfect life and their impending death leads to wisdom.	**Old Age**	

SOURCE: Erikson (1993) and Galinsky (1987).

or not—their own culture. They notice changes in the way their children look, behave, and approach tasks. They watch carefully the new things their children can say and do. They worry if their children are doing enough of the right things and at the right time. And they know how their children may compare to others in their family, neighborhood, or circle of friends. Parents may delight in the wonderful moments that occur as children grow and become capable of new and impressive feats, but they have an intuitive sense of the difficulties at different stages. As Jeffers (1999) says, no one ever mentions the "terrific twos, satisfying sixes, or great eights. . . . Just as we get over one terrible, turbulent, or tantrum stage, we seem to come face to face with the next" (p. 93).

We need to remember that kids are not passive. They do much more than simply respond or react. They think, decide, and act on their own. They are agents in their own lives. Their thoughts, words, and behaviors are not simply responses, but also causes. Kids are not only *done* unto; they *do* unto. They cause change in their parents and in others.

Parents Change and Develop Too

Galinsky (1987), in her extensive and influential study of parents of different backgrounds and ages, determined six stages through which parents move as they and their children grow up together. The most interesting theme that weaves through the stages is that of the clash between image and reality. Galinsky believes—and I agree with her—that as children progress through their stages of development, parents will be responding to their changes. At every change, parents must reconcile what *is* from what they *thought* would be. Parents do not always know that it is happening, yet this can explain a host of parent-child difficulties. What happens when athletic, trim, active parents are blessed with a child who is low energy, happier reading than playing, and chubby? What happens when a low-key parent bears a high-strung infant? What happens

when parents comfortable with rigid rules and expectations meet their own child's rebellious nature? The clash between image and reality is real, and the bigger the discrepancy, the more difficult it is for families to face. Teachers benefit from this information when they think about the age of their students and the related stage of their students' parents.

Galinsky's six stages are shown in Table 1.2. As children mature, their needs change, and the tasks that parents must do will also change. The first three stages of parenthood occur before children enter school. First is the *image-making stage*, and it occurs before a baby is born. Preparation for parenthood is the activity of this stage, and the parents form images of what they and their baby will be like.

The *nurturing stage* lasts from birth to about 18 months or about the time parents begin to hear the familiar word "no." In this stage, the parents get to know their baby, his or her temperament and needs. They begin to wrestle with differences in personality and the real demands of parenthood—physical, emotional, and temporal. They form a strong bond with their baby. And, if they're honest, parents will describe the things they lose at becoming a parent: freedom, time, fun, sleep, privacy, and relationships (Jeffers, 1999).

The *authority stage* lasts from "starting to walk" to "starting school." The child is learning about his or her own authority, and the parents establish theirs. Parents of preschoolers can experience the range of human emotions directed at their child. The negative emotions—anger or resentment—will flash through most parents. The negatives can be surprising and unsettling, and some parents might feel shame. They are normal feelings and need to be managed.

The *interpretive stage* corresponds roughly to the elementary school years. Parents must let go of their children, and they have to reconcile their judgments of their children with the judgments of others. Teachers are of special concern to parents, because they have the power to influence the quality of the child's day. The child—out in the world—is seeing more, doing more, and subjected to more. Parents usually

know by this stage that many others will affect their child's self-concept. One major activity for typical middle-class parents in this stage is to coordinate all of the others who are involved in the rearing of their child. They need to schedule appointments, organize church activities, and arrange for music lessons and sports leagues. Parents who are living in poverty are also involved in coordinating activities. For them, days can be filled with survival activities: getting to work with unreliable transportation, buying food each day because of money or food-storage issues, trying to manage child care, helping others who also struggle, and putting in "agency time" to get appropriate help from social services (DeVol, 2004). Most parents become experts on their child—and are appreciative when professionals recognize this.

The *interdependent stage*—adolescence—brings another period of reconciliation. Parents have to face a new person, one who is *almost* an adult. Many parents describe remarkable changes, not all of them good, in their children. Moms and dads also talk about their sadness at saying good-bye to the children they used to know. Once again, parents must work with their children to construct a new relationship with new forms of communication, changing roles, and adjustments to authority. There is a cruel irony for some parents because they often are cognizant of their personal aging process and feeling the changes: hair loss, weight gain, and sagging or bulging stomachs. And their children are reaching their peak. They are stronger, leaner, and better at many things than the parents. Most parents aren't jealous; they're happy for their children. Even so, it can be a complicated shift—and the demands of parental authority are still very much in place. Parents must continue to help their children safely negotiate their way into adulthood.

The last stage is the *departure stage*, in which the "children" are no longer children: They are adults venturing into the world as independent people. This departure is a process that in my experience can come in fits and starts. At this point, the parents are still adjusting their images of what actually

happened. They take stock of the whole experience and reflect on what they think went well and what didn't. Galinsky (1987) found that parents at this stage who had the most positive sense of accomplishment were those who seemed to recognize early on that their children were quite separate beings. I remember when my husband, our oldest son, and I drove three separate vehicles to his new apartment. The vehicles were each packed so full with his belongings that visibility was a problem, and we knew that this was a big move, much different from the trip we had taken a year earlier to his first college dorm. We unloaded the truck, the minivan, and the compact car, and set things here and there in his apartment. The furniture went where he wanted it and the place was all his. We sat on the floor for a moment before we prepared to go, and our son held up a key. "Do you want to take this now?" he asked. It was the key to our house . . . *his* house. I told him that he could always keep a key to our house, but I have thought about that moment many, many times. It was a memorable symbol of his departure from one place to another, from one role to another, and from one relationship to another.

The stages are interesting to consider and useful in understanding the nature of this parenting task. Parents are of a certain age and will be in a particular stage of human development. They also will be in a particular parenting stage. They may have more than one child and the children may be at different stages. When we examine the theories and charts describing changes or levels of performance in children, their parents, or any of us, it is important to remember that the information is *general.* I find the information and descriptions very useful because they help me understand, recognize, and interpret the expected and unexpected behavior I see as I work with children or adults in *groups.* However, *individuals* rarely evidence all of the typicalities. Children are different. Parents are different. People are different. And those differences can lead to easier or harder lives, greater or lesser success, and a whole array of experiences. For parents, sometimes the differences lead to special struggles.

HELPING PARENTS WHO HAVE SPECIAL STRUGGLES

All parents have struggles, and a small percentage of parents have huge struggles that impact their lives, the lives of their children, and life in our society. Most parents are "good enough," but when they are not, they need our help. Teachers and other professionals who work with children are legally obligated to act when they encounter particular problems in families. Friends, family members, and even bystanders are encouraged to act as well. With knowledge, concern, and caution, we may be able to provide successful intervention to help end, manage, or prevent serious trouble.

Troubled Parents

Some parents are either off "the target" or barely on it. These troubled parents may be addicted, dysfunctional, or mentally ill (McEwan, 2005). They may have limited skills or resources. They may have cognitive disabilities. They may be experiencing a particularly difficult time in their lives that puts them and their children at higher risk for physical and emotional abuse. Parents who are barely on target can benefit from social services and similar agencies. Parents who are "off the target" may need to be controlled through the legal system.

Laws require reporting of suspected child abuse so that children will receive the protection they need. Those who know of problems must act, and doing so is difficult. We know that we may not understand everything. We may not be sure of what we see or hear. We often are afraid of making a mistake. Some of this caution is well placed. Hewlett and West (1998) describe a shift in how professionals who work with children and families have come to view parents over the past 30 years. A sizable minority have adopted a parent-bashing mentality, think that the American family is dysfunctional, and believe that a majority of parents have the potential to abuse children. This has led to a tremendous overreporting of child abuse. Of the 600,000 child abuses charges filed in the

mid-1970s, 60% were substantiated. "Today, of the 3 million charges filed annually, only a third are ever substantiated and of these only a fifth involve elements of serious endangerment" (Hewlett & West, 1998, p. 115). Families have been torn apart by unfounded allegations.

Caution is needed, but so is proper action. Early action may prevent problems, and some experts encourage us to act *before* a horrible tragedy that too often is our impetus for action. Researchers advocate replacing "our typical pattern of after-the-fact notion of 'parent culpability' with a before-the-fact notion of 'shared responsibility'" (Coontz, 1997, p. 119). Providing children with safe, intact families is an important goal, and with the proper help, many parents can improve. In some states, child protective services have created successful programs that respond to reports of neglect or abuse in ways that both support families as well as ensure children's safety. Of course, in severe cases and for their health and safety, children may need to be moved to the care of other family members, foster care, or elsewhere. Coontz (1992) reports that children can make surprising progress in new environments.

What should we do to protect at-risk children and provide troubled parents the help they need? If child abuse or neglect is suspected, we need to report it. Though rules and reporting procedures vary from state to state, they generally require mandatory reporters to inform law enforcement agencies at once if a child is in immediate danger. If no immediate danger is present, but maltreatment is suspected, a different agency may be the proper contact, but the report still must be completed in a timely manner. Others, who are not mandated to report, are encouraged to follow the same procedures. The agencies that receive the report should be trained to protect the children, the rights of the parents, and anyone making the report in good faith (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2003). Teachers, of course, are mandatory reporters, and school systems should support and train the teachers in recognizing and reporting suspected child neglect or abuse.

The following suggestions indicate typical procedures and guidelines when child neglect or endangerment is suspected:

- Gather information and keep clear records.
- Don't go it alone. Keep superiors informed. Work with mental health professionals, social workers, and/or law enforcement professionals.
- Know the legal rights and responsibilities of all involved.
- Keep focused on the child.

As we focus on the child, we can also remember that children can beat seemingly unbeatable odds, especially with support from others and through their own resilience. The keys to resilience—in addition to support from important person or persons believing in the kid—include feeling connected and successful in school, reading competently, having a sense of humor, showing initiative, and having intelligence, creativity, and spirituality (Rosenblum, 1999). We must remember that resilience is countered by risk factors, and the more risks that pile up, the harder it is for any child to survive. We must work to support the children and families who need it.

Parents With Troubled Kids

Some children have survived horrible experiences. In this section, however, we look at children who failed to live well under good conditions. These are children with particular temperaments or illnesses who have presented their parents with extraordinary trials, beginning as early as infancy. What may look like an out-of-control parent may be a parent who is working hard to keep an out-of-control child as reined in as possible. Our habits of mind (and mouth) tell us that the parents have done something wrong, but sometimes we are wrong to believe that. It sometimes really is the child.

I have had college students—soon to be teachers—come to me after class to say how much they appreciated my message about understanding and supporting the parents of their future students. They tell about how one of their siblings has been in serious trouble despite the efforts of their own loving parents. They add that sometimes their parents have fallen

under public criticism and suffered greatly. Parents can indeed be crippled with shame when their children have committed public errors—often experimental drug use that gets out of hand or is caught (Meltz, 2000). I once asked a juvenile court judge if he thought that the parents of the teens he tried and sentenced were incompetent or uncaring. He said that though some did seem to have serious problems of their own, many parents clearly loved their children and had tried to help them with every resource available to them. Instead of unexamined censure, parents need support during difficult times so that they may provide the help and support their children need.

Sometimes, the difficulties lead to tragedy, even when the parents are doing everything they can do to help their children. Garbarino (1999) explains that boys commit 85% of youth homicides and, in about 90% of those cases, the boys have grown up with parents and general environments that are linked to such crimes. He describes their lives of abuse, neglect, and emotional deprivations, racism, poverty, and drug and gang cultures. In the aftermath of the 1999 school shootings at Columbine High School, however, he placed the two young killers among the 10% whose parents and lives did *not* fit the pattern of abuse. He wrote, "Most kids are like dandelions; they thrive if given half a chance. Some are more like orchids. They do fine while young enough be nurtured by loving parents, but wilt as adolescents subjected to peer competition, bullying, and rejection" (p. 51).

The temperamental, vulnerable children often make it through the elementary school years, but in the normal adolescent movement away from parents, they can't make it. The culture of adolescence today makes it hard for parents and professionals to distinguish between signs of the times and true trouble. Garbarino (1999) believes that we are

> too ready to blame good parents for how their children cope with a violent and coarse society. Even loving, attentive parents can lose children who are temperamentally vulnerable—if they develop a secret life, get caught up in the dark side of the culture and form dangerous peer alliances. And that's scary for any parent to acknowledge. (p. 51)

We must remember that even "normal" parents and "normal" children can run into a bump in the road, especially during adolescence. All children—even the "good" ones—lead what Garbarino and Bedard (2001) call "secret lives." As they move toward adulthood, they have to learn independence, and they learn it by *being* independent. Problems and struggles will arise. We can be thankful that most are solvable and temporary. We also can be thankful that understanding teachers who show empathy can make a difference. Box 1.1 shows how.

Box 1.1   Helping Parents Who Have Special
            Struggles

- Remember the demands of parenthood in general.
- Seek to understand specific troubles.
- Listen carefully and withhold judgment.
- Avoid blame and focus on positive action.
- Work with others to ensure the safety of children.
- Assist families in locating services and resources.

PARENTS LOVE THEIR KIDS

At the close of this chapter, I want to stress one important fact: Parents love their children. When we believe that, a world of opportunity awaits us. I think that, because parents love their kids so much, they may not be able to be at their *rational* best when their children are concerned. Parents are emotional about their children, and I think parents are supposed to be emotional. Psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner tells us that a child develops through a process of complex interactions "between the child and somebody else—especially somebody who's crazy about that child" (qtd. in *Columbia World of Quotations*, 1996). For most children, that crazy someone is their parent. In Chapter 2, you will read about ideas for building collaborative relationships with these people who love their children so much.

Additional Resources

Books

Friel, J. C., & Friel, L. D. (1999). *The 7 worst things parents do.* Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc.

> The title sounds negative, but the book is not. It is one of my favorite books on parenting because it is accessible, reasonable, and supportive. The authors describe common mistakes that parents and families make, and then they suggest new and more helpful ways to approach the complex parental undertaking. They make good sense, and it is a fast read.

Galinsky, E. (1987). *The six stages of parenthood.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

> This book is not a fast read, but what I consider a "must read." Galinsky tells the parenting story sensitively and intelligently. Her anecdotes are interesting and her analysis is informative.

Harris, J. R. (1998). *The nurture assumption: Why children turn out the way they do.* New York: Free Press.

> A very strange and oddly entertaining book. When this book was first released, it created quite a hoopla. Many people were dismayed and angry at the author's assertions that it doesn't so much matter what parents do. She does say some things along those lines, but she says a lot more than that. It is an interesting and provocative book.

Jeffers, S. (1999). *I'm okay, you're a brat.* Los Angeles: Renaissance Books.

> I love this book. It is smart and funny. A student of mine who read it claimed, "It's not for the faint of heart." She found it a little disturbing to come face to face with negative feelings that parents may have from time to time. The book helps parents put many of the dimensions of parenting into perspective.

Web Sites

Aha! Process, Inc., available at www.ahaprocess.com.

Ruby Payne, a leading authority on poverty in America, founded the Aha! Process, Inc., publishing company. This site is their home page and is an excellent place to find resources and training opportunities.

Child Development Institute, available at www.childdevelopmentinfo.com.

This site was founded by Robert Myers, a clinical child psychologist. It is a very practical site, easy to navigate, and full of information about child development and parenting. There are many links to other useful sites.