



NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR HEALTH AND WELFARE

**Sharing the burden of parenting
under multicultural stress:
Primary prevention of child abuse and neglect**

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MOTHERS NEED OTHERS TO SHARE THE BURDEN AND THE STRESS OF BRINGING UP A CHILD



Mothers and others

- A mother is the biological center of a family
- Mothers have always needed others to be able to cope with basic child care
 - **fathers**
 - older **siblings** and cousins
 - **grandmothers** and aunts
 - sisters and sisters-in-law
- In western cultures there has been a change
 - a strengthening in the role of **fathers**
 - child minders and **day-care** personnel
 - **teachers** and coaches
 - **social service** and health-care personnel



Stress

- Stress is the body's reaction to an event threatening with **harm or loss**
 - loss of an important other
 - loss of control or continuance of being
- Individual window of tolerance
 - **individual capacity** for regulation
 - temperament and experience of co-regulation
 - attachment relationships
- Mild stress increases individual potential
 - bravery and innovation
 - **tend and befriend** -behaviors



Major stress

- Constriction of individual potential
 - functioning with **less flexibility**
- Integrative brain areas disconnected
 - **fight, flight or freeze** reactions
- Experience of traumatization and **dissociation**
- Difficulty in using co-regulation to reconnect
 - earlier experiences of attachment crucial
- Social support is central for handling extreme stress
 - we adults also need attachment relationships for co-regulation



Causes of multicultural stress

- **Trauma and loss** behind and in seeking refuge or in immigrating
- **Uncertainty** of future
 - means of livelihood
 - future for self and children
- **Unfamiliarity** of surroundings
- **Minority** culture
 - differences in family and parental roles
- Continuous stress most harmful
 - **MEES**: mundane extreme environmental stress
 - stress of **visibility** or stigma



Coping mechanisms bring resilience

- Stress is strain on ones coping mechanisms
- Internal
 - practical: how to handle stressful situations
 - alternatives for action are **culture specific**
 - emotional
 - how to regulate and express ones feelings
- External
 - how to use help of other people
 - silent wisdom is particular to every culture
 - **whom to approach**
 - **how to present own case**
 - **how to interpret answers and actions of others**



Parenting and culture

- Parenting is learned intrinsically
 - reactions to child and to challenges of parenting are primarily not conscious
- Different goals of upbringing
 - communal or individualistic
 - different goals and expectations bring conflict
 - there is no one good way of parenting – **however:**
- **Punitive, authoritarian parenting is harmful**
 - clearly associated with behavior problems
 - associated with less experience of social support
 - from own family
 - from own community
 - from professionals



The paradox

- Many parents neglect, abuse and abandon their children in all known cultures now and in history
 - mothers often responsible for abuse of small children
 - what underlies this contradictory parental behavior?
- Our nearest relatives, the great apes do not
 - each infant is kept and protected without question
- Human child needs an immense investment
 - longest time of dependence – and development
 - **no parent can manage on their own**
 - child is at risk if parent does not find help
 - the danger of our individualistic success societies



Parenting in evolution

- One of the basic motivations of life
- Parent child conflict of interests
 - there is no perfect match
- In most species children grow relatively quickly into independence
 - mother is alone in care
- Some species have longer childhoods
 - all characterized by high intelligence and high levels of co-operation
 - AND co-operative parenting: sharing the burden
 - **children are selectively neglected and abused if mothers are left without support**



Human parenthood

- Biological, social and psychological parenthood affect each other
 - parenthood causes changes in all areas, in both child and parent
- Shared or co-operative parenting is intrinsic
 - mothers are willing to give their baby into other hands
 - most women readily accepted by mother
 - men capacity to care for children is phenomenal
 - big variations: contact with babies is of help
 - father leave changes culture
 - children monitor all adults with interest
 - big temperamental differences
 - fathers chosen selectively as playmates



Co-operative parenting: child perspective

- More adults to provide
 - brain growth is immensely expensive
- Different adults resonate with different potentialities
 - interpersonal experiences mould the brain and mind
 - resonance creates energy and brain growth
 - the most potent formative and reparative element
- Developmental possibilities of child expand
 - intelligence, creativity and morality
 - inborn capacities that require shared experience



The underpinnings of social development

- Theory of mind
 - infants monitor how others are inclined towards them
- Language is based on babbling
 - communication over distance
 - responsivity of adult easily gauged
 - only in species with co-operative parenting
- Altruism
 - natural preference for pro-social behavior
 - aversion to hindering other's in their intentions
 - expectation of support natural
 - child, mother and father all are entitled to the support they need



Attachment

- Attachment is the external mechanism of stress regulation
 - with more support in stress regulation, more of ones potential is realized
- From an exclusive relationship perspective to the desirability of multiple attachments
 - preference for one is natural
- Capacity for security of attachment develops with experiences of attuned support
 - abusive parenting leaves one handicapped in using support in adulthood



Social support

- Experience of support increases positive and diminishes punitive parenting
 - advice does **not** have a positive effect
 - **practical** help does
 - improves parenting by lowering burden of other areas
 - help with **children** does
 - lowers burden of parenting
 - gives children other adults to relate to
 - help with **private feelings** does
 - increases self-worth as parent
 - **proto-prevention** of abuse and neglect



What is experienced as support

- **Concrete support in whatever are of life**
 - tending to physical needs of child and parent
 - the logic of food in parent groups
- **Experience of interpersonal resonance:**
 - Being seen as one is
 - interested **curiosity**
 - Being understood and accepted
 - **respect**
 - Being answered to
 - **active interaction**



Lack of support

- Those who could do not answer to ones needs
 - those in position of “stronger and wiser and kind”
 - **asking** for help **and not receiving** it
- Being expected to do something one cannot manage
 - working through crises in a foreign environment
 - conflict of **roles** and **parental values**
 - fantasy of returning home
- Risk of fight, flight or freeze reactions towards the one responsible for the increase in stress
 - the child is a major burden: child abuse and neglect
 - the spouse may not be supportive: **partner violence**



Refusal to share the burden of parenting is dangerous to children

- Historically infanticide has been common
 - letting die of malnourishment
 - giving away
- Child abuse and neglect share the same dynamic
 - sharing is the **responsibility of our society**
 - helping to access informal support can be difficult
 - one has to ask parent how to be of help
 - being interested in the **experience of the other** is supportive in itself
 - **speaking the language** of the parent is immensely valuable



How to offer support in our multicultural societies

- **Being active:** knowing that parents need support
 - **smiling and greeting** children and their parents
- **Respecting** the cultural underpinnings of parenting and child development
 - interest in the nuances of parents' mother culture
 - respect for the hardship of minority parents cope in two cultures
- **Positively discriminating** minorities in social work, teaching, health and youth work training
 - multiplicity of language and cultural knowledge
- **Voting** for minority representatives
 - knowing that complexity brings resilience



Thank you for your interest

- Further reading on shared parenting:
 - Mothers and Others
 - Sarah Blaffer Hrdy : Harvard University Press 2009
 - Attachment and Bonding, a New Synthesis
 - ed b C. Sue Carter, Lisa Ahnert et al MIT Press, 2003
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