Parenting and Resources in Developing Countries

Parenting practices in developing countries vary significantly, according to Bornstein and Putnick (p. 46), who looked at geographic areas that have been understudied. Using the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), a nationally representative and internationally comparable household survey of developing countries in different regions of the globe, they evaluated the parenting practices of more than 127,000 mothers of children under 5 in 28 developing countries. Mothers in the countries studied engaged in more socioemotional parenting activities (such as reading books, telling stories, and drawing) than cognitive parenting activities (such as playing, singing songs, and taking children outside). Most of the parenting measures surveyed were uniquely related to country-level GDP, suggesting that improving a country’s overall economic conditions might allow parents to refocus on their parenting to improve young children’s quality of life.

Another study, by Bradley and Putnick (p. 76), used the MICS to look at countries with low to medium levels of support for human needs (such as drinkable water, basic materials like books, and transportation). Their assessment finds strong links among the average wealth in a country, the quality of housing for young children, and children’s access to materials for learning and meeting daily needs. For example, the likelihood of a child having access to a toilet or a TV in the home or living in a home that was properly vented for cooking was strongly connected to the GDP of the country in which he or she lived. The study, done under the auspices of UNICEF, concludes that the same conditions that make it difficult for children to thrive make it difficult for parents to function in ways that are optimal for their children. It suggests that improving access to such things as water, electricity, and toilets can have benefits for children that go well beyond the obvious.

Another study that used MICS data, this one by Arabi, Frongillo, Avula, and Mangasaryan (p. 32), assessed the feeding practices of infants and young children. Such practices include breastfeeding, getting complementary foods, and receiving oral rehydration salts during diarrhea. The first 2 years of life are considered a window of opportunity for preventing undernutrition, and carefully designed programs that address inappropriate feeding practices during this period are successful. The study finds that feeding practices are far from optimal and differ substantially across countries—and that living in a wealthier country doesn’t always translate into more appropriate feeding practices. The findings can inform comprehensive programs at the community, health system, and national levels that will boost children’s chances to thrive.

Children’s Rights

The basic rights of a quarter to a third of the world’s youngest children aren’t being upheld. That’s the primary finding of an assessment by Britto and Ulkuer (p. 92), who looked at conditions of young children worldwide seen through the lens of compliance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has been ratified by all countries but the United States and Somalia. Using the MICS, the assessment looked at the ecological contexts and situations most influential for young children’s survival and development, including nutrition and feeding, caregiving, discipline practices, and their home environments. The results have implications for policymakers, encouraging them to increase investments and infrastructure support for programs and services that serve the health, education, development, and protection of young children.

Lansford and Deater-Deckard (p. 62) also considered the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the MICS in their study on violent and non-violent responses to children’s behavior in developing countries. Because children are vulnerable to abuse or neglect if parents’ actions are left solely to their own discretion, children’s right to protection was recognized in the Convention. Partly in response, more than 100 countries have banned physically punishing children in schools, and 29 countries have legally banned physically punishing children in all settings. Nonetheless, this study finds...
that across 24 developing countries, two thirds of moms said their 2- to 4-year-olds experienced psychological aggression (such as calling a child names) in the last month, and almost two thirds said that someone in their household had used physical violence toward their toddlers in the last month. Moreover, almost a third of moms said they believed physical punishment was necessary to properly rear a child. There was wide variability across countries, but in general, countries with low levels of educational attainment were found to be at particularly high risk for violence against children.

Gender Norms

Previous studies suggest that girls’ friendships are more emotionally intimate than boys’, girls support and help their friends more than boys, and girls are better at resolving conflicts with their friends than boys. Yet despite all the ways girls seem to be better at friendship, boys’ friendships last just as long as girls’, boys are just as satisfied with their friendships as girls, and boys aren’t any more lonely than girls. MacEvoy and Asher (p. 104) sought to determine why. They presented more than 250 fourth and fifth graders with hypothetical vignettes to find out whether girls cope more poorly when a friend violates a core expectation of friendship (for example, by being unreliable, failing to offer emotional support, or betraying a friend by sharing a secret with others). They find that girls responded to the violation just as negatively or even more negatively than boys. Girls were more likely than boys to interpret the transgressions negatively and to say they would be angry and sad. Girls also were as likely as boys to say they’d seek revenge, insult their friend, and threaten to end the relationship. The findings challenge assumptions that girls are more socially skilled in their friendships than boys, and suggest that there may be some parts of friendship that are more difficult for girls, such as coping with disappointment.

Studies have shown that around age 5, children think about gender as relatively fixed and inflexible and as they get older, they become more flexible about their thinking on the subject. Conry-Murray and Turiel (p. 146) examined children’s reasoning about gender by looking at different areas, including personal preferences, variations in cultural norms, and the moral implications of imposing regulations. In their study, more than 70 children ages 4, 6, and 8 were interviewed about hypothetical situations involving a parent’s choices (for example, should a parent choose a son or a daughter to go to a babysitting class). Findings: Young children use gender norms to make decisions in some cases, but they have a nuanced view of gender that they often apply flexibly. Even 4-year-olds consider individuals’ preferences, and they don’t believe gender norms should be imposed on anyone. Furthermore, children understand that gender norms don’t reflect a natural order of things, but may legitimately differ in other cultures. And older children are more likely to show flexibility than younger ones.

Migrant Children in China

In China, an estimated 10–30 million children have been left behind by their migrant parents in rural areas. Using cross-sectional data collected in rural areas of Hunan Province, China, Wen and Lin (p. 120) examined whether rural Chinese children and adolescents of migrant families differ from their non-migrant counterparts in three areas: satisfaction with life and schooling, health behavior, and engagement in school. The researchers surveyed more than 600 children between the ages of 8 and 18. They conclude that children who are left behind are disadvantaged in health behavior and school engagement, but not in perceived satisfaction. Taken together, the findings show that interpersonal social environmental factors (such as socioeconomic resources and positive socializing processes) and intrapersonal characteristics (such as self-motivation and self-determination) contribute jointly to children’s positive development, regardless of their parents’ migrant status.

Collaboration, Explanation, Exploration

The ability to collaborate, which starts around age 2, is an important skill, enabling groups of individuals to reach a goal that one person might not be able to reach alone. Hamann, Warneken, and Tomasello (p. 137) used a new problem-solving task with about 50 German children to determine whether pairs of 2- and 3-year-olds understand these activities as having a joint goal—do they get that it’s a team effort designed to bring about an outcome that creates benefits for all involved? The researchers find that 3-year-olds consistently collaborated beyond the point when the first child got a reward, continuing until the second child got the reward, too, while 2-year-olds continued the collaboration much less often. This suggests that between ages 2 and 3, children develop the understanding that joint activities involve mutual commitments.
How does the process of explaining inconsistent information generate new ideas? Legare (p. 173) looked at 80 children ages 2–6 who experienced events with outcomes that were either consistent with or inconsistent with their expectations. The goal: To determine not only what children explain and explore, but how they do so, by examining if their explanations and exploratory play are oriented toward discovering new information. Findings: Explaining and exploring inconsistent information are mutually informative and work together to support learning and discovery. Explaining inconsistency promotes discovery by guiding exploratory, hypothesis-testing behavior. Children’s explanations and exploratory play following inconsistent information are much more sophisticated and relevant to learning than their behavior following consistent information. The finding that giving children the opportunity to explain and explore inconsistent information may help them learn new information has implications for education practice.

**The Way They Were**

Most adults can’t recall events that took place before they were 3 or 4 years old—a phenomenon called childhood amnesia. While some people do recall events from an earlier age, their veracity is often questioned. In their longitudinal study of about 50 children and their parents, Jack, Simcock, and Hayne (p. 159) find that events experienced by children as young as 2 can be recalled after long delays. The children played a game when they were 2- to 4-year-olds, then were interviewed 6 years later. Although the researchers couldn’t predict children’s long-term recall on the basis of children’s general memory and language skills, they did find some evidence that talking about the event soon after it occurred may have helped preserve it in memory. The results mirror theories that suggest that the basic capacity for remembering our own experiences is in place by age 2. The findings have implications for clinical and legal work with children.

**Maps and Mind**

Children see symbols everywhere—including when they draw, write, read, and decode maps. But how do they develop an understanding of symbols? Myers and Liben (p. 186) asked eighty 6- to 9-year-olds to make maps and read maps someone else had made. They also tested the children to determine how well they understood that different people may interpret the same situation or picture differently, which involves theory of mind. Children who did better on the theory of mind test made better maps and had better explanations of what kinds of information would be valuable to use a map successfully. In sum, part of understanding maps and symbols more generally requires children to think about the mind of the person using the symbols.

**Talking Points**

Children vary substantially in their early vocabulary development. Delayed language onset can be a risk factor for later language and academic difficulties—but it’s difficult to tell which late talkers will overcome early delay and catch up in language learning, and which will not. Over the course of a year, Fernald and Marchman (p. 203) tracked vocabulary growth and assessed real-time language processing efficiency using eye gaze in more than eighty 18-month-olds—some of whom were typically developing, some of whom were late talkers. They found strong ties between early processing efficiency and individual differences in language development in both types of children. The study provides the first evidence that differences among infants in early verbal processing skills predict vocabulary growth from 18 to 30 months, both in typically developing children and in late talkers with delayed language onset.

Even though young infants respond differently to positive and negative tones of voice in their parents’ speech, preschool children ignore this emotional information when it doesn’t match the words they’re hearing—such as when an adult says sarcastically, “That meeting was really fun.” Quam and Swingley (p. 236) asked: Do children not understand how emotional tones of voice convey meaning, or have they struggled in the past only because tone of voice conflicted with the words in the sentence? After testing more than 110 preschoolers (ages 2–5), they find that until age 4½, children struggle to interpret happy versus sad tones of voice as indications of the emotional state of a puppet, even without conflicting word information. The findings highlight the complexity involved with interpreting tone of voice in language, suggesting that it’s an ability that develops later than previously thought.

To learn more about how people develop the ability to take another’s perspective, Farrant, Maybery, and Fletcher (p. 223) took a longitudinal look at the influence of the way parents interact with and talk
to their children. The study involved more than 120 Australian children between the ages of 4 and 6, and included youngsters with typically developing language and those who were delayed in starting language. Findings: Mothers who talked more about people’s thoughts and feelings had children who were better at taking another’s perspective. This occurs because mothers’ use of this type of language influences their children’s language ability and cognitive flexibility, which in turn influences their development of theory of mind, a key component in learning to take another’s perspective. Children with delayed language acquisition were delayed in their development of perspective-taking skills.

**Exploring Basic Cognitive Processes**

Infants have great memory skills—most babies can easily remember where mom’s cell phone is stashed and where the bag of cat food is stored. Even when something they’ve seen is put somewhere else, infants update their memories to include the new locations. In a study by Bell (p. 251), fifty 8-month-olds sat on their moms’ laps and played a game with another adult that involved a toy that was hidden in different locations. Small sensors recorded the infants’ brain wave and heart rate activity. Babies who were better at the toy hiding memory game had a pattern of brain wave activity that suggested they may be using different areas of their brains in a coordinated way that’s typical of how adults’ brains work during working memory tasks. In addition, they showed heart rate activity patterns typical of older children and adults who are doing difficult problem-solving tasks. The study is significant because, given the interest in infant brain and behavior research, it suggests an integrative model of brain activity.

We know that children get faster at doing simple cognitive tasks as they get older, while older adults get slower at the same tasks with age. Ratcliff, Love, Thompson, and Opfer (p. 367) sought to determine whether a single factor—perhaps a “speed of processing mechanism”—was responsible for the changes on both ends of the lifespan. Their study, of 130 children ages 8–15 and 72 college-age adults, used a diffusion model (a widely used mathematical model that separates the decision-making process into different parts) to determine response times and choices made. Then they compared those results with previously collected data from older adults. They conclude that processing components responsible for changes in response times at the beginning of the lifespan are somewhat different from those responsible for changes that occur with healthy aging. Specifically, older adults get the same amount of information in the tasks studied as college-age adults, but children extract less.

**Expending Energy**

Activity level, an individual’s customary level of energy expenditure through gross motor movement, is an important dimension of temperament that’s been linked to various facets of children’s health and development. Research suggests that activity level is, in part, influenced by genetic factors, but what factors influence the development of activity level? Saudino (p. 266) looked at more than 300 twin pairs at 2 and 3 years old, using mechanical motion recorders at home and in the lab to gauge the frequency and intensity of physical movements to determine what factors (genes or environment) influence developmental stability and change. She finds that in both the home and the lab, genes contributed to stability in activity level. Factors that influenced developmental change in activity, however, differed across situations. In the lab, change was due to both genes and environments, whereas only environment influenced change in activity levels at home. This suggests that outside the lab, the influence of parents and the home environment plays a role in the development of children’s activity level.

**Value Differentiation**

 Teens and preteens live in complex social worlds and have multiple identities, with different aspects of their lives helping them shape their values. Daniel, Schiefer, Möllering, Weisman, Boehnke, and Knafo (p. 322) examined value differentiation—the degree to which values differ in importance depending on the context in which they’re considered—by surveying almost 3,500 early and middle adolescents (fifth and sixth graders, and tenth and eleventh graders) living in Israel and Germany. The youths, part of either the majority group in their country or a group of immigrants from the former Soviet Union, were asked to identify the values that were important to them as parts of different groups, namely family, school, or country. The difference between answers reflected differentiation in value systems. The study finds that the development of value differentiation increases with age and takes place in part during adolescence: Tenth and eleventh graders showed higher value differential-
tion than fifth and sixth graders. In addition, immigrant youths showed a more differentiated value system than nonimmigrant youths, likely because the structure of the social world experienced by the immigrant youths is more complex than the one experienced by their majority-group counterparts.

**Teen Health**

Which teens are most likely to be influenced by their friends to get involved with alcohol and substance use? In a longitudinal study of more than one hundred fifty 15-year-olds and their parents and close friends, Allen, Chango, Szwedo, Schad, and Marston (p. 337) find that teens who've learned to think for themselves in family discussions and formed good relationships with parents and peers are most likely to resist peer influences to use drugs or drink. Among the best protected were teens who had learned to argue well with their mothers; the healthy autonomy they’d established at home seemed to carry over into their relationships with peers. Also protected were teens who had real support in relationships, either from their moms or their best friends.

Researchers have long known that students who are frequently absent from school often have symptoms of psychiatric disorders. Wood et al. (p. 351) asked: Do mental health problems lead to increased absenteeism, or does pre-existing absenteeism trigger or magnify mental health problems? Their longitudinal research is based on three studies involving more than 23,000 children in first through twelfth grades and is representative of the United States as a whole or specific regions of the country. Findings: In middle school, missing a lot of days tended to precede increased depression and antisocial behavior problems. In both middle and high school, students who already had symptoms of mental health conditions missed more days. The findings have implications for public health and for intervention and prevention programs.

**Academic Readiness and Achievement**

With a greater focus on accountability in early childhood education programs, there’s a need to better assess children’s early skills and how they function. Using data from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care, Sabol and Pianta (p. 282) followed almost 950 children from preschool to fifth grade. They find that school readiness profiles—assessments of the children’s readiness for school based on social skills, working memory, and attention problems in preschool—forecast achievement and social skills in fifth grade. The results demonstrate that multiple measures of school readiness can provide a deeper understanding of children’s strengths and weaknesses than any single measure. As such, they have implications for early intervention.

Some 5.1 million students from more than 350 language backgrounds who are classified as English language learners (ELL) are enrolled in U.S. public schools. Based on data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study that tracked 16,000 children from kindergarten through fifth grade, Han (p. 300) focused on Latino and Asian ELL students to determine what role bilingualism plays in children’s academic trajectories in the early school years. She finds that, when they started kindergarten, children speaking a non-English language tended to have lower reading and math scores than their English-speaking peers, largely due to their generally disadvantaged family socioeconomic backgrounds. But by fifth grade, ELL students who had a good command of both English and their primary language closed the gap. The results also indicate that providing more English-as-a-second-language instruction was helpful for children’s reading trajectories, and offering more services for families was beneficial to students’ math trajectories.

**Eye on Welfare Offices**

Current research suggests that the way government policies designed to alleviate poverty are put into practice may alter the influence they have on families in need. Godfrey and Yoshikawa (p. 382) took a longitudinal look at welfare recipients and their young children who got benefits at 10 welfare offices as part of a large-scale evaluation of welfare policies in the 1990s; they also collected information from caseworkers. They find that three specific characteristics of those offices—the amount of support caseworkers provide to their clients, the amount of emphasis caseworkers place on clients getting a job quickly, and the number of clients caseworkers have—influence families’ long-term economic circumstances, which are, in turn, related to children’s academic achievement and mental health. The results suggest that focusing on key characteristics of welfare offices can help improve recipients’ long-term economic circumstances and have benefits for their children.

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