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The Role of Parents in the Education of Their Children

It is a pleasure to be with you today at this Empowerment of the Family conference. From a scientific standpoint, I have had the privilege of studying the association between parenting behaviors and young children's development in a variety of cultural contexts for more than two decades. From a practical standpoint, Kerstine and I have been married for 32 years and have experienced many of the challenges and opportunities that parents face today in rearing their children. Our youngest of four children is now 18, and our role as parents is changing not only as we become grandparents, but as we also try to support them in appropriate ways as they transition to adulthood and start their own families. One thing I have learned from the whole experience is that I was probably the best parent before I had children. My sons and daughters would likely agree with that sentiment as I have learned many things by trial and error at their expense. However, being a part of their lives in my parenting role has been the highlight of my life and continues to be so.

How Parents Matter

We live in a time where some scholars argue that parents have only minor influence on their children's lives. They propose that children's genetic makeup and the peer culture override parental influence (e.g., Harris, 1998; 2002; Loehlin, 2001; Rowe, 2001). Therefore, parents do not play a significant role in educating their children. Claims about genetic influence are largely based on scientific evidence showing that siblings reared in the same family often show little resemblance in their personalities and behavior. These findings are interpreted to mean that parenting is merely a reaction to children's dispositions and does not change children in any appreciable way. Claims regarding peer influence stem from research that indicates children and adolescents often resemble their friends more strongly than their siblings. Therefore, peers must be far more powerful than parents in influencing children's behavior. If society buys into the argument that parents have minimal influence on their children, parental responsibility will likely be abdicated, and support for helping parents as the primary educators of their children will erode.

Fortunately, scientific research from my own academic tradition has cast significant doubt on the assertion that parents matter little (Hart, Newell, & Olsen, 2003; Hart, 2007). Long-term studies indicate that the influence of parenting on different aspects of children's development holds true even after taking into account children's earlier personality characteristics. These findings suggest that parents' influence is profound and lasting, particularly when parents adjust their childrearing patterns to different child characteristics in ways that create a good fit with child temperaments and dispositions. For example, research shows that temperamentally anxious and

inhibited children are more likely to become more socially outgoing over time when parents proactively orchestrate positive peer group experiences and coach children on how to initiate play and get along with peers (Hart et al., 2003). Parenting that does not create a good fit can also have negative influence. For example, overprotective parenting, where parents actively withhold social opportunities due to concerns about an inhibited child not fitting in with peers, generally lends itself to more withdrawn/anxious peer group behavior (Nelson, Hart et al., 2006a).

Studies have also shown that children with feisty, spirited temperaments are more likely to conform to parental expectations and be cooperative with peers when parents foster a warm, nurturing parent-child relationship, establish clear limits that are reinforced by reasoning about why rules are important, and then systematically follow through with pre-established consequences when rules are violated. These same children typically become more difficult to manage and are more aggressive with peers if parents use arbitrarily harsh, punitive disciplinary techniques, particularly in the context of a cold and distant parent-child relationship. Even in these situations, parenting intervention studies show that when child rearing practices and parent-child relationships are improved, child behavior improves accordingly. This body of research suggests that parents do indeed matter, despite children's genetic predispositions (Hart et al., 2003).

Other studies show that while peers have influence, they seem to matter more in superficial aspects of behavior like hair and clothing styles, the use of slang, and transient day-to-day behaviors, all of which can shift frequently with changes in friendships. Parents are more likely to have influence on core values that are reflected in religiosity, political persuasion, and educational plans, to name a few (e.g., Collins et al., 2000; Sebald, 1986). It is the quality of the parent-child relationship that more often determines the type of peers that teenagers choose and whether they buy into parental values (Furman et al., 2002; Laird et al., 2003; Zhou et al., 2002). In the absence of parents actively teaching strong core values by precept and by example in the context of a healthy parent-child relationship, children will more likely gravitate to peers and adopt their value system, whether for good or for ill.

To briefly summarize, there is credible scientific evidence that parents do matter as educators of their children. Although few would argue that peers and genetics are not important contributors to children's development, parents are an important part of the equation that cannot be overlooked. Contrary to the notion that parental teaching has little influence in children's lives, there is good scientific evidence to suggest that what parents do with their children in the home has a lasting influence on how they adjust to the world outside of the home. What are some specific ways that parents play a role in the education of their children that we can learn about from research? I would like to consider three possibilities.

Teach Moral Values

First, teach moral values that can help children make wise choices in the face of less desirable genetic inclinations and negative pressures from peers. Children and teens have many sources from which they can gain moral understanding. While parents have been shown to have the strongest influence in this regard (e.g., Leman, 2005), schools, culture, the media and peer interaction can play major roles as well (e.g., Comunian & Gielen, 2006; Gibbs et al., 2007; Speicher, 1994). When children and teens go outside of the home, they have ample opportunity to contrast the values that their parents display with those that come from these other sources (e.g., Killen & Nucci, 1995; Schonert-Reichl, 1999). Whether they hold onto parental values depends significantly not only on parent-child relationship quality (e.g., Walker & Taylor, 1991), but on how stable and supportive the home environment is, and whether mothers and fathers are united in the

values they endorse. How parents treat each other and whether they behave in a manner consistent with their values and stated family goals largely determines whether a consistent message is being sent to children about what is important to them (e.g., Pratt, Skoe, & Arnold, 2004; Wyatt & Carlo, 2002). Parents cannot help but teach what values are important to them, for they are exemplified in the way that they conduct their lives. Children are more likely to adhere to values preached, if they actually see them reflected in the daily living of those whom they trust.

One of the most powerful tools that parents have in teaching positive values to their children is their religious faith (Smith, 2005). Those who do not adhere to a religion are less likely to hold onto a consistent set of values that are reflected in their daily living. And they are far less likely to draw upon religious faith in teaching moral values their children. Unfortunately, there is a continuing trend of declining religious involvement of parents and youth in many parts of the world (Adams, 2003; Jones, 2003).

Why is religious involvement important to parents in helping children develop a strong value base to guide their behavior? Research shows that adolescents who embrace a religious community are more likely to exhibit behavior that is consistent with positive moral values. Compared to nonaffiliated youth, they are more involved in activities that help the less fortunate and in community service that reflects a concern for others (Kerestes, Youniss, & Metz, 2004). Religious involvement also fosters better academic performance and prosocial behavior, as well as discourages misconduct (Dowling et al., 2004). It is associated with less delinquent behavior, including lower levels of sexual activity and drug and alcohol use (Bahr & Hoffmann, in press; Smith, 2005; Regnerus, Smith, & Fritsch, 2003).

Religious practices and traditions create conditions that engender greater moral maturity. Youth activities and religious education provide opportunities for moral discussion and civic engagement in ways that help youth think beyond themselves and consider the needs of others (e.g., King & Furrow, 2004). They also provide young people with expanded networks of exemplary, religiously-oriented adults and peers – conditions that also provide opportunities for internalizing important values that help children and teens override temptations that stem from biological urges or negative peer group pressure (e.g., Bridges & Moore, 2002; Jang & Johnson, 2001). Encouragement of and support for religious involvement starts with parents and is followed up by teaching religious precepts in the home.

Adapt to Individual Child Characteristics

Second, adapt parenting to help children overcome unfavorable dispositions and capitalize on their strengths. Brigham Young, whom the University I teach at is named after, encouraged parents 150 years ago to “Study their children’s dispositions and their temperaments, and deal with them accordingly. Not adapting to child unfavorable dispositions or trying to plug each child into the same recipe can make the situation worse. As I noted earlier, using coercive control instead of rational firmness with an impulsive child, or overprotection instead of encouragement with an inhibited youngster, worsens maladaptive behavior (e.g., Hart et al., 2003). Part of being a good educator is ascertaining what children’s weaknesses are and then finding ways to help them overcome and compensate for them.

Children are not equally endowed with the same set of aptitudes. They come into the world with some desirable characteristics than are less than complete. For example, two of my children are reasonably good test takers. They graduated from high school at the top of their class and have been very successful in their university experiences. Two are less capable in academics and have

had to work harder at what they have achieved. Yet they have strengths in other areas that their two academically inclined siblings do not have. One of my sons has short term memory and information processing deficits that manifested early on in life with speech impairment challenges. Kerstine and I had to spend much more time as he grew older helping him to develop compensatory memorization and cognitive processing strategies. We sometimes had to hire tutors and work with other specialists to help. The other child who had difficulty with tests is a reflective, creative thinker and reads too much into every question on exams. She finds endless ways to justify the correctness of many responses to exam questions, and often misses the obvious point that the teacher is looking for. We have had to help her take better notes (even talked her into recording some lectures), so that she could focus on what the teacher deemed important. Creatively adapting to child characteristics that are less than complete is a challenging endeavor for parents. It requires considerable time, effort, patience and inspiration.

Positive capacities can be fostered through rich, varied experiences in academic, social athletic, artistic, musical, and spiritual domains. Looking for what children are naturally talented at and then providing opportunities for enhancement is an important role for parents as educators. We have found ways to provide music lessons, soccer team involvement, art lessons and a variety of activities, as we have been able, for our children to help enhance their natural talents. Not all parents have the means to do this, so have to carefully focus their efforts on what can realistically be supported. And parents have to be careful not to over-program children with these talent enhancing opportunities.

One thing I have learned from my research and early childhood education training is that children from varying cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds benefit from learning activities that are developmentally appropriate (e.g., Hart, Burts, & Charlesworth, 1997). More competent parents are able to capitalize on learning opportunities by providing children with hands-on, real-life experiences and assuring that learning activities are age appropriate. For example, taking young children grocery shopping and initiating discussions about where vegetables come from can be a solid educational experience, particularly if it is followed up by planting vegetable seeds and helping them grow at home. And as children grow older, being involved and working with teachers in formal schooling by concretely reinforcing concepts taught and helping assure that homework is being done can go a long ways toward helping children achieve and feel a sense of accomplishment.

Developmentally appropriate teaching also requires common sense. For example, pushing a four year old to tell time with a face clock would work much better if parents waited until they are older. Have you ever tried explaining to a 4-year old why a 9 on a face clock can sometimes mean 45, or how the little hand works together with the big hand to designate time? Saying something like it is three more sleeps until your birthday is far understandable to a four year old. Helping young children understand time sequencing is more applicable at their age and lays the foundation for later abstract, face-clock thinking. Research shows that some parents can benefit greatly from parent education programs in order to become the best they can in adapting their teaching to the child's level of understanding. Being a child's first teacher is a vital role that parents play.

Engage in Positive Parenting

Third, engage in authoritative child rearing (not coercive), a style that consistently predicts positive outcomes for children and adolescents. In our cross-cultural studies, my colleagues and I have found that parenting can be classified into one of three general parenting styles -- coercive, permissive, and authoritative. Although this has long been known in North American research,

the results of our studies suggest that authoritative styles are most effective in the long-term positive development of children, regardless of the cultural context (Nelson, Nelson, Hart, et al., 2006). Authoritative parenting, as we have measured it, involves consistently connecting with children in a loving way, setting reasonable limits and following through with expectations, and allowing children an appropriate measure of autonomy or latitude that allows children and teens to make reasonable choices so that they can practice being independent in responsible ways. So Love, limits, and latitude are the teaching principles. Their application can be tailored to meet individual child and adolescent needs and developmental stages in ways that perhaps I can elaborate another time.

Fortunately, many parents parent in positive ways that matter in educating their children. However, some do not. Coercion and permissiveness are less effective and have been found in research to be detrimental to positive child and adolescent development. Coercion involves the use of harsh physical punishment or psychological control such as withdrawing love or putting children on guilt trips to psychologically manipulate children into complying with parental expectations (e.g., Nelson, Hart et al., 2006b). While these types of coercive practices often lead to immediate child conformance by the child, research indicates coercion rarely results in a long-term solution and often leads to children being more defiant, depressed, aggressive or withdrawn, and manipulative in the home and with peers (e.g., Hart et al., 1998). And it often leads to poorer academic performance (Hart et al., 2003). Coercive parenting, in particular, is a one size fits all approach that typically creates a negative emotional climate that undermines parental efforts to teach positive values and adapt to individual child strengths and weaknesses.

In conclusion, I believe that parents do matter in the education of their children. There is considerable scientific evidence that supports my belief. And it is important to find ways to better support parents in their parenting and educational roles. As parents teach positive moral values, adapt their parenting to maximize individual child growth and development, and engage in authoritative child rearing practices, the world society will be strengthened and there will be greater hope for generations to come.

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