

# The Power of Parents

## *The science of human development*

Research findings in neuroscience, genetics and developmental science provide unequivocal evidence of the critical importance of nurturing and two-way intimate relationships between parent and child.



Researchers' understandings are moving from a view of temperament as inborn and relatively stable to a view of temperament as much more fluid, influenced in utero by mother's biological state, shaped by the experience of intimate relationships and subject to change throughout early childhood. Some children's genetic inheritance makes them more susceptible to the behavior of their mothers and fathers. This higher sensitivity can turn out to be beneficial, or it can be harmful, depending on the quality of the parenting the child receives.

Our body's response to stress (heart rate and respiration) is not set at birth, but it settles into a life-long pattern by the age of one. A mother's behavior has a strong influence on an infant's physiological response to stress and novelty.

Parents have direct and indirect effects across a range of young children's emotional and social competencies. Researchers have built a substantial body of evidence showing the importance of emotional and social competencies, as well as the foundational influence of mothers and fathers.

For more about the science of human development, including references, see these articles on our website: [Children's Needs](#), [The Power of Emotional and Social Competencies](#) & [Thinking About Parenting](#).



*"Nothing is more important in the world today than the nurturing children receive in the first three years of life, for it is in these earliest years that the capacities for trust, empathy and affection originate."*

- Elliot Barker, MD



## Social and Emotional Development

In order to establish and maintain intimate, nurturing relationships, parents and infants need generous amounts of time together.

Human infants are born with the “expectation of being loved and lovingly cared for” writes psychoanalyst Elisabeth Young-Bruehl. She notes the Japanese word *amae*, “the expectation to be sweetly and indulgently loved” and suggests as the closest English equivalent the phrase, “the need for cherishment.”

Bruce Perry, renowned psychiatrist and expert in neurodevelopment and child mental health, warns: “We have slowly been neglecting two of our most powerful biological gifts: the power of relationships and the brain’s malleability in early childhood.”

“The early years are when virtually all neurobiological systems are completing their development. They form the foundation for the rest of life, including getting along with others, sociality and morality,” says Darcia Narvaez, Professor of Psychology Emerita at Notre Dame University.

## The Evolved Nest



Dr. Darcia Narvaez and colleagues bring scientific research from a range of disciplines to their explanation of ideal conditions for human development. They explain that current mainstream parenting practices, public policies, and health care are woefully inadequate for healthy development, and note the increasing rate of unhealthy mental and physical conditions. They call for a paradigm shift in policies, attitudes and childcare practices. See: [The Evolved Nest](#)

# Time: an uncomfortable topic


Many parents make extraordinary efforts to spend time together with their infants and young children. Unfortunately, cultural and political factors can make it difficult to talk about time and unpaid caregiving; there is little societal support for parents at home full- or part-time. Surveys show that many parents employed full-time would prefer to spend more time with their children.

The doctors asserted that meeting children's needs for “ongoing nurturing relationships,” is essential “to build capacities for trust, empathy and compassion.”

And Greenspan wrote: “...caring relationships between a baby and a caregiver who really knows her over the long haul is responsible for a surprisingly large number of vital mental capacities. The interactions that are necessary [to regulate behavior, moods, feelings and intellectual development] can take place in full measure only with a loving caregiver who has lots of time to devote to a child.”

We all hear a lot about the importance of learning in early childhood—but as 21st Century biological sciences show, “the foundations of life-long health are also built early.”

Watch the short video, “[How Early Childhood Experiences Affect Lifelong Health and Learning](#)” with Jack P. Shonkoff, MD, Director of the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2020).



For decades, most political discussions about families have avoided consideration of the needs of children as well as the related issue of parents' time together with their children. At a White House Conference on Infant and Child Development (1997), President Bill Clinton asked: “What specific types of experiences are most important and how much of each of them is necessary?” In response, highly-respected children's doctors and researchers T. Berry Brazelton and Stanley I. Greenspan co-authored *The Irreducible Needs of Children: What Every Child Must Have to Grow, Learn and Flourish*. The doctors explained: “We have set out to identify the very most basic needs, the kinds of care without which children cannot grow, learn, and thrive. [...] Yet by spelling out these needs, it becomes clear that at present our society is failing many of its families and small children. As physicians deeply committed to the well-being of children, we can no longer stand by with the complacency that silence implies.”

The first of the seven needs described by Brazelton and Greenspan—the need for ongoing nurturing relationships—has enormous effects on emotional, social, cognitive and physical development.

*“Virtually every area of women’s reproductive and caregiving lives has been distorted by the fear that if we admit the importance of having and caring for children, we somehow risk losing our opportunities, our freedom, and even our dignity as persons.”*

- Daphne de Marneffe, PhD



# Parents' well-being

*In order for parents to nurture their children, they themselves must be nurtured*



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*Parenting: like the unending rehearsal, under ever-changing circumstances, of a particularly complex task.*

- Alice van der Pas, PhD

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As developmental psychologist and parent educator Harriet Heath says, our very language has limitations that make it difficult to talk about what it is that parents do: "The English language does not have words that combine an emotional feeling component with a cognitive thoughtful one." Philosopher Jean Kazez points out: The parent grows with the child and the job of parenting changes as the child changes; each parent faces the challenge of wrestling with his/her unique puzzle over work- family conflict and the meaning of a "good life" (and repeats this challenging task periodically).

Families are diverse; there are many caregiving and income-earning strategies. Far too many mothers and fathers face difficult circumstances: They are too isolated, don't spend enough time with their infant, don't have others helping to care for the infant, and have inadequate economic resources. We're working to improve conditions for all parents. We hope you join us! Our grassroots nonprofit organization offers parents affirmation, information and advocacy.

## **Our online Family and Home Community: [family-and-home-network.mn.co](http://family-and-home-network.mn.co)**

brings together mothers and fathers who forgo or cut back on paid employment in order to spend generous amounts of time with their children. It's a place to ask questions, share ideas and resources, and explore thoughts and feelings.

Our community also offers the opportunity to join us in advocating for at-home parenting in a society that tends to overlook the micro- and macro-benefits of this choice. We invite you to initiate and join conversations about family topics in culture, media, and politics.

**Thriving at Home workshops:** a focused, 6-week online discussion-based workshop for mothers and fathers who have cut back on paid employment (by choice or circumstance), as well as parents who are considering doing so, in order to spend more time at home with their children. For parents who want to explore ideas, feelings, and experiences and learn about tools and resources. The workshops and all materials are free. Eight to 12 participants and a facilitator meet via video conferencing for 90 minutes once a week for 6 weeks.

[www.familyandhome.org](http://www.familyandhome.org)

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