Parent-Child Communication and its Perceived Effects on the Young Child's Developing Self-Concept

Assoc. Prof Dr. Azizi Hj Yahaya
Faculty of Education
University Technology Malaysia

Abstract: The modern family is becoming stretched, due to the fast pace of living, stres, and time constraints that can impact on the quality of parent-child interactions. (Mustard & McCain:39,Bornstein,n.d.). In addition, the traditional autocratic parenting style is being challenged due to society's move towards a more democratic style of parenting. As parents only want the best for their children, this shift has caused further stress and confusion as their parenting role and to what is expected by society. As a consequence of society's high expectations, parents "feel concerned and often their worry is passed on to the children" who is turn may " have very high expectations of themselves and become extremely tense and frightened of failure" (Roe,1999:20).

(Key words: self-confidence, high expectation, autocratic parenting style)

1.1   Introduction

Self-confidence (high self-esteem) leads to success. On the other hand, when children think they cannot do anything right, they are afraid to try new things. They expect to fail. They avoid new challenges, so they never learn that they can do things. Their confidence never gates a chance to develop. The responses of parents and other adults have a powerful affect on children's action. Adult reactions actually teach children how competent of incompetent they are.

1.2   The Self-Concept In Developing Young Children

The self-concept is our sense of self. The content of our self-concept is our knowledge of what we have been and done. Its function is to guide us in deciding what to be done in the future. Our self-concept, then helps us to understand ourselves and also to control or regulate our behavior (Markus & Nurius, 1984). How do children develop these complementary aspects of the self-concept ?

1.3   Self-Recognition And Self-Definition In Children

At about age 3, children think of themselves mostly in terms of externals – what they look like, where they live, what they do (Some people never progress beyond this level, defining themselves even as adults by the image in the mirror, the work they do, and the neighborhood they live in). Not until about age 6 or 7 do children begin to define themselves in psychological terms.

With self-definition, children develop a concept of who they are (the real self) and also of who they would like to be (the ideal self). By the time they achieve this growth in self-understanding, young children have made significant progress form parental control toward increasing self-regulation.

The ideal self incorporates many of the "should" and "ought" children have learned and helps them control their impulses for the sake of being considered "good". A large gap between a child's real self and ideal self is usually a sign of maturity and social adjustment (Maccoby,1980). Children who set high standards for themselves seem aware of the differences between what they are and what they would like to be, and working toward the goal of the ideal self helps children mature.

1.4 Self-Regulation In Children

Children are now able to do more than they could earlier. They also have more responsibilities, homework, chores, and rules at home and at school, and perhaps some care of younger brothers and sisters. Children begin to regulate their behavior not only to get what they need and want but also to meet other people's needs and wants. As children internalize society's behavioral standards and values, they coordinate personal and social demands. Now they voluntarily do things that at an earlier age they would not have done without prodding.

As they strive to become functioning members of society. They must:

a. *Expand their self-understanding* – to reflect other people's perceptions, needs, and expectations. They have to learn what it means to be a friend or a teammate.

b. *Learn more about how society works* – about complex relationships, roles, and rules. A child comes to realize, for example, that his or her own mother had a mother, and that the same person can be nice at one moment and mean at another.

c. *Develop behavioral standards* – standards that are both personally satisfying and accepted in society. This is sometimes hard, since children belong to two societies – that of the peer group and that of adults – which sometimes have conflicting standards.

d. *Manage their own behavior*. As children take responsibility for their own actions, they must believe that they can behave according to both personal and social standards, and they must develop the skills and strategies to do it.

1.5   Self-Esteem In Children

As Erikson (1950), among others, points out, middle childhood is an important time for the development of self-esteem. A   positive self-image or self-evaluation. Children compare their real selves and their ideal selves, and judge themselves by how well they measure up to the social standards and expectations they have taken into their self-concept and by how well they perform.

Coppersmith (1967), concluded that parents base their self-image on four criteria:

(a)   Significance -   the extent to which they feel loved and approved of by

people important to them.

(b)   Competence - In performing tasks they consider important.

(c)   Virtue – Attainment of moral and ethical standards.

(d)   Power – The extent to which they influence their own lives and the lives

Of others.

The parents of the child with good self-image tended to have an authoritative parenting style. They loved and accepted their child and made strong demands for academic performance and good behavior. They showed respect and allowed individual expression. They defined and enforced limits, replying more on reinforcements than on punishment. Furthermore, they themselves had high self-esteem and led active rewarding lives.

Parents who are both democratic and strict help their children in several ways, Coppersmith believes. By setting clear, consistent rules, they let children know what behavior is expected of them. Knowing what to expect helps children gain internal control; as they function within rule systems, they earn to consider the demands of the outside works. And children of demanding parents know that their parents believe in their ability to meet demands – and care enough to insist that they do.

It makes sense that parents' treatment of their children affects the children's feelings about themselves and yet there is another way to look at the relationship between parenting & children's self-esteem. Children with high self-esteem may have characteristics that encourage their parents to be loving, firm, and democratic. Children who are self-confident, cooperative, and competent are easy to bring up. Thus we see children – how they continually influence each other.

1.6   Styles Of Child Rearing

There is much doubt as to how different styles of child rearing might influence the development of child's personality. Thus, we do not really know whether the psychological development of children is affected either by feeding method. (breast feeding versus bottle feeding)

1.7   Parent Child Relationship

Given the intimate, protracted and highly influential nature of parents relationships with their children, it seems obvious that the quality of such relationship, the power and reach of early experiences must have a vital bearing on the development of the child's personality and general adaptation.

Another useful source of information a boned childcare and development is the research carried out in prosocial (socially acceptable) behavior in children. The major factors that foster prosocial personality attributer are:

(1) Parental affection and nurturance

(2) Parental control (setting limits)

(3) Consistency in child care and training

(4) The use of reasoning in disciplinary encounters. (So called inductive methods)

(5) Modeling

(6) Giving children especially adolescents and response suability

The kinds of parent attempts to direct children activities situations parent should encourage verbal give and take and share the reasoning behind their policy with their children.

1.8 Understanding The Children Development

As parents are the primary socializes of their children, especially in the first five years, they feel responsible for ensuring that their child measures up to societal, cultural, familial and parental expectations (Bigner, 1994; Gonzalez-Mena, 1993; Miller, 1990). Parent has a major influence on the child's cognitive, social, emotional and physical development. They are the role models from whom children imitate and learn about themselves, their family and the community they live in (Marion, 1999). The five main aims of socialization are the first one being to help children develop a healthy self-concept.

Another important aim was to ensure children are taught social skills-manners: and technical skills-necessary for children to learn in order to function effectively as adults.

1.9 Authoritarian Parenting Style

Authoritarian parents assign the child the same responsibilities as adults " (Scarr, Weinberg & Levine). The Authoritarian parenting style has a high level of demanding ness but a low level of responsiveness, and is generally associated with poorer developmental outcomes for the child. (Daniel et al. 1999; Marion, 1999; Bornstein, n.d). The authoritarian parent values tradition and order, thus viewing obedience and

conformity as virtues. When the child's actions conflict with the parent's ideas of proper conduct, the child is punished in whatever way the parent sees fit (Barakat & Clark 1999). These parents set " too many arbitrary" limits & demand that the child unquestioningly accept their decisions (Marion, 1996:63). As verbal give and take is discouraged, the child's opinion is not considered.

The Authoritative parenting style is associated with a high level of both demanding ness & responsiveness, and is viewed as providing the optimal emotional climate for the child's growth and development (Daniel et al. 1999). Authoritative parents set limits and standards for behavior that is developmentally appropriate. Expectations for desired behavior are clearly communicated, and whilst the authoritative parent is warm and nurturing, they use power to achieve the control seen as necessary in guiding and monitoring the child's activities & behavior (Marion 1999). However, the control of the child is maintained with rational, issue-oriented strategies as the aim of the authoritative parent is to promote the child's autonomy whilst also ensuring conformity to group standards (Marion, 1995).

As part of their communicative strategies, parents use reasoning, negotiation and suggestions that rely on persuasion, and not force, to gain a child's cooperation. The child is given choices and encouraged to make decisions and taught responsibility by having to accept the natural & logical consequences of their choices / decisions thus empowering the child (Barakat & Clark, 1999; Porter, 1997; Miller, 1990). As verbal give & take is accepted & the child is opinion is respected and valued, it enables a "Win2" situation in the parent-child problem-solving process (Marion, 1999; Gonzalez – Mena, 1993; Gordon, 1970).

Overall, the parent-child relationship is mutually accommodating & based on reciprocity. This healthy parent-child micro system produces a positive emotional climate as the quality of interactions and nurturance is high and expectation realistic, creating developmental opportunity for the child (Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992). As this style of parenting provides a balance between control and independence it is likely to produce a child who is competent, socially responsible, self-assured, and independent (Gonzalez-Mena 1993). It is in this positive emotional climate that the child can develop high self-esteem & a positive self-concept.

1.10   Permissive Parent

Permissive parent is passive and grants all power to the child so in a 'Win-lose' situation the child wins (Gonzalez-Mena, 1993: Garbarina & Abramowitz, 1992). However, their child remains dissatisfied as if it 'uncomfortable o be out of control' so the child places a lot of energy into controlling their parent and trying to get their parent to control them'. This parent-child microsystems fails the child due to reciprocity, as the indifferent parent ' staves the child of emotional sustenance'.

Like the authoritarian parenting style, this permissive style creates a negative emotional climate where the child's psychological needs are not met, making the child 'vulnerable to being easily discouraged by everyday problems and turns the child away from full and satisfying participation in the world'. Thus, posing developmental risk to the child by hindering the development of social competence, high self-esteem and a positive self-concept. The possible outcomes for the child are inability to handle

frustration, difficulty in accepting responsibility, social / emotional immaturity, dependency, and lack of self-control and self-reliance (Barakat & Clark, 1999; Gonzalez-Mena, 1993).

Thus, according to smith (1998:1) effective parenting, no matter what parenting style is adopted, 'must be the first priority; and effective parenting is built on communication…and that…planned, ongoing communication is the crucial missing link in many families'. As parent are the major influence in the child's life, optimum development in early childhood is thus largely dependent on the parent's knowledge of how children think and learn. Following an ecological approach this level of knowledge can be influenced by the information parent receive from a varying array of societal and family inputs.

However, effective communication is a two-ways social interaction so it is not just important to understand the impact of parent's understanding of child development but also the mechanisms the child in understanding what the parent is communicating to them.

1.11   Child's Construction Of Knowledge

Through social interaction, the child learns to guide and direct his or her won learning and behavior using private speech. Eventually, this private speech is intern used to become silent inner speech and thought.

At this level (kindergarten to early to primary) of literacy development the child is forming basic concepts of print and starts to experiment with reading and writing. (Smith et al,1981;Berk, 1996). Thus, parent's goals and expectations for young children's

achievement in reading and writing should be developmentally appropriate and with sufficient adult support. This means that parents need to firstly understand and accept that children at this level do not use conventional forms of spelling.

Secondly, that parents can best encourage the young child's attempts by providing meaningful, literacy-rich experiences in the context of everyday routines, activities and play where the children are free to experiences and learn all kinds of things. Thus, the parent's role is one of "supporting, guiding and facilitating development and learning as opposed to the traditional view of teaching "as transmission of knowledge in children development.

1.12   The Importance Of Self Concept In The Child Development

The importance of positive early childhood experiences is emphasized, as it is between the ages of two and six that a child begins to form and develop self-concept (Demoulin 1999:4)

In early childhood, the child's development self-concept is largely influenced by "parental evaluations, interests, and expectations" (Hattie, 1992:189). Thus, parents pay a critical role in promoting a healthy self-concept. One way to promote its development is to give positive feedback to the child. "Feedback is probably among the most powerful modifiers of one's self-concept". According to Marion (1999;171) by giving meaningful feedback that focuses on the things that a child has done well helps the child to recognize his or her own competence,

As a child's view of him/herself develops in a social context, it is through positive feedback that the child develops a realistic view that competence is earned and with it comes confidence and motivation. The child requires a warm and friendly environment with supportive adults who adopt an authoritative parenting style. "Authoritative adults have a clear communication style. They deliver messages simply, kindly, firmly and consistently". This approach has been closely linked to children displaying qualities such as "higher levels of compliance…helpfulness, and cooperation, and to lower levels of aggression"

1.13   If Parents Given Negative Feedback – What Effect?

Basically, constant negative feedback is detrimental to the child's social, emotional and congruities development (Porter, 1997). Thus, a positive and nurturing environment and experiences is crucial to healthy neurological development in the child.

The underdevelopment and destruction of neural pathways can occur when the child's environment and experience are lacking, negative or stressful. (Milne, 1999: 11)

Actually, the negative feedback given, through the use of this phrase, how many times have I told you ? Can erect "roadblocks" in the child's mind, as the message sent is one of judgments, blame and critics for failing to meet expectations. If used often enough the child eventually becomes "parent deaf" as the child perceives the parents as lecturing, scolding, threatening or moralizing. (Birch 1999 : 41 & Balson, 1994 : 163). The child who has been exposed to ongoing negative feedback withdraws and stops communicating with their parent. The parents use of negative labels and put-downs when interacting

with a child presents development risk will leads to grow the child into a negative self-concept.

1.14   Parental Communication And Expectation

Patterns of interactions among family members become a model for the child as he/she learns about ways of communicating in personal relationships. The child learns about authority, feelings, closeness and distance between parent and child.

Sound parent-child relationships are based on effective communication that is friendly and respectful in manner (Smith, 1998, Balson, 1994).

Furthermore, parents, should communicate with their child either by sitting low or kneeling, making eye contacts and emphasized the importance of positive responses such as smiles and interest and of course by concentrating or paying attention on the child activity.

Balson (1994) also claimed that effective communication between parents and children is a two-way process involving listening and expressing. To listen effectively that parent needs to give the child their undivided attentions, notice the child's feelings and the words used and actively neglects on what is being conveyed.

1.15   Conclusion

As parents are main role models, especially in their early childhood, they are in the best position to influence their children for the better. However, the care giving style parents adopts and what they consider to be appropriate behaviors are influenced by past experiences tradition, culture and community. All children need a supportive and

friendly environment where caring adults interact with them, using positive communications based on respect, reciprocity and warmth. The development of the child must be foremost in the minds of educators and parents as well as by care giving is the best method in helping young children to develop a healthy self-concept. Both parents play an important role to develop his or her child development by paying attention and understanding their actions and behaviors with highly moral support towards their growing progress in future.

Bibliography

Balson, M. (1994). *Becoming better parents*. 4th ed. Melbourne: ACER.

Barakat, I.S., & Clark, J.A. (1999). *Positive discipline and child guidance* [on-line].
Available WWW:
http://muextension.missouri.edu/xplor/hesguide/humanrel/gh6119.htm
[25.3.2000].

Berk, L.E. (1996). *Infants, children and adolescents*. 2nd ed. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Bigner, J. (1994). Perspectives on the parenting process: Family systems theory. In
Parent-Child Relations (4th ed.). New York: Macmillan Publishing Co.

Birch, K. (1999). *Positive parenting: The absolute guide to rearing children*. Milson's
Point: NSW: Random House.

Bornstein, M.H. (n.d.). *Refocusing on parenting* [on-line]. Available WWW:
http://parenthood.library.wisc.edu/Bornstein/Bornstein.html [26.3.2000]

Clark, R. (1999). *The Victorian parent centre* [on-line]. Available WWW:
http://www.robertclark.net/communityservices/990602napt.htm [26.3.2000]

Daniel, B., Wassell, S., & Gilligan, R. (1999). *Child development for child care and
protection workers*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Demoulin, D. (1999). A personalized development of self-concept for beginning readers.
In *Education*, 120 (1), 14-26.

Garbarino, J., & Abramowitz, R. (1992). Sociocultural risk and opportunity. In J. Garbarino (Ed.), *Children and families in the social environment* (pp. 38-63). New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Gonazalez-Mena, J. (1993). *The child in the family and the community*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

Gordon, T. (1970). *Parent effectiveness training*. New York: Plume.

Hattie, J. (1992). *Self-concept*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Maccoby, E. (1980). *Social development*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Markus, H., & Nurius, P.S. (1994). *Self-understanding and self –regulation in minddle childhood*. In W.A.Collins(Ed.), Development during middle childhood: The years from six to twelve. Washington, Dc: National Academy.

Marion, M. (1999). *Guidance of young children*. 5th ed. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc.

Marion, M. (1995). *Guidance of young children*. 4th ed. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc.

Miller, D.F. (1990) *Positive child guidance*. New York: Delmar Publishers Inc.

Mulvaney, A. (1995). *Talking with kids: How to improve communication and your relationship with your children*. East Roseville, NSW: Simon & Schuster Australia.

Mustard & McCain. (1999). *Early years study* [on-line]. Available WWW: http://www.childsec.gov.on.ca

Porter, L. (1997). *Children are people too: A parent's guide to young children's behaviour*. 2nd ed. South Australia: Louise Porter.

Roe, D. (1999, Autumn). Assessment: Stress for parents & children. *Every Child,* 5 (1), 20.

Smith, B. (1998*). Communication: The key to successful families* [on-line]. WWW: http://www.family.go.com/Features/family_1998_09/iowa98talk/iowa98talk.html [27.3.2000].

Smith, P.K.; Cowie, H., & Blades, M. (1998). *Understanding children's development*. 3rd ed. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.