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AUTHOR Price, Jean B., II
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ABSTRACT

This position paper surveys recent study results on the variable effects of both socioeconomic status and parent-child relationships on the development of competence in young children. Research results imply that certain ways that parents interact with their children are more effective than others in aiding the development of a child's social, intellectual, and language abilities. In this connection, an overview and analysis of the Harvard Preschool Project study of the development of competence in young children is presented. Discussion centers around the following questions: Do the characteristics of competence occur in the same sequence in children of different cultures? Are these characteristics dependent on internal developmental structures similar to those that have been theoretically described by Jean Piaget? How much attention should be given to studying the existence and importance of critical periods? Should parenthood be a licensed profession requiring special preparation? And how much influence should the state exercise in the family life of its citizens? (Author/CS)

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ABSTRACT

This position paper surveys recent study results on the variable effects of both socioeconomic status and parent-child relationships on the development of competence in young children. The Harvard Preschool Project has been a significant contributor to the literature in this area.

It is the writer's position that a major effort needs to be undertaken on a national level to develop and implement a variety of parent education programs that will help fill the current need that parents feel for information about optimal child-rearing techniques.

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The Development of Competence in Young Children:
A Function of Parenting Styles

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INTRODUCTION

Psychologists are continuing to develop various theoretical positions with regard to the ways in which a young child's mind may grow and develop. New positions concerned with the acquisition and use of knowledge and diverse skills in young children have been constructed on both developmental and social learning foundations. It is the intention of this writer to survey the notions and indications of some representative research-based positions in this area, and then draw from these studies the implications for parenting styles. It is the belief of this writer, based upon the indications of numerous studies, that certain ways that parents interact with their children are better than others toward the end of the optimal development of the child's social, intellectual and language competence. Consequently, a large portion of this paper will be given to the overview and analysis of the Harvard Preschool Project study of the development of competence in young children.

The director of the Project, Burton White, has stated that the development of competence in children is primarily a result of the interaction that takes place between the child and his environment. Such a point of view can take firm support from the theory of development described by Jean Piaget. During the life of the human and especially during the first twelve years, changes in the mental functioning of an individual take place. Piaget has looked at the sequence of the development of logical thought processes and tried

to determine how knowledge about the world and ways to use that information are acquired by the human being.

In the infant period Piaget has looked at the emerging sensory and motor abilities, and how the direct activity of the infant underlies and permits the formation of higher levels of cognitive functioning. In this conception, development is a continuous, sequential process dependent upon the interaction of the organism with its environment.

Piaget is not directly concerned with the influence of the parent-child interaction on learning or with the educational problems of the disadvantaged. He does comment tangentially in Schwebel (1973) upon the forementioned aspects of development by defining certain factors of development. Among these factors are concerns such as, Is the organism maturing according to norms of development? Is there sufficient opportunity for interaction with a variety of real objects in the environment? Are opportunities for interaction with persons other than the parents possible and in a variety of circumstances?

The Harvard Preschool Project has attempted to determine the major factors in a child's environment which contribute to his development by focusing attention on the child's first six years of life at home. White has indicated that up until the age of eighteen months, all children behave in similar ways regardless of the quality of care they receive or variety of interactions they experience.

However, after eighteen months and especially through thirty-six months, differences between children as a result of experiences and subsequent skill development, become apparent with an ever-increasing gap developing between the competent, or successful, and the less competent children.

Some questions that the content of this paper could suggest are: Do the characteristics of competence occur in the same sequence in children of different cultures? Are these characteristics dependent upon internal developmental structures similar to those that have been theorized by Jean Piaget? How much attention should be given to studying the existence and importance of critical periods? Should parenthood be a licensed profession requiring special preparation? Finally, underlying many of these questions is the ethical concern of how much influence the state should exercise in the family life of its citizens.

A review of the Child Development literature published within the past three years on the development of cognitive, social and language skills in young children, and on the influence and importance of the parent-child interaction, has yielded several indications for the purposes of this paper and of future study.

Results of research can be grossly divided into two groups. The first one including Beckwith, and Birns and Golden, attributes development in the forementioned areas, to the effects of the socio-economic class and its accompanying environment. The second group,

including Olim, identifies the parent-child interaction pattern as the primary influence in the development of the child. It is the writer's opinion that parenting styles are the major factor in the degree of competence that a child will develop, but this influence does not develop in a vacuum. The social matrix in which the parent finds himself has an impact upon the interaction style the parent exhibits in his relationship with his child. For example, variables such as dialect, use and complexity of language, ways of asking and responding to the child's questions, will differ from one sector of society to another depending upon the income bracket, age, ethnic origin and attitudes of the parents.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In studying maternal language styles and children's cognitive growth, Olim (1970) has drawn the conclusion that the language of the mother, regardless of socioeconomic status, is an accurate predictor of the child's later cognitive development. Mothers who tended to use more complex and varied language tended to have more competent children in this cognitive area. The reverse of this finding was indicated in mothers whose language was not expansive. The author drew implications from these results for the development of expansionist language programs, as well as decrease the age of entering school to the childhood years that are critical for the development of this area of cognition.

Beckwith (1971) studied the environmental influences in the intellectual development of infants living with adoptive middle class families. Adoptive mothers were observed in spontaneous interaction in their homes, i.e. attention was paid to such variables as physical contact, verbal interaction, opportunity for baby to explore his environment and people other than the parents, and the adoptive mother's socioeconomic status. No relationship was found to exist between results of intelligence testing and socioeconomic status, but how the mother behaved to her infant did have an influence on results of the Cattell IQ test and on the Gesell Gross Motor Scores. If the infant was spoken to less, touched less, and had less opportunity to

explore, the infant tended to score lower on the various tests. In comparison, infants who received more social experience with people other than the parents had higher scores on the Cattell.

Results of studies by Birns and Golden (1968, 1971) of black children aged twelve, eighteen and twenty-four months from three different socioeconomic levels showed no differences in intellectual performance between the lowest and highest socioeconomic groups on the Binet. A discussion of the results focused upon the importance of language in the development of intelligence, and connected this observation with the language of the parents and the time that the children begin to use language. Children gain their information about the world first-hand, by direct interaction, through the first two years of their lives. During the later portion of this stage, language understanding and usage is developing with an increase in the amount of information that is learned from the parents. It is at this point that the parent's socioeconomic level begins to effect the child's cognitive development.

Birns and Golden (in Schwebel, 1973) do not relate precocity during the first eighteen months of life to later cognitive development. This opinion does change when looking at the next developmental stage. It is indicated that at that time, parental styles of problem solving, question asking and answering, do relate to the child's later success in school. (This view is consistent with that of the Harvard Preschool Project on the effects of parental behaviors

and child development that will be discussed later.)

These same researchers criticize attempts to accelerate sensori-motor development in disadvantaged children. This is supported by previous indications that no significant differences have been found to exist across socioeconomic levels, and therefore infants do not need, nor can they benefit from compensatory enrichment. Differences occur at a later point in development. Any gains in cognitive development that occur during infancy and up until twenty-four to thirty-six months are thought to be of no importance to subsequent development. This writer supports the observations made by Birns and Golden on the importance of "critical periods" in early childhood, but calls attention to the significance of the pattern of parent-child interactions during this time, for later development.

Research conducted by Dewart (1972) on social class and children's understanding of complex language structures has resulted in the findings that there may be social class differences in the rate at which children acquire a mastery of the rules of language. Middle class children make fewer mistakes in understanding and following directions than do lower socioeconomic class children.

Graffar and Corbier (1972) conducted a study in five European countries on the effects of socioeconomic conditions on the growth and development of the child. Examinations of subjects at one, three and five years of age showed that poor physical growth correlated with lower socioeconomic status at all ages. Poor mental development

was correlated with low socioeconomic status at three and five years but did not surface at one year. The authors concluded that social factors have a considerable influence on mental development and that this influence increases with age after the first year.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EARLY CHILD DEVELOPMENT

In 1965, during the laudable but impulsive attempt to bring the Great Society into everyone's reality, Head Start and other compensatory educational programs for young children were begun. Active in the field were Bereiter and Engleman, and Martin Deutsch, among others, who were developing compensatory programs in the areas of cognitive and language skills, and sensory discrimination capacities respectively. Yet, no single study undertook a coordinated examination of several developmental dimensions simultaneously.

The Harvard Preschool Project was also begun in 1965. It was supported by the Office of Education to study the development of overall competence in children who have gotten off to a superb start in their early years. The ultimate goal of the study is, "to produce dependable information on the question of how to raise children so that their basic abilities might develop as well as possible during their first years of life, and thereby maximize their likelihood of success in formal education" (White, 1973). Statements of the effects of various child-rearing practices and experiences will continue to be made available as later phases of the Project's work are developed.

Competence in general means the degree of suitability or proper qualification for a special purpose. In relation to this project, competence is a term used to specifically describe the degree of overall educability that a child develops, (i.e., language,

intelligence, social skills, etc.) that can be brought to bear on any novel or problematic situation.

A major part of the time during the first two years of the project was spent searching the literature and analyzing the scope and complexity of the problem as well as the previously conducted relevant research. It was determined that the question of how to structure early experience so as to assure optimal development remained unanswered. In addition, there were virtually no descriptions of healthy, well-developed six year olds in the combined areas of social, intellectual, and language skills.

As the project staff analyzed the problem, two main options presented themselves. They could jump on the intervention bandwagon and "help" children immediately by developing yet another compensatory program, or they could attempt to enlarge the knowledge base in understanding the laws of optimal development for use with children at a later time. The second option was chosen for the project's direction.

A series of naturalistic observations of parents and children interacting in the home was independently recorded by several observers to collect descriptions of both parent and child behaviors. As the bulk of data accumulated, it was decided that it could be condensed to develop the protocols for assessment of the role of experience in the development of competence.

When it was determined from the observations that very

competent children of three years were quite similar to the very well developed six year old, it was decided that the focus for determining the point in time when the skillful and unskilled child can be identified from one another should be directed at a younger aged child. Eventually, the staff agreed that a divergence in children's skill development can be detected by three years of age, but not until after one year.

A logical next question which then arose was what occurred during the second year of life which contributed to the observed differences in the performances of various children. Two major factors can be identified that affect the course of development: language understanding and usage, and the development of various motor abilities. It seems that it is how the parents, and primarily mothers react to and deal with these emerging skills that determines the direction and extent of future development.

In order to verify the project's notions about what styles of parenting resulted in what type of child, another series of observations was conducted on selected subjects to determine if the identified style of parenting produced the anticipated type child.

Families were chosen on the basis of already having produced one or the other type child and having a one year old in the home: competent and non-competent older children being identified by nearby public schools. Those who became part of the study agreed to have the young child tested mentally and physically, and following successful screening to admit an observer into the home once each week to take minute-by-minute anecdotal records of the parent-toddler interactions for approximately a year in total duration: one-half year during the second year and one-half year during the third year of the child's life.

Results of an analysis of the observation data supported the project's hypothesis that parents with certain attitudes, values and styles of interaction tend to raise children who are similar to themselves in the amount of competence they develop. For example, parents who are generally happy in life, and like doing what they do, who enjoy being around young children in the one to three age range, who are not disturbed by the disarray of household items that exploring children continuously create, who

remove potentially hazardous items from the child's reach rather than constantly saying no, and who believe and know there is great significance in the importance of the child's development of this period tend to raise competent children.

Conversely, parents who are not content with themselves or their occupations, who do not like being with young children, who are fussy housekeepers, who are over-protective or restrictive, and who do not recognize the importance of development during this period of childhood tend to raise less competent children in the same areas of language, social and intellectual skills.

It is apparent to this writer from both the information discussed about the Harvard Preschool Project as well as the other literature reviewed, that the period of time between the the first and second y ars of a child's life is one of great importance for the orientation of all later development. It is also clear that the primary caregiver or parent is the single most important influence during this period of time.

A question of what to do with the growing body of information on parenting styles and their results can be raised at this time. Should information be distributed on a large scale to citizens for the purpose of bringing about a greater uniformity in methods of competence-producing, child-rearing techniques? Or should parents be permitted to continue in the traditional, some good—some bad

methods of gathering information about raising children? In today's complex and changing society, should parents rely only upon sources of information such as other mothers, popular opinion and the like, when results of research-based studies on the raising of competent children are becoming available.

The concern being given to the issue of parents and their skills in working with children is motivated by a consideration of the fact that success in school is a major determinant in the possibility for mobility, job opportunity, earning power, and general success in life, and the fact that the positive achievement of these societal goals is very much affected by the early parent-child relationship.

This writer encourages the development and availability of national support for a variety of research-based programs for working with parents of young children, or future parents. Currently operating programs that would fall into this category are the Florida Home-Based Care Project developed by Ira Gordon at the University of Florida at Gainesville, and the Mother-Child Home Program directed by Phyllis Levenstein in Freeport, New York. Both of these have been designed to supply parents with information and training toward the end of developing in them a self-awareness and thoughtful approach to raising their children.

APPENDIX

The following list is a gross categorization of parenting behaviors that were observed and identified as contributors to the quality of the various levels of social, intellectual and language skill in children.

Mothers of Competent Children

- 1) Not much deliberate teaching.
- 2) Little more than 10% undivided attention.
- 3) Skillful in organizing and designing the child's physical environment.
- 4) On-the-fly consultants.
- 5) Provides rich variety of toys.
- 6) Removes harmful elements from environments, so child is safe to explore.
- 7) Pauses with child briefly for explanation, language stimulation, curiosity stimulation.
- 8) Supplies related ideas.
- 9) Encourages child to master tasks he sets for himself.

Mothers of Non-Competent Children

- 1) "Protect" their children.
- 2) Rule many places out-of-bounds.
- 3) Use play pen, high chairs and gates excessively.
- 4) Make children wait too long and often.
- 5) Makes self less available to the child.
- 6) Seldom encourages child to make sense of the world. (i.e.) objects in milk, peek-a-boo when changing diapers.
- 7) Seldom shares enthusiasm for child's activities.

Parents and caregivers will be able to identify some of the behaviors on either list as ones they may occasionally perform. It is not the ones that are occasionally performed, but the ones that consistently form a pattern of interaction with the child that helps shape his developmental direction.

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