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**AUTHOR** Holden, George W.; And Others  
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**ABSTRACT**

Two studies explored mothers' beliefs about the characteristics of effective mothers of preschool-aged children. Study One consisted of interviews of 50 mothers which were designed to generate a pool of characteristics associated with good mothering. Of the 33 characteristics generated, those most frequently mentioned were being loving, patient, and able to provide appropriate discipline. The 33 characteristics, and 40 others found in a review of research, were combined in a questionnaire. In Study Two, 61 mothers, 32 parent educators/counselors who were parents, and 58 non-parent undergraduate students rated the importance of each characteristic on a 7-point Likert-type scale. The 24 qualities which mothers rated as at least "quite important" included "loving," "communicates frequently," "affectionate," and "demonstrates interest in child and child's activities." Mothers and professionals differed on 10 of the ratings. Factor analysis revealed three characteristics of effective mothers: (1) "creation of a nurturant environment"; (2) "child management in a reasoned way"; and (3) "healthy personal and child orientation." Mothers and parenting professionals differed on 14 percent of the items, while parents differed from non-parents on 36 percent. Results suggested that an alternate model of parent characteristics is needed, and that developmental psychologists should investigate parental characteristics which are infrequently studied. (RH)

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**MOTHERS' AND OTHERS' VIEWS ON THE  
QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE PARENTS**

**George W. Holden, Kathy L. Ritchie,  
& Elizabeth A. Sylvester**

**Dept. of Psychology  
University of Texas  
Austin, TX 78712**

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### **Mothers' and others' views of the qualities of effective parents**

**Parental social cognition is becoming an increasingly common topic of inquiry. Recent work has been devoted to investigating parental beliefs, perceptions, and attributions about children (e.g., Sigel, 1985). Yet, attention has not been devoted to assessing what parents themselves think are the essential characteristics of competent parents. This goal is important for understanding parents' views and goals concerning their child-rearing behavior and to compare parents' views with that of psychologists'. Two studies were conducted to investigate this topic.**

#### **Study One**

**Forty-nine middle-class mothers, half of whom were college educated, served as subjects in this study. Most of the mothers (68%) were multiparous. The mothers were asked a series of questions, but the results from only two questions ("What are the characteristics of a good mother?" and "How does one learn to be a good mother?") will be reported here.**

**The mothers generated a total of 33 different characteristics of "good mothers"; most mothers mentioned about four. The most frequently mentioned characteristics included: patient (mentioned by 41% of the mothers), loving (39%), provides discipline (35%), attentive (31%), and understanding (29%). The mothers reported that one learned to be an effective mother primarily through observing others--especially one's own mother (mentioned by 62% of the mothers), own experience (43%), and reading (36%).**

#### **Study Two**

**The results of Study One, in conjunction with a review of the research on parent-child relations (e.g., Maccoby & Martin, 1983), were used to develop a questionnaire consisting of 73 parental characteristics. These characteristics were**

rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale of how important that characteristic was for effective parenting of a preschooler. Six additional adjectives (e.g., physically attractive) not considered to be attributes of effective parenting were included as "anchors" or a check on acquiescence response set.

The questionnaires were filled out by three groups. One hundred mothers were mailed the questionnaire; 61 mothers returned it and formed the maternal group. Of these women, 66% were college educated; 53% worked outside the home. They averaged 36 years old. Group Two consisted of 29 female and 3 male professional parent-educators or counselors (all were parents and college-educated) who had attended a conference on family intervention. Their responses represented a return rate of 27%. These professionals averaged 38 years of age. The third group consisted of 58 non-parent undergraduates (34 were female) who averaged 21 years of age.

After removing the six "anchor" variables, the parents' questionnaires were factor-analyzed using a varimax rotation and a three-factor solution (based on the eigenvalues greater than one).

### Results

Of the 73 characteristics included on the questionnaire, 24 (34%) were rated by the mothers as "Quite Important" (6.0) or higher. The mostly highly rated characteristics were "loving" ( $M = 6.7$ ), "affectionate", "caring" ( $M_s = 6.6$ ), "communicates frequently", "demonstrates interest in child and child's activities" ( $M_s = 6.5$ ). Another 32 characteristics (44%) were rated at least "fairly important". Professionals rated 31% as at least "Quite important" and 47% as "fairly important". Their highest ratings went to "communicates frequently with child", "fosters self-esteem" ( $M_s = 6.5$ ), "caring", "affectionate", and "provides dependable, secure

environment" ( $M_s = 6.3$ ). Non-parents rated 44% as at least "Quite important" and 41% as "fairly important". "Caring", "affectionate", "communicates frequently with child", and "loving" all received the same mean rating ( $M_s = 6.7$ ), followed by "demonstrates interest in child and child's activities" ( $M = 6.6$ ). The subjects did rate the "anchors" as least important; for example, the characteristics of "physically attractive" and "young" were rated as "a little important" ( $M_s = 1.8$  and 2.2, respectively).

Mothers and professionals differed on 10 of the ratings as assessed by  $t$  tests. Professionals rated the characteristics of "adaptable", "allows child to participate", and "encourages mature behavior" as more important than mothers' ratings. Mothers rated "highly principled", "honest", "kind", "loving", "mature" "puts child's needs first" and "has a strong and happy marriage" as more important than the professionals. Because the differences represented only 14% of their ratings, the two groups were combined. When the ratings of the mothers and professionals were compared with the non-parents, 36% of the  $t$  tests indicated a significant difference. See Table 1 for a list of the characteristics, the ratings of the parents (mothers and professionals combined), the non-parents, and which pairs of ratings differed reliably.

When the ratings from all the parents were factor analyzed, a three factor solution was found. The factors, characteristics, and loadings can be found in Table 2. Factor 1, labelled "Creation of a nurturant environment" included such characteristics as caring, warm, responsive, and supportive. This factor accounted for 10.1% of the variance. The second factor was labelled "Child management in a reasoned way" and it accounted for 8.8% of the variance. Characteristics clustering in this factor included adaptable, cooperative, anticipates, calm, and gives child

responsibility. The final factor was labelled "Healthy personal and child orientation" and included characteristics of highly principled, high standards, educates or teaches, and wanted the child. It accounted for 8.6% of the variance.

When the ratings were added together for each factor and then compared across the groups using a MANOVA, the overall test was significant ( $F[6, 278] = 8.82, p < .001$ ). Univariate tests indicated that the groups differed on Factor 3, "Healthy personal and child orientation" ( $F[2, 142] = 9.96, p < .001$ ). Bonferroni tests on Factor 3 indicated that this effect was accounted for by the professionals ( $M = 43.1$ ) who rated those characteristics loading on that factor as lower than did either the maternal ( $M = 47.7$ ) or non-mother ( $M = 50.5$ ) groups. The latter two groups did not differ from each other.

In order to test the reliability of the results, the subjects were divided into two subgroups. Data from the parents from the first subgroup were re-computed in the factor analysis. The same three factor solution was obtained. This factor solution, which only slightly differed from the main analysis, was then used to form factor scores for the second subgroup. A MANOVA was recalculated and again an overall effect was found ( $F[3, 68] = 4.88, p < .01$ ) with a significant univariate result on the third factor ( $F[1, 70] = 12.11, p < .001$ ). In this smaller sample, the second factor also attained significance ( $F[1, 70] = 4.58, p < .05$ ).

### Discussion

The first study served two functions. It provided evidence that mothers were able to generate readily the characteristics of what they considered to be necessary for a good parent, and it generated a pool of items for the second study. Study Two resulted in a number of findings. First, mothers and others are able to differentiate between those items intentionally included as not important and

items that are. Second, mothers rated 78% of the items (a total of 57 characteristics) as at least "fairly important".

When comparing individual ratings, the mothers and the parenting professionals differed on 14% of the items, while the parents differed from the non-parents on 36%. When comparing the mothers, parenting professionals, and non-mothers on the three factors identified, the professionals rated personal and child orientation as less important than either the mothers or the non-mothers. That difference indicates an experiential effect; professionals who have worked with many parents appear to de-value those characteristics that are not as intimately involved in parent-child interaction.

The factor analysis revealed three clusters of characteristics that were related. More confidence for the reliability of this three factor solution is provided by the sub-group replication. In some ways, the first two factors are expansions of previous factors of warmth and control (e.g., Schaefer & Bell, 1958). Warmth is expanded into characteristics related to creating a nurturant environment, while control is extended to the notion of well reasoned child management. This includes such characteristics as consistent and allows freedom but also more cognitive abilities such as anticipates and problem solves (see Holden, 1983).

The findings of this study have two major implications. One implication is that while developmental psychologists have been focusing most of their efforts at assessing qualities of responsivity and sensitivity in mothers of infants, these are only a few of the characteristics that mothers consider to be important. The results suggest psychologists need to examine many other parental characteristics that are rarely found in the current research literature, such as demonstrates interest in child, respects child, accessible, and kind.

The second major implication from this study deals with the model of parents. How can one parent embody all the 57 characteristics that were rated as at least fairly important? This observation calls into question how we conceptualize parental behavior. Are they additive qualities? The indirect evidence provided by this study is that they are not.

We propose that an alternative model of parental characteristics is needed. A static, trait-like approach is not consonant with the data nor with other work. One such model better suited to account for parental characteristics is the dialectical model (e.g., Riegel, 1976). As we have argued elsewhere (Holden & Ritchie, in press), parents face multiple child-rearing dilemmas, both external and internal. External dilemmas include decisions about home vs. daycare, resolving divergent sources of child-rearing advice, and dealing with parenting behavior between a mother and a father. Internal dilemmas are more pervasive and involve conflicts within the individual parent. Examples of a few of the conflicts are: Should a parent be firm or flexible?; Should a parent have appropriate expectations or high standards?; and Should a parent foster independence or constantly monitor the child? Even within some of the factors that we identified in this study there exists the suggestion of a dilemma. For example, the second factor of "Child management in a reasoned way", indicates that an effective parent needs to be both consistent but also be adaptable and flexible.

The purpose of these studies was to investigate what mothers and others view as the important characteristics for effective parenting. The results suggest that investigators into parental behavior need to reconsider their conception of parental behavior. Both parents, professionals, and non-parents attributed importance to many more characteristics of parental behavior than have commonly been studied.

The very fact that such a large number of characteristics were rated so highly by the subjects also calls into question how we, as psychologists, view parental characteristics and behavior. A simple additive model of parental qualities (i.e., more is better) is unrealistic. Alternative conceptualizations of parental behavior, such as one that can be provided by the dialectical model, are needed to more fully capture the range and diversity of parental behavior.

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Table 1. Means for parents and non-parents on characteristics important to parenting. (\* denotes a significant difference,  $p < .05$ .)

Characteristic	Parent mean	N-Parent mean	Characteristic	Parent mean	N-Parent mean
loving	6.5	6.7	adaptable	5.6	5.6
communicates frequently	6.5	6.7	sense of humor	5.6	5.1*
affectionate	6.5	6.7	educates	5.5	6.4*
caring	6.4	6.7*	flexible	5.5	5.5
fosters self esteem	6.4	6.3	gives child choices	5.5	5.7
demonstrates interest in child	6.4	6.5	allows participation in decisions	5.4	5.6
provides secure environment	6.3	6.4	provides frequent social stimulation	5.3	5.8*
monitors child's whereabouts	6.3	5.8*	frequently reasons	5.3	5.9*
respects child	6.3	6.3	anticipates, plans ahead	5.3	5.4
responsive to child	6.3	6.4	wanted the child	5.3	5.9*
consistent and follows through	6.2	6.0	cooperative	5.3	5.5
spends quality time with child	6.2	6.4	good at solving child problems	5.3	5.3
accessible	6.2	6.5*	conscientious	5.2	5.9*
cares for child's physical needs	6.2	6.3	has "common sense"	5.2	5.6*
mother is psychologically healthy	6.1	6.4*	correctly identifies causes of child's behavior	5.2	5.0
models appropriate behavior	6.1	6.2	suggests rather than tells	5.2	6.0*
sets appropriate limits	6.1	5.8	allows freedom	5.1	5.0
kind	6.1	6.3	calm, relaxed	5.1	5.5
emotionally involved	6.1	6.4*	has strong, happy marriage	5.0	5.3
values being a mother	6.1	6.3	open minded	5.0	6.0*
encourages discussion of child's feelings	6.1	6.3	highly principled	4.9	5.1
accepting	6.0	6.0	firm, enforces	4.8	5.0
supportive	6.0	6.4*	encourages mature behavior	4.7	4.8
enjoys motherhood	6.0	6.1	puts child's needs first	4.7	5.5*
empathetic	6.0	6.1	generous	4.7	5.4*
nurturant	6.0	6.1	organized	4.4	5.0*
patient	5.9	6.3*	energetic	4.3	4.6
childproofs home	5.9	5.9	has high standards	4.1	4.4
honest	5.9	6.2	uses rewards, not punishments	4.9	5.1
mother has social supports, friends	5.9	5.7	experienced with children	3.1	3.8*
attentive	5.8	6.2	anchors:		
expectations are appropriate	5.8	5.7	enjoys art & music	3.3	3.7
warm	5.7	6.2*	involved in outdoor activities	3.2	3.9*
gives child responsibility	5.7	5.4	athletic	2.3	3.1*
fosters independence	5.7	5.4	graceful	2.0	3.2*
sensitive	5.7	6.1*	young	1.9	2.7*
mature	5.7	5.9	physically attractive	1.7	2.0

Table 2. Characteristics perceived by mothers to be important to parenting loading on three factors.

<u>Creation of Nurturant Environment</u>	<u>loading</u>	<u>Child Management in a Reasoned Way</u>	<u>loading</u>
caring	.72	allows child to participate	.65
demonstrates interest in child	.71	adaptable	.64
fosters self esteem	.69	allows freedom	.61
accessible	.67	cooperative	.59
responsive to child's needs	.65	anticipates, plans ahead	.55
warm	.65	gives child choices	.55
supportive	.64	encourages mature behavior	.54
respects the child	.59	calm, relaxed	.53
nurturant	.58	gives child responsibility	.51
affectionate	.53	flexible	.50
emotionally involved	.52	sensitive	.49
sets appropriate limits	.51	childproofs home	.47
provides secure environment	.42	communicates frequently	.46
sense of humor	.41	good at solving problems	.46
		fosters independence	.43
		consistent, follows through	.42
		expectations are appropriate	.39
<u>Personal and Child Orientation</u>			
highly principled		.73	
educates or teaches		.59	
has high standards		.58	
has "common sense"		.57	
has strong, happy marriage		.52	
frequently uses reasoning		.49	
wanted the child		.47	
spends quality time with the child		.42	
puts child's needs first		.39	