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Review

Parenting in context: Revisiting Belsky's classic process of parenting model in early childhood

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ABSTRACT

Jay Belsky's process of parenting model, published in 1984, continues to be widely referenced within the scientific literature. The main premise of this model is that parenting is multiply determined and is influenced by characteristics of the parent, child, and social context. In this review, we survey the theoretical and empirical literature that has accumulated related to the model within the past 30 years, with a focus on interactions among contextual factors and the applicability of the process model to the parenting of fathers. Specifically, we review in depth the domains of parental personality, parental depression, child negative emotionality, and marital quality, with more concise overviews of literature covering parental developmental history and social support. In line with Belsky's original article, we focus on predictors of parenting during infancy and the early childhood period (i.e., birth to 5 years). Although in many ways the process model has stood the test of time and continues to be supported empirically, we recommend ways the model could be expanded based on updated current theory and research on the process of parenting in early childhood.

Introduction

In 1984, Jay Belsky published a manuscript outlining his process of parenting model, a theory that has become classic among parenting and family psychologists, with over 4400 citations in the scientific literature (Fig. 1). According to Belsky's model, parenting is multiply determined and is influenced by characteristics of the parent, characteristics of the child, and characteristics of the family's social context. Within each of these broad domains, Belsky posited links between specific predictors and parenting behavior: in the parent characteristics domain, Belsky highlighted the importance of parental personality and parental psychological functioning (i.e., depression). In the child characteristics domain, Belsky focused on difficult temperament (i.e., negative emotionality), and in the social context domain, Belsky reviewed parents' work habits, sources of parental social support, and marital relationship quality. Despite its widespread acceptance and frequent reference, empirical support for this model at the time of its publication was minimal and non-specific. Although theoretically innovative and well-grounded, validation of its primary tenets was limited by the lack of quality research on parenting. Belsky himself noted that "most of the available research is based on non-experimental and correlational studies [on abuse and neglect] (Belsky, 1984, p. 84)." Over the past three decades, however, research on predictors of parenting behavior has blossomed—no doubt in part because of Belsky's integrative model for the field—increasing in complexity, specificity, and scientific rigor. Thus, the purpose of the current review is to revisit Belsky's classic model, reconsidering it in the context of the empirical and theoretical literature that has successively grown around the 1984 paper. After reviewing the literature related to contextual predictors of parenting proposed by Belsky, we offer an updated process of parenting model based on the current

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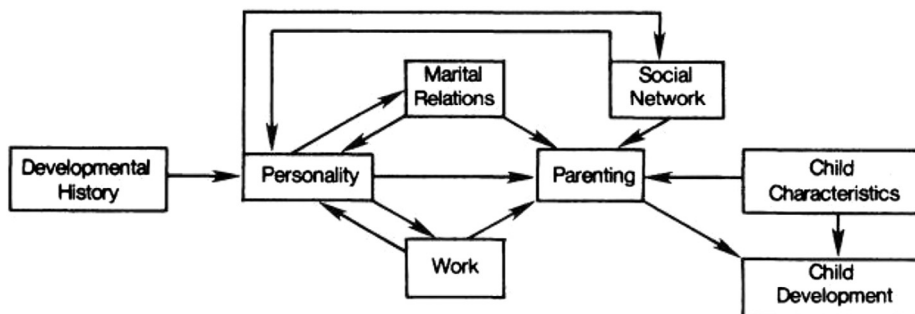


Fig. 1. Jay Belsky's (1984) Model.

literature. Although this review does not take the form of a meta-analysis, meta-analytic findings are incorporated whenever possible in reviewing links between Belsky's predictors and early childhood parenting, and will be noted throughout the document.

Early childhood parenting

Although parenting can be conceptualized and measured in a variety of ways, both Belsky and the majority of researchers in the field think about parenting in terms of two broad domains: positive and negative. 'Positive parenting' is an umbrella term used to refer to dimensions of parenting such as warmth, sensitivity, limit setting, appropriate scaffolding, and contingency-based reinforcement (Bradley & Corwyn, 1999; Waller et al., 2015). 'Negative parenting,' in turn, refers to parenting behaviors that are inconsistent, over-reactive, controlling, and especially, harsh (Chang, Schwartz, Dodge, & McBride-Chang, 2003; Lovejoy, Graczyk, O'Hare, & Neuman, 2000). A variety of measures can be used to capture positive and negative parenting, with the most popular methods being self-report and observations in a lab or in the home. Importantly, for both observational and questionnaire- and interview-based measures, as well as diaries and Q-sort-based procedures (Block, Block, & Morrison, 1981), parenting that is low in positivity and high in negativity has been consistently linked to a variety of negative child outcomes, including lower levels of social competence, academic achievement, and emotion regulation abilities, as well as elevated levels of internalizing and externalizing behavior problems. Conversely, using multiple methods, parenting that is sensitive and positive has been linked to adaptive child outcomes across these same domains (Belsky & Fearon, 2002; Dishion et al., 2008; Leerkes, Blankson, & O'Brien, 2009). Parenting takes place over many years of a child's life, from birth to toddlerhood, the early school-age years, middle childhood, adolescence, emerging adulthood, and often, well into adulthood, and research has supported the importance of parenting for child outcomes across each of these developmental phases (Barber, Maughan, & Olsen, 2005; Crnic, Gaze, & Hoffman, 2005; Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). In thinking about parenting throughout development, a particularly strong case can be made for the importance of parenting during early childhood. Associations between parenting and child outcomes are stronger in early childhood compared to later developmental periods, likely because of young children's greater physical and psychological dependence on their caregivers during this developmental stage (Barnett, 1995; Landry, Smith, Swank, & Guttentag, 2008; Lovejoy, Graczyk, O'Hare, & Neuman, 2000; Shaw & Bell, 1993). It is worth noting that mounting evidence suggests that adolescence also represents a "critical period" for parenting and child outcomes (Dishion, Nelson, & Bullock, 2004; Eccles, Templeton, Barber, & Stone, 2003) and there is high value in continued research in this area (for a review, see Steinberg & Morris, 2001). However, we have chosen to limit the scope of the review to early childhood (birth to five years) based on the high volume of research on early childhood parenting; strong associations among contextual factors, early childhood parenting, and child outcomes; and the focus of Belsky's original manuscript, which largely considered parenting in the early childhood period.

Societal shifts in the process of parenting

Since the publication of Belsky's process of parenting model in the 1980s, there have been significant societal changes in terms of family structure and caregiving roles. These include a larger percentage of children being raised by single parents, non-married romantic partners, step-parents, and same-sex couples, as well as a higher percentage of racially- and ethnically-blended families (Pew Research Center, 2014). Perhaps most strikingly, fathers have taken on more active—and at times, primary—caregiving roles, and are increasingly recognized as being important contributors to their children's development (Lewis & Lamb, 2003). A recent survey found that although on average, mothers continue to take on the majority of caregiving responsibilities, fathers' reported time spent doing childcare-related activities has tripled since 1965 (from 2.5 to 7 h per week; Pew Research Center, 2015). Further, according to 2011 census data, one in five U.S. fathers of preschoolers is regarded as the primary caregiver for his child. To his credit, Belsky was ahead of his time in touching on the role of fathers in his 1984 manuscript. However, there was little that could be said about the topic in the absence of academic studies on, or even theoretical interest in, fathering. Research on paternal parenting, while still substantially limited compared to research on mothers, has burgeoned within the past two decades, and has indicated that—similar to findings for mothers—the parenting of fathers is subject to contextual influence and has a significant impact on child outcomes (Amato & Rivera, 1999; Lipscomb et al., 2011; Prinzie, Stams, Deković, Reijntjes, & Belsky, 2009; Wilson & Durbin, 2010).

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