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The Parent-Child Relationship - Chapter 4 from "Christianity and Developmental Psychopathology: Foundations and Approaches"

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The Parent-Child Relationship

Winston Seegobin

DEFINITION AND STUDY OF PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

I was recently tucking our younger son into bed when he indicated that he wanted to talk with me about something. He mentioned that in the past there were knights, American Indian warriors and Samurais who protected people and nations. He wanted to be like Walker, the Texas Ranger, whose reruns we had been watching. He wanted to know why there are not people like these around anymore. I mentioned that the world had changed and we now have armies and soldiers to protect us. At that point, he turned and looked at me and said, "Dad, I would like to become a policeman." As I listened to him, pictures of the dangers and threats of being a police officer came to my mind. What he was saying began to affect me, and my fears got the better of me. I shared with him the safety issues involved with being a police officer, tried to discourage him from this aspiration, and reminded him that he had once said he wanted to be a neurologist and could serve people through this profession. As I left his room, I could sense his disappointment in my response to him. Later that night, as I pondered what he had said to me, I realized that I had completely missed the point of that important conversation. I wept as I realized that I had allowed my fears to influence a powerful conversation with my son about his desire "to protect and serve" with honor. He wanted to be a knight, a warrior, and I could not see beyond my desires and dreams for him. I had missed an opportunity to hear his heart.

Our conversation that night illustrates the importance of the parent-child relationship as well as its reciprocal nature. I was trying to be the good parent

and listen to his desires while imparting my wisdom. I was affected by his desires and thoughts that made me fearful as a parent and emotionally moved by how I had missed what he was trying to communicate with me. I had been in the role of the authoritarian parent (“I know what is good for you”), and he helped me to become instead the authoritative, humble and teachable parent (“you share what you think is good for me, we discuss it, and you support me”).

The parent-child relationship is one of the most significant relationships that a child will experience; it is also impactful for parents. Its influence goes beyond childhood and affects development into adulthood, including marital relationships (Lamb & Lewis, 2011; Seegobin, Reyes, Hostler, Nissley & Hart, 2007). As such, an understanding of the ways in which both children and parents are affected by this relationship is pertinent. In Scripture, parents are encouraged to not exasperate their children (Eph 6:4), and children are exhorted to be obedient to their parents (Eph 6:1-2). When these two principles are practiced in the parent-child relationship, a more harmonious and healthy relationship develops, resulting in children who behave in ways that honor their parents and parents who treat their children with love and respect. Bunge (2001a) notes that both Luther and Calvin encouraged parents about their responsibility for their children’s moral and spiritual formation. She also observes that Schleiermacher “urges parents to build trust in their relationships with children by taking their concerns and interests seriously, by responding empathically to their needs, and by resisting the temptation to live out their dreams and aspirations through their children” (p. 22). We are also encouraged in Scripture to see children as gifts from God and persons in their own right, which influences how we treat them, relate to them and invest in them.

Parenting is a very important concept in the Bible. Parents are instructed to take care, including spiritual care, of their children. Our relationship with God is sometimes seen as a metaphor for the relationship between a parent and a child. In Matthew 7:11, Jesus said that if we know how to give good gifts to our children, how much more will our Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him. Here, the Gospel writer is using the principle of good parenting, exemplified through the giving of good gifts to our children, to illustrate God’s even greater goodness toward us. The assumption is that good parents are generous and kind toward their children.

The relationship between parents and children has been studied extensively, and there is an abundance of literature on the influence of parents on children.

Many of these studies have examined the impact of parenting styles on child outcomes (Kerr, Stattin & Ozdemir, 2012; Erath, El-Sheikh, Hinnant & Cummings, 2011). Other studies have examined early attachment styles and their impact on child development and security (Prior & Glaser, 2006; Rosen & Rothbaum, 2003). Fewer studies have examined the impact of children on parents (Boyatzis & Janicki, 2003; Kuczynski, 2003). Developmental psychopathology makes important contributions toward better understanding the bidirectional aspects of the relationship (Cicchetti, 2006; Cicchetti & Howes, 1991; Pardini, Fite & Burke, 2008). In this chapter, I will first present models of parent-child relationships. Second, I will look at aspects of normal development. Third, I will examine factors related to the abnormal development of these relationships. Finally, I will discuss integrative themes related to the parent-child relationship. My hope is that the impact of the parent-child relationship on children's development will be clearly and comprehensively understood through the lens of developmental psychopathology, particularly within the context of Christian themes related to relationships.

MODELS OF PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

The parent-child relationship plays a crucial role in the development of the child and can result in normal, healthy development or abnormal, unhealthy development. A high-quality relationship between parent and child positively influences the early attachment relationship as well as the emotional health of the child. In contrast, certain parent characteristics may negatively influence child development (Larsson, Viding, Rijdsdijk & Plomin, 2008; Pardini et al., 2008), the way children see themselves and how they interact with their world. An extreme example of the detrimental influence of parenting is the impact of child abuse on children's development, resulting in a negative view of self, relationship difficulties and poor emotional self-regulation (Cicchetti, 1987; Cicchetti & Howes, 1991).

There are various models for understanding parent-child relationships (Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Pardini, 2008) that focus on different aspects of the connection between parents and children. The unilateral or unidirectional model emphasizes the influence of parents on children and puts the onus on parents as the main determinant of children's normal and abnormal development. For example, according to this model, parental depression may have a negative impact on the child through the parent's lack of availability to the

child, leading to outcomes such as higher rates of emotional and behavioral problems (Weitzman, Rosenthal & Liu, 2011).

The bilateral or bidirectional model emphasizes both the influence of parents on children and the influence of children on parents (Pardini, 2008). In the above example of the depressed parent, this model not only examines the influence of the parent's depression on the child but also how the child may be influencing the depression of the parent (Gross, Shaw & Moilanen, 2008). For instance, the emotional and behavioral problems of the child may cause the parent to believe that she is an ineffective parent, leading to negative emotions and a decreased sense of self-worth. The bidirectional model helps explain why children who share similar parental experiences may have different outcomes (multifinality), and children who share different parental experiences may have similar outcomes (equifinality; Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1996).

A developmental psychopathology perspective emphasizes this bidirectional model, noting that children can influence the parent-child relationship in both positive and negative ways. For instance, the temperament of the child can influence the parent's response to that child. If the child's temperament is positive and warm, parents are more likely to be emotionally warm and communicative, and the relationship healthier. If the child's temperament is difficult (e.g., fussy and demanding), parents may hold back and not form as close a relationship or become frustrated and overwhelmed by the child's needs, which can negatively affect the development of that parent-child relationship (Cumings, Davies & Campbell, 2000). A healthy parent-child relationship includes mutual care and respect as well as open communication.

NORMAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

According to a developmental psychopathology perspective, the same factors that are involved in the normal development of the parent-child relationship are also involved in abnormal development. Therefore, in order to understand problematic parent-child relationships, we must first understand healthy, normal interactions across development. Normative child development is strongly influenced by parenting. In a healthy parent-child relationship, parents are supportive, warm, sensitive to the psychological states of their children and responsive to their psychosocial needs. They are generally seen as emotionally available and accepting of their children. Such parenting behaviors result in greater sociability, self-regulation, prosocial

behavior and constructive play in children (Alessandri, 1992; Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Schofield et al., 2012). Additionally, parental warmth and responsiveness are associated with children who are secure, in control and trusting of their environment. Success in school, better coping strategies and secure attachment in adolescence are also associated with parental warmth (Schofield et al., 2012).

Another characteristic of a healthy parent-child relationship is children's positive contributions to their parents. Children who are caring and respectful and who honor their parents may have parents who are less stressed, more content and happy. In addition, children who are responsible, engaging and helpful create an atmosphere where parents feel appreciated and valued. A third characteristic of a healthy parent-child relationship is stability and consistency even in the face of trauma, difficulties and challenges. Often the relationship gets stronger in these circumstances.

In the following sections, several aspects of the normal development of the parent-child relationship will be considered, including attachment styles, parenting styles, parenting practices and the role of ethnicity/culture.

Attachment Styles

In the course of normal development, attachment plays a significant role in the emotional security of the child and influences personality development (see also chapter 9, this volume). Attachment is defined as the deep emotional connection between infants and their caregivers that begins in the first year (Rosen & Rothbaum, 2003). Children with a close emotional bond with parents have greater respect for their parents and respond more favorably to their directions and discipline (Thompson, 2008). This finding is not surprising given that the emotional bond provides an atmosphere of warmth and acceptance in the home. Cummings et al. (2000) conclude that "the formation and maintenance of emotional bonds between parents and children were a highly desirable state of affairs that predicted positive qualities of children's adjustment" (p. 183). The idea that emotional connections between parents and children significantly influence later development was initially proposed by object relations theorists as well as learning theorists focusing on the notion of dependency (Ainsworth, 1969). As further research occurred, it became clearer that the emotional bond between parents and children was strongly predictive of positive adjustment in children (Bowlby, 1969; Thompson, 2008).

The attachment of the infant to the caregiver determines the quality of the

relationship between the parent and the child and the emotional security of the child as he develops (Bowlby, 1969; see chapter 5, this volume). The attachment relationship can lead to a positive relationship with the parent and normal healthy development, or it can result in a strained relationship with the parent and feelings of insecurity resulting in unhealthy relationships and psychopathology (Cummings et al., 2000; Prior & Glaser, 2006). Children who are securely attached see their parents as a secure base because of the warmth and responsiveness of the parent. Examination of parent-child attachment relationships (e.g., the Strange Situation; Ainsworth et al., 1978) shows that securely attached children are upset when the parent leaves the room but easily reestablish contact with the parent and are comforted upon reunion. It is proffered that when the parent is out of sight, these children have an internal representation or cognitive image of the parent that helps them continue to feel secure (Bowlby, 1969); however, their distress upon separation occurs because of the closeness to the parent. Parents are perceived as dependable and trustworthy because of their care for the child and responsiveness to her needs. As a result, these children are able to form close relationships as they develop and have a sense of emotional security (Cummings et al., 2000; Prior & Glaser, 2006; Rosen & Rothbaum, 2003).

The other three attachment styles (avoidant, anxious/resistant and disorganized/disoriented) represent insecure attachment styles and will be discussed in the abnormal development section of the chapter.

Parenting Styles

Along with attachment styles, parenting styles are important determinants of children's outcomes. Cummings et al. (2000) emphasize that "from a developmental psychopathology perspective, it follows that consideration of the effects of parental behavior is an essential component of any model of the effects of families on children" (p. 157). The four parenting styles that have been studied within developmental psychology are authoritative, authoritarian, permissive (Baumrind, 1971) and indifferent/uninvolved (Maccoby & Martin, 1983), all of which vary along dimensions of control and warmth. Baumrind (1996) provides an overview of the parenting styles in this manner: "Authoritative parents are both highly demanding and highly responsive, by contrast with authoritarian parents, who are highly demanding but not responsive, permissive parents, who are responsive but not demanding, and unengaged parents, who are neither demanding nor responsive" (p. 412). The authoritative parenting

style will be presented here, and the authoritarian, permissive, and indifferent/uninvolved parenting styles will be discussed in the abnormal development section of the chapter.

Consistent with the developmental psychopathology concept of dynamic transactions between the child and the environment, it is important to note that parenting styles are flexible within families depending on the child characteristics and the parenting situation (i.e., parents can show different styles in response to different situations or in response to different children). Furthermore, Cummings et al. (2000) underscore the fact that “no optimal parenting style exists for all children of all ages in all situations” (p. 157). They also indicate that parenting occurs within a larger ecological context consisting of the family system, subculture, neighborhood, and developmental period of both the child and the family.

The authoritative parenting style involves both high control and high affection and is often presented as the most effective because children exposed to this style are usually well adjusted. Children are treated with warmth and respect and feel loved and valued. Parents are firm and consistent in their control and make increasing demands of children as they grow older, being sensitive to changing developmental needs and abilities. Additionally, children are invited to participate in the decision-making and problem-solving process, resulting in greater security and confidence. The effectiveness of this approach is its ability to be both strict and loving at the same time. Authoritative parenting has positive influences on children from preschool through adolescence (Cummings et al., 2000; Teyber & McClure, 2011). Baumrind's (1968) description of the prototypic authoritative parent explains the effectiveness of this parenting style:

She encourages verbal give and take, and shares with the child the reasoning behind her policy. She values both expressive and instrumental attributes, both autonomous self-will and disciplined conformity. Therefore, she exerts firm control at points of parent-child divergence, but does not hem the child in with restrictions. She recognizes her own special rights as an adult, but also the child's individual interests and special ways. The authoritative parent affirms the child's present qualities, but also set standards for future conduct. She uses reason as well as power to achieve her objectives. She does not base her decision on group consensus or the individual child's desires but also does not regard herself as infallible or divinely inspired. (p. 261)

In addition, Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger and Gorsuch (2003) indicate that there is tentative evidence that among adolescents the authoritative parenting style is associated with intrinsic religious orientation, which means that children raised with this parenting style take their religious faith more seriously and seek to live it. This finding suggests that parents who are warm, loving and respectful mirror attributes of God that influence their children to be more authentic in their faith commitment.

Parenting Styles and Parenting Practices

Darling and Steinberg (1993) make a distinction between parenting styles and parenting practices, noting that “parenting style differs from parenting practices in that it describes parent-child interactions across a wide range of situations, whereas parenting practices are by definition domain specific” (p. 493). Parenting practices focus on the specific resources that are available to a child within a specific domain. For example, the parenting practices of attending school functions, ensuring that homework is completed and checking grades affect children’s academic achievement. Parenting practices also affect specific behaviors, such as table manners, by having a direct goal attainment or outcome. Interestingly, the reciprocal relationship between parenting practices and the disruptive behavior of children has also been shown to be significant. Unpleasant child behaviors heavily influence parents to discontinue the use of appropriate discipline (Burke, Pardini & Loeber, 2008; Darling & Steinberg, 1993).

The Role of Ethnicity/Culture

The literature indicates that culture plays a significant role in the parent-child relationship. In Western cultures, children are given more influence in the parent-child relationship and participate in decisions that impact the parent-child relationship. In some Eastern countries, children’s behaviors are more regimented, and parental influence is stronger, with children being given little say in the relationship. Thus, consistent with a developmental psychopathology emphasis on context, cultural context must be taken into consideration in order to understand whether parenting styles are normative. In some Japanese cultures, parents cater to the needs and influences of the child when he or she is very young, but parental influence strengthens as the child grows older, with children’s conformity and compliance to parental desires expected (Kuczynski, 2003; Trommsdorff & Kornadt, 2003).

Authoritarian parenting generally results in negative outcomes for children in European American families but positive outcomes in African American and Asian American families (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997). In both African American and Asian American families, an authoritarian parenting style seems to produce more positive outcomes in children because of the cultural values placed on compliance, rule keeping and the honoring of family traditions. In Baumrind's (1972) study with African American children, she found that families that were high in the authoritarian parenting style had children who were self-assertive and independent.

The cultural context may also determine whether the parent-child relationship is mostly unidirectional or bidirectional. That is, "a culturally informed model of parent-child relationships therefore takes into account the cultural differences and the culture specificities and thus must investigate the relations between bidirectionality and unidirectionality under the specific cultural conditions" (Trommsdorff & Kornadt, 2003, p. 273). In some Asian cultures where collectivism is more prominent, unidirectional aspects of the parent-child relationship are emphasized. For instance, in China, Japan and Korea, where filial piety governs the parent-child relationship, children are expected to obey and honor their parents throughout their life. Parents care for and support their children with the expectation that children will take care of them when they become older. Parents usually do not need to provide explanations for their demands, as they are perceived as authority figures who create the rules. As a result, values such as parental authority and compliance are accepted and honored because of the cultural emphasis on the maintenance of harmony.

These practices stand in contrast to Western culture, where individualism is emphasized, conflicts in the parent-child relationship are expected, and autonomy is celebrated. Children in individualistic cultures have greater influence over their parents when compared with children from collectivistic cultures. The expectation is that they will be involved in negotiations with parents and communicate what they want from parents. However, for both children and parents from collectivistic cultures, following norms and social rules are the expectations and the transmitted value (Trommsdorff & Kornadt, 2003).

The next section focuses on parental pathology and mistreatment's effects on the parent-child relationship.

ASPECTS OF DEVELOPMENT AFFECTED BY THE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

There are several ways in which the parent-child relationship may negatively influence children's development. I will focus on aspects of the parent child relationship that affect abnormal development, paying particular attention to the roles of parental mistreatment and parental pathology. I will also discuss the influence of attachment styles and parenting styles on abnormal development, and the parent-child relationship as a moderator and mediator.

Maltreatment

The results of several studies clearly indicate that children who experience a wide variety of maltreatment, including physical and sexual abuse as well as neglect, are at increased risk for the development of psychological disturbances, such as difficulties in relationship with peers, problems with social skills, internalizing symptoms and externalizing behaviors. Additional problems experienced by these children include low self-esteem, difficulties in school and non-compliance (Erath et al., 2011; Hipwell et al., 2008; Larsson et al., 2008).

Several studies describe the development of abnormal behavior as a bidirectional process that further reflects the influence parents and children have on each other even in the process of the development of psychopathology. Providing a key example within the literature, Pardini (2008) describes the bi-directional model of parent-child interactions developed by Patterson and colleagues (Patterson, 1982; Patterson, Dishion & Bank, 1984) as follows:

The basic premise of the model asserted that children with an irritable and defiant temperament caused unskilled parents to use increasingly harsh discipline techniques in an attempt to gain control of the child's behavior. These harsh parenting practices served to further escalate their child's aversive behaviors rather than eliminate them. As the parent-child conflict intensifies during these aversive exchanges, many parents then withdraw from the interaction as a means of escaping the aversive behaviors of their child. As a result, the child learns that requests can be avoided by increasing the intensity and/or duration of their aversive behaviors, which reinforces an escalation in their conduct problems over time. . . . Importantly, this model has served as the foundation for many successful interventions designed to break the coercive exchanges between parents and children with conduct problems. (p. 629)

Additionally, in a longitudinal study examining the bidirectional relationship

between parental negativity and early childhood antisocial behavior, Larsson et al. (2008) found that the association between children's antisocial behavior and parenting was influenced by both parents and children. Parents' negative feelings toward children served as an environmental mediator for antisocial behavior in children, and children's antisocial behavior evoked parental negativity toward children. Another study that assessed the direction of the association between parenting practices and conduct problems in boys found that "the influence of conduct problems on changes in parenting behaviors was as strong as the influence of parenting behaviors on changes in conduct problems across development" (Pardini et al., 2008, p. 647). Other studies have found reciprocal influences between girls' conduct problems and depression and parental punishment and warmth (Hipwell et al., 2008) and between boys' externalizing problems and mothers' depressive symptoms (Gross et al., 2008). Consistent with a developmental psychopathology framework, we can clearly recognize the significance of bidirectional influences of abnormal behaviors in both children and parents.

Attachment Styles

The three insecure attachment styles—avoidant, anxious/resistant and disorganized/disoriented—negatively affect children's development. Children with an avoidant attachment style do not rely on their parents to be present and consistently meet their needs, perceiving them as rejecting, irritable, tense and avoidant of bodily contact. In the Strange Situation, children displaying avoidant attachment show little or no distress when the parent leaves and avoids contact with the parent when she returns; they may even turn away when the parent tries to make contact. These children believe they cannot turn to the parent for assistance in stressful or threatening situations because they are unreliable and untrustworthy; indeed, parents of avoidantly attached children are generally dismissive or rejecting of their infants (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Cummings et al., 2000; Prior & Glaser, 2006; Rosen & Rothbaum, 2003).

In the anxious/resistant attachment style, children display both clingy behavior and anger toward their parents. In the Strange Situation, they cling to the parent and do not show interest in the toys; when she departs, they become very upset. When the parent returns, these children exhibit both anger at the parent and excessive contact with the parent and may vacillate between seeking and resisting the parent. These children are not quickly comforted by the parent's presence, and it takes some time before they feel reassured and can settle

down emotionally following the separation. Children may relate to parents in this manner because of parents' inconsistent responses to them and parents' insensitive manner of relating to them (Cummings et al., 2000; Prior & Glaser, 2006; Rosen & Rothbaum, 2003).

Children displaying a disorganized/disoriented attachment style have failed to develop a coherent strategy to respond to stressful situations. These children are stressed when the parent leaves but seem uncertain about how to respond to the parent when he or she returns, exhibiting both avoidant and resistant behaviors. They may appear dazed and disconnected from their surroundings. Disorganized attachment generally results from extreme deficits in parenting, such as in the case of parental psychopathology or maltreatment, in which parents are so insensitive and/or unresponsive that children cannot form a coherent strategy for relating to and depending on them (Cummings et al., 2000; Prior & Glaser, 2006; Rosen & Rothbaum, 2003).

Parenting Styles

There are three parenting styles associated with abnormal development in children: authoritarian, permissive and indifferent/uninvolved. The authoritarian parenting style involves high control and low affection and is common but less effective than authoritative parenting in producing positive outcomes in children. Authoritarian parents demand unquestioned obedience, and consequently, any display of individualistic behavior is punished. Children exposed to this parenting style are less likely to engage in externalizing behaviors such as delinquency, drug use or sexual promiscuity; however, they are more likely to display internalizing symptoms such as low self-efficacy and devaluation of self and to display less autonomy. They also tend to internalize their anger, resulting for some children in angry outbursts (Baumrind, 1968, 1991; Cummings et al., 2000; Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Teyber & McClure, 2011). Teyber and McClure further note that

without the emotional support and affection so important to the development of a sense of belonging and security, especially during moments of distress, children of authoritarian parents learn to hide any signs of vulnerability from their parents and sadly, eventually from themselves as well. (p. 242)

These children keep people at a distance and their emotions under tight control because they have learned that they cannot depend on their parents for support and closeness.

The permissive parenting style involves low control and high affection. Parents are accepting of most of their children's behaviors, including those that are disruptive or impulsive, and set few rules or constraints (Cummings et al., 2000). Children are unsure of what is expected of them and of the consequences indicating when parental norms are violated. They are unclear about the rules they need to follow and often do not follow the rules because their parents are inconsistent in enforcing them. For instance, they may stay out late with friends because their parents may or may not discipline them for this behavior. As a result, these children do not learn how to live disciplined lives and develop healthy ways of relating to rules and boundaries. They also try to dominate other relationships and become angry when they do not get their way (Teyber & McClure, 2011). Teyber and McClure state that "the balance of power has tipped in permissive families, and children wield too much control in the parent-child relationship" (p. 244). As a result of this parenting style, children may exhibit high self-esteem and self-worth, but they will have difficulties with achievement, maturity, social responsibility and impulse control (Baumrind, 1991). Spilka et al. (2003) report that among adolescents, the permissive parenting style is associated with extrinsic religious orientation, meaning that they tend to use their religion for personal accomplishments rather than have it influence their behavior and lifestyle.

The indifferent-uninvolved parenting style, also referred to as the disengaged parenting style, involves low control and low affection. This parenting style is perceived as very problematic because parents are emotionally uninvolved with their children and engaged only peripherally in their lives. Parents are minimally invested in their role as caretakers, and their disciplinary methods are erratic or inconsistent (Teyber & McClure, 2011). As a result, children have difficulty achieving social and academic competence because they have to negotiate these areas on their own without much parental guidance and support. They are also susceptible to sexual promiscuity, drug use, delinquency and criminal behavior (Cummings et al., 2000). Balswick, Balswick, Piper and Piper (2003) state that these "children often feel unloved, unprotected, and vulnerable. When hopelessness sets in, it leads to depression, apathy, anxiety, and acting-out behavior" (p. 23).

Parent-Child Relationship as Moderator

On the other hand, a positive parent-child relationship can be a protective or promotive factor in children's development. Children who have a close

relationship with their parents have higher self-esteem, exhibit better relationship skills, are more successful in school, and refrain from drug and alcohol abuse (Prior & Glaser, 2006; Rosen & Rothbaum, 2003). When parents are more involved with their children, children are less likely to become involved in problematic behaviors and are emotionally healthier (Schofield et al., 2012).

A close relationship with parents also serves as a protective factor specifically for children who display antisocial behaviors (Masten, 2001). Parents influence and alter their children's behavior by disciplining and providing consistent feedback that helps children behave in ways that are adaptive and socially acceptable. Discipline is particularly effective in promoting positive outcomes for these children when it is carried out in the context of a warm, sensitive relationship between parent and child. It is important to note that these interactions are dynamic. Though parenting influences children, children are not passive recipients of parental influences; rather, they also elicit certain behaviors and responses from parents. Therefore, the links between parenting practices and children's resilience are complex. For example, as infants, resilient children experience higher-quality parenting resources but are also more engaging for parents (Masten, 2001). That is, parental behavior may help children to behave in more prosocial ways, but these children's behaviors and characteristics may also elicit better parenting. It is important to recognize the complexity of the parent-child relationship from both psychological and theological viewpoints.

INTEGRATIVE THEMES IN PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

The Role of Religion/Spirituality

Upon first glance, it might seem that religion encourages the unidirectional aspects of the parent-child relationship. In the Bible, greater responsibility is placed on parents for the outcomes of their children. Proverbs 22:6 says, "Start children off on the way they should go, and even when are old they will not turn from it." The onus is on parents to care for, guide and nurture children. Parents are the authority figures in children's lives and are responsible for their physical, emotional, social and spiritual development. The discipline of children is the responsibility of parents. However, children are also given specific charges in their interactions with their parents, including honoring and obeying parents (Ex 20:12; Prov 6:20; Eph 6:1). Although parents may arguably have

more responsibility in leading the relationship, children can—and must—play an active role as well.

The parent-child relationship plays a significant role in the Christian faith and is exemplified in several passages in the Bible. In early Jewish tradition, parents played a major role in teaching their children about God and leading them in a spiritual path. The parent-child relationship is often compared to the relationship between God and his children. Additionally, God is often presented in the role of father. In the Old Testament, God is presented as the father of the Israelites (Deut 1:31). He is also presented as a father to the fatherless (Ps 68:5). The fatherhood of God is also present in the New Testament. Romans 8:15-17 says that we have the privilege as God's children to cry out to God as "*Abba, Father.*" Perhaps one of the best pictures of God as father is presented in the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15. In spite of the younger son's belligerence and disobedient behavior, the father continues to love and care for his son. When he returns home, the father is not judgmental or condemning but rather demonstrates deep compassion by restoring to the son what he has lost and celebrating his return home. What an amazing expression of unconditional love and acceptance by a father for his son and a picture of how God, as Father, welcomes and accepts us when we have wandered from him.

Hertel and Donahue (1995) tested the parallels between children's reports of parenting styles and the images of God reported by both children and parents. They found that the more parents viewed God as loving, the more the children viewed the parents as loving and in turn saw God as loving. These findings highlight the significance of the parent-child relationship for children's images of their parents and, in turn, images of God. In another study examining attachment to God and parents, McDonald, Beck, Allison and Norsworthy (2005) found:

Respondents that reported coming from homes that were emotionally cold or unspiritual exhibited higher levels of avoidance of intimacy in their relationship to God, a trend consistent with a Dismissive attachment style. Overprotective, rigid, or authoritarian homes were associated with higher levels of both avoidance of intimacy and anxiety over lovability in relationship to God, a trend characterized by the Fearful attachment style. (p. 21)

These results indicate that negative parent-child relationships can precipitate both attachment problems and unhealthy or negative relationships with God.

Children as Gifts

Within the context of the family, the Bible clearly describes children as gifts from God to be loved and cherished, valued and protected. How can we value children as divine gifts? One of the primary ways that parents practically value children is through the quality of their relationship, including the effort and time they invest in them. Valuing children means providing a loving and caring atmosphere in the home and having expectations and goals for them that fit with who they are and where they are developmentally. It means providing adequate protection and security for their safety.

Balswick et al. (2003) present a theology of the parent-child relationship consisting of four elements: covenant, grace, empowerment and intimacy. The covenant is the unconditional commitment and love of parents toward their children. Knowing that nothing can separate them from the love of their parents and that they truly are gifts to their families helps in building children's sense of self and self-confidence. Grace, which includes forgiving and accepting forgiveness, develops from the security provided by the covenant love. Empowerment is nurtured in the atmosphere of forgiveness and acceptance created by parents and "comes through equipping, guiding, directing, affirming, encouraging, supporting, in order to help children develop their potential" (p. 37). As children are empowered, they are able to acquire mutual intimacy with their parents, which cycles back to a greater level of commitment to their covenant. Balswick et al. (2003) note that parent-child relationships may initially start with unidirectional love from parent to child but eventually become a bidirectional process, with children also exhibiting love for the parents. In contrast, this relationship can stagnate when we "fixate on contract rather than covenant, law rather than grace, possessive power rather than empowerment, and personal distance rather than intimacy" (p. 38).

Children's views of God are often shaped by their relationship with their parents. This is an awesome responsibility on parents and emphasizes the spiritual significance of parenting styles and practices. In the early psychoanalytic literature, Freud suggested that the "*imago*" of the father influenced children's representation of God (Rizzuto, 1979). Randour and Bondanza (1987) note that for Freud it was during the oedipal period that the child is able to finalize his or her representation of God "through the 'exaltation' and 'sublimation' of instinctual wishes toward the father" (p. 302). Others have suggested that the mother's influence plays a more significant role in the child's God represen-

tation because of the early connection between mother and child as the child catches the gaze of the mother (McDargh, 1983; Rizzuto, 1979). Lovinger (1984) contends that the perception of the mother as the good/idealized object serves as a foundation for the child's conception of God. In a study conducted by Seegobin et al. (2007) with college students, results indicated that a positive relationship with parents was correlated with a positive view of God. In fact, the strongest predictor of a positive relationship with God was a positive relationship with mother, which fits well with the attachment literature emphasizing the emotional bond between mother and child. Dickie et al. (1997) also found that when children saw parents as nurturing and powerful, especially when father was seen as nurturing and mother was seen as powerful, they saw God as both nurturing and powerful.

In terms of biblical examples, Abraham saw his son Isaac as a gift from God. When God told him that his children would be as numerous as the sand on the seashore and the stars in the sky, he was emphasizing that Isaac was indeed a significant gift from God (Gen 22:15-18). Hannah also saw Samuel as a gift from God. She was childless and felt despised because of it. She went to the temple and specifically prayed for a child, and when he was born, she recognized him as a gift from God and gave him to God as an act of gratitude (1 Sam 1:11, 27-28).

The shooting of twenty children and six adults at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in December 2012 prompted many parents to see their children as gifts. Through this painful experience and significant loss, one of the lessons learned is that as parents, we need to cherish our children as gifts from God because we do not know when they will be taken from us. The loss of a child is a difficult experience for any parent.

In contrast, one of the most striking areas where children are not seen as gifts of God is when they are aborted. In 2008, 1.21 million abortions were performed in the United States alone (see www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_induced_abortion.html). These children were rejected before they were born. Hopefully, as we begin to see children as gifts more clearly, we will stop these negative practices and value each child for their inherent worth.

Children as Persons

In a world where many children are used, abused and neglected, there is a significant need for children to be respected as persons. One of the implicit messages given to many children is that "children should be seen but not heard." Parents can give voice to their children by providing opportunities for them to

share their needs, desires and concerns, and by opening the door to mutual communication. We can demonstrate respect for children by providing for their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual needs, a sign that they are real persons with real needs. Another manner is by giving them time and listening to what they have to say. We also respect them when we reason and talk with them at their level of development.

In the Gospels, Jesus demonstrated respect for children by the value he placed on them. He said, "If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea" (Matthew 18:6). Offenses to children were taken that seriously by Jesus.

Christian parenting styles have been criticized because of the emphasis on the discipline of children and the desire for specific behavioral outcomes. They have also been criticized for using corporal punishment such as spanking. But Christian parents have also exhibited warmth and compassion in their parenting (Spilka et al., 2003). Parents who see their children as gifts from God treat their children with great respect and cherish the relationship with them.

Children as Agents

Of these three integrative themes, viewing children as agents seems to be the most difficult for parents to understand, because it involves recognizing children as moral and spiritual persons who can influence and teach them. Yet, often in the Gospels, Jesus spoke of the significant role of children in the kingdom of God. Gundry-Volf (2001) summarizes it concisely, stating:

There are five main ways in which the significance of children is underscored in Jesus' teaching and practice. He blesses the children brought to him and teaches that the reign of God belongs to them. He makes children models of entering the reign of God. He also makes children models of greatness in the reign of God. He calls his disciples to welcome little children as he does and turns the service of children into a sign of greatness in the reign of God. He gives the service of children ultimate significance as a way of receiving himself and by implication the One who sent him. (p. 36)

An excellent example of a child as a moral and spiritual agent is the experience of Ruby Bridges. Robert Coles tells of his encounters in the early 1960s with Ruby Bridges, a six-year-old African American girl, which changed his life. On his way to a psychiatric session, he saw Ruby being

escorted to school by federal marshals as the result of a federal court order to integrate the school. A mob of white people, many of them waving placards such as "God demands segregation," screamed threats and obscenities and waved their fists at her. Coles was surprised at the reaction of this young girl to her accusers, and it made a lasting impression on him. As Ruby walked through the mob, he noticed that she was moving her lips but could not hear what she said. He later learned that she was praying for God to forgive them for they did not know what they were doing, and that her response was influenced by her parents, church and community (Yancey, 1987). As a child, Ruby was influenced by her parents who took her to church, taught her about God and prayer, and empowered her to stand strong in the face of harsh opposition; she then became an agent of change in her home, school and community.

Christian parenting can play a significant role in furthering the perception of children as moral and spiritual agents. One model of parenting, known as Relationship-Empowerment Parenting, is based on notions of discipleship from the New Testament that encourage parents to help children look outside themselves toward engagement with and service to others (Balswick et al., 2003). The model emphasizes that

empowerment begins with the recognition that children are uniquely gifted by God to make a significant contribution in the world. Whether the child is able-bodied or developmentally challenged, he or she has a purpose and meaning that can only be achieved by him or her. While affirming the specific strengths, talents, and gifts in each child, we should be careful to move with and not ahead of our children in terms of what we expect of them. In their own way and in their own time, they are able to meet expectations that are within their capacity and timetable. (p. 50)

Seeing children as moral and spiritual agents provides the opportunity for parents to become receptive to children's contribution. Boyatzis and Janicki (2003) examined parent-child communication about religion to determine whether unidirectional or bidirectional patterns were used. They indicate that bidirectional reciprocity occurred when "children and parents are mutually active in their religious communication and both behave in ways that may ultimately influence the other" (p. 254). They encouraged parents in the study to not correct the views of children and to withhold from sharing their own perspectives. They found that the majority of first conversations about religion

were initiated by children. Additionally, children were active participants and frequently expressed their ideas about religion, and parents were open to the ideas of their children as they provided the space to express themselves without correcting them.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have examined the parent-child relationship from the developmental psychopathology perspective. I discussed the importance of this relationship for both children and parents, emphasizing bidirectional influences. I also looked at the parent-child relationship through the dimensions of both normal and abnormal development. Finally, integrative themes were presented with a focus on children as divine gifts, respected persons, and moral and spiritual agents.

As I reflect on the bedtime conversation with my younger son presented at the beginning of this chapter, my responses to him in light of what I have covered in this chapter have changed significantly. We continue to have conversations about his desire to be a police officer, which I am careful not to dismiss. I see him even more as a gift from God to be cherished and nurtured, respect his perspective and desires, and with humility accept his role as a moral and spiritual agent in our family. Indeed, God is able to use our children to teach us kingdom principles and practices. Parents have an enormous responsibility for their children, but children also influence parents in significant ways.

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

Clinical work focusing on the parent-child relationship involves assessment and interventions with both children and parents. Depending on the situation or presenting problem, we may see the child, the parent or both in therapy. If we are working primarily on the parent-child relationship, it may be best, if possible, to see both the child and the parent(s). Below are possible assessments or interventions that can be helpful in addressing the parent-child relationship.

Assessment

- Assessment of the parent-child relationship
 - The Parent-Child Relationship Inventory (Coffman, Guerin & Gottfried, 2006, p. 209) is completed by the parent and has five scales: *Satisfaction*

with Parenting: the degree of gratification derived from being a parent; *Involvement*: the level of engagement and familiarity with the child; *Communication*: how capably a parent communicates with his or her child; *Limit Setting*: a parent's perception of the effectiveness of discipline practices utilized; *Autonomy*: the parent's capacity to facilitate his or her child's independence.

- The Parenting Stress Index (Abidin, 1983) is a self-report measure completed by parents and has three domains: stresses related to child characteristics; stresses related to parent characteristics; stresses related to situational and demographic factors.
- Assessment of the nature of the attachment relationship—determines the closeness of the parent-child relationship and the level of security the child experiences.
 - The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment—Revised for Children (Gullone & Robinson, 2005) is a self-report measure for youth (ages 9-15 years) to assess the quality of attachment to parents and peers. The three aspects of attachment assessed are trust, communication and alienation.
- Assessment of parenting styles—determine which of the four parenting styles is practiced in the home, in response to what types of situations, and the child's response to it.
 - The Parenting Style Questionnaire (Robinson, Mandleco, Olsen & Hart, 1995) is a self-report measure completed by parents that identifies three parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian and permissive.
- Assessment of family constellation with a genogram of the family will be helpful as you assess for the nature of the relationship between family members.
- Assessment of parent-child communication patterns—inquire about the communication patterns that parents use with their children and that children use to communicate with parents.
 - Observation of parent-child communication in the session.
- Assessment for parental neglect, abuse or mistreatment
- Assessment of religiosity and spirituality of both parents and children using scales or interviews.

Interventions

Depending on the presenting problems, the following interventions may be helpful.

- Teaching parenting skills. Parenting skills cover a variety of areas, including problem solving, conflict resolution, negotiating and affirmation. A specific program that may be helpful is Child-Parent Relationship Training (VanderGast, Post & Kascsak-Miller, 2010), which assists parents in becoming the primary change agents in their home through the use of child-centered play sessions with their children.
- Teaching parent-child communication skills. These skills can be taught through in-session practice of skills such as listening, empathy and responding, and parents and children can practice at home.
- Facilitating parental acceptance of children and children's acceptance of parents. Emphasize the importance of mutual acceptance in the parent-child relationship, and assist both parents and children in acceptance of each other.
- Doing age-appropriate activities with children to help to build the relationship between parent and child. Having the child choose the activity can be very affirming.
- Addressing parental pathology. If the parent has difficulties that are affecting the parent-child relationship, these can be addressed in the therapy, or the parent can be referred out for therapy.
- Addressing child/adolescent pathology. Therapy sessions can be used to specifically address the difficulties or problems of the child (e.g., attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder).
- Addressing religiosity or spirituality. Determine what interventions will facilitate the religious or spiritual needs or desires of the parent or child in order to improve their relationship (e.g., a forgiveness intervention).