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## Culturally Responsive Parenting

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Research identifies key similarities in parenting practices across cultures that help to promote optimal early childhood social, emotional and cognitive development, leading to school readiness and child well-being. Regardless of country of origin, socio-economic status or culture, primary

## Parents are a child's first teachers

Parents are a child's first teachers, and a nurturing relationship between a parent and child supports optimal early childhood brain development.<sup>1 (#r1)</sup> Children develop in an environment of relationships, and the environment into which a child is born and the type of parenting that she receives have a major effect on her later development and well-being.<sup>2 (#r2)</sup>

The influence of these early relationships and environments becomes evident the nature of the attachment that develops between a child and her parents. **Attachment** refers an infants' ability to form a trusting relationship with his mother or primary caregiver. Healthy attachment, in turn, establishes a strong foundation from which a child can explore the world, safe in the knowledge that they can count on safety and care from their parents. Parents, in turn, are able to help their children develop secure attachments by providing consistent and nurturing support and care. When children lack a positive and supportive relationship with a caregiver, they are much more likely to form insecure attachment; which can lead to behavioral and emotional problems as they mature.<sup>3 (#r3)</sup>

## Cultural Significance in Parenting

Families with young children are becoming more racially and ethnically diverse in Memphis and across the country, and early childhood parenting practices differ across societies and cultures.<sup>4 (#r4)</sup> Cultural norms about parenting practices typically influence how children are raised. These norms affect what beliefs and values parents teach their children, what behaviors are considered appropriate, and the methods used to teach these values and behaviors.<sup>5 (#r5)</sup> However, despite some differences among cultures, there are key common parenting themes that emerge across cultures. Looking at parenting in different American cultures, the Centers for Disease Control (2008) found that "overall, parents from all cultural backgrounds held many similar views about which child behaviors were good or bad (p.3)."<sup>6 (#r6)</sup> There was a consensus among surveyed parents that children should be obedient and not "talk back". "They should show respect for adults, parents, and elders; be polite, have good manners, and not interrupt others, particularly adults; and share, be honest, and do well in school (p.3)."<sup>6 (#r6)</sup> Parents in all of the surveyed groups reported disliking their children's disobedience, temper tantrums, and fights with their siblings.

guidelines and support for parents of all backgrounds.

## Culturally “Responsive” Parenting

Current research is moving towards an agreement upon culturally universal practices to the successful parenting of infants. An ambitious and revealing, multinational examination of best parenting practices conducted by the World Health Organization in 2006 found that one of the most universally important, healthy, parenting behaviors is caregiver responsiveness. The study examined caregiving behaviors for families in both rural and urban communities in developed versus developing nations in the following areas: India, Colombia, the United States, Chile, East Africa, Mexico, Jamaica, Brazil, South Africa and the Netherlands. Results of the study universally found that caregiver responsiveness was directly related to positive child development in a number of areas.<sup>7 (#7)</sup>

Responsiveness refers to a caregivers' ability to be prompt, receptive to the child's behavior and appropriate to a child's needs.<sup>8 (#8)</sup> This interaction can vary depending on the type of behavior the caregiver is responding to (e.g., a sign of illness, a verbal signal, a facial expression). Typically, responsiveness is a three-step process consisting of observation (observing a child's cues), interpretation (interpreting signals such as illness), and action (working to meet a child's needs).

The results of the WHO study found that across cultures, maternal responsiveness was associated with “social competence and fewer behavioral problems at three years; increased intelligence quotient (IQ) and cognitive growth at four years; school achievement at seven years; as well as higher IQ and self-esteem, and fewer behavioral and emotional problems at age 12.”<sup>7 (#7)</sup> In addition, the report found that for infants born with a low birth weight or under other adverse circumstances, responsiveness had protective effects on overall health and psychosocial development.

Alternatively, lack of caregiver responsiveness was associated with various behavioral problems and delayed cognitive development. “A sample of 100 children from low-income families in the US revealed that maternal unresponsiveness during infancy predicted aggressive and disruptive behavior at age three (p.2).”

The findings of the study authors of the article showed that caregivers who were successful in helping their children succeed in impoverished environments, showed that caregiver responsiveness was a crucial factor for their success.

## Recognizing Responsive Parenting

Given this information, what does this interaction look like? An example takes the following form: an unresponsive parent receives more intense demands from their infant thus creating extra burden for the parent to cope with. This behavior begins an unhealthy cycle of coping and interaction ultimately leading to behavioral problems for the child as they develop. These types of interaction cycles often frustrate the mother or lead her to direct her energy elsewhere, only exacerbating the problem.

For primary caregivers, it is crucial to be aware of and respond to a child's needs in order to build a secure attachment and foster healthy interactions and future development and well-being. This can often be a challenging task for primary caregivers. According to a study conducted by the National Institute of Health, poor maternal physical health is related to a child's reduced general physical health, increased tantrums, difficulty engaging other children, as well as mothers' feeling of difficulties in managing children's behaviors at 3 years of age.<sup>9 (#19)</sup> Therefore, for a mother or a primary caregiver to be able to remain responsive to their infant they must first be cognizant of their own health needs and ability to care for themselves. Primary caregivers must be aware and able to recognize their own health and psychosocial needs in order to be responsive to their children.

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