

Effective Parenting: Theory, Mechanism, and Intervention of Parenting Competence

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Abstract: Parenting competence is crucial for effective child-rearing and family functioning, encompassing parents' ability to meet their children's needs and support their social development. This concept has drawn attention in educational research worldwide. This review critically examines assessment tools and factors related to understanding and improving parenting competence. It addresses dimensions of parenting competence, including conceptual frameworks, theoretical foundations, measurement tool development, influencing mechanisms, and intervention methodologies. The review emphasizes the importance of understanding and addressing parenting competence to promote positive child development and family well-being, while also highlighting current research shortcomings and future directions.

Keywords: Parenting competence; Assessment; Mechanisms; Intervention

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1. Introduction

"Competence" includes the ideas of "suitability" and "adequacy." Research shows that parenting competence significantly affects children's physical, mental, social, emotional, and cognitive development^[1]. Caregivers with higher competence can promote positive outcomes in children, while lower competence may lead to negative behaviors in adolescence. Extensive research has shown that parenting competence helps caregivers manage parenting stress and challenges^[2]. However, the concept lacks uniformity, and there are various measurement questionnaires based on different theoretical frameworks. This article aims to review the research on parenting competence, including theoretical foundations, measurement questionnaires, related factors, and enhancement interventions.

2. Concepts and theoretical foundations

2.1 Self-esteem theory and parenting sense of competence

Self-esteem theory suggests that parents' feelings of success or failure in raising children can influence future parenting behaviors. Wallston views self-esteem as a cognitive process where caregivers evaluate themselves based on explicit or implicit standards. Parental parenting competence is defined as their subjective assessment of their own parenting, linked closely to self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to successfully execute a specific behavior. Subsequent research has defined parental self-esteem as satisfaction and perceived effectiveness as parents, while parenting competence perception reflects the level at which parents feel satisfied and capable in their parental role.

2.2 Attachment theory and capable parenting

Attachment theory highlights the importance of parental sensitivity and warmth in shaping the parent-child relationship during infancy and early childhood. It emphasizes fostering a strong and secure attachment between parents and children, which requires parents to respond to their children's behaviors, cultivate trust, and build secure relationships. Competent parenting, as per the theory,

involves parental sensitivity, the ability to discern infants' distress and needs, and appropriately respond to their cues for interaction and avoidance. This responsiveness promotes the development of the infant's secure attachment relationship with the primary caregiver, contributing to the infant's physical survival and psychological well-being.

2.3 Contextual theory and parenting competence

Informed by lifelong development and human ecological theories, which assert that development is a continuous process, occurring within the "environment." The importance of understanding how organisms develop within multiple environmental levels is emphasized. Lerner introduced the concept of mutual influence between the organism and the environment, highlighting enduring social and developmental influences. Belsky integrated context theory and proposed a dual-component model of parenting competence, requiring caregivers to sensitively respond to children's needs and actively engage in parenting activities. He emphasized the practical demonstration of sensitivity as parenting competence, crucial for participation in the child's psychological and behavioral activities.

2.4 Integrative perspective and parenting competence

Bornstein suggests that parenting competence should be defined by its effects and outlines three key points after integrating various perspectives. First, universal components of parenting competence, including warmth, acceptance, recognition of the child's basic needs, and setting appropriate expectations, are critical regardless of the child's developmental stage. Second, the impact of strict, negative, and coercive parenting styles varies based on the child's age and personality. Third, parental involvement in children's activities may not always indicate parental competence, and unplanned involvement may not foster parent-child relationships or children's overall development.

3. Assessment questionnaires

3.1 Parenting sense of competence(PSOC)

The scale, initially developed by Gibaud-Wallston to assess parenting competence of parents of newborns, consists of two subscales. The first, "Skills/Knowledge," evaluates parents' cognitive understanding of parenting skills, and the second, "Values/Comfort," assesses individuals' values and satisfaction in the parenting role. In 1989, Johnston and Mash revised the scale to evaluate parents of children aged 4-9 years, renaming the subscales to Efficacy and Satisfaction. Gilmore addressed these concerns by revising the questionnaire, resulting in the Parenting Sense of Competence-Revised (PSOC-R) with improved readability, factor structure, and item valence^[4].

3.2 Parenting Competence Scale-young children (PCS-YC)

The original version derived from a study of parental support needs, covers six aspects. The PCS-YC evaluates parents' abilities during early child development (under 6 years of age) and contributes to reinforcing preventive interventions. It consists of 15 items categorized into 5 factors: self-regulation, self-esteem, enhancement of child self-esteem, forceful conflict resolution, and non-assertive communication. Research has indicated that the PCS-YC can be effective in preventing child abuse and injury while being of moderate length, easy to implement, and holding promotional value.

Since most questionnaires are developed based on local cultures or specific population characteristics, their generalizability may be limited. To address diverse research populations, specific assessment tools have been devised, such as those targeting autism or obesity. Some researchers have also incorporated cultural characteristics into parenting questionnaire assessment tools tailored to their country's context.

4. Mechanism of Influence and action

Parenting skills play a crucial role in establishing positive family functioning, marital relationships, and fostering children's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral development^[2]. Low parental skills can lead to reduced self-efficacy and satisfaction in caring for children, which can affect parent-child interactions and family functioning^[4], ultimately impacting children's behavioral habits. Researchers have found that parenting skills are influenced by various factors, with strong social support and democratic parenting enhancing skills, while early traumatic experiences and physical/psychological illnesses can impair them.

4.1 Parent-child interaction

High-level parenting skills involve positive parent-child interaction, high parental warmth and responsiveness, and effective monitoring of children's activities. Parenting behavior, warmth, and attentiveness are interconnected with parenting skills and play a role in the mutual influence between parental skills and children's psychosocial adaptability. Parents with a greater sense of competence feel more secure, enjoying interactions with their children, and being more enthusiastic and engaged.

4.2 Family functioning

Some researchers propose that parental self-efficacy, which refers to parents' belief in their ability to positively influence

their child's development, acts as a mediator influencing children and family functioning^[2]. Studies show that investing in strong family relationships is key to achieving effective family functioning and parental self-efficacy. Conversely, de-emphasizing family relationships may lead to decreased satisfaction with family functioning and diminished parental self-efficacy.

4.3 Disease factors

Raising children is a complex process influenced by internal and external factors. Chronic illnesses can impact parenting competence, with conditions like emotional disorders, pain, cognitive impairments, fatigue, and mobility limitations posing significant threats. Caregivers may experience heightened exhaustion, powerlessness, and negative emotions when caring for children with illnesses^[5]. Parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) typically experience higher stress levels, and when parents have illnesses, they may feel shame and perceive themselves as lacking parenting competence due to physical or psychological symptoms.

5. Training program

With increased public awareness of the importance of parental skills, many programs have emerged to enhance parental competence. These programs cover aspects of children's development and parenting skills, including self-efficacy, internal control, sense of competence, rules/discipline, role modeling, feeding methods, and knowledge/experience. These programs utilize surveys, home visits, emotional support, role-playing, and participation in group meetings focused on positive parenting.

The evidence for these projects' effectiveness is insufficient due to factors such as subjective goal setting and evaluation, lack of explanation for anticipated changes, and insufficient control groups affecting internal validity. Furthermore, the lack of consensus on parenting skills, low theoretical construction, and passive parental roles also contribute to the limitations of these studies.

6. Summary and Outlook

Research emphasizes the crucial role of parental competence in child-rearing, yet challenges persist. Firstly, there is a lack of a unified theoretical framework for parental abilities across different national contexts. Secondly, parental competence is often based on caregivers' self-assessment, which may not accurately reflect their actual skills. Thirdly, research on influencing factors tends to be superficial, failing to thoroughly uncover the impact of various variables. Lastly, many capacity-building programs lack a comprehensive theoretical structure and objective measurement tools, leading to limited training outcomes. Building on current research trends, this paper recommends focusing future studies on the following areas.

Firstly, theoretical research in parental abilities is hindered by the lack of a unified framework and outdated theories. Future research will focus on exploring theoretical models and delving into the problem-solving process and internal interactions of parental competence. There will also be an investigation into the dynamic changes in parental competence and their cognitive processing mechanisms.

Secondly, there are various measurement tools to assess parental competence, but most are specific to particular demographic or cultural groups. It is crucial to develop a comprehensive set of continuous, objective, and realistic parental competence assessment questionnaires. Implementing continuous questionnaires for longitudinal research can provide empirical support for developing competency enhancement programs tailored to specific needs.

Thirdly, parental ability research relies heavily on cross-sectional studies, lacking comprehensive coverage and depth, and facing challenges in short-term tracking. Future research should adopt longitudinal approaches to study the development of parental abilities, analyze the effects of intervention methods, and establish the groundwork for future practices.

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