Assessment of Parent and Child Interactions

A Simple View of Parenting - Four Areas of Skill

Discipline

- More effective parents tend to:
  - encourage responsibility and ability to work independently as well as with others
  - are predictable and consistent, and have positive expectations
  - show less intrusive parenting (interfering in a child's efforts to learn, and then in frustration taking control away from the child)
  - show less criticism and negative humor, and more positive interactions
  - supervise and monitor children's behavior, can switch attention between children, and show low conflict by avoiding/quickly ending power struggles
  - show more effective and a greater range of discipline strategies (reasoning, praise to shape behavior, distraction, modeling, humor, enticement, bargaining, and "the look") and address negative behaviors more quickly and consistently
  - tend to have higher educational levels and stress the importance of education
  - believe their actions make a difference in their children's lives and stress love, affection, and modeling as key parenting behaviors (see Pinderhughes et al, 2000 study of minority families)
  - co-parent well so as to "tag team" some responsibilities, support each others' structures, share in less pleasant duties, and balance discipline roles (see Margolin et al, 2000)

- Less effective parents tend to:
  - use power assertive discipline techniques (threats and demands), and fail to respond positively to adaptive behavior
  - display inadequate discipline and monitoring, and allow contact with deviant models
  - show even more authoritarian parenting when stressed
  - over use punitive parenting strategies (the punishment doesn't fit the crime)
  - respond to increasing disobedience with more negative controlling behaviors, ensuring escalation and power struggles, and higher conflict with more delinquent children
  - show disrupted or wavering commitment to parenting
  - feel they have little control over their children so endorse more intense discipline
  - show more authoritarian parenting and negative views of children when depressed, interspersed with neglectful parenting and emotional disengagement

Communication

- More effective parents:
  - teach social skills (resolving conflicts, finding common play activities, compromising, empathizing, especially with siblings), through instruction, suggestions, and hints
  - communicate understanding of the child's needs and can "chat" about daily life and things important to the child (see Smetana 2000 study of middle class African American families)
  - praise to create a positive environment... in addition to shaping behavior
  - communicate clearly the importance of the family and the family's values
  - scaffold and communicate their expectations clearly, in a low-density step-by-step fashion, in appropriate language, simplifying and repeating (motherese)

- Less effective parents tend to:
  - communicate poorly, failing to repeat instructions, explain at the child's level, and break up complex instructions
  - show poorer conflict resolution skills and allow/ignore aggressive behaviors too long
  - show more negative and intrusive comments ("Why are you doing it that way?")
  - show fewer positive interactions, compliments, and signs of affection
  - show mixed messages by making but reversing decisions when the child disagrees
  - view misbehavior more negatively ("He knows better than that, and just does it to get on my nerves") rather than recognizing a failure to understand or control impulses
Organization

• More effective parents:
  o set limits in a nurturing but firm way
  o provide structure and help a child focus their attention and efforts (“So you'll do that first and then what?”)
  o show clear roles, responsibilities, and boundaries in family interactions
  o break up tasks and assign them to children based on their skill level
  o lead the children through a task in a step-by-step manner, showing them how to work together
  o have family discussions so that everyone understands what is expected in the home according to their ability
  o engage in regular family rituals that provide a sense of connection

• Less effective parents:
  o assign tasks children can not complete, and then take control rather than coach
  o discipline in rigid and then inconsistent ways; discipline problems interfere in family activities
  o have a hard time splitting attention between children
  o show ineffective planning and problem-solving (decides how to begin a task, starts, backtracks, changes decisions…)
  o tolerate antisocial behaviors

Empathy

• More effective parents:
  o are more positive and warm in interactions with children and partners
  o soothe distress and distract by refocusing attention on other activities
  o help the child feel competent
  o are less defensive and more aware of their own and their child's negative emotions
  o acknowledge, label, and validate the child's negative emotions, but set limits on their expression, helping the child to learn to regulate and soothe
  o provide and foster closeness in the family
  o use negative emotions as a way to teach about life, school, the world...

• Less effective parents:
  o may not show overtly negative interactions, but show fewer positive ones
  o may show significant and overt negative interactions and power struggles
  o may be emotionally inhibited, enmeshed, or disengaged from family processes
  o may show more frustration and irritability
  o may dismiss or ignore the child's emotions (“It will pass”)
  o may over protect from negative emotions (often in depressed mothers)
  o become less spontaneous, nurturing, and responsive when stressed
Types of Parents - A Short History

Initially, Baumrind proposed three kinds of parents. Maccoby and Martin in the 1980s proposed a revised model, and Baumrind supported this. This is the model most people think of when they remember Baumrind.

In 1991, Baumrind published a new model based on a longitudinal study of 139 children and their families at ages 4, 9, and 15 years old. She obtained ratings of the children/adolescents from teachers, parents, and the adolescents themselves. Overall, she found several types of parents:

**Authoritarian**
These demanding parents value obedience, are more controlling and restrictive, show less nurturance and more aloofness, and discourage discussion. The relationship of the parents may also be unstable. They believe in commanding the children to gain compliance, maintaining order with physical means if needed, and monitoring children carefully. Their children have a multitude of problems, and are less individuated, show fewer pro-social values, and perform more poorly on cognitive tests. Such parents also have a more difficult time maintaining satisfying relationships with their partners. 50% were divorced.

**Authoritative**
These parents maintain discipline but show some reason and flexibility, communicate expectations but allow verbal give-and-take. They have clear expectations and monitor their children, and their discipline fosters responsibility, cooperation, and self-regulation. Parents used more suggestions and positive incentives, and less commands, physical enforcement, and prohibitions. Their children cope the best among these groups, and are seen as individuated, loving, mature, resilient, achievement oriented, and have the highest scores on cognitive tests. Children from single-parent authoritative homes did not differ from those from two-parent authoritative homes. 14% were divorced.

**Directive**
These parents are just as likely to monitor as Authoritative parents. They value conformity and adherence to the rules of the home. While they are less warm than Authoritative parents, they tend to be warm and nurturing upon compliance. Their teens show no more behavior problems than teens from Authoritative families. They do view their parents as more restrictive, but also showed very low levels of level of drug or alcohol use. I tend to think of this as a cultural variation of Authoritative parenting. It seems much like some African American parents who look Authoritarian, but who do not produce unhappy children like the Authoritarian parent does. 14% were divorced.

**Democratic**
These parents are just as warm as Authoritative parents, but not as controlling or likely to monitor as Authoritative parents. The teens from these families looked much like those from Authoritative families. I tend to think of this as a cultural variation of Authoritative parenting. Consider a family where family decisions are made more by group decision making and discussion rather than by unilateral parental decision. 28% were divorced.
**Disengaged**
Sometimes called Neglecting, these parents do not discipline and supervise, organize, communicate consistently... and may actively reject or neglect the children. You sometimes see a heavy-handed effort to discipline, which does not work, followed by giving up and making no effort to discipline. Disorganized, divorced, or substance abusing families fall into this group in high numbers. The children cope very poorly, and score the lowest on cognitive tests. They are more likely to be antisocial, to lack self-regulation, to be immature, and the most likely to use drugs and alcohol. 60% were divorced.

**Good Enough**
Rated as medium on warmth and control, these were only 10% of the sample. 39% were divorced.

**Permissive**
Also known as Non-Directive, these parents make few demands, and allow teens considerable freedom to regulate themselves. They require little maturity and conventionalism, and avoid confrontation of problematic behavior, especially substance abuse. The children are less assertive and cognitively competent. They are often smarter but less achievement oriented, show less self-regulation and social responsibility, and are more likely to heavily use drugs. 86% were divorced.
### Assessment of Parenting - Six Simple Activities

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<th>Task</th>
<th>Description</th>
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| **Plan-A-Party**      | The parent is given written instructions and sufficient materials to plan a birthday party with the children, and make hats, one for each family member and one for the birthday child. I also ask them to make a list of games to play and people to invite.  
**OR**  
**Get Well Soon**    | The parent is given written instructions and sufficient materials to make “get well” cards for a boy in the hospital, one from each of the family. Subtasks include a list of jokes to cheer him up, and a list of things to help him once he gets home.  
Both tasks require the parent to organize, discipline, and set goals for the children, as well as offer praise and encouragement for their accomplishments. It lasts about 30 minutes. |
| **Tell-A-Story**      | The family is given pictures selected from *the Children's Apperception Test* and asked to tell stories. This requires the parent to label and validate children's feelings and needs, respond to sample parent-child problems, and use parent-child interactions as a way to teach the children. It lasts about 30 minutes. |
| **Free Play**         | The family is given a box of assorted toys, and allowed to interact in any way they wish. This allows for an observation of the parent's ability to supervise the family, recognize each child's skills and abilities, and manage the children's frustration. |
| **Homework**          | The Free Play Period is interrupted with the Homework Task, which includes giving the parent a “homework assignment” for the children with problems ranging from simple drawing to difficult math. This requires the parent to help the child change activities, demonstrate some skills, and learn some skills from the parent. This also requires the parent to make some judgments regarding the child’s abilities. I sometimes ask the family to read a story or sing a song together as a way to shift back in to a less structured and more play-like activity to prepare for the next task.  
**OR**  
**Family Discussion** | The Family Discussion Task entails discussing with the family issues such as, “Who is the easiest to get along with?” and “Who is the most likely to get mad?” as well as discussion of discipline issues, household rules, and some family values. These allow for observation of family communication processes, the family's overall agreement, and the individual members' ability to deal with differences of opinions. |
| **Shopping List**     | At the end of the Family Discussion, the family is given a list of seven items to purchase from the grocery store, and asked to add seven more they normally enjoy eating in their home. The family is to memorize the items, and repeat them back to the examiner after the list is taken away. It requires the family to extend their discussion and break up a task into subtasks. |
| **Separation**        | The parent is asked to leave the room for five to ten minutes. The children's reactions to the parent's departure and return are observed, as well as the time and means they choose to reengage with the parent. The task allows for observation of the family's ability to handle simulated separation and reengagement, and is a modification of *The Strange Situation* task. |
| **Symbolic Nurturance** | The parent is given candy and asked to supervise the children feeding each other. Next, the parent is given hand lotion and asked to supervise each child in using it. These symbolic nurturing activities allow for an observation of the parent's physical affection and comfort with physical contact. |
A Few Pointers

• **Integrating the Four Areas of Parenting**
  How do we assess the above areas? Think about the Plan A Party task. It requires organization to run the task and get everything done, communication to explain and guide the children through the task, discipline to make sure there’s no fighting over materials and the children comply with instructions, and empathy to enjoy the task or explain which games a child might like to play. Each of the tasks requires all four areas of parenting, and the shift from high to low structure and back again is very helpful in observing the parent’s ability to handle the shift.

• **Focusing on Process**
  Again, the focus is *not* on how the task is exactly done; they can make wearable hats, tiny hats too small to wear, colored pictures of a hat... that’s *fine*. It’s the family dynamic that are important. I do want some kind of hats, and some kind of lists as an assessment of organization, but making four hats instead of five is not a big deal. On the other hand, not being able to make *any* hats, clean up after *most* tasks, tell *any* stories or sing *any* song... is more telling. Likewise, I don’t interpret the CAT stories, but more just watch how the family does the task and includes the elements I asked for.

Similarly, sometimes a parent tries and tries but can not get the child to read or sing. This could be a bad thing if they didn’t try very well or didn’t know how to keep the child’s attention. It could also be a good thing, if they made a good try using different strategies, but accepted that the child didn’t want to read (“picking your battles”).

• **Length of Observations**
  The first activity often isn’t very telling; even not-so-good parents can “hold it together” for 30 minutes in a structured setting. Families sometimes also need time to ignore you and “act natural.” Thus, a longer evaluation period with varying levels of structure is needed. As you can see above, after you factor in a bathroom trip or two, time for a snack midway, and the “Cleanup Song” between tasks... this can be a two to three hour observation for a large family.

• **Order of Activities**
  I order the tasks this way to see how the family moves through changing activities and levels of structure. I also put the Symbolic Nurturance Task last, as even not-so-good parents can usually pull this off (chocolate is an amazing motivator) and can leave the evaluation without feeling horrible about themselves if they feel the did a bad job.

• **Scheduling Appointments**
  Scheduling is important too, as younger children do better in the morning, instead of after a long day at school. Sometimes an afternoon or evening appointment is unavoidable though. However, if you do for a *forensic* case... seeing the child(ren) and each family at the *same* time on the *same* days of the week is preferable. That way, either both parents get a child who is tired and grumpy about missing soccer practice, or neither do. More than one setting can be helpful in terms of your assessment of their family and home life, as well as help them feel you really got to understand them. Including and excluding “added parent figures” can also be useful.

• **The “Right” Response**
  Finally, barring abusive parenting, there is no limit to the number of “right” way to handle a parent-child interaction. You have to judge the interaction by the child’s response how effective it is, and remember that what works with one child might not work with another, and what works today might not next week (i.e., “quack quack”). We sometimes recommend behavioral techniques as the best response, and while they may work... consider that parents are seldom trained in effective behavioral intervention strategies. The thing I tell folks about psychological advice on child-rearing is that *everything* we say works when we do it and smile. I explain that when they do it, it may well work but may not. I’m a different and unknown stimulus to the child(ren) and what I am doing is likely new. After a while it may not work and they will need to switch to something else.
Attachment Style and *The Strange Situation*...

Ainsworth developed *The Strange Situation* as a way to assess infant attachment. She basically asked mothers to leave their 12 to 18 month old child with a stranger for a few minutes, and then had them return, and watched how the child responded to the separation, stranger, and reunification. The idea is that a child's attachment style is the result of the parent-child interactions that develop over time, and by watching the child's response, you can assess the parent-child dynamic. Technically, whereas *attachment* is the child's connection to the parent, *bonding* is the parent's attachment to the child... but these terms get interchanged a lot.

There are basically four kinds of attachment styles to watch for. The classification is based on 1) seeking closeness, and 2) maintaining parental contact:

- **Secure** - this is the best style, as the child is able to tolerate the separation, and when the parent returns, seek the parent for soothing and contact, and be satisfied with it. This style is most common (70% of middle class families).

  When I perform a Separation Task, I find these children can tolerate the parent's leaving, perhaps with minor anxiety, and the parent typically offers some reassurance of returning. In their absence, the child can be engaged with toys and enjoy the interaction with me. The child usually comes with me to bring the parent back into the office, and the child goes to the parent in the waiting room and brings them in. Upon the parent’s return to the office, the child seeks out contact with the parent, sometimes showing new toys they liked and engaging the parent in play, sometimes sitting in the parent's lap, but generally ignoring me.

- **Insecure-Anxious/Avoidant** - this style may not appear problematic, as the child seems to tolerate the separation just fine. Closer examination, however, reveals that the child is almost "unemotional" about it. The child doesn't seem distressed or particularly motivated to seek the parent for reconnection upon their return. The idea is that they are so used to broken attachments and interactions that they emotionally "shut down" to avoid experiencing any distress. Other research has supported that insensitive over-stimulation can lead to this kind of reaction, as if the child needs to shut down to withdraw from the interaction. Further, maternal depression has been linked to this kind of style in other studies, as if the child learns to "go hungry" for attention and ignore "hunger pains" for it.

  When I perform a Separation Task, I find these children seem to withdraw when the separation is announced, and the parent says little if anything while leaving. The child is uninterested in playing in the absence of the parent, and may not even come with me to the waiting room to retrieve the parent. When the parent returns to the office, the child does not engage them in play, and the family typically ends up simply putting away the toys after a few minutes, and waiting for me to tell them what to do.

- **Insecure-Anxious/Ambivalent** - this style is obviously problematic, as the child is very upset about the separation, and on the return of the parent becomes "clingy" and very fearful of another separation. However, the parents' efforts to soothe the child do not work, and even if the child stays close by, the child seems to remain anxious and may even become rejecting of the parent's efforts to soothe. Others become passive and unresponsive when the parent leaves and returns. In both cases, it is as if the separation was so traumatic that they are unable either to ask for nurturance and soothing, or to receive it when it is offered. Some research supports insensitive under-stimulation can lead to this kind of attachment, as if the child becomes unsure of when the attention will "dry up."

  When I perform a Separation Task, I find these children seem to appear distressed as soon as the separation is announced, and may begin to cry as soon as the parent leaves. They are barely consolable, and hard to engage in play. When I announce that it's time to bring the parent back, they run ahead of me to the waiting room, greet the parent, cling, and sometimes don't want to come back into the office. When the parent returns to the office, they cling, stay close, and still can't be engaged in play. They may become fussy, act out, test the limits, and then cry and cling more.
Disorganized/Disoriented - this style has been perplexing, as children of abused parents sometimes showed signs of secure attachment. However, closer observation showed these secure behaviors were interspersed with insecure behaviors, as well as "freezing" at times, and either depression or apprehension about the return of the parent. The idea is that they become fearful of the parent's response and exhibit signs of multiple possible responses as they struggle through a desire to appease and approach, and a conflicting desire to avoid and withdraw for safety. They may vacillate until they figure out what is best based on the parent's desires. Thus, more abused children fall into this group since it was based on observations of abused children.

When I conduct a Separation Task, I find these kinds of children are either very anxious or almost relieved when the parent leaves, and are at first anxious but slowly get easier to engage in play. Sometimes they do not want the parent to return when I ask about it, and may not come with me either when the parent returns. They may want to clean up before the parent comes back, almost as if to hide the interaction with me from the parent. When the parent returns, they make no efforts to re-attach, and watch the parent closely to see how they will react, taking their lead from them. If the parent picks up toys and announces a desire to play, they may slowly join, but if the parent seems uninterested, they may start and stop play, talk then stop talking, and try to engage the parent with a toy but then abandon this.

While some have argued these attachment styles have no stability, others have found a good stability (64% for all types, and 76% for secure/insecure distinctions) over 20 years.
### Activity 1: Plan A Birthday Party
(30 minutes)

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<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>authoritarian</th>
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<th>laissez faire</th>
<th>inconsistent</th>
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<td>Power</td>
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<td>Communication</td>
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<td>aggressive</td>
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<td>Organization</td>
<td>Instructions</td>
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<td>Process</td>
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<td>continued directions</td>
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<td>reinforcement</td>
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<td>closure</td>
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<td>appropriate language</td>
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<td>Empathy</td>
<td>labels feelings</td>
<td>admits to similar strategies to cope</td>
<td>feelings to teach</td>
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<td>Touch</td>
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### Activity 2: CAT Stories
(30 minutes)

### Activity 3: Unstructured Play
(followed by homework and song
30 minutes)

### Activity 4: Separation Task
(5-15 Minutes)

### Activity 5: Feeding

### Activity 6: Lotion