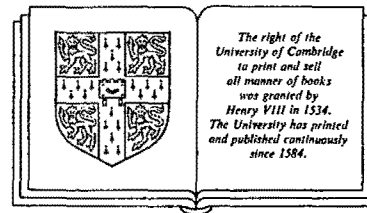# Child maltreatment

Theory and research on the causes and consequences of child abuse and neglect

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Part III   The developmental consequences of child maltreatment

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10 Cognitive foundations for parental care

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What is parental development, and how is parenthood defined? Is it a biologically based instinct, or a set of behaviors and/or skills learned at a parent's own mother's (and father's) knee? Is the development of parental competence largely a psychological process, or is it a reflection of the capacity of the environment to support or erode the establishment and maintenance of a nurturant home context?

Parental development has been variously defined, and the definitions attached to parenting have had important implications for our understanding of the breakdown in parental functioning represented by child maltreatment. For example, researchers who conceptualize parental development as the acquisition of a set of traits or abilities may fail to examine characteristics of the environment or characteristics of the child in order to explain adequately why some parents sharing certain psychological attributes may abuse a child in their care and others may not. Clinicians who focus exclusively on parental psychological variables may place a child in foster care without recognizing that there is a strong and caring extended family where the child could be placed with a minimum of trauma until the parent's emotional issues can be addressed.

We define parenting as a complex and multidimensional process. As Klaus and Kennell (1976) remark,

A mother's and father's actions and responses toward their infant are derived from a complex combination of their own genetic endowment, the way the baby responds to them, a long history of interpersonal relations with their own families and with each other, past experience with this or previous pregnancies, the absorption of the practices and values of their cultures, and perhaps most importantly how each was raised by his or her own mother and father. (p. 7)

What, then, do we see as the essential components of the parenting process that are necessary to our understanding of child maltreatment? The parent's own characteristics and experiences contribute importantly to the pro-

cess. For example, a mother's capacity to foster the healthy development of her child may be influenced by her own upbringing, by the kind and amount of nurturing and protection she may have experienced at the hands of her own parents. This capacity is also influenced by such characteristics as her own self-esteem, depression, the quality of her social and physical environment, knowledge of developmental norms, and how she understands the child's needs. Parents bring to the parental role their levels of maturity in a variety of domains (emotional, cognitive, social) as well as their personal histories, attitudes toward childrearing, and personalities. Children also bring their own characteristics to their relationships. Both parents and children are seen as dynamic and interacting individuals whose mutual influence on each other is affected by complex forces, including their own characteristics, their relationships with each other, and the broader contexts (e.g., social, economic, and historical) in which they interact.

Our appreciation for (if not yet understanding of) the complexity of the development and expression of parental care does not in any way limit the importance of developing a fuller understanding of each of the component parts. In focusing in depth on a component of a complex picture, however, we must not lose sight of the eventual need to integrate that component into a broader whole.

In this chapter we will focus on cognitive dimensions of influence on the development of parental care. These cognitive dimensions have been studied as a subcategory of parental personality characteristics. They include attitudes and beliefs about childrearing, parental attributions and expectations of the child, and the development of the cognitive perspectives that parents draw from in order to make sense of the child and to guide their actions in relation to the child.

Parental attitudes and expectations

Although the characterization of parental thinking and its effects on children has generated a large body of literature, until the past ten years research and theory had been primarily concerned with attitudes toward specific childrearing practices and with behavior (Baldwin, Kalhorn, and Breese, 1945; Blank, 1963; Schaefer and Bell, 1958; Sears, Maccoby, and Levin 1957). Parental attitudes, however, have been found to be poor predictors of parental behavior (Becker and Krug, 1965) and of child outcome (Leton, 1958; Yarrow, Campbell, and Burton, 1968). Nowlis (1952) found that different parental interpretations or concepts can underlie similar acts, so that an act can have different meanings for different mothers and, by implication, for their children.

Even though Sears et al. (1957) found interesting and provocative relationships between parental care variables and children's behavior, Yarrow

and her colleagues (1968) were not able to replicate the findings. Becker and Krug (1965) and Beckwith (1972) found meaningful relationships between standardized measures of parental attitudes and children's behavior only with middle-class families. Tulkin and Choler (1973) report that relationships between the Maternal Attitude Scale scores and observed maternal behavior were much less clear in the working-class sample than in the middle-class sample.

As parental attitude studies have been based on the belief that there is a "best" way to raise children, with the purpose of research being to find this best way, they do not take into account the possibility that people from diverse backgrounds and circumstances might have different beliefs and different standards from those of the researchers and the standardizing populations. Duvall (1946), for example, found different beliefs about "good" parents and children among mothers from various subcultures. Because particular behaviors and attitudes would have different meaning in subcultures with different beliefs and values, they would be likely to have different effects on children's behavior. In a study of Black mothers, both teen-aged and adult, Field, Windmayer, Stringer, and Ignnatoff (1980) concluded that "Despite the teenage mothers' less optimal perceptions and attitudes, their offspring did not differ from those of adult mothers on developmental assessments. Any expected developmental differences may have been attenuated by family support systems, the greater availability of substitute caregiving (e.g., by the unemployed grandmothers) and the infants' exposure to a wide range of playmates" (p. 433).

In addition to these limitations in research and theory on parental attitudes, there is some suggestion that the relationship between attitudes of both parents toward childrearing and toward each other as caregivers may be importantly implicated in parental competence. A review of a number of relevant studies by Parke, Power, and Gottman (1979) supports the conclusion that "Consensus in childrearing attitudes, the father's perception of the mother's caretaking competence, and other qualities of the husband–wife relationship are all related to maternal involvement or competence" (Parke, Power, and Fisher 1980, p. 99).

Another type of characteristic assumed to be related to parenting behavior is knowledge of and expectations concerning normal child development. In a longitudinal study of 37 young couples who married in high school, DeLissovoy (1973) collected data over a three-year period on a number of marriage and parenting issues, including a questionnaire on developmental norms. According to DeLissovoy, "The responses of both parents revealed that knowledge of basic norms was sadly lacking. The answers were skewed to an unrealistically early expectation of development" (p. 251).

Evidence concerning maternal age and lack of knowledge of developmental norms comes from a study by Epstein (1979) that supports the notion

that teenage mothers are deficient in their knowledge of child development and that this lack of knowledge may affect their interactions with their children. Although misperceptions concerning developmental norms have been cited in the literature as related to child maltreatment, the exact nature of this relationship remains unclear.

Parental attributions and child maltreatment

The use of attribution theory to investigate child maltreatment has brought an important new cognitive dimension to the field. With this conceptualization, "a person's perceptions are jointly influenced by a need to objectively understand the environment and by more subjective self-serving needs to enhance or protect self-esteem" (Larrance and Twentyman, 1983, p. 450). Within the bounds of perceived reality, there is flexibility in interpreting the reasons for an individual's actions. In general, investigators have reported that research subjects tend to make positive attributions about their own behavior, and that this tendency toward positive self-attribution is generalized to attributions about others with whom the individual is intimate. As applied to parenting behavior in general and child maltreatment in particular, work has focused on the reasons parents offer for explaining children's specific behavior. These reasons may be related to such factors as motivation ("He's crying because he's upset" or "He's crying because he's bad"), expectations ("She's too young to understand" or "She's old enough to know better"), or situations' influences ("He's tired"). The expectation has been that parents who have maltreated a child in their care will be more likely than control parents to ascribe negative attributions to their children's behavior. For example, a parent who has maltreated a child would be expected to be more likely to attribute a behavior such as breaking a toy to "badness" than to "tiredness."

The results of this approach have been mixed. Several studies matching samples of mothers with protective service histories for having abused and/or neglected their children with mothers without such histories have found significant differences (e.g., Siracusa, 1985; Larrance and Twentymen, 1983). (As with the majority of studies of child maltreatment, fathers are rarely studied.) In these studies, mothers in the maltreatment groups have had consistently more negative perceptions than mothers in the comparison groups.

In direct contrast, Rosenberg and Reppucci (1983) found no differences in abusive mothers' perceptions of their children's behavior when compared with mothers who had problems with childrearing, but who were not identified as abusive by social workers in the parenting program where they were all enrolled.

A partial explanation for these inconsistencies may be in the different

ways parental perceptions were measured and in the differing nature of the control groups employed. In the study (Rosenberg and Reppucci, 1983) with no significant differences, the comparison group consisted of mothers who were receiving help because they had difficulty controlling their children's behavior. That they would view their children's intentions negatively is not surprising. A third comparison group of mothers who did not require intervention for parenting would perhaps have enabled a more differentiated understanding of the relation of parental attributions to parental efficacy in general and to child maltreatment in particular.

Bates, Freeland, and Lounsbury (1979) offer thought-provoking data on the extent to which maternal personality characteristics mediate the ways in which mothers view (and interact with) their babies. In their study, multiparous extroverted mothers tended to rate their babies as "easy." Moreover, there was no evidence that the babies really were easy, as correlations between extroversion and home observation of the babies on variables such as crying and soothability were low. Thus, extroverted mothers tended to *label* their babies as easy despite a wide range of infant behaviors as recorded in the home observations. Noting that mothers who describe themselves as extroverted report a high degree of dominance, Bates, Freeland, and Lounsbury speculate that such mothers may feel that their infants' fussiness is under their control and therefore not difficult. This study raises the important issue of the relation of parental personality characteristics to parental perceptions of the child. Although parental perceptions, attributions, and expectations may all in some way be implicated in child maltreatment, if they covary with parental self-conceptions and emotions, then the limitations of separating the "thought" from the "feeling" are clear.

Parental perspective-taking: a cognitive-developmental view

Emmerich (1969) found that different goals and beliefs can underlie the same surface attitudes, supporting the view that parental attitudes and behavior must be understood within the framework of the parent's own thinking. McGillicuddy-DeLisa, Sigel, and Johnson (1979) propose that parents construct belief systems about their children that provide the basis for predispositions to act certain ways. Sameroff (1975) suggests that mothers' thinking about child development can be grouped into stages that are analogous to Piaget's levels of cognitive development.

Several studies of parental dysfunction have observed relationships between parental conceptions and parental behavior. These investigators have noted that parents who have abused their children frequently lack an awareness of the effects of mistreatment or lack of care on their children (Aldridge, Cautley, and Lichstein, 1974; Berg, 1976; Smith, Hanson, and Noble, 1973). In other words, they fail to comprehend their children's expe-

rience from the children's point of view. In a prospective study, Egeland and Brunnquell (1979) found that "the mother's ability to deal with the psychological complexity of the child and childrearing" at 36 weeks gestation accounted for the most variance in a discriminant analysis that predicted dysfunction/nondysfunction status at an 84 percent rate of accuracy.

Such findings have led to a systematic study of the nature and development of parents' conceptions of children and the parental role conducted by the first author. This research on parental awareness, to be described in some detail, has implications for service providers working with families experiencing difficulties in nurturing and protecting their children, as well as for basic researchers interested in family processes with both well-functioning and poorly functioning families.

Parental awareness, parental development, and parental care

During the late 1970s, Carolyn Newberger (1977) initiated a study of parents' conceptions of children, with the goal of drawing on social cognitive-developmental psychology to develop a framework for understanding the process and development of parental understanding of the child and of the parental role. Newberger's work was generated in part from a series of clinical interviews with a group of parents including some mothers and fathers with a clinical history of having abused or severely neglected a child in their care. During the context of these interviews Newberger noted:

How they reasoned appeared to be related to how they behaved as parents. In particular, parents with especially troubled relationships with their children were frequently unable to perceive their children as having needs and rights of their own separate from those of the parent. Other parents understood their children as separate individuals but in a rather stereotyped way, as though one could understand one's own child only through a definition of children offered by others. Yet other parents reasoned about their children as distinct and unique individuals. Stable individual differences in how these parents thought about their children appeared to correspond to descriptions of different cognitive–structural stages in . . . understanding of others' perspectives and personhood as they have been described by cognitive-developmental investigators [Piaget, 1950; Kohlberg, 1969; Selman, 1971]. (C. Newberger, 1980, p. 3)

These observations suggested a developmental progression of understanding in parenthood. This progression was hypothesized to proceed from an egocentric view through a stereotypic view into a more individualized and analytic view of the child and of the parent–child relationship. A study of parental conceptions of children and the parental role was designed in order to develop a methodology to examine parental cognitive process and its development.

Before we describe the study of parental awareness, let us define what we mean by parental cognition from the cognitive-developmental perspective

employed in this approach. Cognition can be understood as the logic a person uses to make sense of experience. In other words, cognition is a mental blueprint for how the world operates, which organizes how the individual operates in relation to the world. Social cognition is the logic of thinking about persons and relationships in the interpersonal world. In childhood, the stages through which that social logic progresses proceed from an egocentric view, in which children do not differentiate their own perspectives from those of others, to an increasingly complex and comprehensive awareness of the perspectives and intentions of others as separate from themselves (Selman, 1980). The central question addressed by Newberger's application of social cognitive-developmental theory to the study of parenthood was: Can a developmental process of interpersonal awareness be identified in parental thinking and, if identified, does it bear a relationship to parental functioning?

In order to study the nature and development of parental awareness, Newberger (1977) constructed an interview that explores parental reasoning on a variety of issues requiring parental understanding: interpreting the child's subjective experience, identifying influences on development, defining a "good child," making decisions concerning child discipline, resolving conflict, meeting needs, engendering communication and trust, and learning and evaluating parental performance.

In Newberger's initial study (Newberger, 1977, 1980), 51 families representing a broad cross-section of social and family backgrounds (as defined by the Hollingshead, 1965, two-factor index of social scale) were interviewed. An analysis of the interviews revealed that parental conceptions could be ordered hierarchically into four increasingly comprehensive and psychologically oriented levels. These levels of parental awareness are briefly described as follows:

Level 1: Egoistic orientation. The parent understands the child as a projection of his or her own experience, and the parental role is organized around parental wants and needs.

Level 2: Conventional orientation. The child is understood in terms of externally derived (tradition, culture, "authority") definitions and explanations of children. The parental role is organized around socially defined notions of correct practices and responsibilities.

Level 3: Subjective–individualistic orientation. The child is viewed as a unique individual who is understood through the parent–child relationship, rather than by external definitions of children. The parental role is organized around identifying and meeting the needs of this child, rather than as the fulfillment of predetermined role obligations.

Level 4: Systems orientation. The parent understands the child as a complex and changing psychological self-system. The parent grows in the role . . . and recognizes

that the relationship and the role are built not only on meeting the child's needs, but also on finding ways of balancing one's own needs and the child's so that each can be responsibly met (pp. 12–13).

From the interviews, Newberger (1977) constructed a scoring manual for measuring levels of parental awareness. In studies of independent samples of parents, the manual has been found to discriminate among parents, and the reliability between raters has ranged from .88 to .96 (e.g., Cook, 1979; Partoll, 1980; Hofer, 1981; Pita, 1986).

In order to test, in a preliminary way, the relationship between parental awareness and parental functioning, Newberger interviewed a sample of eight parents who presented to a major pediatric hospital with a recent history of having abused or neglected a child in their care. This sample was matched with a comparison sample on race, social status, family size, and age of the index child. Statistically significant differences between the two groups were found in parental awareness level scores ($p < .01$) (Newberger, 1977, 1980).

Although these data suggested a relationship between parental awareness and parental behavior, several limitations of the study constrained the interpretation of the findings. This was a small sample from an urban environment. Furthermore, a subsequent examination of the clinical records of the children in the two groups revealed that all the children in the protective service sample had histories of some sort of physical condition that dated from the neonatal period. These included hearing handicaps, strabismus, and exzema. The review of clinical records suggested the possibility that *both* the development of parental awareness *and* parental care may have been compromised by difficulties in establishing an affectional bond consequent to a medical condition in the child present during the neonatal period.

These issues were addressed with a second controlled study (Cook, 1979). The study sample was recruited from a preschool program for developmentally delayed children in rural Maine. This sampling strategy enabled Cook to match the eight parents in the program who had a history of protective service involvement for child neglect with a comparison sample, not only on the basis of familial and maternal characteristics as in the Children's Hospital study, but also on type and magnitude of developmental delay in the child (Newberger and Cook, 1983). Statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) in parental reasoning were found between the two groups in this sample as well. These findings provide further support for the hypothesis that parental awareness is importantly implicated in parental function and dysfunction.

Further evidence for such a relationship is offered by a recently completed study of childrearing patterns in young mothers. Interactions were observed between 136 adolescent inner city mothers and their one-year-old infants.

Significant relationships were found between level of parental awareness and parental behavior as measured by three widely used rating scales (Flick, 1985).

Developmental parental awareness

One limitation of investigations relying on a measure of parental role variables at a given point in time is that they frequently lack a theoretical framework that enables the investigator to analyze change over time. Several investigators note that parents' behavior and attitudes may change over time and in varying circumstances. Rossi (1968) identified developmental tasks of the parental role analogous to Erikson's tasks of ego development. She identified four stages of a role cycle that can be applied to the parental role: (1) the anticipatory stage; (2) the honeymoon stage; (3) the plateau stage; and (4) the disengagement–termination stage. Each stage is linked to a particular time in the cycle. Because these stages are temporal, rather than functional or developmental, they may serve to identify in a general sense the relationship tasks with which a person is engaged, but do not inform our understanding of the processes within the individual that generate variations in behavior or promote development.

A different approach to parental development is offered by Loevinger (1962). She evolved a test of maternal attitudes that sought basic personality traits from patterns in maternal responses. The Family Problem Scale is composed of a set of dichotomous statements. Each mother was instructed to choose from each pair the statement closest to her way of thinking. Loevinger found that those statements that required a judgment about the inner life of the child assumed a central importance in discriminating personality traits among the respondents. This was interpreted as suggesting that the capacity to conceptualize the child's inner life represents a central maternal personality characteristic. From analyses of patterns in maternal personality types – which she described as (1) resistant to authority; (2) identified with authority; and (3) emancipated from arbitrary authority – Loevinger hypothesized that these personality types represent a developmental sequence, although she did not test the developmental hypothesis in her research.

Further analyses of the parental awareness data (Newberger, 1980) also suggest that parental awareness is a developmental process that unfolds during childhood and continues to develop with parental experience. Initial evidence for the development of parental awareness was derived from two cross-sectional analyses, one of parents with differing years of parental experience, the other of children of different ages. In the parental analysis, a statistically significant relationship ($p < .025$) was found between years of

parental experience and level of parental awareness when parents with the same number of children were compared with each other. When 16 children between the ages of 7 and 17 were administered a form of the parental awareness interview adapted for children (questions were revised to read "If you were a parent . . ."), the parental awareness levels were found to be highly related to age ($p < .005$). None of the children achieved Level 4 reasoning, although many parents did (Newberger, 1980).

A follow-up study (Newberger and Cook, 1986) of 13 of the 16 children seven years later revealed that development continued to unfold, with a threshold at Level 3 for these children, who were now all in their late teens or young adulthood. These data suggest that although concepts relating to issues of parenthood appear to develop sequentially commencing in childhood, there may be experiences particular to the parental role that may be necessary (although apparently not sufficient) to stimulate thinking at the highest level. Further research is needed to elucidate how and what kind of experience facilitates development at what time in individuals' lives, and at what stages of development.

That development of parental awareness both continues and can be facilitated in adulthood is suggested by several more recent investigations. In a study of 31 middle-class mothers between 25 and 45 years of age, Partoll (1980) found a significant relationship between parental awareness level and years of parental experience. She also found parental awareness to be related to ego development using Marcia's Ego Identity Interview, a finding that has been recently replicated in a study of the development of parental generativity (Pita, 1986).

Preliminary evidence that parental reasoning is responsive to intervention efforts has also been found. In a small controlled study, Sandy (1982) found a significant increase in parental reasoning following a 12-week parent education program that combined group discussion of childrearing dilemmas with didactic presentation of child development information ($p < .03$). When parents were reinterviewed four months following the completion of the program, further gains, which were statistically significant, were found ($p < .05$). A process of development appears to have been initiated during the intervention that continued in the absence of further intervention. No changes were found over the same interval in a comparison group, who had also signed up for the intervention but who were randomly placed on a waiting list to receive the intervention at the completion of this study.

Conclusions

Cognition in parenthood has been studied from several practical and theoretical vantage points, including attitudes or beliefs about childrearing prac-

tices, parental attributions of parent and child behavior and intentions, parental expectations of child development, and the cognitive-developmental structure of parental reasoning about tasks of childrearing.

Research has shown some of these approaches to be more fruitful than others as arenas for the investigation of parental functioning. For example, parental *attitudes* concerning childrearing practices appear to have no strong and consistent relationship with either parental practices (Becker and Krug, 1965) or child outcome (Leton, 1958; Yarrow et al., 1968), or to be related to child outcome only with middle-class families (Beckwith, 1972; Tulkin and Choler, 1973). There is also considerable evidence that sample bivariate studies (e.g., between maternal attitudes and child behavior) are not as useful as those studies providing insights into the contexts in which maternal-child interactions take place. Thus, we learn that maternal personality (Bates, Freeland, and Lounsburg, 1979) and the husband–wife relationship (Parke, Power, and Gottman, 1979) are likely to be of importance in the parenting process, along with social class (Becker and Krug, 1965; Beckwith, 1972; Tulkin and Choler, 1973), which may gain some of its importance through its association with particular forms of support systems that may mediate any relationship between maternal attitudes and child outcomes (Field et al., 1980). (See also Cicchetti and Rizley, 1981, and Sameroff and Chandler, 1975, for discussions of a parent–child–environment transactional model of child maltreatment.)

Attitudes toward childrearing may in some ways reflect fairly superficial cognitions that are strongly influenced by socialization and reflect a concern with social desirability. As we move into "deeper" levels of cognition, where prevailing social values may have less impact, we can discover some research findings with important implications for the role of parental cognitions in the parenting process. For example, there is evidence (particularly where the studies have utilized the most appropriate control groups) that parental *attributions* about their children's behavior are of importance.

Typical measures of parental attitudes focus primarily on the *content* of particular cognitions about childrearing practices. Research aimed at this content level may not be as enlightening as research aimed more at the level of functions and structure in cognition. Research on parental attributions holds promise because of the *function* such attributions play in the parent's efforts to understand the environment and preserve self-esteem. Research on the *structure* of parental cognitions (as in work on parental awareness) has yielded particularly valuable findings on the cognitive foundations of parental care.

The levels of parental awareness are thought to describe *qualitative* differences in the way parents organize their understanding of their children, of the relationship between themselves and their children, and of their role as parents. For example, a shift from a Level 2 awareness – of the child as

a "type" of child who is understood from the perspective of the conventional wisdom about children – to a Level 3 awareness – of the child as a unique individual who is understood through personal sharing and communication – is more than a different attitude toward children, or an adding of "unique individual" characteristics onto "character type" characteristics. It represents a qualitative reorientation in how children are known and understood. The qualitative differences are argued to represent *cognitive structures* that operate as mental blueprints through which experience is organized, interpreted, and responded to.

In a structural system, this mental blueprint is consistently applied across different aspects of experience in that system. In the research on parental awareness, this consistency was found in the coherency of responses on interviews (Newberger, 1977). In parent–child relationships, the consistency would be reflected in patterns of childrearing organized around powerful and pervasive world views reflecting a particular cognitive orientation. For example, a conventional orientation might be reflected in a consistent pattern of authoritarian parenting in which the underlying structure is the assumption of an "expert" perspective external to the child, and the more "surface" attitude or belief is that without strict rules children will go "wrong." A limitation of a focus on attitudes is that the attitude (in this example the message of the "expert") may change, but the fundamental orientation of parent toward child might not. In other words, a more critical dimension of parental understanding may be whether the child is related to as a *source* or as an *object* of information, rather than the nature of that information.

Research on parental awareness also offers a developmental perspective on parental thinking and suggests that parental cognition represents an evolving process that begins in childhood and has the potential to continue throughout the lifespan. The process of development, both of understanding and of skills, requires the capacity for both growth and change within the individual, and also the *opportunity* for potential to be realized. This requires attention to the context in which an individual is embedded, the quality of the child's capacity to respond to parental care, and the support available to allow the parent the time and space necessary for growth.

Although much of the important research on the cognitive foundations of care is relatively recent, the findings are of importance to all clinicians and service providers who are concerned with the adequacy of family functioning. Although we would not suggest that attitudinal measures be administered to parents, we would encourage the assessment of deeper levels of cognition. From interviews of parents (ideally, fathers as well as mothers), whether using more structured formal instruments or probing clinical explorations, a sensitive and knowledgeable interviewer can assess how the parent interprets the child's behavior as well as the fundamental reasoning pro-

cesses underlying parental decisions concerning the handling of discipline, conflict, meeting particular needs, and so forth.

It is clear that any approach limited solely to an assessment of parental cognitions is incomplete. Thus, researchers and practitioners would do well to assess also a variety of other factors that may be of fundamental importance to the adequacy of children's care. These include the consistency between father and mother in their parental conceptions and behavior and how they handle similarities and differences. It is also important to determine the extent to which parents are struggling to cope with acute or chronic stresses, and to remember that parental functioning can break down even in parents with well-developed parental awareness if they are burdened with greater stress than they can handle. Attention to cognitive processes should never replace attention to medical, educational, and social realities of parents and children. Nor should attention to cognitive processes replace attention to the specifics of parental practices and their effects on the child. Rather, parental functioning must be understood as a complex process, influenced by a variety of contextual and internal forces (see Belsky, 1984; Belsky and Vondra, this volume; Cicchetti and Rizley, 1981).

The value of the cognitive approach to the study of parenthood is not that it provides an alternative explanation for parental functioning, but rather that it elaborates a critical dimension of parental competence and development, a dimension that has important implications for parental care and that offers new insights into the formation of the enduring parent-child relationship.

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11   Intergenerational continuities and discontinuities in serious parenting difficulties

Michael Rutter

Parental maltreatment of children takes many different forms and has a variety of origins (Mrazek and Mrazek, 1985). Thus, it may involve a pattern of parenting that leads to a nonorganic growth failure or "failure to thrive" disorder in infants and young children; to inadequate or negligent parenting amounting to child neglect; to physical abuse; to sexual abuse; and to deliberately created iatrogenic illness (so-called Munchausen syndrome by proxy). Each of these varieties of maltreatment involves its own specificities but, equally, there is substantial overlap between them with each representing a serious maladaptive distortion of parenting functions and of the parent–child relationship. Accordingly, one way of tackling questions on the antecedents of child abuse is to examine factors associated with serious parenting difficulties more generally. The assumption here is that the occurrence of physical abuse should be seen as just one of several manifestations of aberrant parenting. That is the approach followed in this chapter in the consideration of intergenerational continuities and discontinuities in serious parenting difficulties.

Alternatively, the physical maltreatment of children may be viewed as an example of personal violence that may be linked with violence between husband and wife or violence exhibited outside the home. This approach, too, has validity as shown by the associations between family violence and crime in the community, both violent and nonviolent (White and Strauss, 1981). However, it should be noted that the predictors of violent crime do not differ markedly from the predictors of nonviolent serious crime (Farrington, 1978; Rutter and Giller, 1983). Moreover, the antecedents of adult criminality overlap substantially with the antecedents of nondelinquent social failure and non-antisocial personality disorders (Rutter, 1984a; West, 1982). Thus, a focus on the acts of violence involved in child abuse also leads to attention to variables associated with serious problems in social relationships and in social behavior. It is those variables that will be discussed in the review of possible intergenerational processes in parenting problems.