5

DETERMINANTS OF PARENTING

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- To explain the types of influences on parental behavior.
- To compare the different types of influences.
- To summarize how determinants can interact.

Individuals rear their children in different ways. Picture one father who frequently bellows demands at his children in contrast to another who patiently and gently makes requests. Consider the contrasts between one mother who is constantly controlling and

intrusive while her neighbor is sensitive and child centered. We are reminded of such differences when we read about certain celebrity parents whose poor parenting practices make the evening news. Why do parents act the way they do? Where does it come from? What influences their behavior? This chapter addresses those questions.

CATEGORIES OF DETERMINANTS

For more than 60 years, parenting researchers have investigated why parents behave the way they do. The first extensive assessment of the topic was conducted by Lois Stolz (1967), who concluded that parent behavior can be influenced by many variables and pressures, only some of which win out and determine child-rearing behavior. To provide some organization to these many variables, Harmon and Brim (1980) used four basic categories of influences on parenting behavior. These influences are called *determinants* or *predictors*:

1. *General cultural factors* (nationality and socioeconomic status)
2. *Individual factors (*parental characteristics and unconscious influences)
3. *Interpersonal factors* (child behavior and family structure)
4. *Setting* (e.g., the home or a park)

A Mid-Level Model

A short time after Harmon and Brim published their classification scheme, Jay Belsky (1984) proposed a model depicting how some of these determinants work together. The model provided the framework for many subsequent studies. Belsky identified three central categories of influence:

1. *Parental psychological resources*, such as developmental history and personality
2. *Child characteristics*, including gender and behavior
3. *Contextual sources of stress and social support*, such as marital relations, social networks, and work relationships

These three sets of influences combine to determine how a parent interacts with a child. It begins with a parent's developmental history. Based on his or her childhood experiences and genetic makeup, the individual's personality emerges. The parental personality influences three different types of variables: marital relations, work, and social network (or family and friends). In turn, each of those three variables, along with the child's characteristics, has a role in affecting parenting behavior.

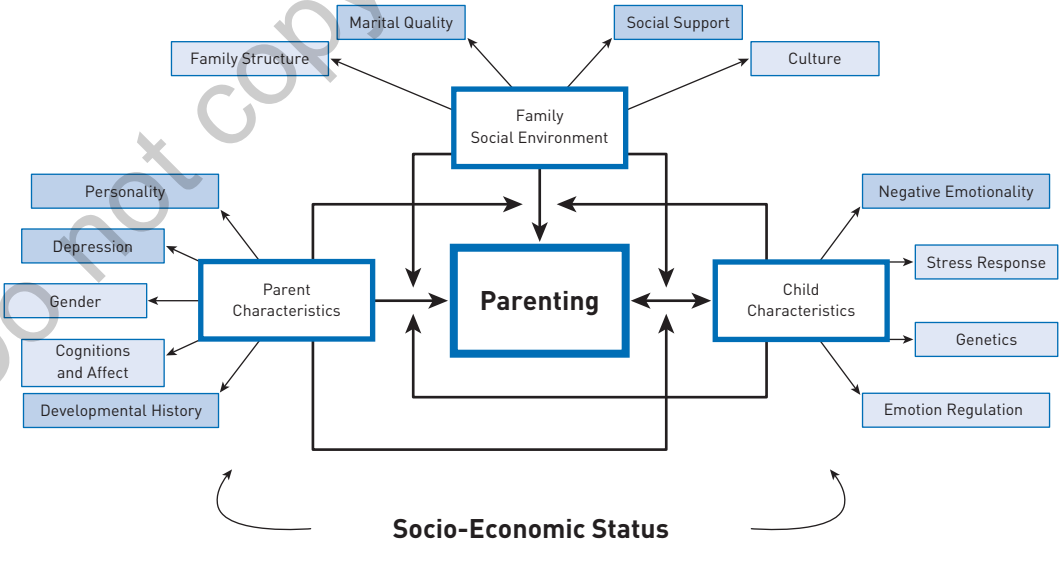
Of all the determinants identified, Belsky and his colleagues believed that *personality* played the most important role in parenting behavior. A psychologically stable and emotionally strong parent can better withstand the stresses that come with a temperamentally challenging toddler or a child with developmental disabilities. Such individuals can also better deal with contextual pressures—such as marital disharmony or financial burdens—than other individuals. In fact, according to Belsky, all the other determinants are mediated through a parent's personality and individual psychological functioning.

Picture two parents in a troubled marital relationship, characterized by frequent arguments and considerable hostility. The parents likely are distressed, irritable, and perhaps depressed. This could, in turn, lead to being impatient with their children, inconsistent in discipline, harsh, and emotionally unavailable (Vondra, Sysko, & Belsky, 2005). However, a parent with a stable emotional and psychological base would be more likely to stay engaged with her children, control her temper, and perhaps try to help the child cope with the hostile climate in the home.

Social supports and resources are another important determinant that can mediate the impact of stressors. Social supports include parents, other children, grandparents, and other relatives, friends, and neighbors. Resources can include financial assets, social and emotional support, and material goods. If one parent faced with a challenging child has a spouse who is an actively involved and effective co-parent, then the parent will be less stressed than would similar parents with less spousal support. This would reflect a protection or buffering of the parenting system (Belsky, 1984).

In an evaluation of Belsky's model, more than 30 years after its publication, Taraban and Shaw (2018) found that the model has largely held up to the test of time. They did provide an update (see Figure 5.1) that more fully captures several determinants that had been left out. In particular, the revised model captures socio-economic status, and several variables that the research has found to be particularly important. The model nicely organizes three key **determinants of parenting** and their interrelations. However, it fails to take into account all the ways that these determinants mutually influence each other. The model is also missing some more **distal** or distant determinants, such as the parent's cultural background or socioeconomic status (SES). Figure 5.1 provides an updated model from a review of determinants (Taraban & Shaw, 2018) that includes some of the

FIGURE 5.1 ■ An Updated Model of the Determinants of Parenting



Source: Taraban & Shaw, 2018.

missing variables. Belsky's model, then, can be described as **mid-level determinants**: It effectively captures some of the key influences on parenting somewhere between proximal and distal levels.

However, the model ignores a number of other determinants on child rearing. Some of the missing influences are immediate or **proximal**. For example, there are situational influences: Was the parent at home or in a public setting? Did the interaction occur before dinner when everyone was tired and hungry or at a park on the weekend? Transient parental qualities—such as mood or illness—can also influence parenting.

CULTURAL AND DISTAL DETERMINANTS

Child rearing is influenced by several types of cultural or distal variables. These variables have been investigated primarily under the headings of SES, religion, and race/ethnicity. These determinants influence child rearing through parental goals, values, and behavior. Examples of the first three types of distal determinants will be provided next.

Culture

Think about a child being reared in a Brazilian *favela* (slum), an American Indian reservation in Oklahoma, or a suburb in Paris. Each child experiences a dramatically different culture. The *cultural context* can be defined as the way of life shared by its members (Ogbu, 1988). It reflects the social, economic, and psychological adaptation of a people. When related to child rearing, culture involves many aspects of the environment. It includes the setting; methods of care; material products (toys, clothing, media); and parental values, goals, and beliefs as well as norms and expectations for acceptable behavior in children. It also prescribes general rules of parenting conduct (Weisner, 2011).

Cultural anthropologists were the first to note similarities and differences in parents from various countries (e.g., Whiting & Child, 1953). They also realized that by comparing children's development in different cultures, it would reveal whether certain types of parental behavior had uniform effects. Cross-cultural, child-rearing studies are now widespread, with the majority of studies outside of North America coming from Western Europe, Australia, China, and Japan. However, parenting studies from Africa and South Asia, for example, are increasingly being published.

Conducting cross-cultural research is difficult and expensive. It often requires overcoming language or dialect barriers. Moreover, cultural constructs do not always transfer smoothly across cultures. Just try comparing a typical elementary school in Tokyo—with its strict academic structure—to one of the "Waldkindergartens" in Germany, where children spend most of the day in a forest, encouraged to learn about their world mainly through unbridled exploration. Both of these settings are *schools*, but the realities within them are worlds apart. These types of issues must be considered when analyzing and comparing cultures. But despite the challenges, psychologists are increasingly applying cross-cultural research as a way of examining both the universals of parenting and how parents differ across cultures.

Usually, researchers simply define a parent's culture by the country where the parent dwells (or from which he or she immigrated), but sometimes it is broken down

more precisely. For example, two investigators examined parental values in rural Cameroon by comparing parents who were Muslim, Christian, or adherents to the indigenous African religion (Nsamenang & Lamb, 1995). In most cases, however, when parents are compared in cross-cultural studies, it is usually where one sample from one country is compared with a sample from a second country. Both samples of parents are assumed to be representative of that culture—a big assumption.

Exploring cultural differences in parent-child relationships is a popular topic in cross-cultural research; it is thought that impressions from a culture are stamped early in a child's development (see Photo 5.1). One unusual cultural practice with daughters, at least from the perspective of many Western families, that begins during the preschool years, is described in Box 5.1.

Source: iStockphoto.com

PHOTO 5.1: An African mother and her child.

Socioeconomic Status

Subordinate to culture, but also a potent determinant of behavior, is the socio-economic status (SES) of the parent. Formerly called *social class*, SES is a multifaceted variable that reflects the distribution of resources, power, and influence within a society (Hill & Witherspoon, 2011). SES is most often determined by income (or poverty) level, education level, and employment status, occupation, or occupational prestige. For research purposes, scales are created to measure these factors and then parents are grouped, often arbitrarily, into SES levels. Occupations that received high scores included doctors, lawyers, and business executives. Occupations at the other end of the scale, considered

BOX 5.1 A PLACE WHERE OBESITY IN GIRLS IS PRIZED

In most homes in the United States, parents do not seek to "fatten up" their daughters for marriage. But in the sub-Saharan West African country of Mauritania (as well as some other West African countries), obesity in women is valued as a sign of wealth—and health. In turn, obese young women are more likely to get married. Consequently, some parents force their daughters, beginning as young as five years old, to drink each day up to five gallons of camel's or cow's milk. This practice is called *gavage* (the term also used for force-feeding geese in order to obtain *foie gras*) (Popenoe, 2004). Girls who resist or get sick are subjected to physical punishment, forced to drink their own vomit, and sometimes even tortured. A study published in 2013 found that 23% of women in Mauritania reported being force fed as children (Ouldzeidoune, Keating, Bertrand, & Rice, 2013). The government is working to combat the practice through a health education program to inform the women about the dangers associated with obesity, including Type 2 diabetes, strokes, sleep apnea, and mental health problems.

Source: © iStockphoto.com/track5

PHOTO 5.2: Living in the inner city.

low status, included convenience store attendants and child care workers (see Bornstein & Bradley, 2003).

Typically, studies have contrasted parents of lower and middle SES on a range of behavioral variables, including warmth, breastfeeding habits, toilet training practices, and disciplinary techniques. Although rates of corporal punishment are decreasing across all parents, one of the most common findings is that parents from a lower SES background (see Photo 5.2) are more likely to use physical punishment or **coercive discipline** in comparison to middle-class parents, who rely more on noncoercive discipline such as reasoning or guilt (Ryan, Kalil, Ziol-Guest, & Padilla, 2016).

What accounts for the relation between SES and parent behavior? One plausible explanation has been around for a long time. Melvin Kohn (1979) theorized that parental occupation and general life situations lead parents to hold particular child-rearing values. Specifically, parents from higher social classes occupy jobs where responsibility, self-direction, initiative, and independence are valued and rewarded. Those parents, in turn, are likely to value and promote similar goals in their children by encouraging, for instance, autonomy, responsibility, and creativity. On the other hand, parents from a lower SES, who have relatively little freedom or responsibility in their jobs, are more likely to value conformity to external authority. Obedience and the ability to stick to the rules are more likely to pay off in blue-collar or manual labor occupations. Consequently, such parents are likely to emphasize obedience, getting along with others, and acting in the socially prescribed way that a boy or girl "should" act.

Kohn's pioneering model reflects the way requirements or demands of one's life situation affect child-rearing values, which in turn modify child-rearing practices. This can be diagrammed as follows:

socioeconomic → status → values → child-rearing values → parenting behavior

Parenting behavior, according to Kohn, is thereby strongly influenced by SES. Support for links between SES and parental values have been found in eight countries (Kohn, Naoi, Shoenbach, Schooler, & Slomczynski, 1990). This work has been extended by Lareau (e.g., Weininger & Lareau, 2009), who differentiates two SES-influenced approaches to parenting. Higher-SES parents facilitate their children's development through *concerted cultivation* or promoted skills and abilities by providing additional resources not typically available to children of lower-SES families (e.g., tutoring, music lessons). In contrast, lower-SES parents adopt a *natural growth* approach to child rearing. Here, while conformity to external authority is valued, these parents do not schedule their children's free time but allow their children to pursue their own interests and thus develop "naturally." Subsequent investigations have largely confirmed that these two parenting approaches are influenced by SES (e.g., Bush & Peterson, 2013).

Religion

Religious beliefs for those who adhere to a particular faith can have a powerful effect on child rearing (Holden & Williamson, 2014). Religion not only influences parents' beliefs and practices, but it also can have a potent impact on the law, cultural institutions, cultural norms, transmission of moral values, regulation of sexuality, and interpersonal orientations (Browning, Green, & Witte, 2006). Recall from Chapter 1 the Puritan ministers' admonitions to parents about the need to use strict discipline. Children were perceived as born with a propensity to sin, and parents were instructed by their ministers to break the will of children in order to socialize them into faithful adults. In contrast, both Confucianism and Islam espouse the view (also promulgated by the Catholic Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1762) that children are inherently good (Husain, 1979; Stewart et al., 1999).

Studies of parenting practices often focus on differences among religious groups. This is not surprising, given the prevalence of religiously-based, child-rearing articles and manuals. In the United States, bookstores are stocked with dozens of Christian parenting books, including best sellers like James Dobson's *Dare to Discipline* books (Dobson, 1992), which have sold more than 3.5 million copies. *Hadassah Magazine* frequently publishes articles that inform and prescribe practices for Jewish parents. Similarly, child-rearing manuals based on the Qur'an (or Koran) are readily available for Muslims (Husain, 1979; Sabiruddin, 1990; see Photo 5.3). Child-rearing advice can even be found stemming from Buddhism. In line with the Buddhist orientation toward selflessness and living-in-the-present is the concept of **mindful parenting**. This refers to a moment-to-moment, nonjudgmental awareness by which parents reach beyond their automatic thoughts and feelings to remain intentional in their child rearing and grounded in the present moment (Kabat-Zinn & Kabat-Zinn, 1997). When translated to parenting, *mindfulness* means listening with full attention, a nonjudgmental acceptance of self and child, being

PHOTO 5.3: A monk in training.

Source: Gettyimages.com

emotionally aware, regulating behavior before responding, and having compassion for both the child and oneself (Duncan, Coatsworth, & Greenberg, 2009). Mindful parents have been found to experience less **child-rearing stress** and depressive symptoms (Beer, Ward, & Moar, 2013).

Fundamentally, religion is about what is to be valued in life. Several cross-cultural studies have examined relations between organized religion, **religiosity** (how faithfully religion is practiced), and adult values. A meta-analytic review of research across cultures and religious groups determined that religious people shared the values of kindness, tradition, and conformity, while they disdained hedonism (Saroglu, Delpierre, & Dernelle, 2004). In analyzing 63 societies, Inglehart and Baker (2000) discovered that adults who described themselves as religious were more likely to value tradition, obedience, respect for authority, and religious faith in their children over independence and self-determination.

All three of the world's great deistic religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) emphasize the family and encourage parents to devote considerable time and attention to their children. It follows, then, that religious parents (compared to nonreligious parents) would hold different values, allocate time differently, and be more likely to involve their children in social networks associated with a religious community. Links between religious beliefs and parenting have been made in multiple areas. For example, religious parents are more likely to be more involved and affectionate with their children; provide more supervision, guidance, and firmer discipline; and model better behavior (e.g., health promoting, coping) and less likely to maltreat their children than nonreligious parents (Holden & Williamson, 2014).

One popular topic of inquiry is how religion can influence attitudes about child discipline. In particular, Christian denominations in the United States and Holland that espouse literalist interpretations of the Bible have been studied. Many conservative Protestants accept as God's literal intention such statements as "Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die" (Proverbs 23:13, New International Version). These parents report more positive attitudes toward (and more frequent use of) physical punishment than do other Christians or adherents of other religions (de Roos, Iedema, & Miedema, 2004; Gershoff, Miller, & Holden, 1999). Children reared by conservative Protestants are less likely to show some of the behavior problems associated with corporal punishment—so long as their parents stopped spanking them during the preschool period (Ellison, Musick, & Holden, 2011).

Religion and parenting are also related in a different way. The onset of parenthood can initiate greater religious involvement; for some men, fatherhood prompted them to return to church (Palkovitz & Palm, 1998).

CONTEXTUAL DETERMINANTS

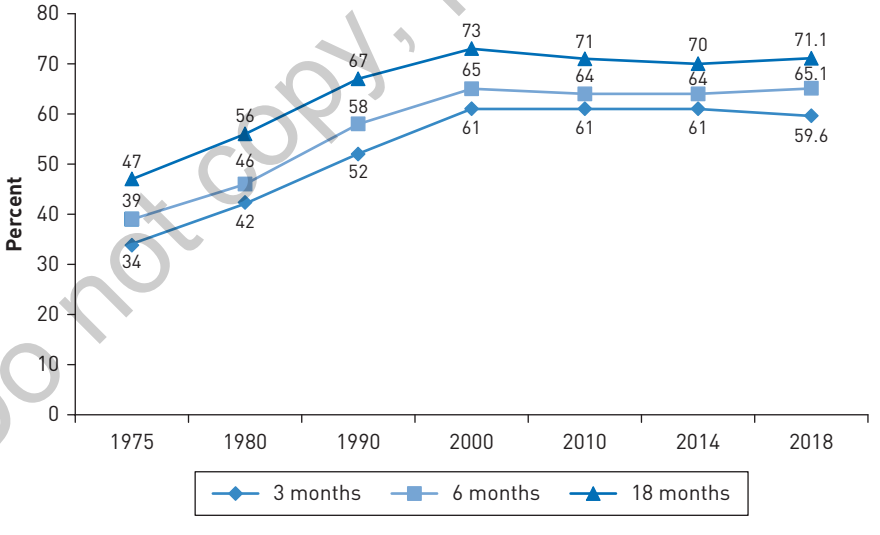
Contextual determinants refer to those features of the environment that influence child rearing. Four variables provide particularly good illustrations of how context can influence parenting: parental employment, stress, social support, and neighborhoods.

Parental Employment

Parental employment can have a variety of influences on child rearing. But, how employment influences parenting is not as simple as whether or not the parent is working outside the home. Employment represents a complex constellation of subtle variables. The objective features of the job (such as the type of job and the number of hours spent at work) are central considerations. But, so are a host of related variables such as the family's financial need and resources, a person's career orientation versus family orientation, and a person's subjective feelings about the job (how fulfilling or stressful he or she finds it). Despite the complexity of this determinant, psychologists have documented that the "long arm of the job" influences a parent's values, psychological and physical well-being, daily moods, and availability for involvement in parenting activities (Crouter & McHale, 2005). In the case of mothers' work, depending on such variables as the type and quality of the job, maternal ethnicity and SES, and the child's developmental level, maternal employment can have either positive or negative effects on child outcomes (Bush & Peterson, 2013).

Prompting much of the attention to this topic is the dramatic increase in the proportion of young mothers who work outside the home. In 1960, only 18% of mothers with children under age six worked outside the home. By 1987, the proportion had climbed to about 57%. By 2018, 65% of mothers with children under six years of age worked outside the home (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). This remarkable social change in the way families lead their lives, graphed in Figure 5.2, has resulted in a number of consequences for parents.

FIGURE 5.2 ■ Changes in Maternal Employment Levels From 1975 to 2018



Sources: Laughlin, 2011; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019.

Note: Data are of first-time mothers working outside the home within 3, 6, and 18 months of giving birth, respectively.

One important change has been an increased reliance on infant and childcare centers as well as other forms of substitute care. Another effect of maternal employment is the impact on paternal involvement. Families are dynamic; husbands as well as wives are affected by their spouses' employment. In general, husbands of working wives are more involved in child care and household work than are those in families with single-earner fathers (Gottfried, Gottfried, & Bathurst, 2002). However, time spent in child care is not divided equally between parents. Several different studies, including investigations from a variety of industrialized nations, have found major discrepancies between the number of hours worked by mothers and fathers, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

One variable that plays an important influence in the relation between work and parenting is **child-rearing commitment**. The amount of time and energy parents commit to their multiple roles (parent, spouse, and worker) has implications for parental behavior, stress, and perceptions of children. A study investigating some of the relations between parenting and working illustrate one aspect of this issue. Ellen Greenberger and her colleagues found mothers to be just as committed to their employment work as fathers were, and they shared a similar level of job satisfaction. However, mothers experienced more stress than fathers did as they attempted to balance the demands of parenting along with work (Greenberger, Goldberg, Hamill, O'Neil, & Payne, 1989). This is not at all surprising, given the fact that mothers continue to shoulder a majority of household and child-rearing tasks in addition to their paid employment. Box 5.2 addresses the issue of mothers' versus fathers' reports about paternal involvement in childcare.

For good or ill, maternal employment affects a mother's emotional state. On the positive side, it can impact her general satisfaction and morale by providing mental stimulation, building self-esteem, and offering a break from child care and home chores. Also, maternal employment serves as a buffer from the stress of marital difficulties or a challenging child. Therefore, maternal employment can potentially enhance the quality of parenting during the time the mother is home, particularly if the woman enjoys her job and exercises some responsibility in it (Gottfried et al., 2002). However, many mothers feel conflicted about their work and being separated from their children. The extent of this role conflict depends not only on whether or not the mother is employed but also on her preferences (whether she wants to be employed), the extent of her anxiety over

BOX 5.2 HE SAID, SHE SAID: MOTHERS' VERSUS FATHERS' REPORTS OF FATHER INVOLVEMENT

To what extent are fathers involved in child rearing? It depends on whom you ask. In one study, fathers reported spending significantly more time (18% more) engaged in 11 child care activities than mothers thought their husbands did. The most frequent activities fathers reported engaging in (at least five days a week) were: putting the child to bed, playing inside with the child, and telling the child that something they did was appreciated. The biggest discrepancies with mothers were in reports of helping the child eat, letting the child help with chores, and putting the child to bed. In each case, fathers reported doing it more than mothers reported they did it (Mikelson, 2008).

separation from her child, and the degree to which she is invested in her maternal role (e.g., Hock, DeMeis, & McBride, 1988).

In addition to causing guilt and anxiety for some mothers about being away from their young children, employment can add considerable stress to a mother's life. Indeed, there is evidence that under some circumstances, a mother's emotional state, child-rearing practices, and perceptions of children may be negatively affected by her employment. However, most studies have found that maternal employment may actually have a positive impact on parenting and it is *not* a risk factor for children (Crouter & McHale, 2005).

Stress

Another general contextual factor that can dramatically influence parenting is stress. Stress on parents comes in a variety of manifestations, both positive and negative. Even such apparently positive events as a major job promotion, the birth of another child, or an economic windfall are experienced as stressful because they trigger changes in the family system. Major life stressors include natural disasters, serious illness or injuries, death, separation or divorce, moving, and change in employment. A second group of stressors, those related to everyday occurrences, has also received considerable research attention. There are four main classes of these proximate stressors:

1. Marital or relationship stressors
2. Work or financial stressors
3. Personal characteristics
4. Child-related stressors

Parenting stress, the discomfort or distress that stems from the child or parenting role is the fourth category of stressors (Hayes & Watson, 2013). The degree of stress experienced is a function of individual child characteristics (e.g., challenging temperament, developmental disabilities), parent characteristics (e.g., age, attributions about the child's behavior), and situations (e.g., premature birth, living in a violent neighborhood) (Crnic & Low, 2002). Some of these stressors reflect acute situations; others are chronic. When two or more stressors team up, they likely have an **additive effect** on parents (Deater-Deckard, 2004).

Stress is not benign, as it can have a powerful negative influence on parental health and functioning. Stressed parents are less nurturant, supportive, patient, and involved. Instead, they are likely to be irritable, negative, punitive, and withdrawn (Crnic & Low, 2002; Deater-Deckard, 2004). In turn, children's functioning can be negatively affected.

Social Support

Social support, or assistance from other people, helps to counteract the effects of stress. There is someone to turn to when life is challenging, when the unexpected happens, or when a crisis arises. A socially supported person feels cared for, loved, and valued. Social support can come from a variety of individuals including relatives, friends, neighbors, and fellow members of a faith-based organization. Usually, the principal support for a parent is

the partner or spouse, and this support (an example of positive co-parenting) manifests in emotional comfort and instrumental assistance (McHale et al., 2002). Instrumental assistance can be in the form of babysitting, running errands, or providing food or clothing.

A number of studies have indicated that support from a social network can mitigate the effects of stress and promote positive parenting. For example, not surprisingly, Dutch parents of children diagnosed with cancer reacted with high levels of distress (Hoekstra-Weebers, Jaspers, Kamps, & Klip, 2001). Those fathers (but not mothers in this sample) who received more social support experienced less distress. Support was also found to have a positive effect in a very different sample of poor African American single mothers. Mothers who received more support were found to engage in more nurturant parenting, although this relation weakened in high-crime neighborhoods (Ceballo & McLoyd, 2002).

Neighborhood

It is not hard to see how a person's residence can influence his or her parenting behavior. Look at the photograph of urban high-rise apartment buildings (see Photo 5.4). How might child rearing be affected by living in such apartments in contrast to other environments, such as suburbia or rural environments?

Urban poverty is the most problematic neighborhood characteristic. Being raised in a poor, inner-city neighborhood is associated with a wide range of negative outcomes for children: crime, health problems, academic failure, substance abuse, and teen pregnancy. The atmosphere has been described as a "war zone" and a toxic atmosphere for children to grow up in (Garbarino, Kostelny, & Barry, 1997). It is not surprising that parenting in high-crime neighborhoods is characterized by a distrust of nonfamilial individuals, an encouragement of children's early independence and self-reliance, an emphasis on aggressive play, and an early withdrawal of emotional support (Halpern, 1990). Some

PHOTO 5.4: Urban high-rise apartments created neighborhoods with high concentrations of low-income families.

Source: ©iStockphoto.com

observers have argued that these patterns result from the behavior of stressed, powerless mothers whose own needs are not being met, which renders them unable to provide consistent, supportive, nonpunitive parenting.

Investigations into the topic of parenting in the inner city have documented some of the difficulties and consequences of living in dangerous and low-income neighborhoods (e.g., Ceballo & McLoyd, 2002). Some parents respond to living in such contexts with depression and harsh child punishment, but others are active and strategic in their child-rearing efforts (Burton & Jarrett, 2000). Parents who are successful in helping their children live in low-income environments engage in actions to prevent various problematic child outcomes that they observe around them, such as dropping out of school, getting pregnant, joining a gang, or experimenting with drugs. Thus the inner city represents a unique context that elicits different types of parenting behaviors, depending on the particular parent. It provides a clear example of how the living context can determine child-rearing behavior.

STABLE CHARACTERISTICS DETERMINANTS

Yet another group of determinants on child rearing are variables that reflect stable characteristics of the parent, child, or the family. Examples of these will be briefly reviewed next.

Stable Parent Characteristics

There are several stable attributes of parents. The four central characteristics related to child rearing are gender, prior experiences, social cognitions (attitudes and beliefs), and personality.

Gender

Do mothers and fathers parent differently? This question has been the topic of much speculation and research. The answer is not simple, in part due to the social trends that result in changes in parenting roles and levels of involvement with children (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000). For example, maternal employment and father absence due to divorce are two societal changes with clear implications that result in modification of both mothering and fathering (see Photo 5.5).

One reliable difference between mothers and fathers in most families concerns involvement in child care. For example, paternal involvement, despite having increased significantly over the past three decades, still lags well behind maternal involvement. Fathers are estimated to

PHOTO 5.5: A father playing with his son.

Source: iStockphoto.com

spend 67% as much time as mothers during the weekdays in child-related activities (Cabrera et al., 2000). Involvement changes dramatically, of course, when fathers are single parents. See Box 5.3 for a description of single fathers who assume the role of primary caregiver.

Mothers and fathers also differ in certain behaviors and attitudes. Using the ecological momentary assessment approach, researchers in several countries have observed fathers interacting with their children differently from mothers. Fathers tend to engage in verbal or didactic play less than mothers do; they are more physically stimulating and rough in their play. Mothers, compared to fathers, tend to be more responsive to variations in their children's play; they are more likely to enforce rules and communicate and play peekaboo-type games (Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004). Mothers and fathers also differ in their child-rearing attitudes (Holden & Buck, 2002). For example, mothers place greater importance on expressive issues such as emotions, intimacy, and the child's enjoyment, in contrast to fathers, who place greater value in self-control, achievement, and responsibility. However, there are many aspects of child rearing where mothers and fathers do not differ (Lamb, 2004).

Prior Experiences

At least three types of prior experiences are particularly relevant as parenting determinants: experiences from the parent's own childhood, nonparenting experiences with other children, and previous parenting experiences.

BOX 5.3 FATHERS AS SINGLE PARENTS

Census information indicates there are three million children being reared by single fathers in the United States (Livingston, 2018). These father-headed homes represent almost 7% of single-parent homes. Men assume this role for various reasons. Many are divorced fathers, some are widowed, others were never married, and some of the fathers are gay men. How do these men fare as primary caregiving parents? Despite the increasing attention being devoted to the role of fathers in development (Cabrera et al., 2000; Lamb, 2010), research on fathers as single parents is limited.

Why is this? In part, single fathers who are the primary caregivers are difficult to study because they are relatively rare and, like all single parents, they are extremely busy. Their schedules do not allow much time to participate in research. When studies are conducted with these men, they often consist of very small samples. In two of the more recent empirical efforts into this topic, only 20 single fathers were included in one study (Hilton & Desrochers, 2000) and 10 in another (Coles, 2002).

Available evidence indicates that men can certainly be competent fathers. However, to fully understand the effect of single fathers, it is necessary to look at the specific features of their caregiving and their situation. Information is needed about the nature and extent of their involvement, the quality of their child care and child rearing, alternative care and experiences the child has, the stress and support the fathers receive, and, in general, their life situation (such as the reason for being a single parent and their employment status). Indeed, these are the same types of variables needed to understand how any type of parent may influence their children's development.

A powerful influence on future parental behavior comes from "ghosts in the nursery" (Fraiberg, 1987) or experiences with one's own parents. From a social learning theory perspective, a number of studies have found similarities between two generations of individuals in terms of the disciplinary practices they use or prefer (Holden & Zambarano, 1992). Using Bowlby and Ainsworth's attachment theory, a number of investigators are discovering links between a mother's perception of her own early attachment experience and her relationship with her child (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008). For example, mothers' representations of attachment with their own mothers subsequently predicted attachment classification when their infants were 12 months old in 75% of the cases (Fonagy et al., 1991). In another study, mothers' internal working models were associated with the quality of their parenting as well as with their toddlers' and preschoolers' adjustment (Eiden, Teti, & Corns, 1995). Those studies provide strong evidence for internal working models as a determinant of parenting.

A second type of prior experience comes from babysitting or otherwise interacting with other children. In most cultures, girls are exposed to many more childcare experiences than boys are. This experiential discrepancy may well account for why females, compared to males, are generally considered more adept at child rearing. Presumably, extensive babysitting experience contributes to greater competency as a parent (Fogel & Melson, 1986). There is some supporting evidence for this idea: Recall from Box 3.4 that individuals with more childcare experience (either through parenthood or babysitting) solved a child-rearing problem more efficiently and accurately than did those without such experiences (Holden, 1988).

Prior experiences can also result from on-the-job training or learning based on raising the firstborn child. Whiteman, McHale, and Crouter (2003) examined parental reports of behavior and the quality of interactions with firstborn teenagers and—several years later—with second-born teenagers at the same age. Parents appeared to have learned from their experiences with their firstborn child and had become more effective parents. They had greater knowledge of the second-born child's needs and lower rates of conflict.

Social Cognitions

Parental social cognition is another key determinant of parental behavior. Some types of social cognitions are relatively stable, such as certain attributions and attitudes. If a father has an unrealistic expectation about when children are capable of toilet training, he is likely to become frustrated and angry when his child continues to have "accidents." Mothers who have positive beliefs and attitudes about breastfeeding or reading to young children are likely to engage in these beneficial behaviors.

Social cognitions are important because they can be closely linked to behavior and emotions. In a longitudinal study, it was found that having a positive attitude about spanking is a strong predictor of future spanking (Vittrup, Holden, & Buck, 2006). As would be expected, the mothers who viewed spanking as an effective technique for stopping misbehavior were most likely to engage in it. The advertisement reproduced in Photo 5.6 exemplifies the idea that some parents believe paddling is a useful educational tool.

Parental mood is also affected by social cognition. Specifically, parents' beliefs about the degree to which they can control a child's behavior (parental self-efficacy) affect

PHOTO 5.6: Shingles can also be used for child-rearing purposes, according to this old advertisement.

parental emotion. Mothers who believed they had little power in influencing the behavior of a child were likely to be unassertive and irritable when interacting with children. Such parents, when interacting or anticipating future interactions with children, actually showed measurable increases in bodily stress, such as increased sweating, heart rate, and cortisol levels (e.g., Bugental & Cortez, 1988; Martorell & Bugental, 2006). These effects are particularly strong with children who have challenging temperaments.

Parental social cognitions are important, not just because they influence behavior but because they provide the most readily accessible avenue for changing parental behavior. As proximal influences, they may supersede more distal ones such as culture and SES.

Personality

Recall from earlier in this chapter that Jay Belsky placed parental personality at the top of the list in his model of parenting determinants. He argued that parental maturity and psychological well-being were fundamental ingredients for effective parental functioning (Belsky & Barends, 2002). Thus, parental personality is considered by many to be a key determinant of child rearing.

Studies have indeed linked personality to parenting cognitions and behavior, though the relations are not necessarily simple. Marc Bornstein and his colleagues (Bornstein, Hahn, & Haynes, 2011) found that the five-factor model of personality (openness, neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) related to 35% of maternal cognitions and 10% of the child-rearing behavior assessed. Another researcher, Grazyna Kochanska, and her colleagues discovered a good example of how personality can affect parenting. Parents who had memories of unhappy and unstable childhoods were likely to engage in **power assertion** (Kochanska, Aksan, Penney, & Boldt, 2007). However, that relation was moderated by certain personality characteristics, such as optimism and trust. Thus, personality characteristics can compensate for negative experiences and result in positive parenting practices.

Various other specific personality characteristics, such as patience and calmness, have been proposed to influence parenting. However, one personality attribute that has received much attention is the capacity for **empathy** (e.g., Psychogiou, Daley, Thompson, & Sonuga-Barke, 2008). This refers to a parent's ability to experience events from the child's point of view and therefore understand better what an infant or young child might be feeling. Not surprisingly, parents judged to be higher in empathy levels are more involved, nurturant, and positive toward their children than those considered lower in empathy. Empathy in parents is described in more detail in Box 5.4.

BOX 5.4 THE POWER OF EMPATHY

Empathy, or lack thereof, can greatly influence how parents react to a particular misbehavior or annoying characteristic in a child. Consider children who throw a noisy tantrum when they cannot get a toy to work as they want it to. Parents with empathy will be able to consider the situation from the child's perspective before deciding on an appropriate action. The parent might consider the child's physical needs (Is the child tired?), emotional needs (Does the child need help to properly deal with his or her frustration?), or personal desires (Is there something I can help the child achieve?). However, a parent without empathy at the time—whether due to a lack of skill or overwhelming personal needs—will likely have one thought: How do I shut this kid up?! Parents' empathic concerns about their children represent a necessary and key attribute of positive parenting. One study found parental empathy was associated with positive outcomes in emerging adults. College students who viewed their parents as empathetic had higher self-esteem and were less likely to report symptoms of depression or to exploit others (Trumpeter, Watson, O'Leary, & Weathington, 2008).

Other Parenting Characteristics

There are several other types of stable parental characteristics that have received research attention, such as intelligence and parental age. There are no clear consistent findings about how intelligence (at least in the normal range) affects child rearing. However, studies of parent age have received sustained attention. Two separate age-of-parent questions have been investigated. One concerns the quality of child care provided by adolescent parents, a topic further discussed in Chapter 12. For example, adolescent mothers are more likely to engage in harsh discipline than older mothers (Lee, 2009). The other question is whether older parents (usually those in their 30s and 40s) of young children differ in their parenting from younger parents. The effects of age on parenting are of interest in part due to the increasingly common trend for women to wait longer to bear children. The mean age of women in the United States for having their first child is now 26.6 years (Martin et al., 2018).

Studies examining how individuals behave when they become parents at different ages have had conflicting results. That may be because the answer depends on the particular child-rearing domain. For example, warmth and taking care of the physical needs of the child have relatively few age-of-mother effects. However, other parenting behaviors, such as maternal speech to a child, structuring the environment, and disciplinary techniques are closely linked to the child's age. Adolescent mothers and emerging adult mothers (19 to 25 years) were less likely to talk to their children and structure the environment but more likely to spank than older mothers (Bornstein, Putnick, Suwalsky, & Gini, 2006; Lewin, Mitchell, & Ronzio, 2013). Another age-related finding is that mothers who give birth in their 30s have children who achieve higher levels of educational attainment than younger or older mothers (Fishman & Min, 2018). There are fewer investigations into the impact of paternal age, but there is some evidence that paternal age may have subtle effects on children's social development (Janecka et al., 2017). In particular, young fathers, in their early 20s, and those men with advanced paternal age (45 years and older) were most likely to have children that differ from the children of other fathers.

Stable Child Characteristics

Research has shown that the characteristics of children can be prime determinants of how their parents behave toward them. The best documented characteristics are the child's age, the child's gender, the child's temperament, and the child's birth order.

Child's Age

Age of the child is the single most powerful influence on parental behavior. This occurs because as the child grows, there are dramatic changes in physical stature, cognitive and linguistic ability, emotional maturity, and social skills. In response to their children's changing characteristics, parents show affection, communicate, discipline, and provide care in very different ways (see Holden & Miller, 1999). The role of child age in parenting will be examined in some detail in the second part of this book.

Child's Gender

"Is it a boy or a girl?" That is likely the first question asked about a newborn, if the answer isn't already known from prenatal sonograms. The answer to that question will have a profound effect on his or her development. Whether the child is a boy or girl influences parental behavior in various ways. First, fertility decisions are often based on sex. Mothers may bear more children until the desired son or daughter is born. Also, parents who had wanted a child of the opposite sex were more likely to perceive problems with their child and to spend less time playing with him or her compared with parents who were pleased with the gender of their child (Stattin & Klackenberg-Larsson, 1991).

To what extent do parents treat boys and girls differently? Many observational studies have found that certain aspects of parental behavior appear to be influenced by the sex of the child. Recall from Chapter 3 that parental perceptions of newborns and young children were dramatically affected simply by the label of girl or boy. Given the large number of studies in this area, two researchers (Lytton & Romney, 1991) set out to conduct a systematic review. The meta-analytic review of 172 studies, concerning whether parents systematically treat boys and girls differently, arrived at a surprising conclusion: Gender effects are not as pervasive as commonly believed. In fact, there were few significant findings. The strongest gender effects appeared to be in parental expectations or early perceptions about boys and girls, but most differences in parental treatment decreased with children's age. The authors concluded that when all the evidence is taken together, there are few robust, consistent differences in how boys and girls are treated by their parents.

Other reviewers have identified certain parental behaviors that appear to be influenced by the child's gender from the early childhood years through adolescence (e.g., Leaper, 2002; Leaper & Bigler, 2011). For example, early autonomy is encouraged in boys but not in girls. Boys are more likely to be encouraged to play, explore, and achieve more, whereas girls are encouraged to help their mothers around the house and focus on interpersonal relationships. There is also evidence of parenting differences in such areas as affectionate behavior, emotion talk and expressiveness, gender-typed play, household chores, and explicitly or implicitly supporting gender stereotypes.

Recent studies continue to find subtle differences related to child gender. An observational study discovered that fathers of female toddlers were more attentive, sang more, and used language related to the body and emotions more than fathers of male toddlers. With sons, fathers engaged in more rough housing ("rough and tumble play") and used more achievement-related language (Mascaro, Rentscher, Hackett, Mehl, & Rilling, 2017). In a study about parent-child conversations after trips to the emergency room, parents were four times more likely to warn girls to be careful about engaging in certain activities (O'Neal, Plumert, & Peterson, 2016).

Child's Temperament

The child's temperament is arguably the second most important determinant of parental behavior. *Temperament* refers to the biologically rooted behavioral style of the child. It helps define how emotionally expressive the child is and how the child responds to changes in his or her environment. Models of temperament are likely to include variables such as the child's activity level, emotions, ability to self-regulate, and social behavior. However, there is considerable disagreement about exactly which traits are the core components of temperament (Zentner & Bates, 2008).

As many researchers recognize, it is not the child's temperament itself that is most important for his or her early development but rather how the child's parents *relate* to it (Putnam, Sanson, & Rothbart, 2002). One parent might label a quiet, introverted child as "good" because the child does not interrupt. Another may call the same child "rude" because the child will not address strangers. Now, imagine describing the same child as "thoughtful and perceptive" or "prefers to listen" or even "courageous" when he or she does speak up. You can see how a particular child can be exposed to very different parenting based on how that parent perceives and reacts to the child's temperament.

Indeed, a parent's interpretation of and interaction with a child's temperament can have a profound effect on the child's self-perception and development. How well parental actions relate to a children's temperament has been called *matching*, *congruence*, or **goodness of fit**. Sometimes a child fits like a glove into his or her family. When this is not the case, significant parental effort may be required in order to relate well to a child with an extremely shy or challenging temperament.

Children who are perceived by their parents as difficult to manage are likely to elicit less positive and responsive caregiving from mothers than are those perceived as easy going. Several different studies have shown that parents of challenging children are more likely to be negative and use punitive techniques, whereas parents of easy-going children appear more authoritative and responsive (e.g., Combs-Orme & Cain, 2008; Putnam et al., 2002). A Finnish study of mothers and their six-year-old children shows that other variables can affect how a child's temperament is responded to. The researchers found that maternal well-being mediated the relationship between a child's challenging temperament and parenting (Laukkanen, Ojansuu, Tolvanen, Alatupa, & Aunola, 2014). Mothers who were psychologically healthy were able to be more affectionate and less negative with challenging children compared with mothers who had depressive symptoms and low self-esteem.

Child's Birth Order

Since the 1950s, investigators have explored ways in which parenting and, in turn, children may be affected by birth order. It continues to be a question that has fascinated people (Marini & Kurtz, 2011; Rodgers, 2014). Among the typical findings is that firstborn infants receive more care, attention, and affection than do later-born infants, largely because first-time parents have more enthusiasm and energy to devote to the child. However, firstborn children also were reported to receive more pressure for achievement, presumably because the parents hold higher expectations for them than for later-born children (Lasko, 1954; Rothbart, 1971).

More recent investigations into the topic have shown that the influence of birth order on parenting is more complicated than traditionally thought. At least three other variables also come into play: the child's gender, the spacing (time between births) of the children, and the family size. In perhaps the most careful observational study conducted to date on this topic, 193 mothers were observed interacting with their three-month-old babies (Lewis & Kreitzberg, 1979). As predicted, the firstborn children generally received more maternal attention than did the later-born children. The spacing between the children also had a significant effect: Both closely and widely spaced children received more attention than did moderately spaced (1.5 to 3.5 years) children. The authors concluded that the spacing of their children modified mothers' perceptions and thus the attention devoted to the children.

Of course, there are other child characteristics besides age, gender, temperament, and birth order that can be determinants of parenting behavior. As will be discussed in a subsequent chapter, premature babies or children with developmental disabilities (such as **autism**) are two examples of such child characteristics. Parents of children with disabilities are more likely to experience distress, disruptions in normal family functioning (mealtimes, sleep schedules, social life), marital difficulties, and even psychiatric problems than are parents of children without disabilities (Hayes & Watson, 2013; Yirmiya & Shaked, 2005). In sum, stable child characteristics and other differences among children represent a basic determinant of parental behavior.

Stable Family Characteristics

Two stable family characteristics have frequently been found to influence parenting: family structure and marital relations.

Family Structure

The primary variable of family structure is whether it is a single- or two-parent family. In 2016, 39.8% of all births in the United States were to unmarried women (Martin et al., 2018). About 30 years earlier, that percent was 18.4%. These 12.9 million single parents—81% of them women—differ from married parents in some of their parenting behavior. In part as a result of the increased stress and pressure of limited time, unmarried single parents, compared to married parents, tend to spend less time with their children and engage in less supervision and monitoring. Because single parents must deal with all aspects of parenting by themselves, they are at risk for high stress, exhaustion, and depression. There is some evidence that single mothers exhibit more

psychiatric symptoms (e.g., depression, anxiety) than married mothers (Schleider, Chorpita, & Weisz, 2014). They also expressed a diminished level of parenting with regard to the time and attention they are able to devote to their offspring (Weinraub, Horvath, & Gringlas, 2002). Single parents will be discussed further in Chapter 11.

A second key family structure variable is the number of children in the home. Given that there is only so much time and energy parents can devote to children, it comes as no surprise that family size has been associated with differences in parental behavior. Family structure, in terms of number of children, can influence parenting practices. The average American mother now has two children, with the fertility rate at 1.82 (Martin et al., 2018). See Figure 5.3 for the fertility rate of women in 10 different countries. There is only limited and dated evidence that family size influences parental disciplinary practices. For example, in larger families (four or more children), it was found that discipline tends to be more punitive and authoritarian than in smaller families (Wagner, Schubert, & Schubert, 1985).

Marital Relations

How the marital relationship affects child rearing provides a clear example of systemic interactions described by family systems theory. Here, there are reciprocal relations between functioning in the spousal and parental subsystems. Close, supportive, and satisfying marital relationships were found to be associated with sensitive and positive parenting as well as more positive attitudes and perceptions about children (Grych, 2002; Kwok, Cheng, Chow, & Ling, 2013). On the other hand, conflict between spouses can result in negative parenting and child adjustment problems. Rhoades (2008) reviewed a meta-analysis of 71 studies and found that children and

FIGURE 5.3 ■ Number of Children Born per Woman in Ten Countries

Source: CIA, 2017.

youth who experience interparental conflict are likely to show physiological, behavioral, self-esteem, and relational problems.

Parents experiencing discordant marriages, compared with those in happy marriages, exhibit less consistent and less effective child-rearing practices. It is likely that parents in unhappy marriages are less emotionally available and less involved with their children (Easterbrooks & Emde, 1988). Marital discord may manifest itself in disagreements over child-rearing practices. Consequently, parents in discordant relationships tend to be more negative in disciplinary practices than nondiscordant parents. In addition, the interspousal conflict may spill over, bringing on parent-child conflict and, in turn, child adjustment problems (Coln, Jordan, & Mercer, 2013; Grych, 2002).

Such a negative spillover into parenting can be dramatically seen in homes of battered women. Men who physically abuse their wives are frequently irritable. According to one study, almost all of the battered women reported that they argued with their husbands at least every few days. In contrast, only 16% of women in a comparison group reported a similar rate of arguments. It is likely that at least some of these marital arguments spilled over into the father's interactions with his children. Violent men reportedly got angry at their children every few days, in contrast to the comparison fathers' rate of less than once a week (Holden & Ritchie, 1991).

An alternative to the **spillover hypothesis** is the **compensatory hypothesis**. Here, a parent who fails to find love and warmth in a marital relationship may seek to meet those needs in her relationship with her child. According to the hypothesis, the child may in this way be **buffered** from the ill effects of the marital discord. However, to date, there is little research evidence to support this hypothesis (Erel & Burman, 1995; Grych, 2002).

SITUATIONAL DETERMINANTS

Does the immediate situation that parents find themselves in affect their child-rearing behavior? It certainly does. As will be shown, parenting is much more flexible, fluid, and changeable than many people without children think. Effective parents must adapt their behavior to the situation by taking into account a change of setting, a swing of mood, a recent experience, or an upcoming event. These situational determinants can be grouped into context, transient parent characteristics, and transient child characteristics.

Context

Relatively few studies have examined the role of context in parent-child relationships. But, context is very important in determining child-rearing behavior. Parents take the context into account when interacting with their children. Ask parents how they react when their children misbehave, and they are likely to respond, "It depends on the situation." The central features of a context for parents are the setting (location) where the interaction takes place, the presence of others, and the time of the day and year.

The most obvious contextual variable is the setting or environment that a parent is in. Parenting occurs most often in the home but also in the car, at the supermarket, on vacation, and in numerous other locales. Observational studies that compared parental behavior across two or more settings (such as the home, a laboratory, or a park) arrived

at similar conclusions: Parental behavior can show considerable variation across different settings (Bradley, 2002; Holden & Miller, 1999; Miller, Shim, & Holden, 1998). Even within a particular setting, child-rearing behavior is affected by ongoing activity in that setting. If a mother is multitasking, her parenting will change considerably. A child's raucous laughter might delight a mother playing hide-and-seek but irritate the same mother trying to make a phone call.

A second contextual variable that can influence dyadic interactions is the presence of additional individuals. The presence of another child or a second parent can modify parental behavior. This type of second-order effect was explained under family systems theory. The presence of many people in a home (i.e., crowding) can also affect child rearing. Parents in crowded homes tend to talk in less-complex sentences to their children than parents who live in uncrowded homes (Evans, Maxwell, & Hart, 1999). Related to crowded homes is chaos. Children in chaotic homes exhibit more problems than other children (Evans & Wachs, 2010). Items from a family chaos scale are listed in Table 5.1.

A final contextual variable that has received some research attention is the time at which the interaction occurs—both the time of day and the time of year. During the summer months, parental involvement and monitoring can change systematically in relation to a parent's work status (Crouter & McHale, 1993). The time of day that interactions occur is also likely to influence behaviors. If parents are in a hurry or tired, they are likely to behave differently than they would otherwise. Fatigue on the part of parents and children may account for the finding that mothers are twice as likely to spank their children in the evening as in the morning (Holden et al., 1995).

Transient Parent Characteristics

Two types of parent characteristics that influence parenting can be considered transient because they are likely to change within a short period of time: thoughts and emotions. As described earlier, parental social cognitions can provide *stable* influences on behavior, as in the case of attitudes and beliefs. Thoughts can also, however, have *transient* effects,

TABLE 5.1 ■ Items From the Confusion, Hubbub, and Order Scale (CHAOS)

1. You can't hear yourself think in our home.
2. There is very little commotion in our home. (reverse scored)
3. It's a real zoo in our home.
4. We are usually able to stay on top of things. (reverse scored)
5. There is usually a television turned on somewhere in our home.
6. The atmosphere in our house is calm. (reverse scored)
7. We almost always seem to be rushed.
8. We can usually find things when we need them. (reverse scored)

Source: Matheny, Wachs, Ludwig, & Phillips, 1995.

as is the case with short-term goals, which can change minute by minute. The particular goal that a parent has in mind is potentially a strong influence on that parent's behavior. For instance, parents often enter situations with either child-centered, parent-centered, or socialization goals in mind (Dix & Branca, 2003). Child-centered goals are oriented around the child's needs rather than the parent's. Socialization goals focus on long-term development; examples of them were listed in the last chapter (see Table 4.3).

Closely linked to goals are emotions. Positive or negative emotions are aroused when parental goals are either met or frustrated, respectively (Dix, 1991). These emotions are essential for effective parenting because they help to organize the parent's sensitive and responsive child-rearing behaviors. However, when emotions are too strong, too weak, or inappropriately matched to the child's behavior, they serve to undermine effective parenting.

Several empirical studies have documented linkages among parental cognitions, emotions, and behavior. To give one example, mothers' attachment classification with their own mothers, as assessed by the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), is related to how they parent their two-year-old children. For example, preoccupied mothers exhibit angry and intrusive caregiving. In contrast, dismissing mothers—those who had depressed symptoms—were less warm and responsive than secure mothers (Adam, Gunnar, & Tanaka, 2004).

Transient Child Characteristics

Parental behavior can also be influenced by a child's rapidly changing emotions and behavior. We know that children are more susceptible than parents to changes in their physiological or emotional states. This is why we can have compassion for a screaming toddler who has just dropped his or her ice cream cone. For a two-year-old, that is as serious as totaling a new car. Effective parents are able to take into account these changes in their children—whether it is toddler frustration or teenage angst—when doling out consequences.

The best way to study how transient child characteristics influence parental behavior is through the child effects and transactions approach. Studies examining parental responses to changes in a child's behavior have shown that when a child misbehaves, the *type* of misdeed is a powerful determinant (Grusec & Kuczynski, 1980). However, the mother's attitude and the child's gender are also important determinants of responses (Hastings & Rubin, 1999).

INTERRELATIONS AMONG DETERMINANTS

As is now obvious to the reader, parental behavior is influenced or determined by a large number of factors. Characteristics of the parent, the child, and the context all contribute to the ways the parent behaves. Unfortunately, the more than 30 influences on parenting that have been identified in the research literature cannot be clearly demarcated like the components of a chemical reaction or entered into a formula.

Different contexts can affect each other, as the ecological model proposes. What happens in the work environment can be brought home and affect the quality of parenting, as Jennifer Matjasko and Amy Feldman (2006) found. They investigated whether there was evidence of how the context of work could spill over to child rearing once the parent was home. They found evidence that both mothers and fathers can bring emotional experiences from the workplace to the home. When mothers reported being happy, angry, or anxious at work, they also reported feeling similar emotions at home. Fathers, on the other hand, reported only bringing feelings of anxiety home with them.

The different determinants of parenting can also influence each other in several ways. Most commonly, the variables can have additive, moderating, or mediating effects. In addition, they can work together by interacting or compensating. Each of these interrelations between variables will be explained next.

Additive effects (also called *cumulative effects*) result from variables combining to form a stronger influence on behavior than any of the variables has on its own. A parent with an explosive temper plus a temperamentally difficult child is a dangerous combination. Add to this equation a loss of the parent's employment and the risk of abusive parenting is considerably higher than it would be if only one or even two of these variables were present. Sometimes these potentially problematic variables are called *risk factors*. The more risk factors affecting parental behavior, the greater the likelihood of a poor child-rearing environment. In a study of risk factors, Kristi Hannan and Tom Luster (1991) assessed six potentially detrimental influences on child rearing in 602 families with 1-year-old children: three contextual factors (absence of a partner, three or more children, and low income); two maternal characteristics (low IQ score and adolescent mother); and one child characteristic (difficult temperament). The risk factors present in each family were then added together to form a **risk index**. Each family was also assessed on the HOME (Home Observation for the Measurement of the Environment) scale, which rated the quality of the home environment. The results revealed a strong relation between risk index and low HOME score. Only 22% of families with one risk factor had low HOME scores, in contrast to 88% of those families with all six risk factors.

Recall from Chapter 3 the discussion of *moderating* and *mediating* variables. For parenting, the most important moderating variable is the marital relationship. Supportive spouses can reduce the effects of stress by providing assistance, advice, and encouragement to their mate. A loving marital relationship can moderate the negative parental effects of financial hardship (Simons, Lorenz, Conger, & Wu, 1992) and even of a parent's psychologically painful childhood. For example, supportive spouses provide encouragement, promote healing, and suggest positive child-rearing behaviors rather than allowing their partners to engage in the negative child-rearing behavior that they experienced in childhood.

A mediating variable affects the strength of another variable, sometimes negating it completely. For example, economic hardship can certainly influence a parent's behavior. But as a determinant, economic problems are mediated by feelings of economic strain. If a parent fails to recognize his or her financial problems, ignores them, or is surrounded by others content in the same situation, it is unlikely that economic hardship will have much influence on his or her parenting. But when the financial problems are recognized and experienced in the form of strain or worry, parenting will likely be negatively

impacted (Simons et al., 1992). Thus, in this case, parental awareness, attitude, and even the neighborhood context can mediate or moderate the strength of economic hardship as a determinant of child rearing.

Generally, the single most important mediator of child rearing is parental cognition. If parents can revise or reframe their thinking, then parental behavior can be changed. For example, mothers with irritable infants provided less supportive care if they believed (true or not) that responsive care would reinforce the demandingness of their infants. Thus maternal beliefs mediated the extent to which infant irritability was predictive of maternal sensitivity (Crockenberg & McCluskey, 1986). Faulty cognitions (including attributions, expectations, and problem solving) are a key determinant of why some parents maltreat their children (Seng & Prinz, 2008).

A fourth way that parenting determinants can relate to one another is through their **interaction**. Interactions occur when one parenting variable impacts a second parenting variable. A common interaction found in parent-child relationships is between the gender of the parent (a parent characteristic) and the gender of the child (a child characteristic). Fathers, for example, are sometimes observed to behave differently toward their sons than toward their daughters (Russell & Saebel, 1997). Another example of an interaction with parent gender is that children disclose more personal and emotional experiences to their mothers than to their fathers (Smetana, Metzger, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2006).

Finally, determinants can relate through **compensation**. If one positive variable is strong enough, it can compensate for the presence of a negative one. The features that are perceived to make babies cute and adorable to parents help to compensate for the incredible amount of work required to rear a child. A second example concerns stress. As described above, parental stress can be a powerful negative influence on child rearing. However, high levels of social support could compensate for the stress so that parenting would not be adversely affected.

CHAPTER CONCLUSIONS

This chapter addressed the question "What determines how a particular parent behaves?" The simple answer is that there are a lot of determinants. More than 30 variables can influence parenting behavior. These variables range from proud cultural traditions to fleeting thoughts and emotions that we might not even notice—if a researcher was not observing them. Four categories were used to organize these determinants. The most general type of variable was that of cultural and distal variables such as socioeconomic status and religious beliefs. The second category concerned contextual variables. These influences included parental employment status, stress, social support, and the neighborhood where the family resides. Stable characteristics of the parents, children, and family formed the third category. This group of variables included such considerations as parental gender and personality, child age and temperament, and family size and structure. The final category consisted of situational variables that are prone to change rapidly—such as the context of the interaction or the parent's mood.

When trying to chart out the relations between these variables, the task quickly becomes overwhelmingly complex. The determinants of parenting can relate to each other in at least five ways. The simplest relation is when two or more variables have similar and therefore additive effects. However, other variables may moderate, mediate, interact with, or compensate with or for another variable. Just how particular determinants relate depend on which variables are being examined.

Thought Questions

- What were the major influences on your parents' child-rearing behavior?
- Identify the determinants that are the easiest to modify.
- Select two or three determinants. How do they interrelate? Is one more powerful than another?
- What are some approaches to modifying parental beliefs?
- What are some of the implications of knowing the different influences on parenting?