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Communication in Healthy Parenting: The Interplay of Positive Parenting Strategies and Parents' Communication Styles

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Abstract

This chapter intends to review theory and research in parenting studies from the family communication perspective. This will include discourse on the interaction between parenting and communication and how these influence child-rearing outputs. Evaluating healthy parenting on the criteria of effective communication, the chapter shall focus on how communication mitigates diverse parenting challenges to bring about positive child-rearing outcomes in parent–child relationships. To do this successfully, efforts shall be made in the chapter to interrogate diverse parenting strategies recommended in the research literature and parents' communication styles to see how these impact child-rearing in a changing society. From the foregoing, the chapter shall illustrate the contributions of positive parenting strategies and communication styles in mitigating challenges of child-rearing in a changing society.

Keywords: family communication, positive parenting strategies, parents' communication styles, healthy parenting

1. Introduction

Parenting can be examined in different ways. We could focus on how parenting strategies are shaped within diverse cultural contexts. We could also ask questions about how parenting is influenced by parents' personalities and parental upbringing, or investigate the effects of lifespan development on parenting. While the above questions drive investigations into parenting from both the sociological and psychological perspectives, our perspective in this chapter shall be communicative. Thus, in this chapter, we review the literature to find out how parenting is shaped by family conversations. Our primary interest, therefore, is in the communication processes and topics that enact parent–child relationships to see how these influence child-rearing outcomes.

Communication is a process through which meanings are created [1] in all human relationships. Bochner [2] posits that communication is fundamental to all family processes. Parenting, being the chief of these processes, utilizes communication in all of its endeavors. Adapting to parenting, Turner and West [1] submission on the instrumentality of communication to family life, family relations and family

functioning, we say in this chapter that parenting is not doable without communication. Thus, while parenting involves interpersonal skills and places emotional demands on parents [3–5], we propose in this chapter that communication drives all parenting processes.

At the center of parenting are the diverse strategies parents engage in nurturing their children. Literature [6, 7] has defined these strategies as all the behaviors, attitudes and values utilized by parents in interacting with their children. This is done to influence their physical, emotional, social and intellectual development. Underlining the central role of communication in all of these, Darling and Steinberg [6] point out that parents ‘communicate’ these attitudes to create an emotional atmosphere within which their parenting behaviors seek expression. This chapter thus seeks to explore communication as both a socialization tool in the art of parenting and the medium for the expression of all parenting behaviors and attitudes. We will also see how these influence child-rearing outcomes.

Family communication literature [8, 9] posit that understanding the nature of theory is the only way to fully understand the nature of families and the communication dynamics within them. Consequently, for over five decades [10], scholars have engaged diverse theories in their bid to conceptualize and expand the boundaries of family communication research. Having established the central role of family communication in parenting, we seek to interrogate a few out of the most utilized theories in parenting drawn from family communication research. Our aim in this is to seek out connections between these theories and the strategies parents engage in raising their children to see how they influence each other and consequently impact child-rearing outcomes. Our theories of focus in this chapter shall be *family systems theory*, *family communications theory* and *social constructionist theory*. We choose them because of their preoccupation with our subjects of interest.

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this chapter is therefore to review theory and research in parenting studies from the family communication perspective. This will include discourse on the interactions between parenting and communication and how these influence child rearing outputs. Evaluating healthy parenting on the criteria of effective communication, the chapter shall focus on how communication mitigates diverse parenting challenges to bring about positive child-rearing outcomes in parent–child relationships. To do this successfully, efforts shall be made in the chapter to interrogate diverse parenting strategies recommended in the research literature and parents’ communication styles to see how these impact child-rearing in a changing society.

1.2 Significance

Over the last five decades, parenting as a domain of study has gained grounds in family communication scholarship [11]. The focus, however, in most of the studies has been purely sociological and psychological [1]. Thus, so much has been written on parenting without much emphasis on communication as the context within which most parenting behaviors and attitudes are expressed. This chapter seeks to engage parenting through the medium of communication. It hopes to do this by examining the interactions between positive parenting strategies and parents’ communication styles to see how these influence child-rearing outcomes.

Topics that shall be discussed in this chapter about how communication mediates between positive parenting strategies and parents’ communication styles to bring about positive child-rearing outputs include:

- Parenting and communication
- Theory in parenting studies
- Parenting strategies as parents' communication styles
- Implication
- Recommendations

2. Parenting and communication

While definitions of parenting abound, we define parenting in this chapter from O'Connor and Scott [12] perspective as the various ways that parents shape their children's development. This definition for us encompasses covertly all the processes that parents engage to arrive at producing well-developed children: processes that involve parents' efforts at attending to both the physical and psychological needs of their children. Over the years, parents have deployed many styles across cultures to achieve their goals towards raising well-developed children who become responsible citizens in society. Diana Baumrind's 1971 multidimensional model of parenting summarizes these parenting styles under four different headings: authoritarian, authoritative, permissive and uninvolved parenting styles. While all these styles have their implication on parenting and child-rearing outcomes, our preoccupation in this chapter is to see how parents' engagement of any of these styles translate into their communication styles with their children.

Communication, on the other hand, has been defined as the process of meaning-making between people [1]. Apart from the biological foundation that originates the connections between parents and children, the processes involved in creating and maintaining parent-child relationships are captured in the interactions between them. Zolten and Long [13] predicates healthy parent-child relationship on positive communication. Through positive communication, parents forge strong bonds with their children. The nature of these bonds determines how parents fare with the various developmental challenges children go through and their impact on their parenting [14]. While healthy parenting involves appropriate behavioral standards and expectations and verbal expression of maturity demands, parents who positively communicate these behavioral standards and expectations to their children succeed at achieving healthy levels of aspiration, independence, and attitudes in their children [15].

3. Theory in parenting studies

Theories give us a mechanism for understanding phenomena, and parenting is one such phenomenon. While several attempts have been made by scholars to locate parenting within specific theoretical frameworks, there is no comprehensive theory of parenting [16]. We review therefore three theories of family communication research that have found relevance in parenting studies: family systems theory, family communication patterns theory and social constructionist theory. Our preference for these three theories is informed by their ability to isolate the communication patterns within a family system and to deploy them for meaning-making purposes. We seek to identify aspects of these theories that inform parenting orientations, otherwise known in the literature as parenting styles [17] or parenting

strategies [11]. We hope to make connections between these theories and the strategies parents engage in raising their children to see how they influence each other to bring about child-rearing outcomes.

3.1 Family systems theory

Family systems theory emerged as a result of Bowen's early research at the Menninger Foundation. It assumes that a system is characterized by the interaction of its interdependent elements, with each element mutually influencing every component in the system [9]. Utilizing the family as an interaction system, it attempts to explain social behavior and patterns of social interactions [16]. Looking at the family as the basic emotional unit, the theory upholds the view that families can be understood not through individual members' experiences (which can vary widely from one another) but, rather, through the unique dynamics and overall climate achieved in a family. This suggests that any change in the emotional functioning of one member of the family is compensated for by changes in the emotional functioning of other members of that family.

Examining parenting through the lens of the systems theory, parents derive their different parenting behaviors from their interactions with other subsystems in the entire family system. Holden [16] supports this with the view that to fully understand behavior in the family, one cannot simply focus on an individual child in isolation or only on the parent-child dyad. Rather, relationships among all members of the family must be recognized to understand how the behavior of individuals is supported by, encouraged, or reacted to by other family members. Thus, as parents interact with other interdependent elements at the different sub-systems in the family, they come off from such interactions with notions about parenting that eventually influence their parenting. Their social context thus casts a shadow on the relationships each member of the family eventually develops [18]. We discover from this, parents' effort to parent their children in ways not too different from how they were parented. In doing this, they struggle to transmit to their child's values, attitudes and norms imbibed from their upbringing. This process contributes immensely to the diverse parenting strategies that parents deploy in raising their children.

3.2 Family communication patterns theory

Family communication patterns theory, proceeding from the works of McLeod and Chaffe in the early 70s and Ritchie and Fitzpatrick in the early 90s, has been used by scholars in the family communication field to articulate the diverse ways parents communicate with children and the implication of such communication styles on the parent-child relationship [19]. The two major patterns emerging from the literature that either grow or shrink family conversations are *conversation* and *conformity* orientations. The conversation orientation refers to the degree to which family communication patterns are characterized by an open and unrestrained exchange of ideas while the conformity orientation refers to the degree to which family interactions are characterized by an emphasis on the homogeneity of attitudes, values, and beliefs.

Reuter and Koerner [20] further opine that families create their shared reality through these two communication orientations-the conversation orientation and the conformity orientation. Conversation orientation, characterized by frequent, spontaneous, unrestrained interactions allow family members to co-discover the meaning of symbols and objects in their relationship systems and thus encourage them to participate in the definition of their social reality. Conformity orientation, on the other hand,

characterized by the uniformity of beliefs and attitudes, direct family interactions to focus on maintaining harmonious relationships that emphasize obedience to parents. These often manifest in the pressure on family members, mostly children, to agree and maintain the family hierarchy, thus placing the power to define social reality in the hands of family members in the authority roles (mostly parents) [20, 21].

Examining parenting strategies through the lens of these twin theoretical models presupposes that both models will have implications on child-rearing outcomes. Parents who engage conversational strategies are more likely to produce children who are psychologically balanced and can engage life's issues from a balanced perspective. Communication for such parents is not a tool for control, rather it is utilized for forging connections that stabilize parent-child relationships during the storm and stress of adolescence [14, 22]. On the other hand, parents who engage in conformity-oriented strategies focus more on control than on cultivating a relationship that produces psychologically balanced children. Children from such parenting backgrounds develop more delinquent and deviant tendencies as their response to authoritarian parenting. We discuss this further in the section on Positive parenting strategies as parents' communication style.

3.3 Social constructionist theory

Social constructionism is a theory used to construct man's attempt to come to terms with the nature of reality [5]. Traced to the works of sociologists, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman in 1966 whose ideas were inspired by the thinking of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and George Herbert Mead, Social Constructionism asserts that all meanings are socially constructed. It proposes that people make sense of the world by constructing their model of the social world and how it works through social interactions and language. Harach and Kuczynski [23] in their study identified the role of language in the construction of parent-child relationships.

By asking parents to describe the relationship with their children within a framework of questions concerning the nature of the relationship, questions such as how parents and children strengthen the relationship, how they damage the relationship, and how they make repairs to the relationship after interactional missteps, they sought to discover the categories and concepts that parents use to *talk* (emphasis mine) about their relationships with children, thus gaining insight into the insider's views (meanings) of parent-child relationships through the language of interaction. Thus, as parents talk to (communicate with) their children and vice versa, both parties in the relationship can derive meanings which give rise to whatever knowledge of each other, and of the relationship they possess. These derived meanings and knowledge determine each other's response to the relationship.

Thus, in parenting research, while the relationship between parents and their children is enacted through communication, parents' language use in the communication process has implications on what knowledge or understanding of the relationship gained by the children which directly or indirectly impacts their response in the relationship. Dunkeley [24] in her phenomenological study of parenting adolescents from both parents' and adolescents' perspectives, also identifies language as not just a vehicle for the expression or representation. Rather she reiterates that without language, higher functions of thought and imagination cannot develop. According to her, it is from language that children build concepts which make it possible for them to begin to direct their actions thus shaping the course of their own and other lives. Dunkeley [24] shares Vygotsky's view which encourages the idea that "personalities are constituted by language from an early age in a process which continues throughout life allowing continual change and growth to take place at a higher cognitive level" (p. 44).

Thus, children and adolescents through the use of language in parent–child interaction settings can be seen as active agents, intimately involved in constructing meanings about events in their lives. These meanings contribute to shaping who they become, what notion of parenting they have and will perpetuate and what views they will hold about their own lives and other interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, parents through their parenting teach children what to think about the world, what is important or unimportant, and about their self-worth [25]. Directly or indirectly, parents mirror for child's notions about life. These have implications on their child-rearing outcomes.

The three theoretical frameworks examined in the context above highlight the role of theory in deepening the understanding of parenting from the family communication perspective. The family systems theory highlights the interdependent relationships between parents and children as members of a family system. It also highlights how parents' interactions with other elements at the various sub-systems in the family influence their parenting strategies, which consequently influence child outcomes. The family communication patterns theory identifies the specific communication patterns in the different parenting strategies deployed by parents in raising their children and also deepens an understanding of their impact on child-rearing outcomes. Lastly, the social constructionist theory highlights the meaning-making functions of language in parent–child interactions and their implications on child outcomes as well.

4. Parenting strategies as parents' communication styles

Having defined parenting strategies in this chapter as all the behaviors, attitudes and values utilized by parents in raising their children, we propose also that these strategies are parents' communication styles because they serve as channels for all parenting activities and also provide platforms on which parents connect with their children. Without these connections, parenting becomes a struggle. Parenting research literature has tried to group these strategies according to the philosophical perspectives of their proponents. We review some of these strategies to identify elements of family communication in them and to highlight how they function as parents' communication styles.

4.1 Positive parenting

Eanes [26] describes positive parenting as an entirely different way of relating to children that allow parents to maintain a strong bond with them through the ages and stages of childhood while still raising kind and responsible people. Its philosophy is rooted in connection and not just a method of discipline. This strategy, according to her is directly opposed to conventional parenting methods which often pits parents against children. The goal of this strategy is to achieve more strong connection, cooperation, and joy and peace in the family. The five principles that inform positive parenting include attachment, respect, proactive parenting, empathetic leadership and positive discipline [26]. These are principles that are relationship-oriented and powered by communication. Summarizing the role of communication in positive parenting, Eanes [26] opines that:

Effective communication is more than just an exchange of information. It helps us to understand our partners and our children better. It helps us to connect, solve problems, and convey emotions. Understanding the emotion behind the exchange of information is really what effective communication is all about; it's tuning in

to our partners (and others) to hear the meaning behind the words. That brings us a deeper understanding of the ones we share our lives with and leads to more fulfilling relationships overall (Chapter 4, pp. 2–3).

The above submission is quite different from what most of us experienced with our parents while growing up. I see efforts on the part of parents in the above context to, not just control with instructions, but to establish connections that will produce lasting bonds between them and their children. The communication pattern adopted by parents in this context is conversational. Parents in the above context talk to their children differently [22]. Communication for them is a tool for fostering connection, and not control. They seem to have transformed notions of parenting that have shifted the way they perceive and respond to their children. Children from such parenting backgrounds are happier more emotionally balanced and readier to seek out and establish healthier relationships than their peers for the conventional parenting background.

4.2 Scream-free parenting

Scream-free parenting is built on the principle that parents can ‘keep their cool’ even when events in the parenting experience get hot [27]. Its philosophy is hinged on the notion that parents can relate with children in a calm, cool, and connected way, taking hold of their emotional responses no matter how children choose to behave. The dominating principle in this school of thought is that for parents to be able to parent in a calm, cooperative and peaceful environment, they need to focus on themselves instead of the children. By focusing on themselves, they can get a handle on their ‘emotional reactivity’, which is usually the ‘greatest enemy of great relationships’ [27].

To combat emotional reactivity, parents are tasked with the duty of regulating their own emotions so they do not get in the way of calm and peaceful parenting. By getting a handle on their own emotions, parents are better disposed to respond to issues in their relationship with their children, thereby modeling for them the calmness and good behavior which they expect in return. Markham [22] describes this as “self-regulation.” Since parenting, for her, is not about what a child does, but more about how a parent responds, staying calm enough to respond constructively to all childish behavior and the stormy emotions behind it requires growth on the side of the parents. Achieving this ‘growth’ is the hardest part of parenting but the only key to positioning parents/the more peaceful parent that our children deserve.

Engaging ‘response’ as a phenomenon in scream-free parenting, scholars [22, 27] opine that an adult’s peaceful presence has a more powerful influence on a child than yelling ever could. This promotes emotional regulation as a communication strategy for achieving positive child-rearing outcomes. This also directs attention to parents’ use of language in parent–child relationships. The language of communication in such contexts is usually conformity-oriented rather than conversational. While yelling at children may force them to cower into obedience to parents’ instructions, it disregards respect for their tiny personalities and produces emotionally imbalanced children, with lots of externalizing and internalizing symptoms [28, 29].

4.3 Poisonous parenting

Dermer et al. [25] define a poisonous parent as one whose ways of teaching children about life and styles of interaction damage children’s abilities to form healthy connections with family members, friends, and eventually romantic partners and offspring. In a nutshell, poisonous parenting addresses how destructive

relationships with parents will lead to unhealthy relationships throughout the lifespan if they are not effectively addressed [25]. It hinges its philosophy on the notion that people who have destructive parenting styles often were the victims of malevolent parenting themselves.

Coming from such backgrounds, parents cannot help but play out their insecurities, deficiencies, and fears from childhood in their relationships with their children. Thus, when attachment anxieties are triggered in the relationship, parents resort to abusive behaviors to control children and to force emotional and physical proximity [25]. Such abusive behaviors are manifested in harsh criticisms, shaming, labelling and the use of words too big for a child's developing emotions to handle—words that are not age-appropriate [30–32]. This suggests that the communication environment in which poisonous parenting occurs is overly conformity-oriented. Parents here strive through their communication to achieve strict obedience to parental authority and the maintenance of family hierarchy without paying attention to the sensibilities of the children in the relationship. Children from such parent–child relationships very often carry their unresolved trauma into future relationships and are incapable of emotional regulation, emotional awareness, emotional responsiveness, making an accurate assessment of people's behaviors, and interpersonal connectedness [22, 25, 26].

4.4 Unconditional parenting

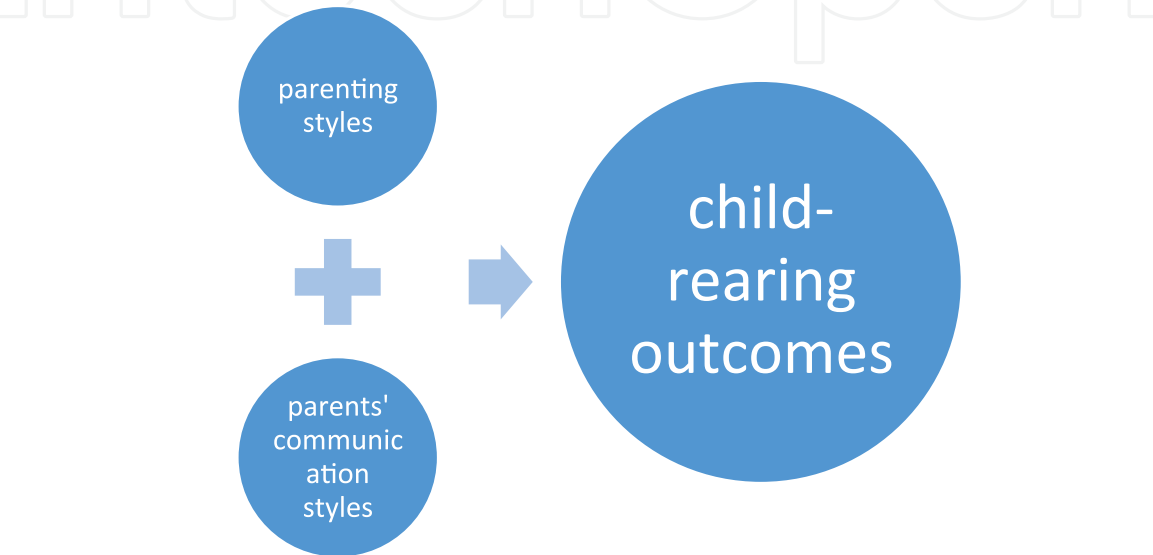
Unconditional parenting is founded on the notion of lovingly parenting children without attaching the conditional strings of 'good behavior' and 'achievement' [30]. It pushes forward the idea of parents loving their kids not for *what they do* but for *who they are*. Contrasting the two ideas, Kohn [30] opines that while the first sort of love is conditional, demanding that children must earn their parents' love by acting in ways they deem appropriate, or by performing up to their standards, the second sort of love is unconditional and does not depend on how children act, whether they are successful or well behaved. Parents in this tradition parent with the consciousness that children do not have to struggle to earn their parents' approval. Rather they are to be loved by their parents for 'no good reason' [30]. This consciousness is further informed by the idea that loving children unconditionally will help them to accept themselves as fundamentally good people, even when they make mistakes or misbehave.

Research has shown that children raised in this kind of atmosphere come off with a healthy assessment of their personalities, can regulate their emotions and become responsible citizens of the society [17, 22, 33, 34] and are also capable of forming healthy and balanced relationships later in life. Meeting this need of acceptance for children positions them to also accept and help other people in their present and future relationships. It is noteworthy to say that the communication environment in this parenting style is conversational and makes way for frequent, spontaneous, unrestrained interactions which allow children to co-discover the meaning of symbols and objects in the parent–child relationship systems and thus encourage them to participate in the definition of their social reality [20].

5. Implications

From the parenting styles outlined in the chapter, two patterns of communication are identified: the conformity-oriented and the conversation-oriented communication patterns. While the conformity-oriented communication pattern is unsupportive of children's psychosocial development because it is concerned with hierarchy and strict submission to parents' authority, the conversation-oriented

communication pattern, on the other hand, is supportive because of its preoccupation with relationship cultivation and children’s overall psychosocial development. Thus, engaging parenting from the two communication perspectives has implications on the parenting atmosphere and ultimately on child outcomes. The overarching role of communication in helping parents articulate the different values, norms and attitudes they hope to transmit through their chosen parenting styles cannot be over-emphasized. While a chosen parenting style can be supportive or unsupportive of children’s psychosocial development, an ability to identify the communication patterns inherent in them and to demonstrate their dual roles as parenting styles and parents’ communication patterns has been the preoccupation of this chapter. We make this statement in the diagram below:



6. Conclusion

While both parenting styles and parents’ communication patterns have been articulated differently by various scholars of family communication and parenting education with both having implications on child-rearing outcomes, we propose that the interconnections between them qualify them to be used interchangeably in the parenting process. We also say that the role of parents’ communication styles as platforms without which parenting styles cannot be appropriately expressed gives credence to our claim that parenting is not doable without communication. Thus, all parents’ efforts at transmitting norms and values through their chosen styles of parenting are their way of communicating with their children. The outcome from such parenting communication is indicated in the children produced from such combinations.

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