



Parents play the most important role in children's development. Caregivers, teachers, friends, and the media are important in children's lives. However, psychological research shows that parents are the most important influence on their children. Being a parent is demanding. It requires skills, flexibility and openness to learn. Whether parenting with a partner, in one or two homes, or as a single parent, parents need support from family, friends, and their community.

“Adults can be especially challenged in their roles as parents when ...a child or adult in the family suffers from a mental or physical illness.”

Two basic ingredients - love and structure. A loving relationship is essential for children to develop confidence and self-esteem. Parents show love in different ways according to their personal style and cultural background. Love is shown by smiles, hugs, compliments, interest in the child, and by being available to spend time with them. The investment of a few minutes of quality time each day devoted entirely to the child (without distraction from phones, TV, or the computer!) is the foundation of a good relationship. It also helps children turn to their parents when they are upset. Children who do not experience a warm and loving relationship with their parents are at risk for low self-esteem and lack of confidence. They may try to find other, more negative ways to get attention and to feel good such as, acting-out, trying to impress their peers, or using drugs and alcohol.

A loving relationship is necessary, but is not enough to ensure healthy development. Children also need structure and monitoring. From an early age, children benefit from routines that help them know what to expect each day. Parents show children the limits of acceptable behaviour by setting clear rules and expectations. Parents help children to learn that their actions have consequences. By noticing and commenting on good behaviour, parents strengthen good habits.

Physical punishment, yelling and humiliation can hurt children. The appropriate use of a brief time-out or brief withdrawals of privileges are effective alternatives to physical punishment and yelling. Without structure, children may have difficulty learning self-control and may experience conflict with authority figures if they fail to learn to follow rules. Parents provide an important model for their child's behaviour. Children learn from watching their parents' appropriate (e.g., problem solving, tolerance, communication) and inappropriate (e.g., yelling and physical aggression) behaviour.

Children of all ages need love and structure. As children get older, parents need to change the ways they show love and provide guidance. A baby thrives on rocking, broad smiles, and singing. A teenager is likely to feel cared for by a parent who is a good listener while driving to an activity. In helping a toddler to learn that it is not acceptable to pull the cat's tail, the parent may say "No" firmly. Because teenagers need to develop responsibility and the ability to make healthy independent decisions, parents should negotiate with them about issues such as curfews.

Adults can be especially challenged in their roles as parents when they are stressed at work, when they are dealing with separation or divorce, or when a child or adult in the family suffers from a mental or physical illness. Children present a variety of challenges depending on their temperament, developmental level, learning style and cognitive abilities. Parents of children with, for example, mood, anxiety, acting-out or learning disorders are likely to benefit from evidence-based psychological services.

How can Psychology Help?

Research psychologists have studied families to learn about parenting that works. Based on that knowledge, psychologists offer many different services to families. Parent Education provides information about normal child and adolescent development as well as problem behaviours.

Parent Education presents positive approaches to parenting that have been shown to be effective.

Behavioural Parent Training is offered in a group, couple or individual format to help parents learn and practice strategies that research has shown to be effective in managing misbehaviour. Parents learn how to spend quality time with their children, how to notice and reward desirable behaviour, and how to effectively deal with undesirable behaviour by using time-out and the withdrawal of privileges. Behavioural parent training is most effective when parents have opportunities to observe and practice the techniques they are learning. Following behavioural parent training, two-thirds of children show significant improvements in their behaviour and they have fewer problems in adolescence.

Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy: Parents who are, for example, depressed, anxious or in an unhappy relationship, usually require help with their own problems before they can benefit from behavioural parent training. Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy is effective in helping parents deal with their own problems such as depression, anxiety, chronic pain, or marital distress. Cognitive-behavioural therapy is effective in improving communication, anger management, and problem solving in the family.