

Parenting Infants and Toddlers Today

Executive Summary

Parenting often is touted as life's most rewarding job. Parenting can be a joyful experience but also can be very challenging. This survey of 1,615 parents of children ages birth to three sheds some meaningful light on the experiences of parents today, what factors they feel shape their approach to parenting, who they rely on for child care assistance, and who or what they value as trusted sources when questions arise regarding childrearing. The survey also reveals important new information regarding parents' beliefs and misconceptions about the factors that foster healthy development and their expectations for when young children are capable of reaching different developmental milestones.

The full report provides a wealth of information that helps us to better understand these areas of exploration in great detail, and across different subgroups of parents. In reviewing the findings, it is important to keep in mind that while this survey can help identify where differences exist, it cannot tell us *why* differences in perspective, attitudes, and knowledge exist among various groups of parents or how these factors impact the parenting experience or individual children's development. We do know that a family's cultural beliefs and values, and their individual experiences, all play a role in the development of these different perspectives. However, understanding how these issues impact parenting experiences is beyond the scope of this research.

Key Findings:

Parents understand the importance of a number of experiences that are critical to young children's development.

This research reveals the good news that parents are getting the message that participating in certain activities and experiences with their young child will help foster the child's healthy development. Virtually all parents (93%) understand the importance of reading to young children in fostering cognitive development and nearly as many parents for whom English is not their primary language appreciate the importance of speaking (88%) and reading (83%) to their baby in their native language. While still a fairly substantial majority, fewer parents see the importance of talking to (74%) and singing to (70%) very young babies or newborns in facilitating cognitive development.

A fairly strong majority of parents also understand the importance of engaging in certain activities and experiences that support their child's social-emotional development. For example, more than 80% of parents believe that letting a child play with other children, comforting a child when upset, and setting and enforcing rules foster social development.

Many parents lack a clear understanding of when young children are capable of reaching certain developmental milestones.

Generally, parents demonstrate less understanding of when children are capable of reaching emotional milestones than cognitive or physical ones. This lack of understanding may lead to parents having unrealistic expectations for their children, and ultimately frustration. This is demonstrated by the fact that many of the challenging behaviors that parents are vexed by involve their child's emotional development. The most commonly mentioned childrearing challenges that parents face include tantrums, crying, and the child not being able to control his or her emotions.

Parents do not fully understand how deeply babies' and toddlers' social-emotional development is affected by certain early experiences.

A significant majority of parents do not realize that by six months most babies can experience feelings such as sadness and fear (69%) and can be affected by their parents' moods (65%). Many parents also are not aware that most children are capable of feeling good or bad about themselves between ages one to two, with a majority believing that this happens later in a child's development.

Family is critical for parents of young children, both as a source of support and information, and as an underlying influence that shapes their approach to parenting.

Parents who rely on someone other than themselves or their spouse for child care mostly rely on a family member to provide such care. One in four parents relies on the child's grandparent and 9% rely on another family member to provide child care.

When questions arise regarding parenting, parents trust family members, especially mothers, as a source of day-to-day information. Nearly half of parents (47%) turn to their mother or mother-in-law when seeking information about parenting, 16% turn to a relative other than a parent or in-law, and 12% turn to their spouse when parenting questions arise.

Family also plays a very important role in influencing a parent's approach to childrearing. More than eight in 10 parents say that the way their parents raised them has a major (53%) or moderate (30%) influence on their approach to parenting.

Faith has a significant influence on parenting approaches.

Parents also credit their faith and religious background, which often is passed on through family, as having a powerful influence on how they approach childrearing. Two-thirds of parents identify their faith as having a major (41%) or moderate (23%) influence on their approach to parenting. Faith is a more powerful influence than other factors, including input from professionals and information garnered from parenting books and magazines.

The research also reveals that parents of young children face a number of challenges today.

Parents find it difficult to strike a balance.

Most parents experience challenges related to balancing their many competing responsibilities. Nearly six in 10 parents feel that there is room for improvement in balancing the priorities of family, work, and other responsibilities. Likely contributing to this is the fact that a significant proportion of parents (45%) feel they could benefit from more help or support when they are overwhelmed with their parenting responsibilities.

The economy negatively impacts many parents' child care arrangements.

Further compounding the challenges many parents face as they work to find a healthy life balance is that millions of parents are feeling the negative impact of the economic downturn, which is specifically affecting their child care arrangements. The recession has forced one in four parents to make adjustments to their child care arrangements. One in five of these parents reports that they simply cannot afford child care, 11% say their spouse has taken over child care duties due to losing a job, and 10% have cut back on child care hours.

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Implications

This survey among parents of children from birth to 36 months provides a wealth of information that helps us better understand the situations parents face today, their knowledge and awareness of factors that influence child development, where they turn for information on parenting, and their approaches to parenting and the factors that influence it. Findings from this research that can help inform the important work of ZERO TO THREE are outlined here.

Parents need greater understanding about the importance of experiences that foster healthy development.

While parents for the most part have a solid understanding of many of the experiences that are important for fostering healthy social, emotional, and cognitive development of young children, there still is work to be done.

- Virtually all parents understand the value and importance of reading to young children. However, parents could benefit from information about the importance of reading and talking to very young babies and newborns, as roughly one-quarter of parents do not consider these experiences to have a strong or major influence on babies' healthy development.
- Generally, parents are less aware of the importance of the experiences that foster social and emotional development than those that influence cognitive development. Therefore, educational efforts pertaining to social-emotional development could prove helpful to parents of young children.
- Perspectives vary on the importance of a range of experiences in fostering social and emotional development (e.g., setting and enforcing rules, comforting a child when upset, encouraging a child) based on racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. This points to the need for a broader dialogue with diverse communities to better understand parents' perspectives on these issues. This will ultimately help professionals more effectively partner with parent groups and other professionals to support early social and emotional development that incorporates culture and reflects this range of different views and perspectives.
- Fathers could benefit from educational efforts that are specifically targeted to them to increase their understanding of the kinds of experiences that promote healthy early development.

Parents need more information about when young children are capable of reaching certain developmental milestones.

A significant proportion of parents hold misconceptions regarding when young children are capable of reaching certain developmental milestones. Generally, parents demonstrate less understanding of when children are capable of reaching emotional milestones than cognitive or physical ones.

- A significant majority of parents do not understand when babies reach certain emotional milestones (e.g., experiencing feelings like sadness and fear and being capable of feeling good or bad about themselves.) Without the awareness of how deeply affected babies and toddlers are by their earliest experiences, parents may not be as sensitive and responsive during their interactions with their young children. Research shows that this is especially concerning when a child has suffered a significant loss, such as a prolonged separation from a parent, or trauma, such as exposure to domestic violence or being victimized by neglect or abuse. Both parents and children could benefit from efforts to educate parents about when young children are likely to achieve various developmental milestones.
- Given that there are different expectations for when young children can achieve certain developmental milestones among different racial and ethnic groups, educational efforts and communication strategies should be designed with cultural considerations in mind.

Outreach and communication to parents of young children should go beyond traditional sources.

The study findings offer numerous ways to inform outreach and communication efforts to parents of young children.

- Parenting magazines and Web sites are the sources that parents turn to most frequently and therefore are likely to be an effective outlet to provide educational information.
- Other outlets emerge as valued information sources that can help ZERO TO THREE target communication to specific groups:
 - Parenting books and TV programs are likely to be effective sources for communicating with Hispanic and African-American parents, as they turn to these sources at high rates.
 - Online sources including Web sites, blogs, chat rooms, and social networking sites are good ways to reach Hispanic and younger parents.
 - Professionals are a good source of information for African-American and Hispanic parents, as well as younger parents.

Findings regarding factors that influence approaches to parenting also have important implications for outreach and communication efforts and opportunities.

- Faith and religion have a powerful impact on how many parents approach parenting. This points to the need for professionals to look beyond traditional partners to different kinds of entities and organizations such as churches and faith-based organizations to reach parents of young children or help provide them with information, support, and resources.

- Family is an important resource for many parents of young children. Given that so many parents turn to other family members—especially their mothers—as a source of childrearing information and for child care, tapping into extended family as another target audience in educational communication likely will provide an important avenue for reaching parents.
- Family history and culture are powerful influences on the approach many parents take to childrearing. Developing culturally appropriate and sensitive educational materials is critical.