Experiences of Parenting Multiple Expressions of Relationally Challenging Childhood Behaviours across Contexts

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Definition: This entry delves into the parenting literature and reveals the complexities, perspectives, and multiple expressions of parenting challenging childhood behavior that distress or negatively impact the parent-child relationship so that we can better understand how to support families who are struggling to cope. The entry specifically focuses on the period of transition to school for children aged five to eight years. This transition can illuminate vulnerabilities previously hidden as children attempt to navigate the demands of their unfamiliar environment, meaning that parents can experience distress and emotional challenges. The entry explores the various expressions of relationally challenging behavior and comments on the intersectionality and reciprocity of explicit and implicit expressions of affect such as frustration and anxiety. To gain context, the entry examines common antecedents associated with relationally challenging behavior, such as academic comparison, forming friendships, hidden neurodiverse development, neglect, attachment dysfunction, and family conflict. Qualitative literature enriches understanding and identifies problems such as parental distress related to social stigma and minority stress and reveals specific struggles, including stress, related to homeschooling children with special educational needs, homeschooling during the recent pandemic, single parenting, grandparenting, parenting neurodiverse children, and the triangulated tensions that exist between the parent, the child, and the school. Holding in mind these diverse and context-orientated perspectives, this entry examines research that evaluates helpfulness and illuminates deficiencies of popular structured parent programs. Lastly, the entry identifies and illuminates the need to know more about the ways in which parent programs work, and it is anticipated that this new knowledge will help practitioners to better respond to the complexities of need and expectations of families who struggle to cope with relationally challenging behavior.

Keywords: parenting; experiences: relationally challenging; childhood; behaviors; contexts; literature; mother; father; primary caregiver

1. General Introduction

This entry first offers a brief overview of the central theories that support parenting programs, parenting, and the ways that parenting and children's development and adjustment relate.

Parental socialization recognizes parents as an all-important force in the socialization process, shaping and molding the values and behaviors of the child [1], and the centrality of the parent as mediator, interpreter, reflector, and moderator of the child's internal cognitive and emotional state of mind cannot be underestimated [2]. Parents are seen as influencers, guides, teachers, and indirect socializers in their capacity as role models, supported by social learning theory [3], and as social managers, taking charge of the child's social experiences. Parental socialization informs and educates infants and young children in societal norms, expectations, rules, and values that influence behavior. Children learn how to socialize within this early familiar framework, which helps them adjust to societal norms and expectations. Furthermore, parents are seen as moderators to the risk effects that deprived neighborhoods, poverty, and adverse life events have on children's emotional

and behavioral development [4]. This process is guided using a combination of parental styles and practices, such as authoritative parenting, which is associated with a securely attached relationship with the main caregiver [5,6].

1.1. Object Relations and Attachment

Object relations theory [7] originates from the psychoanalytic school and suggests that a person's primary motivational drive is to seek relationships with others, defined as object seeking. How these relationships manifest is influenced by the individual's internal mental world, which is populated by the self, its objects, and the relationship between them. This internal world is influenced by early experiences between the parent-infant dyad. Winnicott [8] describes such experiences as the infant conjuring up a utopian-like object that completely satisfies his needs, especially when excited, and if the "good enough" mother meets the needs of this conjured object, an illusion is created, where the infant believes that he has created the object himself. The repetition of these omnipotent hallucinatory wishes and their realization by the parent leads to a true self from which the reality of pain and loss can be met. Where the parent is not seen as good enough, for example, where the parent is unable to respond to the emotional and physical needs of the infant, a compliant false self surfaces, hiding frustration and requisitioned instinctual drives. In response, the child develops defense strategies designed to generate a sense of security. These might include avoidance, inattention, or tactical misrepresentations, such as false statements that may attract or avert attention.

Attachment theory [6] extends object relations theory [7] by integrating evolutionary developmental psychology and proposes that children require a secure base from which they can explore their surroundings and a safe haven to return so that they learn to flourish [9]. Children who acquire this secure attachment are associated with being socially competent, relational, and self-assured, with robust affect coping skills, meaning that they are less likely to be anxious compared to insecurely attached children [10]. The theory posits that through this secure relationship, the child co-constructs their understanding of self, others, and the world. This is known as the child's internal working model, and the theory suggests that it is developed through countless interactions with the parent.

An observational paradigm is used to assess different attachment styles between mother and infant. The relational quality is assessed during the moment of reunion following a brief separation. The action of separating from the mother, seen as the secure object, tends to evoke anxious affect in the infant. A child who is easily soothed by the sensitive parent on their return demonstrates a secure attachment, whereas infants who anxiously ignore the returning mother, are not easily soothed, resist the mother's attempts to comfort, or demonstrate disorganized behavior are considered insecurely attached. Whilst associative and observational research points to the adaptive influences of a secure attachment [10], it is not to say that insecure attachments are necessarily maladaptive, and in certain environments where fewer trusting relationships are available, they are arguably a useful resource [11].

Further, cross-cultural research indicates that the different values placed on family relationships mean that a secure attachment, as defined by the strange situation test, might not be positioned as the gold standard for child adjustment cross-culturally [11]. However, a mother who is interested in the narrow world of the child and is able to believe in the intensity of the child's feelings is placed to support and guide the child when the child is overwhelmed with affect [8]. Here, the parent scaffolds the development of the internal mental states of the child's inner world. Mentalizing theory, which expands on attachment theory, examines these processes and proposes that they underpin a secure attachment [12,13].

Mentalizing theory suggests that as children develop, they begin to work out the intentions and mental states of others based on their interactions with their parent as the parent attempts to hold self and child in mind. This meta-cognition aids comprehension of the intentional self and the other through recognizing the motivating influences of mental

states, such as desires, feelings, goals, needs, beliefs, and reasons. Understanding these mental states guides relational behavior, which underpins a secure attachment [12]. To date, interventions that are specifically designed to enhance and promote mentalizing and reflective thinking among parents address the early years parenting audience. Nascent findings from a mixed-methods study of 16 parent participants at risk of severe parenting breakdown seem to indicate that parent interventions specifically designed to enhance reflective thinking appear to be helpful in promoting sensitive parenting and fostering the parent-infant relationship [14]. In recent decades, however, popular parenting interventions that support parents who struggle to manage childhood challenging behavior across the middle childhood years tend to focus on behaviorist strategies and principles adopted from social learning theory [3].

1.2. Social Learning

Social learning theory [3] offers relevance to this entry because supporting literature continues to guide current understanding of parenting skills and practices, particularly concerning the detrimental effects of harsh discipline, a lack of boundary setting, and ineffective monitoring of behavior [3,15]. Furthermore, popular parenting programs, designed to help families to foster an adaptive home environment, are based on social learning interventions that have been researched and tested [16]. Whilst social learning theory offers fundamental differences from the psychodynamic object relations attachment model, such as reciprocal determinism, there are striking similarities, such as the emphasis on parent-child interactions. This understandably means that parenting programs based on social learning principles tend to influence the attachment relationship through introducing behavioral strategies that foster adaptive discipline and positive reinforcement [17]. In fact, a recent study found that parents who attended a parenting program based on behavioral and social learning theories significantly improved their mentalizing skills and that this ability both moderated and mediated positive relational behavior, indicating that mentalizing seems to influence and explain behavior change [18].

Children's learning is influenced by the behavior of a significant other, for example, parents [19]. Social learning theory [3] suggests that learning occurs through a process of observation and imitation rather than reinforcement [20]. The theory is supported by the seminal Bobo doll experiment, which involves an adult aggressively hitting a doll whilst being observed by nursery school children and demonstrates how observational learning, such as watching an adult behave a certain way, can result in children consequently displaying similar behavior. It purports that the process of learning takes place within the family setting as well as external settings, such as schools, peer groups, neighborhoods, and social media platforms. Moreover, the theory understands the child as active within their environment, which is termed reciprocal determinism. This means that the child shapes their environment as the environment shapes them. The goals and interactions the child seeks will be guided by their individual characteristics. The more successful the child is in achieving their desired goals by controlling their thoughts, feelings, and behavior, the more established their self-belief (perceived self-efficacy) becomes and the more adept the child becomes at meeting their goals.

Arguably, both theoretical frameworks fail to recognize the interdependent parts of a systemic whole, namely the family system, and the circular, causal, dynamic, complex reciprocal processes that exist within this structure [21]. Nevertheless, Belsky's model of parenting [22] includes multiple factors that influence parenting and child development, including un/employment, marital relations, social support, parent developmental history, and child and parent characteristics. Indeed, research does indicate that these external environmental factors begin to exert their influence on child socio-emotional behavior in utero [23]. It is important to consider these factors to gain a fuller understanding of parent/child needs so that parenting programs and the sessions within can better provide support to their service users.

1.3. Summary

The overarching purpose of this entry is to discuss the existing literature on parenting the multiple expressions of relationally challenging childhood behaviors across a variety of contexts, including the COVID-19 pandemic. This exploration incorporates the perspectives of mothers, fathers, grandparents, and other caregivers. This entry also considers literature that investigates parenting programs and parents' experiences of them to gain an appreciation of what is currently known about the ways in which these programs work. The aim is to provide the reader with a means by which to explore the multiple expressions of relationally challenging childhood behavior, including, aggression, fears and worries, and challenges associated with special educational needs (SEN) and developmental neurodiversity and parents' experiences of parenting these more relationally challenging behaviors. It intends to foster understanding around the needs that motivate parents of children in the early school years to engage in parenting programs that have been designed to help them cope with and manage challenging behavior. Lastly, it aims to offer the reader an evaluation of the research pertaining to how parents and caregivers experience parenting programs that are designed to foster parenting skills and support the parent-child relationship and to demonstrate what would be useful for practitioners to know more about.

1.4. Process and Selection

Searches were conducted through Psych Info, Google Scholar, university library resources, and reference lists of relevant journal papers and books. Search terms included anxious childhood behavior; parent experience and aggressive childhood behavior; developmental neurodiversity; SEN; referral pathways; experience; and parenting programs. This entry is concerned with parents' experience of parenting children's challenging behaviors that commonly emerge during middle childhood and distress the parent-child relationship. Therefore, studies were included on this basis of participant relevance, i.e., relevance to parents of children aged between five to eight years.

Qualitative studies were prioritized because this entry is specifically concerned with the experience of parenting from multifaceted contexts and perspectives. Whilst literature from the last decade dominated the search results, foundational studies that support the theories behind popular parenting programs, such as social learning theory and attachment theory, and their efficacy were also included. Quantitative studies that investigate measurable outcome of parenting programs across demographic contexts were included.

Overall, the selection process included studies that offer nuanced understanding from a range of contexts from which parents may seek help in managing common childhood challenging behaviors.

2. Key Themes Elicited

Through this extensive search and subsequent examination of the available literature, several key themes were elicited, namely socio-demographic discrepancies in the experience of parenting programs; motivations of parents to seek help from parenting programs; parents' experiences of structured parenting programs; parenting relationally challenging childhood behaviors; homeschooling relationally challenging childhood behavior during a pandemic; single parenting, and grandparenting relationally challenging childhood behavior.

2.1. Socio-Demographic Discrepancies in the Experience of Parenting Programs

Families facing socio-demographic adversity such as poverty, immigration, minority ethnicity, single-parent households, low parent education, and stressful life events seem less likely to seek help [24–27] despite children from disadvantaged neighborhoods being at greater risk of exposure to domestic and community violence and at higher risk of developing mental health problems [28]. Levels of childhood anxiety within this community group can be explained by the association between uncontrollability in the environment and anxious affect [29]. Anxious affect can be expressed through multiple behavioral

forms [30,31]; however, parents living within deprived communities appear less likely to identify the need to seek help or develop and follow up on a plan of action [32], meaning that the needs of this vulnerable group are insufficiently addressed, most notably amongst families of children aged under six years [33]. Some might suggest that this is due to a lack of perceived helpfulness of parenting programs for families of low socioeconomic status unless the parent perceives the problem as severe [34].

Families living in poverty where concerns about money, education, housing, food, and inadequate transportation dominate daily existence are less likely to prioritize seeking help through attending parenting programs. In fact, situational difficulties, such as transportation and scheduling time, have been identified as preventative to accessing support for families living in disadvantaged communities [35]. Drop-out rates for this community group can be over one-third of those enrolled in a program [36], as parents from disadvantaged communities report struggling to see the relevance of specific parenting strategies such as positive praise and play [37]. Although, when parents reflected on their own childhood experiences of being parented, these parenting techniques were found to become more culturally relevant and acceptable [38]. Nevertheless, vulnerable parents report adverse effects when group parenting programs include a reflective component and convey feelings of being marginalized and stigmatized by other members [39]. Overall, more still needs to be known about the ways in which parent programs work, including the relative importance of fostering reflective capacity as a mechanism of change. Exploring the inter-subjective processes within parenting programs might offer a valuable contribution to this topic.

2.2. Motivations of Parents to Seek Help from Parenting Programs

Challenging, unpredictable childhood behavior can result in high-conflict family environments that lead to parents turning to parenting programs to seek help in managing difficulties to support children in their social development, for example, in making and maintaining friendships. Behavioral difficulties might include chronic non-compliance, extreme tantrums, aggressiveness, argumentativeness, and frequent loss of control. Distressing child behavior affects relationships between siblings and partners, and parents express feeling guilty for neglecting other children [40]. Motivation to seek early help tends to be influenced by family members, professionals, parental anxiety, or perceived appraisal of the severity of the problem along with perceived helpfulness of parenting programs as a preventative mechanism [41]. Seeking help also tends to be motivated by parents' difficulties, including managing their child's behavior problems, distressing interactions with the child, and feelings of isolation. Commonly, parents express feeling a sense of helplessness, desperation, fear of being judged as a bad parent, and overwhelming feelings of loss of control [42].

2.3. Parents' Experiences of Structured Parenting Programs

A third theme identified by this entry focused on the parents' experiences of structured parenting programs. In the United Kingdom, structured parent training programs are the recommended intervention for parents of younger children experiencing behavioral problems. An extensive body of literature indicates their effectiveness in improving challenging childhood behavior [43–47], parenting skills [48], parent-child interactions [49], and maternal stress [47]. Parenting programs that focus on strategies that improve parental knowledge, fostering a sense of competence and improved attitude towards their child, seem to help parents better cope and diminish instances of aggressive or non-compliant relational behavior. Parent-reported outcome measures are frequently used to assess the helpfulness of parenting programs, with typical questions asking parents about the frequency and impact of behavior on family life as expressed by the child. However, helpfulness is a subjective concept, and this understandably varies across families, with some reporting minimal helpfulness or no change in managing difficulties [50]. In fact, more recent research advocates the need for further exploration to investigate what happens

for families who engage with parenting programs so that more dynamic mechanisms of change can be revealed, such as the therapeutic relationship [51].

Relational communication skills are fostered through the medium of role play, whereby a parent describes acquiring techniques such as actively listening and identifying the need behind the child's behavior. Parents report that communication skills are gained through one-on-one time with their child and managing expectations [52]. In turn, this way of being increases parents' feelings of affection for, closeness with, and empathy towards the child [53]. Parents also highlight relational change as the most helpful in providing an opportunity to reflect on their own experience of being parented and noticing the ways this influences their parenting approach [53].

Furthermore, parents express gaining a sense of empowerment when parenting programs foster a more compassionate, less critical approach towards themselves, and this helps them to recognize, neutralize, and reduce dwelling on challenging situations. Parents comment that adopting compassionate perspectives reduces feelings of guilt and thoughts of not being good enough [54,55].

2.4. Parenting Relationally Challenging Childhood Behaviors

Parenting a child whose behavior is impulsive, aggressive, overactive, or inattentive can elicit feelings of frustration accompanied by prominent levels of distress for both mothers and fathers [56]. More challenging behavioral characteristics are commonly associated with neurodevelopmental difference, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). For some parents, obtaining a diagnosis for their child enables them to be proactive in helping [57], and, despite challenges, they describe working hard to maintain a positive family environment [58]. However, frustration and distress may cause tensions that triangulate across school, parent, and child relationships, which may depend on where challenging behaviors are more frequently observed. Parents also express feeling demoralized and saddened as they take on the stigma associated with their child's difficulties, often exacerbated when school staff deny evidence of stigma [59]. Equally, parents express appreciation of the preferential treatment their child is given in assisting them to adjust to school life and better tolerate sensitives such as crowds and noise or difficulties with concentration. Some parents comment that such compensatory or preferential strategies, for example, being placed at the front of lunchtime queues, means that children miss the opportunity to further develop "soft" or social skills, such as tolerance and compromise. Others indicate that teaching staff adopt short-term compensatory techniques, such as taking challenging children out of the class to avoid conflict to maintain a manageable academic environment suitable for the majority of pupils [59].

Parents also experience feelings of guilt and self-blame when challenging behaviors play out in a public or extended family setting [60]. These feelings are exacerbated for parents of children with a diagnosis of developmental neurodiversity, which is often described as a hidden disability [60]. In fact, developmental neurodiversity frequently remains hidden until children's circumstances change, such as starting school, when difficulties become more noticeable. Obtaining a specific diagnosis may offer benefits, including access to appropriate interventions, psychoeducation around learning challenges and strengths, and awareness of risk and resiliencies of associated physical and psychological challenges; however, parents' experiences of seeking and receiving a diagnosis of developmental neurodiversity vary markedly [61]. To help alleviate relational distress during this uncertain protracted process, parents may be offered support from primary care early years parenting programs. Through gaining an understanding into the ways parenting programs are experienced by this parent audience, practitioners will be better equipped to both adapt and sensitively deliver support.

Recent research illuminates that parents continue to express an unmet need for support across medical settings, school settings, and parenting programs that helps their families and their relationship with their child. This lack of adequate help evokes feelings of isolation, stigma, and frustration [41]. Appreciating the parenting experience can help

ground understanding around the ways that parenting programs can help; for example, de-shaming therapeutic interventions might help address feelings of stigma that are associated with this parent group.

2.5. Homeschooling Relationally Challenging Childhood Behavior during a Pandemic

A growing number of parents are making the decision to home-educate their children, with the Office of National Statistics reporting that since 2015, 1.1% of the UK population alone had engaged in homeschooling. Of this total, almost a quarter of children are described as meeting Special Educational Needs (SEN) criteria, with reasons given for homeschooling that include frustrations with the school system along with parental worries about children's mental health and overall dissatisfaction with school provision [62]. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, more is known about parents' experiences of home-schooling due to school closures, with homeschooled children with SEN being identified as uniquely challenging. Here, parents describe feeling inadequate, unprepared, and under resourced and report a general decline in the family's wellbeing [63]. Indeed, prior to the pandemic, parents of children with SEN who home-educated reported experiencing high levels of stress [64] and expressed that effective, flexible, and collaborative communication with teaching professionals helped facilitate a positive experience [65]. Collaboration with schools can help overcome multiple issues, such as provision of specialist care, support, and equipment. When further restrictions were imposed by COVID-19 and school resources became acutely stretched, parents of children with SEN experienced increased pressure, responsibility, and distress, and many reported significant deteriorations in their psychological health [66]. With the adverse effect of homeschooling on the mental health of parents and their children and the potential longer-term impact [67], supporting this parent group has now become essential.

2.6. Single Parenting and Grandparenting Relationally Challenging Childhood Behavior

Social support networks that surround families are seen as central in offering practical, emotional, and motivational support and may alleviate the challenges of parenting. Support networks help single mothers, who research has identified as being increasingly vulnerable to managing the day-to-day challenges of parenting and distress due to financial strain, long working hours, and loneliness with fewer emotional resources such as a spouse or coparent to help [68]. In a qualitative study including eleven fathers who live separately from their children, the fathers expressed concern around the impact of spending limited time with their child. Their concerns included not knowing how to relate and engage with their child in age-appropriate activities. Further, their concerns extended towards how to manage relationally challenging behavior, particularly relating to discipline [69]. Some single fathers expressed feelings of loneliness and emotional separation from their children and commented that they tend to defer to the child's mother, who they believe instinctively knows how to help their child feel important, understood, and secure [69]. Building perceived social support networks around single mothers has been identified as a mechanism to help manage parenting challenges, foster confidence, and assist contented family life [70]. Similarly, a thematic analysis of eleven fathers who attended a fathers-only parenting group found that fathers expressed benefit and increase in parenting confidence from the support and from open, reflective discussions with other single-parent fathers in similar circumstances [69].

Difficulties in parenting relationally challenging childhood behavior for single mothers and fathers can become exacerbated because of parenting in isolation. Similarly, feelings of loneliness and isolation are expressed by grandparents who have taken on custodial responsibility for their grandchildren [71]. Whilst research identifies that support from peers can be welcome and has been linked to alleviating stress and reducing feelings of emptiness [72], communication across families can been linked to negative consequences and increased psychological distress [73,74]. This is especially the case when conflict and relational breakdown exist within the parenting dynamic, for example, when grandparents

take on the parenting responsibility due to parental substance problems, abuse/neglect, or incarceration. Attempting to remain collaborative when parenting relationally challenging childhood behavior under such circumstances sometimes leads to conflict [74].

2.7. Relationally Challenging Childhood Behavior as Being within the Individual

Generally, the literature discussed here considers challenging childhood behavior as something that tends to take place within the child. Whilst this helps guide overall understanding of the ways that behavior develops and changes across developmental stages and situations, this perspective could be criticized for precluding relational elements, ecological contexts, and genetic factors. The reader is invited to hold this in mind and has been offered a tangential perspective through this in-depth entry that considers the reciprocity and relational experience of parenting challenging behaviors.

The function and expression of challenging behavior is grossly complex. Common childhood behaviors such as fighting, hitting, kicking, pushing (physical), quarrelling, name calling (verbal), telling nasty/false stories, or revenge friendships (indirect) tend to be grouped under the umbrella terms of "aggressive" or "conflict" behaviors [75]. Aspects of early home life, such as abuse, are frequently pointed to as developmental predictors of reactive aggression and its potential co-occurrence with later psychological adjustment [76]. This point is supported by a classic study that identified a significant interaction between genotype and environment and subsequent expression of violent behavior [77]. Aggressive behavior may often be precipitated by feelings of deep frustration. For children, the focus of their instinct, or motivation, is the attachment figure. When this need is thwarted or lost through neglect or simply separation, the emotions evoked can include frustration, disappointment, sadness, and worry, and the behavior response may be interpreted as aggressive or defensive.

3. General Discussion

By taking a contextually based approach towards the multiple aspects of parenting challenging childhood behavior, this entry demonstrates the ways that context interacts with the parent-child relationship and influences behavioral response. This intends to open discussion around how parents may feel about being described as needing to engage with a parenting program, for example, in the context of being a parent of a child with SEN or when homeschooling their child without adequate provision being provided. Parents express feeling a sense of shame or guilt and question their own parenting capabilities, when, in fact, the finger of blame could instead be extended to a society that is failing to support them. In addition, it is necessary to hold in mind how contextual differences alongside reciprocity of affect between parent and child influence behavior. Further, given the popularity of structured parenting programs as a response to helping parents manage challenging childhood behavior, it is important to consider how these programs could be more sensitive and adaptive to contextual differences and thus better able to respond to the diverse issues influencing families' needs. Evidence points towards the relational elements within the delivery of structured parenting programs, such as open, reflective discussions, as helpful. Structured programs can offer general guidance and provide behavioral-based strategies that have been found to be helpful; however, further research investigating parents' experiences with the therapeutic mechanisms of change that exist within the delivery of structured parenting programs can provide better understanding of how these elements may occur.

4. Conclusions

This entry highlights the breadth and diversity of the parent caregiver population that parenting programs endeavor to help. Structured parenting programs tend to offer a generalist approach that integrate strategies from social learning, behaviorism, and attachment that endeavor to assist parents in managing and coping with a wide range of relational childhood challenging behaviors. Whilst evidence repeatedly demonstrates that parenting

programs work, with positive measurable outcomes for both child behaviors and parental stress, studies have tended to rely on parent reports, whilst future research should aim to include the experiences of all involved. The reviewed literature enriches understanding and identifies problems such as parent distress related to social stigma and minority stress and reveals specific struggles, including stress relating to homeschooling children with special educational needs and during the recent pandemic, as well as single parenting, grandparenting, parenting neurodiverse children, and the triangulated tensions that exist between the parent, the child, and the school. Holding in mind these diverse and context-orientated perspectives, this entry illuminates deficiencies of popular structured parenting programs and has identified a need to know more about the ways in which parenting programs work. It is anticipated that this reviewed knowledge will help practitioners to better reflect on the complexities of needs and expectations of families who struggle to cope with relationally challenging behavior.

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