FEATURES OF THE TEXT

The ninth edition of Parent–Child Relations has been revised and updated to retain the significant pedagogical features of previous editions:

• A sharp focus on parenting. Students using this text typically study child development in a separate course.
• A strong emphasis on various theoretical models pertaining to parenting
• An emphasis on family systems theory and a systemic family development model to describe intergenerational family scenarios and life span challenges
• A focus on the ecological, social, and cultural contexts in which parent–child relations occur
• Anchoring of some parenting strategies by focusing on nurture and structure
• Expanded discussions of ethnic diversity and family structures in the United States
• Frequently Asked Questions allow students to see parenting concerns through the eyes of a parent or a therapist
• Parenting Reflections raise significant questions to promote critical thinking
• Focus On highlights important information

SUPPLEMENTS TO THE TEXT

Instructors will be pleased that their favorite topics may be included during lectures to supplement the text. The following online supplements are available to instructors and can be downloaded at www.pearsonhighered.com:

• Online Instructor’s Manual. This manual provides a variety of resources that support the text, including notes from the author regarding each chapter, suggestions for supplementary lecture topics, and a listing of audiovisual materials that illustrate chapter concepts.
• Online Test Bank. The Test Bank features evaluation items, such as true–false and multiple choice.
• Online PowerPoint® Slides. PowerPoint presentations accompany each chapter of the text. These slides can be customized by adding comments.
• Computerized Test Bank Software. Known as TestGen, this computerized test bank software gives instructors electronic access to the Test Bank items, allowing them to create customized exams. TestGen is available in a dual Macintosh and PC/Windows version.
• Course Management. The assessment items in the Test Bank are also available in WebCT and Blackboard formats.

NEW TO THIS EDITION

• For the ninth edition, this text has undergone numerous changes and updates. Dr. Clara Gerhardt has joined the team as the coauthor.
• Many chapters were rewritten to reflect recent research and subtle changes in societal attitudes. “Culture and Diversity,” “Parenting Strategies,” “Transition to Parenthood,” “Pregnancy and Birth,” and “Family Formation and Parenting in Same-Sex Couples” have been revised in their entirety.
• The “Theoretical Perspectives” chapter was expanded and rewritten to clarify areas that students often find challenging. New visual renderings of the theoretical models were incorporated to facilitate understanding.

vii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This ninth edition was built on the inspiring and solid foundations created by the late Dr. Jerry Bigner. My deepest gratitude extends to him, as well as to his partner, Duane Farnell, who smoothed the way to carry out Jerry's wishes for this book. My appreciation to Dr. Bigner's many collaborators, including Dr. Raymond Yang.

It takes many musicians to perform a symphony. For any creative endeavor, there is a wide net of people who inspire, support, and simply create the space so that the project can be completed. I had an entire team, not all mentioned by name, guiding and encouraging me, and importantly, believing in my ability to capture what Dr. Bigner had envisioned. For her consistent affirmation, her artistic eye, and virtually all the diagrammatic renderings in this book, I embrace Claire Gerhardt Gottschalk. My heartfelt appreciation and love I owe to Dr. Christina Gerhardt, pediatrician. She is the backup vocalist who provided the harmony for this duet. For generously sharing her photographs and her vision, my gratitude extends to award-winning photographer Carolyn Sherer.

Samford University has been the academic home which nurtured and supported me. I am deeply indebted to my colleagues and students, especially research assistants Melissa Bellflower and Katrina Brown. Dr. David Finn transformed “I can’t” to “I can” with cups of tea. Others created the environment in which creativity flourishes: Drs. Mary Sue Baldwin, Jeanie Box, Kristie Chandler, and David Shipley.

The thoughtful insights and comments of the reviewers are greatly appreciated: Jennifer Andres, St. Cloud State University; Ming Cui, Florida State University; Deborah J. Handy, Washington State University; and Kim Kiehl, The Ohio State University.

Many generously shared their expertise and enthusiasm, specifically Drs. Tatum McArthur, Willem Grotepaa, Gisela Kreglinger, Eva Buttner, Thomas Boll, Dan Sandiver-Stech, Arlene Hayne, Bryan Johnson, Ginger Frost, Jo King, Fred van Staden, Harold Goss, Irv Hayward, Danielle Hardaman, and computer genius Paul Gerhardt. Special acknowledgment is owed to the numerous unsung experts who read sections of the manuscript and pointed me in the right direction; you know who you are and I thank you from the bottom

viii  Preface

- The final chapter, “Best Practices in Parent–Child Relations,” is a new addition to the book, and looks at the larger societal systems that cushion families. We ask the ambitious question, “What is the state of parent–child relations?” and analyze some demographics to provide us with indications of our strengths and aspirations.

- We listened to the suggestions of our reviewers, who pointed us in new directions. We asked a number of subject experts to review rewritten sections of the book and to identify leading researchers on particular topics and to highlight current trends.

- Relevant themes were added and expanded, such as parenting in military families, coparenting, sudden infant death syndrome, parental despair, shaken baby syndrome, postpartum depression, miscarriage and infant loss, the history of childhood, prenatal tests, bullying, fragile families, children’s brain development and parenting, the role of family therapy in supporting parent–child relations, and commercial parenting programs, to mention a few.

- Current terminology is used. This is especially clear in the chapters on blended families, pregnancy and birth, and family formation with same-sex parents. Proposed, updated DSM-5 terms are used. We have used gender-neutral language and randomly alternated the use of masculine and feminine pronouns such as he and she.

- The family snapshots were abbreviated and a select few were introduced with a family genogram to expose our students to this form of family notation.

- The illustrations that support theoretical models were newly rendered for clarity and reader engagement.

- The references have been checked and compared to the original sources. A serious effort was made to replace dated references with current research. This is an ongoing task which ensures that students benefit from up-to-date material.

- We have kept in mind that this is a text intended to facilitate teaching and learning. We added numerous pedagogical features and focused on reader friendliness. We updated the photos and figures, added clarity to the layout and visual engagement through bullet points, recommended reputable websites, and added charts and tables to sum up key concepts.

- The supplementary materials for this text have also undergone major restructuring to lighten the instructor’s load.
of my heart. The editors at Pearson were my compass and anchor: Senior Acquisitions Editor Julie Peters and Editorial Assistant Andrea Hall. Kerry Rubadue, Laura Messerly, Brian Baker, Pat Onufruk, Mansi Negi, as well as the entire Pearson team responsible for editing and production, ultimately guided this book to a safe harbor.

Lastly, to my inner circle—my husband Michael and our children, their spouses and our grandchildren. They are the ones who turned me into a parent and a grandparent, the most important and rewarding learning school of all.
PART I

Parent–Child Relations in Social Context

In some ways, we are all parenting experts. We have personally felt the effects of parental and coparental influences. We carry these experiences with us for life; we know about that most sacred of bonds, the one that remains with us forever. After all, we have all been parented or coparented within the diverse context of contemporary family life.

In an ideal scenario, we have been at the receiving end of our parents' and coparents' good intentions. We were the object of their hopes and dreams; we may have witnessed their challenges and sacrifices. In reality, we may have been cared for, but not all of these relationships may have amounted to loving or constructive interactions.

Not all parents can or want to parent.
Not all children take the extended opportunities.
Not all parent–child relationships have successful outcomes.

There are many shades of gray in the quality of a (co)parent–child relationship. We take it for granted that children are lovingly parented, but the reality is more complicated. Parenting can challenge us like nothing else. It can bring immense joy; disappointment and bitter tears are the flipside of that coin.

For as much as parents parent, the children do something in return; parents and their progeny do things to each other. It occurs against the backdrop of family histories. Parenting goes forward and backward in time; it crosses generations. We parent in the context of social, educational, and biological influences—factors that limit or enhance our effectiveness. Having some tried and true techniques and well researched literature at hand raises our intuitive knowledge to a more scholarly level. Assuming that parenting skills are innate may preclude the benefits of learning from a model of best practices.

In a parenting course, we try to describe the many visible and invisible threads that set the loom—the influences we may be aware of, as well as the somewhat imperceptible ones. By recognizing and understanding some of the patterns, learning techniques, and approaching parenting as a skill set that can be expanded, parent–child relations can become more rewarding for all participants. We can train professionals who will help parents find the most constructive and rewarding path through a forest of challenges. Biological parenthood is not a prerequisite; there are many paths toward a caring
relationship of the caretaker–care taken configuration. We can use these skills in any responsible coparenting relationship involving children and adolescents, and in a variety of professions.

Parenting courses are anchored in countless volumes of research. In approaching parenting as a formal topic for study, we sum up the highlights and make the material accessible to those interested in this topic. We try to keep the joyful aspect of parent–child relations in mind. If these relationships seem like an occasional endurance test, learning from what has worked for others may increase our fitness level to run the parenting race gracefully and with good outcomes.

Parenting and the caring dimensions it represents has the potential for being one of life’s greatest joys and ongoing gifts. As students of parent–child relations, we are particularly privileged to be close to the stage, where we can observe, encourage, and cheer on the actors partaking in one of life’s true dramas, and where we can become part of the audience eavesdropping on the many dialogues that occur within the sacred space of the family.
CHAPTER 1

The Ecology of Parent–Child Relations

Learning Outcomes

After completing this chapter, readers should be able to
1. Explain the current views that support formal parenting education.
2. Explain the implications of the different perspectives concerning parent–child relations.
3. Explain the social factors that contributed to the changing trends in parenthood over the past century.
4. Describe the factors that contribute to the parenthood role, and reflect on the relevance of each of these factors during the life span development of the parent.

THE NEED FOR PARENTING EDUCATION

When we reflect on our own childhood experiences several questions come to mind: Why did our parents behave and react the way they did? What would we do differently if we were in their shoes? Are there lessons to be learned that will make us better parents? Are there best practices that we can follow to ensure optimal outcomes?

One of the most significant and intimate relationships among humans is that between parent and child. The parent–child bond is unique in its biological foundations and in its psychological meanings. For children, this essential relationship ensures
Part I  Parent–Child Relations in Social Context

survival and helps shape their destinies. For adults, it can be one of the most fulfilling human experiences and a challenging opportunity for personal growth and development.

For many years, the need for formal parenting education was undervalued, and typically the option of training for this role was not available. Parent educators and professionals who work closely with parents agree that such skills would be a welcome addition. Our society goes to great lengths to train people for most vocational roles. A license indicating training and competence is required for a range of activities and vocations—from driving a car to the most sophisticated of professions. Other than for special circumstances such as foster parenting, no state or federal statute requires individuals to have training or preparation to become parents, or to practice parenting, even though the stakes are high and the effects are long lasting. The question concerning the feasibility of licensing parents has been asked (LaFollette, 2004). Our legal system has intervened in regulating potentially harmful activities, and promoting situations and behaviors that are “in the best interests of the child.” It has played a role in adoption and parental rights issues. Even though parenting licensure would represent an attempt at raising the bar and exerting a gate-keeping role, many would see licensure as an intrusion on family privacy. Questioning a family’s innate willingness to rise to the challenge of giving parenting their very best shot seems to be an intrusion into the private sphere of family life. Unless the overall emotional and physical well-being of a child is jeopardized or there is suspicion or fear that a child may be at risk, we tend to leave parenting to the parents, with varying outcomes (Tittle, 2004).

The media sometimes depicts parenthood in unrealistic ways by portraying idealistic outcomes of parent–child relations: the happily-ever-after story. It is tempting to believe that most parents and children have smooth interactions; children improve their parents’ marriage; children will turn out well if they have good parents; children generally are compliant with parents’ requests; and parents are solely responsible for their children’s character, personality, and achievements upon attaining maturity. Learning about parenting in formal coursework, observing parents and children interact in natural settings, and hearing parents share their experiences may contribute to a more authentic understanding of parenthood.

Although most parents could profit from learning new ways to be effective in their role, there are so many opposing guidelines concerning parenting that it is hard to separate the wheat from the chaff. Researchers continue to make progress toward helping parents find more effective ways of performing their parenting roles and raising children to become competent adults.

Contemporary ideas about the nature of parent–child relations are the result of years of social evolution and many historical changes. Our concept of the relationship between a parent and a child contains numerous complex meanings. These perceptions influence an adult’s decision to become a parent and also shape the subsequent parenting behavior. Our understanding of this significant family relationship has benefited from increased knowledge of the behavioral sciences. Experts continue to study parent–child interactions in the hopes of gaining a clearer understanding of how this relationship changes over time and is altered in certain social contexts. Researchers look at the dynamics of parent–child relations and try to distill the essence of competent parenting behaviors.

Disconcerting events occurring in families and in contemporary society underline the urgency of preparing parents and coparents to ensure that they are competent in their roles. It is becoming clearer that the qualities inherent in parenting relationships can benefit or harm a child’s development. The prevalence of destructive behaviors in adulthood is traced to family-of-origin experiences in which poor and ineffective parenting may have played a major role (Coontz, 2006). Family experts are concerned about the effects of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse of children by their parents and close family. Poor preparation for parenthood, inadequate social support, lack of adequate skills for coping with the stresses of parenting, and resource-depleted environments all interact to put families at risk (Cheal, 2007).

The relationship between parents and children is complex and varied. Parenthood is described as a developmental role that changes over time, usually in response to the changing developmental needs of children. Clearly, people can learn how to be effective in raising children and may be able to improve their behavior as parents. By studying the research, theories, and approaches that have been developed and examined by practitioners, it is possible to develop a better understanding of the many facets of parenting.
Parenting Reflection 1–1

At the outset and before having studied parent–child relations, what topics would you include in a course for first-time parents?

Coparenting

Coparents can come in various guises and in several contexts. It refers to the people who team up or collaborate to parent. Think about the word cooperate. It contains the prefix co, meaning that it is an activity that we do together or jointly, where we share our resources: in short, where we collaborate. It is much more than an extended form of child care. It is a very legitimate form of parenting and can occur in many settings. It can have legal implications concerning parental rights and responsibilities.

At the heart of coparenting lies the ongoing commitment to a child’s well-being in a parental manner. Coparents can be biological parents in binuclear families who take on parenting roles from two different households because of divorce or separation. Coparents can be adults who significantly support parents in the parenting role, or may take over the parenting role for an absent or incapacitated parent. In this way, grandparents, supportive family members, friends, and foster parents could act as coparents if they take on permanent and semi-permanent roles with a serious commitment to a child’s upbringing. They carry the child’s interests at heart and become a significant force in the child’s life in a relationship that is ongoing and enduring.

The adults could have a biological link to the child, but they need not have this connection. For instance, parents and stepparents in a post-divorce situation may coparent. Same-sex couples may coparent. Unmarried parents may coparent from two different households. Foster parents could coparent occasionally with a biological parent. In summary, “[c]oparenting is an enterprise undertaken by two or more adults who together take on the care and upbringing of children for whom they share responsibility” (McHale & Lindahl, 2011, p. 3).

Focus Point. It is important for parents to learn how to raise children, to understand their developmental needs, and to become more effective in their roles as parents.

CONCEPTS OF PARENTHOOD

In our society, the parenting role is associated with several different concepts. Originally, the idea of parenthood referred singularly to the prominent aspect of sexual reproduction. Our society, like all others, values the function of reproduction within a family setting because, traditionally, this was the only way to sustain the population.

Although advances in medical technology allow for assisted reproduction, the traditional manner of family formation is the most frequently occurring variation. Initial family formation is followed by years of careful supervision of the offspring.

Other ideas are also embedded in our society’s concept of parenthood—namely, that parents are responsible for nurturing, teaching, and acting as guardians for their children until they reach the age of legal maturity. This extended timespan of providing care for children is unique among most species found on Earth. Human infants and children have a prolonged period of dependency on adults, partly because of the length of time it takes for maturation of the brain and the complexity of the skills that have to be attained (Stiles, 2008). The brain of a human infant, unlike that of the offspring of many other mammals, is immature at birth and continues to develop. Human infants’ survival is dependent upon being protected by adults. In contrast, the offspring of many other species walk within hours of birth and are capable of running to escape danger. Human infants do not master these same motor functions until many months and years after birth. Differences in brain size and function account for many of the disparities between humans and other species.

Parents were originally considered to be a child’s principal teachers. This instructional function and the responsibility given to parents by society to prepare children for adulthood is referred to as socialization, or learning how to conform to the conventional ways of behavior in society. In the past, parents served as educators for their children by teaching them the essential skills needed to survive in society, including reading, writing, and calculation if they were growing up within a literate society. They helped children learn the job skills necessary to provide a living upon attaining adulthood. Today these requirements are met by schools and other agents. Parents are expected to help children learn the basic rules of social functioning and to impart values to guide the behavior and decisions of their offspring.
Part I  Parent–Child Relations in Social Context

Behavioral scientists have placed an ecological perspective on human development and social behavior. Using this approach, the developmental changes in individuals, families, and other social groups take place within the context of interactions with changing environmental systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This same perspective is used in the context of parent–child relations. To understand the parent–child relationship from an ecological angle, we must examine the context of the various environments that influence and shape behavior. We explore the basic nature of parent–child relations and identify the particular aspects that influence the roles and behaviors that parents assume.

THE ECOLOGY AND CHARACTERISTICS OF PARENTHOOD

The relationship between parents and children can be described according to several dimensions. This relationship is one of the cornerstones of human existence, largely because of its biological basis. It is an essential part of our society, and society requires the addition of new members in order to continue.

To understand the context and complexity of the unique bond between parents and their children, we examine this bond from an ecological perspective. Ecology is an interdisciplinary branch of biology that examines the interrelationships between organisms and their environment (Barry, 2007). Behavioral scientists focus on the role of a parent. These concepts define the different meanings associated with the role.

Focus Point. A number of concepts are embedded in the role of a parent. These concepts define the different meanings associated with the role.

Following are some characteristic traits and qualities of the parent–child relationship:

1. **Parenthood is a social construct.** The parental role is a social institution based on complex values, beliefs, norms, and behaviors that focus on procreation and the need to care for the young (Bengston, Acock, Allen, Dilworth-Anderson, & Klein, 2005; Coontz, 2006). People who are not parents can also experience the parenting role—for instance, through coparenting. Coparents are significant persons within a system who collaborate and contribute to the parenting of a child (McHale & Lindahl, 2011).

   The role of the parent is universally understood by diverse groups. Every society, culture, and subculture defines appropriate behavior for parents. Some cultural groups allocate a higher moral stature to parents than to nonparents. People who are not parents may be devalued by societies in which parenthood is valued.

2. **The relationship between parents and children is a subsystem of the larger social system that we call a family.** One of the most salient models for understanding family group functioning is the family systems theory. This approach falls within an ecological context (Beevar & Beevar, 1998). Family systems theory...
describes family functioning in ways that resemble other systems found in nature, such as the solar system and ecological systems. This model explains how everyday functioning takes place in a family, how rules evolve to govern the behavior of members, how roles are assigned to regulate behavior, and how these roles relate to family goals. It explains how a family group strives to maintain stability over time and adapts rules, behaviors, roles, and goals. This model recognizes that family members experience developmental changes, resolve interpersonal conflicts, and confront crises in ways that enhance effective functioning.

Several other subsystems exist simultaneously within a larger family system, such as the committed relationship or marriage between adults and the relationships among siblings. A subsystem is a microcosm of the larger family system that mirrors the functioning of this group. The same principles and concepts that explain the functioning of the larger family system relate to how subsystems, including the parent–child subsystem, function.

The main priority of the parent–child relationship is to nurture children toward maturity and effective adult functioning. The family systems model describes the parent–child relationship as bidirectional. The flow of influence goes both ways. Children’s behavior and development are strong factors that contribute to the quality and scope of interactions with parents. As children experience developmental changes, parents change their behavior and adapt by changing the rules, the ways they interact with children, and their goals for child rearing. Interactions between parents and children evolve in tandem with children’s developmental changes. Similarly, children respond to changes in parenting behavior in ways that help them achieve the developmental tasks appropriate for their particular life span stage.

The parental role is sensitive and responsive to changes within the family system. For example, when one adult is removed from the family through divorce or death, the remaining adult’s quality and style of parenting change. The parenthood role is also heavily influenced by factors arising from what is known as family ecology, which is the influence of the larger environment on the family system.

3. **Parenting is bidirectional.** Our ideas and philosophies about parent–child relations are derived from diverse cultural and historical influences. Until several decades ago, the relationship between parent and child was described as a unidirectional model of socialization (Ambert, 2001). In this model, the adult assumes the role of a teacher who is responsible for encouraging appropriate behavior patterns, values, and attitudes that prepare the child for effective participation in society upon reaching maturity. The child’s role is that of being an active learner. According to the model, the flow of information is solely from parent to child. Clearly, the unidirectional model features the adult as having significant power over the child. In contrast, the subordinated child lacks social power. In the past, these were the accepted roles for parents and children, and they received strong support.

Our current ideas about parent–child relations are shaped by the insight from research that reframes this bond as being bidirectional (Ambert, 2001; Cui,
TABLE 1–1. Childhood and the Family in Victorian England

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influences of Victorianism occurring from 1815–1914</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Industrial Revolution: Mid 18th to mid 19th century</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood differed depending on the class, the generation, and the gender of the child (Frost, 2009). Breakup of the extended family. Increased urbanization as fathers, who were the breadwinners, took on factory jobs; 80 percent of the people lived in cities, often in poverty. Separation of family life from work led to the formation of the nuclear family. Less support from the extended family. Class differences were based on education, financial prospects, and family background. Children were exploited, often laboring in factories.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Early Victorian: 1830s–1840s</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queen Victoria’s reign from 1837–1901. Upheaval in the economic, political, and social arenas. Depression in industry and in agriculture. Potato blight in Ireland, resulting in mass immigration to the United States. Victorians idealized the family and the middle class. Reality was different with poverty and persons in the lower classes struggling. This had a direct effect on family life and children. In 1841, about 36 percent of the population was under age 15. At worst, children were exploited, died early of infectious diseases, missed out on education, and were sometimes sexually and socially abused. At best, children were idealized for their innocence and seen as central to the family. Childhood was a very short period, and children could start working as early as age 7.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Middle Victorian: 1850–1875</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative prosperity. Large families and low life expectancy. Children could be orphaned or have to deal with stepparents. Children born out of wedlock were stigmatized and were either absorbed by maternal families or left as foundling children to be raised in orphanages. Class differences set the stage for the different experiences of childhood. Highly religious society.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Late Victorian: 1875–1914</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rise of new technology like the telephone, chemicals, and electricity. This period culminated in World War I. Large families and high infant mortality. Also frequent loss of a parent as life expectancy was short. Children were often socialized by their siblings. Family size declined in middle-class families. Children’s rights became a topic for discussion. Some social reform. Alternatives other than prisons and workhouses for troubled children. The length of childhood increased as children were schooled longer. Scotland made schooling compulsory in 1872; England had a national school system by 1870 and compulsory schooling followed by 1880. Children entered the workforce later.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General Themes: Attitudes toward children</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gradual increase in awareness of the importance of parenting. Gradual change in children’s roles with the understanding and insight that childhood had its own characteristics and demands. Childhood and youth were not the first stage of adulthood, but a separate entity. Slow but steady social and legal reform occurred, fueled by political changes, and these reforms spread throughout the social classes. Child rearing entered the realm of public policy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discipline</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typically harsh discipline, treating children as if they were innately bad and needed correction. Corporal punishment. From about age 12, children were treated as adults. No extended transition into adulthood. No juvenile legal system; children were punished in the same manner as adults, or placed in harsh reform schools. Social reform initiated in the late 1800s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Homeless children and orphans</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children born out of wedlock were mostly absorbed by maternal households, although some children were abandoned as a result of dire poverty. Increasing social reform movements to help these children (e.g., orphanages, schools, foundling homes). Many institutions were founded by religious groups (e.g., the Salvation Army).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1 The Ecology of Parent–Child Relations

This means that adults and children influence each other. Their mutual influence changes constantly, too, because of the developmental nature of the relationship over the course of a life span.

4. Parenthood is a developmental role that can continue over the life span. Unlike most adult social roles, parenting behavior and interactions must adapt to the developmental changes in children. Changes arising from a parent’s own personal development affect the caregiving behavior. The age and developmental status of both the parent and the child affect the nature and context of the relationship at any point in time. Typically, the parent–child relationship can be a life span pursuit as it stretches over the entire life span of the parties involved, and the quality and characteristics of this relationship change accordingly.

Focus Point. Parent–child relations were traditionally and historically described as unidirectional; that is, the adult had complete jurisdiction, power, and control over the relationship. Current mainstream thinking describes this relationship as bidirectional, meaning that a child is acknowledged as an active participant and contributor to the relationship. Each person influences the behavior of the other. The parent–child relationship is unique to family systems and can be described in various ways.

Focus Point. Parenting is characterized by four important characteristics:

- Parenthood is a social construct. The parental role is a social institution based on complex values, beliefs, norms, and behaviors.
- The family systems theory describes parenthood as a subsystem of the larger social system of the family and within an ecological context.
- Both parent and child actively participate in a bidirectional interaction with mutual influence.
- Parenting is a developmental role and a life span pursuit: both parent and child undergo developmental changes with time and life span progressions.
HISTORICAL CHANGES IN PARENT–CHILD RELATIONS

Contemporary ideas about the nature of parent–child relations are very different from those of the past. Current ideas have evolved from earlier beliefs. The nature and quality of parent–child interactions are influenced significantly by cultural values and by the historical context in which we live (Coontz, 2006).

Generally, our culture values the well-being of children and social institutions like the family, schools, and social service agencies, which focus on meeting children’s needs. Our society tends to be child centered. We see childhood as a special time in the life span, a time of preparation and education for the later years. Childhood is hopefully a time for happiness and freedom from anxiety. We believe that children have special needs that are first met in their family system and later by institutions, groups, and agencies outside of the family system. Our ideas about the unique nature of childhood developed over many years of social transformation in Western culture (Coontz, 2006).

Childhood, parenthood, and the family were viewed differently during the Middle Ages, or even during the Colonial period of the United States. Most social historians agree that the love between parents and children has probably not changed over time. Changes are noted in the ways that adults define and conduct appropriate parenting behavior. Although parenting has always had a strong nurturing context, the way that adults express this nurturing has changed in culturally approved ways. Child-rearing practices have evolved throughout history to reflect the changing ideas of what children need from adults to prepare them for their own future as adults.

Infant Mortality. Where there are adults, there must have been children, and the history of humankind, as shown in Figure 1–1, is also the history of childhood. Our knowledge of children during prehistoric times, including the times of hunter–gatherers, is limited to archeological and paleontological data (Volk, 2011). We know that child mortality rates were disconcertingly high, and from archeological findings, the estimates are that around half of the children never reached adulthood. Stating this bluntly:

In Victorian times, the loss of a sibling was a likely occurrence, and it exerted an emotional toll on the entire family. The loss of a parent proved to be disruptive to the family structure and devastating to the children who were sometimes sent to live with extended family, which was not always a loving environment. The surviving parent very likely remarried, even if it was only to keep the household intact.

Walter Littler, the 14th of 18 children, describes his Victorian childhood in his memoir. Within a dozen years, eight of his siblings had passed away from infectious diseases such as measles and scarlet fever; illnesses, which a century later, would be fairly well controlled (Frost, 2009). In the Foakes family, the mother, Grace, had 14 children, of whom only five reached adulthood, while nine died in infancy or childhood.

"[The loss of a child is] an almost unimaginable loss to modern eyes. Parents faced such grief with resignation, but when siblings died, children were both frightened and saddened, a state sometimes aggravated by the Victorian custom of keeping the body in the parlor or kitchen until burial. The death of a contemporary was a shock, one that forced children to face the reality of mortality." (Frost, 2009, p. 21)


With the absence of a long-lasting oral or written history, the details elude us. The review of the evolution of childhood begins with the ancient cultures that influenced contemporary Western societies, and where we have greater access to more detailed historical data.

The threat of death forced parents to be both invested and disinvested in their offspring. They invested strongly in these bonds to increase the odds of survival as children represented their lineage, the hope of a next generation. At the same time, the many circumstances accompanying high child mortality demanded a certain resignation and disinvestment (Volk, 2011).

Ancient Greece and Rome

In ancient times, only two stages of the human life span were recognized: childhood and adulthood (Cunningham,
Adulthood was considered to be the culmination of childhood experiences. Childhood was the time for preparing to become an adult. Achieving this status was the primary goal of an individual’s developmental progress. The boundary between childhood and adulthood was distinct. Childhood commenced at birth and usually ended between the surprisingly young ages of 5 and 7 years, at which time individuals assumed adult status, along with the associated responsibilities, behaviors, and traits expected of an adult. The life span was much shorter, and many people died in their mid 30s and 40s.

The ancient cultures of Greece and Rome recognized that the experiences of childhood gave rise to the adult’s character. The artistic works of these eras suggest that adulthood was considered to be of higher value and the epitome of human development (Golden, 1993). Infancy and late adulthood did not seem to receive the same degree of interest, assuming artistic attention as a valid indicator of social concern. Child sacrifices, infanticide, and slavery were common during these historical eras. On the authority of the father, infants who were deformed, weak, or of an undesired sex (usually female) could be left to the elements, drowned, or suffocated.

There was concern for children’s preparation for their future roles in adulthood. Although schools taught a wide variety of subjects, parents were responsible for teaching their children basic skills and knowledge. Education was considered to benefit the well-being of the community and the state, rather than the welfare of the individual. In these cultures, a formal education was a privilege that was restricted to males. Females were expected to acquire only domestic skills related to home management and child care.

The family was recognized as the core element in both of these early civilizations. The father was the family leader, and the mother was regarded as a child’s first teacher. Women and children had very few rights and were considered to be the property of an adult male. Children could be sold into slavery or even abandoned. By the 5th century, rewards were given to families who gave asylum to orphaned or deserted children. Conditions changed during the Middle Ages.

The Middle Ages to the Renaissance

The Middle Ages (400–1400) were a time in which Western societies functioned in a rural, primitive manner. Formal education was minimal and restricted to the clergy of the Roman Catholic Church. Families were structured in extended families, with several generations living together. Family life centered primarily on an agrarian lifestyle.

In these premodern times, children were treated with indifference to their special needs. During the Middle Ages and for some time afterward, the nature of an infant was taken for granted by adults. There was no concept that infants needed to learn to trust their caregivers. Assimilation into the adult world came early, usually between ages 5 and 7. A child’s education—probably their only schooling—came from observing and imitating adult role models. Parents in the Middle Ages probably felt that children needed adult supervision and care, but this did not extend to close emotional ties. Parents did not appear to provide warmth or nurture to children, possibly because many children died in infancy and childhood from diseases that are preventable today. During this period, parenting was only one of many functions of the family, and no high priority was attached to it. Families were most concerned with the production of food, clothing, and shelter to ensure daily survival.

The prevailing attitude during the Middle Ages was that children were miniature adults. They were dressed in adult-type clothing and given responsibilities at an early age. The lives of children and adults paralleled closely. Children were exposed to adult behavior and living conditions. For example, most children of commoners in Europe were apprenticed to learn a particular skill or trade once they reached age 7.

During medieval times, infants were featured in artwork. During the early part of this era, subjects were depicted holding infants in a detached manner, with little direct eye contact between mother and child. Infant mortality rates were particularly high. The advent of medical care, and especially the availability of antibiotics, was centuries away. Because life was uncertain, adults probably did not develop a close attachment to infants and young children for fear of a disastrous, premature end to their relationship. This would change in the years that followed.

Over the next two centuries that followed the Middle Ages, that is, 1400–1600, Europe experienced a period of cultural revitalization that was marked by voyages of discovery, scientific exploration, and an explosion of artistic creativity. Adults explored their inner environments or personalities, attempting to discover their true...
selves. This social and cultural expansion generally did not lead to an increased understanding of children and parenting. The focus clearly was on the adult, as illustrated by the concept of the Renaissance man, that is, someone who was well rounded in almost all areas of development, including intellectual, artistic, social, and physical.

It was common practice among Italian Renaissance nobility to send their infants to live with wet nurses (i.e., peasant women who had infants of their own). The wet nurse usually cared for the nobility’s infants for about 2 years, including nursing them. Apparently, the biological parents were not particularly concerned about the quality of care given to their infant during this time (Harlow & Laurence, 2010).

The artistic works produced during this period show a greater interest in children. Fra Filippo Lippi was among the first of the Renaissance artists to portray infants with accurate body proportions. In the artwork of this period, babies were usually drawn as cherubs, which was considered to be the position in the angelic hierarchy of Heaven assigned to infants and children who died. A new sentimentality about children began to emerge. This contributed to changes in attitudes about the nature and status of children in society. During the late 1500s, artists gave more attention to children in their artwork. Another indication of greater concern and attention was the creation of special clothing styles just for children. Until this time, children had been dressed in replicas of adult costumes. This change in clothing style signaled that children, at least those of the nobility, were seen as distinct and separate entities (Cunningham, 2005).

By the late 1500s, additional distinctions between the world of adults and that of children emerged. Recreational activities, stories, and types of medical care between the two groups began to differ. Advice on how to provide discipline and guidance in child rearing became more widespread (Mintz, 2006). Over the next 200 years, the rate of social change would accelerate, bringing new adjustments to the ways that people viewed parenthood and childhood.

Colonial America: 1600–1800

The cultural and religious conditions that existed at the time that America was colonized contributed to a unique view of children and the provision of care by their parents. Children were seen as inherently depraved. Adults thought that children were basically bad or evil. It was thought that parents could overcome this by providing particular child-rearing experiences. Many parents believed that if they administered stern discipline through hard labor, children would become self-denying, pious adults upon maturity. Adults prized children for their usefulness in colonization and for being a good source of cheap labor. Their value in the colonies increased because of the high rate of infant mortality.

The premise that the nature of children was sinful stemmed primarily from the rigid Puritan religious views of the colonists (Mintz, 2006). These are illustrated in the Day of Doom, a catechism written by Michael Wigglesworth (1631–1705), which was learned by almost every child in Puritan New England. Puritan parents were responsible for providing vigorous moral and religious training for children, which included stern discipline. These parents believed it was their responsibility to bring children to religious salvation or conversion. This was accomplished when children were able to recognize and admit their own sinful nature and become Christians. The earlier this occurred, the better, from many parents’ point of view. To help children achieve religious conversion, they were taught that they must always obey their parents unquestioningly, especially their father. They were taught to curb their natural inclination to commit sins. Aspects of childhood that are considered acceptable and developmentally appropriate today were, in Colonial times, viewed as satanic manifestations. Play was considered sinful, and children were kept occupied by memorizing scripture and religious songs. This approach to child rearing placed authority and the welfare of children squarely in the hands of parents. Based on this approach, the unidirectional model of parent–child relations became the primary model of child rearing.

During Colonial times, adults approached their parenting role in ways that we would today label as overly involved and borderline abusive. Stemming from the indifference toward children during the Renaissance, this represented a pendulum swing toward the opposite stance. There was a heavy emphasis on religious matters and the use of harsh disciplinary methods to achieve children’s salvation and obedience. Despite the punitive image, parents had great affection for their children and showed concern for their welfare in ways that were thought to be appropriate at that time.
Nineteenth Century

The 19th century in the United States involved a serious internal conflict: the War Between the States. Prior to this event, several major views about parenthood and childhood emerged that had originated during the Colonial period, and which continue to influence our current ideas.

Three contradictory philosophies on how to rear children emerged during this era. These approaches prescribed appropriate parental roles for specific outcomes.

Calvinism. The strongest approach, which received the most attention, was inspired by the Calvinist religious movement. This view advocated stern, harsh use of physical punishment and strict moral instruction for children, essentially a strong, authoritarian child-rearing style. It implied a cause-and-effect between how a parent trained a child and the outcome in terms of the child's character in adulthood. This approach was thought to be based on the Biblical admonition to parents, “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22.6, p. 876). Susanna Wesley, mother of brothers John and Charles Wesley, who were attributed with founding the Methodist movement based on the principles of Methodism, wrote that her own children would cry softly in fear of punishment. From her diaries, it appears that children as young as a year old were harshly corrected. This was thought to promote quiet children and tranquil households (Cunningham, 2005). She described correction as follows: “... when turned a year old (and some time before) they were taught to fear the rod and cry softly, by which means they escaped abundance of correction” (Cunningham, 2005, p. 53).

The Industrial Revolution produced dramatic changes in family life and roles. During the Colonial period, the father's central role consisted of providing the economic support and moral and religious education for children and acting as the disciplinarian, as such, authoritarianism and fatherhood became intertwined. During and following the Industrial Revolution, fathers were increasingly employed in nonfarm jobs, which took them away from their families for long periods. To compensate, mothers assumed increasing responsibility for the character development and socialization of children. The mother became the instructor and central family figure in a child's life. Because of this shift within parenting roles and responsibilities, a shift occurred from the harsh Calvinist approach to a greater emphasis on nurture (Cunningham, 2005). This shift is attributed to the increasing maternal involvement in all aspects of child rearing. In some very religious families, physical punishment for character molding continued.

Environmentalism. As the Calvinist approach began to wane, a second approach to child rearing emerged that was influenced by the writings of John Locke (1699). Locke was known for his tabula rasa theory of development. In this view, children were believed to be born with their minds and personalities empty like blank slates; the child-rearing experiences provided by parents inscribed the traits that were manifested in their adult personalities. This is a cause-and-effect view of child rearing as well, but it was a departure from the Calvinist- and highly religious-inspired approaches. It was not as harsh. It emphasized that the model of behavior presented by parents to children played an important role in children's future character development. The strength of a child's character was thought to come from exposure to a wide range of experiences while growing up.

Early Developmentalism. The third approach to child rearing that emerged during the 19th century is similar to some contemporary views. Stemming, in part, from the movement in Europe that advocated early childhood education via nursery schools and kindergartens, this approach acknowledged the developmental immaturity of children. If children did not behave appropriately, it was because they did not know any better. Parents were advised not to be overly concerned about breaking a child's will or to be fearful of indulging the child. Obedience was valued, but it could be coaxed from children in more humane ways, such as being firm, using persuasion, and giving rewards rather than physical punishment (Mann & Peabody, 1863). This view can be considered to be the first developmental approach to children because it emphasized

- the role of meeting children's developmental needs,
- the parents' role in shaping children's personalities,
- the effects of neglect and harsh punishment, and
- the effects of gentle care and nurture on development.
on positive reinforcement or reward became increasingly popular. The use of physical punishment to shape children’s behavior was discouraged.

Changes also took place in the expectations of fathers’ involvement with their children. Fathers were encouraged to take an active role in preparing for and participating in the birth of their children and in bonding with children during infancy and thereafter. Men’s greater involvement in family life was encouraged by the Women’s Movement during the late 1960s and early 1970s. These changes produced widespread and significant social changes. The emphasis on gender equality encouraged both women and men to participate in all aspects of life: family, work, and community involvement.

Significantly, this period was also characterized by the Civil Rights Movement that forged a new awareness toward granting equal rights to all citizens, regardless of racial or ethnic origin. This movement gained momentum in the 1960s with many legislative acts at the federal, state, and local levels, shifting social attitudes about race and ethnicity. Many federal programs were initiated, with the War on Poverty program playing a significant role. One of these programs remains in effect today as Project Head Start, a proven educational approach to prepare children for public school participation. It also enhances family life, physical well-being, and parental involvement. Numerous other programs were a part of the War on Poverty and impacted the lives of many underserved, inner-city families in the United States.

Since World War II, changing economic conditions and the rise of the Women’s movement have left families with new ideas about gender roles involving working mothers. The current norm is a two-income family with the vast majority of women working outside the home throughout their children’s childhood years.

Twentieth-Century and Current Trends

The 20th century witnessed child-rearing approaches that ranged from increasing permissiveness, encouraged by the writings of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and Benjamin Spock (1903–1998), to more restrictive and authoritarian approaches, advocated by John Watson (1928) and others. As scientific information increased and children were studied in a developmental context, numerous child-rearing experts offered detailed, frequently conflicting child-rearing advice (Bigner & Yang, 1996). The emphasis became more psychological. Behavior modification based...
more willing to support the young mother and her child, fewer children were made available for adoption. Teen fathers did not receive the attention and acceptance given to teen mothers. In recent years, this has changed, and public school systems allow teen parents to continue their education when they have a child.

The American public became increasingly aware of the insidious and pervasive presence of incest and sexual abuse of children by parents and family members. This was partly prompted by a number of well-known public figures and celebrities sharing information about their own victimization. The extent of family violence and addictive behaviors became better known, revealed by the dramatic increase in children in the foster care system. The number of incarcerated parents with addictive behaviors climbed dramatically. This has accounted for the increase in the number of grandparents who have custody of grandchildren and are actively raising these children.

Changes in laws and attitudes led to greater acceptance of divorce and, in turn, to the emergence of the single-parent family. Changes in American society following World War II contributed to the demise of the traditional nuclear family. Increases in the number of divorces were accompanied by a rise in the number of remarriages and blended families. By the end of the 20th century, diversity in family forms and structures became the norm rather than the exception. Today, a variety of family forms are considered functional, healthy, and effective. Poverty and homelessness continue to affect families, children, and society at large.

A number of other contemporary social issues impact parent–child relations directly or indirectly. What occurs in the larger society affects all individuals and families to some degree, and the reverse is true as well, as there is a bidirectional influence. Some of these issues are controversial and can be divisive in nature.

- Societal issues pertaining to public education, violence, addiction, and the drawn-out economic recession, accompanied by a housing and mortgage crisis, have had far-reaching effects on childhood and family life. Record numbers of resource-strapped families are raising children in poverty, and employment prospects for young adults are especially challenging.
- The continuing debates surrounding reproductive choices, adoption rights, general civil rights, legal and illegal immigration, and so forth continue.

![The Convention on the Rights of the Child, drafted by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 1959) and formally adopted in 1990, reflects a concern with the global well-being of children and is an intentional approach to create and maintain a comprehensive national agenda for children. The rights address the best interests of the child, the protection of rights, nondiscrimination, parental guidance, and survival and development to name just a few. There are 54 articles focusing on rights, as well as the implementation of measures.](#)

**FIGURE 1–2.** Rights of the child.


- There was a significant turning point in American culture after September 11, 2001 (9/11). As a nation, we have been involved in wars on terrorism. Military families and especially the children in these families have been deeply affected by deployment and war-related issues.
- The increasing presence of the World Wide Web via personal computers and handheld electronic devices, as well as the influence of the social media, have caused a ripple effect in changing communication patterns, education, and endless other areas of family life in a paradigm shift unlike anything previously experienced in history. Information overload and less real-life face time with significant others are new phenomena linked to the digital age.

---

**Parenting Reflection 1–3**

Should parents raise their children using identical methods, styles, and approaches? What effects would such uniformity in child rearing have on adult outcomes?

---

**Focus Point.** The concepts of parenthood and childhood have undergone many changes over the last 2,000+ years. Contemporary ideas on parenting roles reflect changes in cultural values.
Cultural Influences

Research over the past decades assumed that cultural variations in child-rearing patterns present in the personality and behavioral differences in children. In theory, differences in social class cause corresponding differences in child rearing. The patterns found in the social class groupings are thought to be perpetuated from one generation to the next, although individual parents interpret them in different ways.

Numerous studies reported considerable variations among socioeconomic groups in the ways that children are reared and in the values that are promoted (Coontz, 2006). For example, middle-class families, in contrast to lower class families, were believed to use psychologically harsher methods to control children's behavior. Middle-class families tend to teach children to delay need gratification, while lower class families tend to promote immediate need gratification. Lower class families appear to place greater emphasis on conforming to parental values, unlike middle-class families.

Generally differences between families of different socioeconomic backgrounds have diminished. There appear to be more similarities than differences in child rearing. This has been attributed partly to the presence of the mass media, which portrays middle-class values, and the fact that more families can achieve a middle-class lifestyle through education and better paying jobs.

Children's learning styles and the ability to process information differ dramatically between disadvantaged and middle-class families (Coontz, 2006). This suggests that the potential for children's mental growth may be strongly influenced by the mothers' differences in language use and teaching styles. The middle-class values placed on education and academic achievement may result in patterns of interaction that promote children's problem-solving skills.
A parent's behavioral style is partly guided by the value system of their social class. Each group maintains essentially the same common objective in child rearing, that is, to support children's growth and development. The style of each group differs considerably. Middle-class parents tend to value social achievement, encourage children to acquire knowledge, and expect independence early in their children's lives. These differences in values translate to differences in child-rearing patterns and what the children are taught.

**Synchroney of Parental Style and Child Development**

Parenting should be congruent, or synchronized, with the child's developmental level. For example, the parenting style during infancy focuses on nurture and providing tremendous amounts of physical care to meet the infant's needs. When families have children of a broad age range, parenting styles must be mixed, while still congruent with each child's developmental level. Parents must attend to the developmental needs of their children while attempting to meet their own developmental demands. For example, interactions with children may be tempered by the pressures on working parents who juggle family and work roles.

**Primary Parenting Functions**

Parental behavior and ways of interacting with children are usually purposeful attempts to meet their children's needs (Marsiglio, Hutchinson, & Cohan, 2000). These, in turn, relate strongly to the goals that adults wish to accomplish with regard to the socialization of their children. Two broad categories anchor parenting behavior to prepare children for their future, namely **structure** and **nurture** (Clarke & Dawson, 1998).

**Structure** describes those aspects of parenting behavior that aid regulation and lay the foundation for personality formation and expression. Structure teaches children personal boundaries, the limits to which they may go so that they do not infringe on others' needs and rights. Structure provides the experiences that promote a healthy sense of self-worth and a sense of safety and security so that children learn to trust in the appropriate contexts. Structure also helps children develop healthy habits in thought and behavior; learn values and ethics; and acquire valued character traits such as honesty, integrity, and personal honor. Additionally, they develop personal responsibility for their actions. Structure provides a child with a healthy, strong sense of self-esteem that permits growth toward meeting personal potential and becoming a well-differentiated individual who is valued for distinct qualities and traits.

**Nurture** relates to those parenting behaviors intended to meet a child's need for unconditional love. This is necessary for healthy growth and well-being. By experiencing that he or she is lovable, a child learns to love others. The assertive care and support that are given in unconditional ways form the basis of nurture and support appropriate attachment.

Additionally, parents and caretakers should strive to provide responsive care, which includes assertive and supportive components.

**Responsive care** involves reacting to the child in an appropriate manner. It requires noticing, understanding, and answering to the behavioral cues and verbal requests of the child. It is expressed when adults respond to children's needs in loving, predictable, and trustworthy ways. It becomes part of the bidirectional communication between caretaker and child, and supports the formation of basic trust and bonding, because the child is a part of an interacting unit in which the child is acknowledged and cared for appropriately. It resembles a dialogue with bidirectional exchanges.

Two facets of responsive caregiving are **assertive** and **supportive** care. In assertive care, the caregiver initiates and extends the necessary and appropriate care to the infant or child. For instance, for new parents or caretakers, a very young infant's needs may be difficult to read, yet they initiate the appropriate assertive care, without waiting for the child to express its own needs. Supportive care is expressed when adults offer care to children but allow them the freedom to accept or reject the offer because it is offered unconditionally.

**Family-of-Origin Influences**

Because humans become parents largely without the assistance of instinct to guide behavior, we rely on other means to help us learn how to care for a dependent child. One of the major influences comes from observing our own parents and close caregivers. We unwittingly use them as models for how to act as a parent (Marsiglio, Hutchinson, & Cohan, 2000). The reactions, perceptions, and feelings that we have about how
we were raised influence how we approach our own children. Generally, people who are satisfied with how they were raised and how they feel about themselves as adults will probably duplicate the parenting methods and attitudes of their own parents (Clarke & Dawson, 1998). Conversely, people who are dissatisfied with their parents’ methods may try to do the opposite of what they experienced in their family of origin. Another response is feeling that one’s parents did not provide enough love or physical affection, and this may lead one to overcompensate with one’s own children.

The experiences we have in our childhood provide a blueprint for a number of interactional patterns in adulthood (Marsiglio et al., 2000). There are several sources for this blueprint:

- The goals our parents had for our growth and development
- The model of parenthood we observed from our parents’ behavior
- The influence of parenting models that were handed down from one generation to the next

The parenting blueprint we assimilate may not be helpful when the time comes to assume the role ourselves. It may be outmoded, inappropriate, and unrealistic because circumstances in our family of origin may not resemble those in our current family.

Not every family system is healthy or functions in a well-adjusted manner. For example, one or both adults can be affected by addiction and related disorders, by mental or emotional disturbances, or by living conditions that hamper the ability to parent. Most attempt to hide the emotional pain that results from their inability to function healthily. When this occurs, the adults often adopt certain parenting behaviors (possibly learned from their own parental models) and assign roles to the children that mirror those in their family of origin, even if these roles are dysfunctional. This illustrates the concept of wholeness and interrelatedness in family systems theory: What affects one person in a family system affects everyone to some degree. Patterns for coping with the stress of an unhealthy family of origin tend to carry over into future generations.

Based on observations of numerous adults acting as parents, several models of parenting behavior have been developed that illustrate how an unhealthy family of origin influences a person’s own patterns of parenting (Framo, Weber, & Levine, 2003). There is never a pure assimilation of one particular model into a person’s potential parenting behavior; instead, a composite of behaviors is taken from the various models.

Influence of Children on Parents

Our culture traditionally ascribes the role of learner to children. Children and adolescents are thought to need numerous learning experiences to prepare them for adulthood. They are the objects of adults’ intensive socialization efforts. The relationship between parents and children focuses on the configuration of the adult as teacher and the child as learner. From this viewpoint, there is support for maintaining the unidirectional model of socialization.

Our culture also constructs the concept of children as people who are in need of adults’ protection. Children obviously need assistance in learning the many skills considered necessary to ultimately function effectively as adults. Children are dependent on parents for a longer time than they were earlier in history. The relationship between parent and child has become one of the last human interactional relationships in which the use of social power by an adult is largely unquestioned. Because of the inherent teacher–student quality of this relationship, the power of adults is accentuated in interactions with children. In addition, the greater physical size and strength of adults also contributes to the greater use of their power over children. According to many psychologists and sociologists, this has caused the child to become somewhat of a victim.

Power, or rather the way in which it is used, may be the culprit. Some adults use power to control and manipulate, rather than facilitate, children’s growth and development. This causes difficulty in the relationship, especially as children grow older (de Mol & Buysse, 2008).

With the advent of family systems theory, which describes interactions within family relationships as having a reciprocal effect upon participants, researchers began acknowledging the impact that children have on their parents’ behavior and the effects that they have in a number of other areas, including (de Mol & Buysse, 2008):

- Parental health
- Adults’ activities
- Parental employment status
- Use and availability of family financial resources
- Parents’ intimate relationship
- Parents’ interactions and community interactions
Disciplinary Approach

The approach parents take in teaching their children the values and beliefs their family hold will shape parenting styles in a variety of ways. The goals that parents hold for their children’s growth and development usually arise out of altruism. What adults desire for children and how most people shape their parenting activities and behavior relate to what they believe children need to become effective adults. Ordinarily, most parents want their child to

- have a happy and fulfilling life;
- become a person who functions independently, can be employed, and have constructive relationships;
- acquire the skills and competencies that permit effective functioning as an adult in society; and
- acquire behaviors and attitudes that allow participation as a good citizen within a democratic society (Bornstein & Toole, 2010).

Parents think about the behaviors and social competencies that they feel are important for children to acquire to become effectively functioning adults. Adults believe that children need these skills, and they shape them as part of children’s behavioral repertoire. **Social competence** usually refers to a group of attributes that are believed to be essential in assisting a person to make full use of personal resources to cope productively with the circumstances of life. The way that parents provide structure for children is shaped to facilitate the acquisition of these essential social skills.

The parental goals in child rearing and discipline are guided by personal and societal influences. Adults’ perceptions of what children need are based on complex personal opinions that reflect the realities of life and family experiences. Parents’ opinions about what children need are based on, among other things, their own past experiences, the values from their families of origin, and the philosophies of parenting they have developed as adults. These perceptions can be tempered by specific events, such as a child’s physical or mental disability or when divorce changes the structure of the family.

Parenting should be adapted to the child’s developmental stage. As the offspring establish goals, most parents realize that they must change how they interact with their children to facilitate new developmental goals. Parents can seek out information and assistance in learning how to adapt and change their behavior in response to developmental changes in their children (Bigner & Yang, 1996). This represents one of the major challenges of effective parenting behavior.

Family Ecological Factors

The influence of various environmental systems on the functioning of the parent–child microenvironment can be observed in a variety of ways, but they can be difficult to accurately anticipate or measure. Our behavior is influenced by a number of environmental factors. Our past experience with children is one factor. Our behavior can be influenced by internal factors, such as blood sugar levels, hormone balances, sleep deprivation, and emotional states. Sociocultural factors that affect our behavior include value systems and beliefs about appropriate role behavior. Other factors are more physical, for example, where we live (e.g., in an apartment or in a single-family residence, in the city or in a rural area). Even the time of day can be an important consideration. All these factors from the past and present lead to variability in parents’ behavior and affect the way interactions take place.

Family ecological factors, such as the level of family income (poverty level vs. middle class), ethnic identity, or type of family structure, influence parenting styles. See Figure 1–4 to see how the family structural dynamic has changed over time. They also affect a family’s ability to provide equipment and services, such as medical or dental care, clothing, and food, which, in turn, influence the quality and nature of the interactions. In this way, parents’ goals for their child-rearing efforts may be tempered by a variety of family ecological factors.

Attitudes and Parenting Styles

Adult attitudes about children and child rearing are important. They are the result of socialization and past experiences and form the implicit rules, or “shoulds,” that guide parental behavior. The attitudes about how one should act as a parent may be seen more clearly in disciplinary styles.
The range of attitudes about how to parent children appropriately and effectively can be viewed as a compilation of the attributes of parental control (what parents feel they should do to control children’s behavior and development) and emotional warmth. They range from authoritarian (strict), through authoritative (balanced), to permissive (lenient; Baumrind, 1966). For example, an authoritarian attitude is distinctly high in parental control but also low in emotional warmth toward children. Typically, attitudes guide actual parenting behavior and can be expected to shift with the changing developmental stages of children. These attitudes have a significant influence on parenting styles, especially when children reach preschool age.

**Parenting Reflection 1–4**

Consider how your own disciplinary style could be influenced by various interacting factors. Would you or wouldn’t you adopt the disciplinary style that you experienced in your own youth? Justify your choice.

---

**Focus Point.** Eight major categories contribute to the nature and context of an adult’s potential behavior as a parent and influence the configuration of the adopted parenting style:

1. **Cultural influences:** social class, background, and associated values and beliefs
2. **Developmental time:** synchrony of parental style and a child’s developmental stage
3. **Structure and nurture:** primary parenting objectives in achieving child-rearing goals
4. **Family-of-origin influences:** the model of parental behavior as experienced in family of origin
5. **Child influences:** the many ways children influence their parents’ behaviors
6. **Disciplinary approach:** the approach adopted by parents in guiding their children toward goals
7. **Family ecological factors:** ethnic identity, level of family income, and type of family structure
8. **Attitudes and parenting styles:** as reflected in authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive approaches
Points to Consider

- Individuals in our society need training and education to be effective parents, just as for other roles in adulthood. Until recently, little preparation was provided to future parents.
- In contemporary society, there are four characteristics of the parenthood role:
  - Parenthood is a **social construct**. The parental role is a social institution based on complex values, beliefs, norms, and behaviors.
  - The family systems theory describes parenthood as a **subsystem** of the larger social system of the family and within an ecological context.
  - Both parent and child actively participate in a **bidirectional** interaction with mutual influence.
  - Parenting is a **developmental** role and a **life span** pursuit: both parent and child undergo developmental changes with time and life span progressions.
- Our current ideas about the nature of parent–child relations have evolved over time. What is considered appropriate today differs somewhat from what we practiced in the past.
- A number of factors contribute toward how behavior affects the parenthood role. Among them are our beliefs, attitudes, and values; the developmental stage of both the child and the parent; nurture and structure; family-of-origin influences, and the bidirectionality of the relationship.

USEFUL WEBSITES

**Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**
www.acf.hhs.gov

**American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry**
www.aacap.org

**American Academy of Pediatrics**
www.aap.org

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**
www.cdc.gov

**National Institute of Child Health and Human Development**
www.nichd.nih.gov

**National Institutes of Health**
www.nih.gov
CHAPTER 2
Cultural Perspectives

Learning Outcomes

After completing this chapter, readers should be able to

1. Describe the roles of socialization, cultural identity, traditions, and assimilation in effective parent–child relations.
2. Describe the principal features, forms, and structures found in contemporary American families.
3. Explain how parents and coparents can contribute in promoting multicultural competence.
4. Describe the unique characteristics and challenges of parent–child relations in ethnically diverse families in the United States.

To understand how parenthood roles function within family systems, it is essential to describe the factors that may be collectively grouped as family ecological influences. Some of these factors serve as part of the social context in which parent–child relations take place. Family ecology refers to the various social, psychological, and physical environmental systems in which parenting behaviors are contextualized. For example, the level of a family’s income and resources, as well as the ethnic identity of a family, can influence parenting styles and behavior. For all practical purposes, these systems comprise cultural content as well. Culture is relative to each particular group and is characterized by some flexibility because it can change over time. Culture cannot be contained within tight boundaries; instead, it permeates into many areas of life and has fuzzy edges. There is a bidirectional influence as individuals can influence a culture and culture, in turn, can influence its group members. The cultural exchange is modified by the context within which cultural events are embedded.
We examine how culture is influential in parent–child relations and how a range of family systems are defined, structured, and characterized in contemporary American society. We explore the ecological factors of ethnicity and background from an ethnographic perspective because these influence parent–child relations.

THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN PARENT–CHILD RELATIONS

Culture

One of the most significant contexts for parent–child relations is the cultural dimension. This social construct defines what families value and believe to be important, and guides the behavior of all members subscribing to a particular cultural group. Culture is a virtual shorthand between persons sharing the same cultural context; it allows them to assume content and meaning without further clarification because as members of the same cultural perspective they have been enculturated in a similar manner. Culture can be likened to a computer operating system; it forms a basic layer on top of which other programs can run. Similarly, in a group of people who share cultural values, there are rituals, values, beliefs, and ways of doing things that are shared unquestioningly. This adds to the harmony within a group because there is a cohesiveness that results from these shared values, customs, and belief systems. Being part of a cultural group, members absorb the values seemingly by osmosis. In reality, culture is learned behavior that is transmitted initially in the parent–child relationship, and later by all those who assume coparenting, supportive, and other social roles in a child’s life.

Culture shapes the rules or social norms that outline appropriate behavior in a variety of contexts, such as the roles that persons fulfill and the notions of acceptable and unacceptable actions. Importantly, it links them to individuals, agencies, and institutions that transmit these values and beliefs, and may impart a sense of belonging. For example, for some, these values are derived from the larger ethnic group with which they identify (Matsumoto & Juang, 2008); for others, these values come from religious beliefs and philosophies. Usually, all of the contributing agents are so intertwined that there is little point in teasing out which system contributed what in terms of culture. Matsumoto and Juang (2008, p. 7) reference Malpass (1993) when they state that “Culture, in its truest and broadest sense, cannot simply be swallowed in a single gulp.” This reflects the complexity of this multifaceted topic.

Regardless of the origin of the values, parents are charged with transmitting this cultural heritage to their children. It also plays into the scenario that children’s brains are equipped with what neuroscientists call mirror neurons, which support children in mimicking and copying behavior, especially language, in a virtually involuntary manner (Ferrari & Coudé, 2011; Pätzold, 2010). This ability is also believed to play a supportive role in the acquisition of culture (Azar, 2005; Dobbs, 2006).

Cognitively, children learn values, attitudes, and beliefs by parental example. Negative prejudices can also be learned, which underlines the necessity of parent–child relations that focus on values and behaviors that will support and enhance multicultural competence in the child’s later life. According to Ryder and Dere (2010), cultural competence should be regarded as a general orientation. It is also aspirational and can be fostered and strengthened with ”knowledge about and comfort with the implications of cultural difference” (Ryder & Dere, 2010, pp. 11–12). These same authors use the concept cultural humility to describe the quality required in a professional clinical relationship.

An informal description of culture compares its effects to a global positioning device, which directs, and gently redirects, the user back to a preset destination. In cultural terms, it would mean that ongoing minor behavioral adjustments are made to meet cultural expectations. Members of a cultural group share and can reference the symbols and behaviors pertaining to that group. It becomes especially apparent in rituals for life transitions, for instance, life-span rites of passage surrounding birth, marriage, and death.

The formal definitions of culture may seem simple, but encapsulate complexity. Matsumoto and Juang (2008, p. 27) define culture as “[a] unique meaning and information system, shared by a group and transmitted across generations that allows the group to meet basic needs of survival, pursue happiness and well-being, and derive meaning from life.” Shiraev and Levy (2010, p. 3) describe it in the following manner: “Culture is a set of attitudes, behaviors, and symbols shared by a large group of people and usually communicated from one generation to the next.”

According to Nanda and Warms (2007, p. 86), who describe culture from an anthropological perspective,
the following commonalities recur in definitions: It is learned behavior, it uses a symbolic “shorthand” or sets of symbols, it is integrated in a logical manner, the material is shared by members who subscribe to a particular culture, and culture adapts and changes over time.

Even though cultural constructs have a degree of permanence, there is also fluidity, allowing for change. The change can be rapid, as in some small subcultures, or relatively slow, as in intergenerational changes. Culture has blurry or indistinct boundaries in that there is no clear demarcation where the influences of culture begin or end. We live in more interconnected ways through mass media, global communication, travel, immigration, and other effects of globalization, and therefore cultures become less stable because there are so many layers of bidirectional influence.

Applied here, culture serves as the lens through which parenting behavior may be observed regarding the proper ways to raise children to maturity in accordance with cultural values and beliefs (Derbort, 2006). More specifically, each culture is likely to have its own particular ways of defining proper child rearing. From this vantage point, culture becomes a worldview possessed and practiced in unique ways by each culture or subculture. Large societies, such as the United States, often consist of a variety of subcultures that are differentiated from the larger society according to distinct sets of behaviors, values, and beliefs. These subcultures may be based on features held in common, such as ethnicity, nationality of origin, sexual orientation, age, gender, political affiliation, religious belief, or geographic location. It is possible that individuals may ascribe to more than one subculture based on these factors. Blending or fusing cultures may allow for both a heritage culture and a mainstream culture (Ryder, Alden, & Paulhus, 2000, p. 49).

In the United States, where the population has been largely derived from immigrants of many different groups over the years, multiculturalism encourages and allows various subcultures to retain their basic features while also coexisting with others as one nation. Immigrants can maintain a heritage culture while simultaneously assimilating to the host culture; leading to bi- and multicultural identities (Ryder et al., 2000). The process of acquiring a second culture, layered on top of the first or integrated with the first, is called acculturation (Shiraev & Levy, 2010).

Individualism and collectivism are two cultural conceptions of value systems (Greenfield et al., 2006). The various cultures around the world are characterized by the manner in which these two value systems are blended or balanced. Essentially, individualism in a culture values the person and what can be accomplished on one’s own. Individual identity and self-expression are valued as well. Collectivism as a cultural trait emphasizes
the interdependence of the individual with the larger community. Collectivism encourages people to fit in and adapt to the characteristics of the larger community. Collectivism is frequently associated with cultural groups in Asia, whereas mainstream North America is generally regarded as individualistic.

These two cultural conceptions have direct application in parent–child relations in that they influence how parents translate cultural values into interactions with their children. For example, parents in cultures characterized as individualistic tend to

- Encourage autonomy or independence in children.
- Promote children’s self-reliance.
- Foster children’s personal achievements.
- Support children’s competitiveness.
- Allow children to question and explore.
- Allow children to participate in decision making.

In contrast, parents in cultures characterized as collectivist tend to

- Have closer emotional ties to children for longer periods in infancy and childhood.
- Emphasize the extended family network in teaching children what is valued.
- Stress obedience to all authority, especially to parents and older family members.
- Emphasize children learning and respecting social norms governing appropriate behavior.
- Emphasize the sharing of property and belongings.
- Shape children’s behavior to demonstrate responsibility and obligation to others (Greenfield & Suzuki, 2001; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Greenfield, 2000).

There are some implications concerning this interplay between collectivism and individualism. Parents who emigrate from typically collectivistic cultures may find it difficult to assimilate into individualistic cultures. The family cultural values may be at odds with the mainstream cultural values of the host country. First-generation immigrants may bear the brunt of these challenges, while second-generation immigrants (the offspring of the immigrants) may thrive as cultural “translators,” understanding both the culture of the country of origin and the culture of the adopted home country (Ryder et al., 2000).

In the teaching–learning environments of educational systems, individualistic approaches emphasize dialogue, independent exploration of ideas, creativity, questioning, and active participation in the teaching–learning process (Gerhardt & Gerhardt, 2009). Traditional collectivistic environments tend to put the teacher or professor into an authoritarian position as the expert, whose opinions may be accepted unquestioningly, while placing the student into a more passive learning role. In an individualistic teaching–learning environment, original thought and action may be prized. For parents (and for teachers) in general, it is a constructive challenge to impart values promoting some cultural cohesiveness while also allowing individualistic, yet pro-social, expression.

The aspects of the cultural heritage to be maintained, versus the aspects to be silenced by the assimilation process, may contribute to adaptation to the host culture. The willingness of migrants and immigrants to find the level of assimilation best suited to integrate successfully may contribute to the family’s well-being (Dere, Ryder, & Kirmayer, 2010). Typically, the assimilation and integration process occurs and strengthens from one generation to the next. Each subsequent generation becomes more assimilated into the host culture. The language of the country of origin is usually lost by the third or fourth generation post initial immigration. The United States is an example of such blending of many immigrant voices into one choir.

Behavioral scientists who study cultural influences warn us about the problems of ethnocentrism as we study our culture in the United States in comparison with that of others. This occurs when we use the understandings of our culture to compare, evaluate, and judge those of others. Implicit is the conclusion that our culture is superior and preferable to that of others (Matsumoto & Juang, 2012; Rogoff, 2003). For example, the use of physical punishment by parents with children has different meanings and different values from culture to culture and even from one subculture to the next. In another example, although American parents typically value children becoming autonomous at an early age, this practice is viewed as unusual in some cultures.

In studying parents and children, as well as families, we should strive to recognize that there are patterns that are likely to be shared across subcultures, as well as patterns that are unique to each, recognizing the functioning of cultural universalism versus cultural relativism in influencing our perceptions. In cultural relativism, the cultural context within which any cultural expression occurs is emphasized, increasing the understanding and tolerance of cultural expressions that may occur beyond the mainstream (Shiraev & Levy, 2010). Additionally, the concepts emic (culturally specific) and etic (culturally universal) are
of importance. Emic (pronounced to rhyme with “scenic”) refers to that which identifies us, or makes us culturally unique. Etic (pronounced to rhyme with “poetic”), on the other hand, draws together those cultural components that we share universally (Shiraev & Levy, 2010).

Socialization

The family is a universal social institution. This group has the responsibility of producing children and socializing them to become well-functioning members of the larger society in which their family is embedded. Although families have always been the basic building blocks of a society, they have also changed significantly over the past century in terms of composition, size, and functioning, as well as the characteristics that give them meaning.

Years of social evolution have produced changes in families themselves, as well as in the umbrella societies under which the families are sheltered. Family functions have altered over time as societies have changed. Of all the functions that families originally had in society, the socialization of children to prepare them for their participation in society is perhaps the principal task to which parents in contemporary families continue to subscribe.

While there are various definitions of what socialization comprises, we will use this term to mean “the set of interpersonal processes through which cultural meaning is passed on and changed” (Peterson, Steinmetz, & Wilson, 2005, p. 10). In a more practical vein, socialization is what parents do to teach children to conform to social rules, acquire personal values, and develop attitudes and behaviors that are typical or representative of their culture at large. Socialization occurs through the many ways that culture is transmitted to children by parents, the media, institutions, and agencies.

This process begins in earnest when children are toddlers and preschoolers, when parents and other caregivers take an active role in teaching and socializing children. The lessons are not always given in formal, verbal instruction; many are learned by children when they observe the behaviors of their parents and caregivers. Young children are excellent imitators as young brains are programmed to copy. This is a powerful way of socializing children, as well as transmitting culture, even at an early age (Azar, 2005).

Depending on the nature of a particular family system, certain standards may be promoted more than others. Despite the diversity of families today, almost all teach certain kinds of behaviors and values to children. Embedded in the guidance about acceptable behaviors are lessons about undesirable behavior as well. All of this is based on the assumption that there are shared meanings for acceptable/desirable versus unacceptable/undesirable behaviors that are taught by all parents and other agents in society that influence individuals and families. Families can be socialization agents and function on a rigid to flexible or even permissive continuum, as reflected by their parenting styles. This depiction of socialization as a unidirectional model fails to accurately describe what truly happens in families when parents are raising children for adulthood. In reality, the process of socialization is bidirectional in nature because children play a role in this process. Parents change and shape the lessons of socialization based on the developmental stage and personal abilities of the child. This is also referred to as developmental parenting, meaning that it is appropriate for a particular child, acknowledging their individual and unique abilities while also considering their developmental age.

Focus Point. Parent–child relations are influenced by and take place within a cultural context. Socialization is the way that parents and other societal entities teach culture to children. Socialization is bidirectional in that children participate with their parents in this process.

Parenting Reflection 2–1

Try to predict how marriage, parenthood, and parent–child relations will be conceptualized in the year 2100 or even 2200. How would you rate contemporary families in their abilities to socialize children effectively for their future?

THE FEATURES OF CONTEMPORARY FAMILIES

Characteristics

Societal changes are reflected in families. Demographic trends indicate an increased complexity in family life and boundaries between groups that are more fluid
(Cherlin, 2010). Society and the families within it have a reciprocal relationship. What affects society affects families, and vice versa. The trends have revealed an increasing separation between what is regarded as a family and what can be described as a household. There has been an increase in childbearing among single women. Other changes are reflected in cohabiting relationships, partnership formation and dissolution, and changing marriage and divorce trends (Cherlin, 2010). Diversity is reflected by a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Immigrant families may have extended families in other countries.

Demographic data are useful for understanding contemporary American families. The conditions under which they operate influence parent–child relations. This information, much of it collected by the U.S. Census Bureau, is helpful in evaluating changes in family and population characteristics and for making predictions about the forms that American families will take. Contemporary American families exhibit trends and features that provide another ecological dimension that shapes independence and other family functions and relationships. Families also reflect the influences of culture and socialization in parent–child relations.

Marriage. Generally, Americans continue to value marriage as a social institution, but a number of changes are occurring. Compared with the start of the 20th century, when the median marriage age was 25.9 years for men and 21.9 years for women, the age of first marriage has increased to 27.5 for men and 25.6 for women a century later (Carl, 2012, p. 83). Couples are marrying later and are marrying less frequently as educational responsibilities and cohabitation increase. Although the overall figures vary by geographic region, ethnicity, and race, the pattern indicates that this trend is occurring across ethnic boundaries (Carl, 2012). Important changes in marital events (marriage, divorce, and widowhood) affect family formation and the assumption of parenting roles.

The higher median ages at first marriage appear to be related to economic and social issues. The delay in assuming adult roles has to do with complex educational and career demands, obstacles in establishing an occupational path, greater gender equality, and greater economic hardship. Later marriage has contributed to delayed childbearing, smaller families, and greater marital stability (Fields, 2003; Hobbs & Stoops, 2002). It has also created new and novel approaches that affect family life: stay-at-home dads, dual-income couples, job sharing, part-time and temporary employment, semi-permanent coparenting arrangements, and moving back to the parental home (boomerang kids). These variations are frequently born out of socioeconomic challenges. Another indication of the delay in first marriage is the increasingly larger number of young, unmarried adults in the population. A sizable number of Americans are deciding whether to become parents independent of their choice about marriage.

Births. The number of children born in the United States has been relatively stable since about 1975, following a significant decline in births from 1958 (Martin et al., 2006). The number of births increased dramatically among unmarried women within recent years, while those among adolescents have declined significantly. In recent years, Asian and Hispanic women have tended to have higher fertility rates (the number of births that a typical woman will have over her lifetime) than women in other ethnic groups. The overall population numbers continue to grow, and according to the 2010 U.S. Census, the U.S. population is about 308 million, representing an almost 10 percent increase over the census from a decade earlier. Some of this growth can be ascribed to immigration (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010f).

Only 10 percent of all American families had four children or more in 2002, a decline from 36 percent of all families in 1976 (Downs, 2003). Most commonly, parents have two children per family unit (Carl, 2012). Small family size produces other ripple effects observed in society, such as the overall age structure of the population, school enrollment, and social programming needs.

Divorce. Divorce data are reported in many forms by different government agencies. This presents complicated and often contradictory information, made more difficult as the figures vary by ethnicity.

The rate of divorce appears to have stabilized within the last 20 or more years, although at a level that is the highest in our nation’s history (Munson & Sutton, 2006). According to Carl (2012), the picture is not as bleak as commonly believed. He states, “Notably, and contrary to common belief, fewer Americans than one might assume had ever been divorced in the year 2000. While the percentage of couples divorced tends to increase based on the length of that marriage, on average, only 20 percent of people—not the 50 percent
as often cited—has ever been divorced” (Carl, 2012, p. 84). He emphasizes that these figures are complex as they vary by age, cohort group, and ethnicity. For example, in the 50–59 age group, the divorce rate is very high, which approximates the oft-quoted one-in-two message of gloom concerning the state of American marriages. For older adults (age 70+), the figure is lower, namely around 18 percent, as it was probably was influenced by harsher social disapproval of divorce and the lower earnings potential of women who tried to make it on their own. Age at first marriage and racial group membership are related to the probability of divorce. Couples facing multiple stressors may be at greater risk for divorce (Karney, 2011; McHale & Lindahl, 2011). Higher divorce rates also tend to occur in fragile families (families where several simultaneous stressors are present). Stressors such as poverty, unemployment, or a child with a disability can strain the resources of a family system to the breaking point. The high incidence of divorce, as well as single parenthood, has given rise to the prevalent family form in the United States, namely the single-parent family.

As divorce has become more common, it has lost much of its social stigma. For many couples, it is difficult to maintain a long-term commitment to marriage in these more liberal times. The reasons include:

- Changes in the status and roles of women in society.
- Changes in laws that make obtaining a divorce less complicated and less stigmatizing.
- The strong desire to achieve personal happiness (Cherlin, 2004, Cherlin, 2005).

Parenting Reflection 2–2

You are the mother of a young woman contemplating marriage. She has a concern that she wishes to discuss with you: Why do people continue to get married given the current likelihood of divorce? What would you say to her in defense of marriage?

Remarriage. Remarriage is more likely to occur among those who leave a first marriage via divorce (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010a), although since the mid-1960s there has been a general decline in the rate at which remarriages occur. The median length of a first marriage in the United States has remained at about 7 years since 1980. The median interval between divorce and remarriage is about 3 years. Fifty-four percent of divorced women tend to remarry within 5 years, 75 percent within 10 years (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). Racial group identity also influences remarriage rates; Caucasians are more likely to remarry than are African Americans. These relationships are considered to be at high risk of divorce, often within 6 years.

For many individuals, remarriage creates blended families, increasing the likelihood of coparenting and stepparenting. Many remarried adults can expect to parent children other than their own offspring. The 2000 U.S. Census reported that about 5 percent of all children were living in stepfamilies (Kreider, 2003). In an analysis of 2010 U.S. Census data, the reciprocal influence between marriage and parenthood is clear. Parenthood has an effect on marital status. Similarly, marriage affects parenthood. This seems to be an intuitive statement, yet closer analysis of the data shows that those persons who divorced before starting a family and did not remarry, are more likely not to have children (Carl, 2012).

Family Income and Working Mothers. Americans are reeling under the pressures of the global financial crisis. Although many adults would prefer to be working, the high unemployment rates have made this difficult. Employment of both adults in contemporary families has become the norm, if possible, but stay-at-home dads (often because they cannot find employment) and unemployment have changed the characteristics of the working population. Family income may have a more influential effect on the quality of family life and on parent–child relations than other factors that have been previously discussed. When both adults are employed, challenges in family life generally include concerns about housework, child care and child rearing, extracurricular activities during personal and leisure time, health care, and the amount of attention devoted to the marital relationship.

The median income of families in the United States provides an idea about how finances influence quality of life. The median income of all family types in the United States has risen considerably since the mid-1940s (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Lee, 2006) but is dropping under current global financial pressures. The current generation will have a bleaker financial future than their parents before them. These differences in
family income have a significant influence on the quality of life experienced in these families, which, in turn, plays a central role in parenting and parent-child relations. The number of working mothers rose to an unprecedented high (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010a) as fathers were losing their jobs during the economic recession.

The number of families headed by women among minorities is a major factor in the differences in family income among racial groups. Two trends among those affected by poverty continued to be observed in recent years: (1) the feminization of poverty, as noted by the increasing number of women and children who are poor; and (2) an increase in the number of working poor, or those who may work one or more jobs earning low wages with few or no benefits. In addition to these factors, inflation has continued to erode the buying power of the American dollar, affecting those earning minimum wages the greatest.

Poverty and Homelessness. Family well-being is threatened when homelessness occurs and a family exists at the poverty level or below. Poverty varies considerably in the United States relative to family structure, racial group, and ethnicity. Americans who make up the poorest of the poor increased and, in 2009, had reached a record high of 6.3 percent of the population. These extremely poor families have to scrape by on less than half of what is officially designated by the poverty guidelines, namely $22,350 for a family of four living in any of the 48 contiguous states in 2011 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Note that these are not the same figures as the poverty thresholds referred to by the U.S. Census Bureau because poverty thresholds and poverty guidelines are slightly different versions of the federal poverty measure. The poverty guidelines are used in determining financial eligibility for certain federal programs (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Almost 18 million children, or 18 percent of all American children, live in families affected by poverty. The amount that a family of four would require to stay above the poverty threshold varies, as it is tempered by the cost of living in different regions, employment opportunities, the ages of the children, the effects of the recession, and other economic factors. The U.S. Census Bureau uses a very complex formula to determine the poverty threshold.

The higher incidence of single-parent families headed by women among minorities is a major factor in the differences in family income among racial groups. Two trends among those affected by poverty continued to be observed in recent years: (1) the feminization of poverty, as noted by the increasing number of women and children who are poor; and (2) an increase in the number of working poor, or those who may work one or more jobs earning low wages with few or no benefits. In addition to these factors, inflation has continued to erode the buying power of the American dollar, affecting those earning minimum wages the greatest.

It is extremely difficult to estimate the number of homeless individuals currently in the United States. These are individuals who live on the streets or in public shelters. An increasingly large segment of the homeless population is women and families with children. In 2003, 42 percent of children affected by homelessness were less than 5 years of age (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2006). In rural areas, these segments of the population account for the largest numbers of those who are homeless. Other factors, such as substance abuse, mental illness, unemployment, disability, and an unstable family life, may also contribute to homelessness. Domestic violence experienced by women is a leading factor. About half of all women who were homeless were thought to be escaping from abusive relationships (American Civil Liberties Union, 2006a).

With homelessness, parenting is either terminated or inadequate because of the inability of the adult(s) to provide for themselves or for their children. The many causes of homelessness, as well as the complexity of providing solutions to end this status, represent a serious challenge to communities that are trying to reintegrate homeless children and families into the mainstream of American culture.

Many families deal with the economic pressures by moving in together. Half of young Americans ages 18 to 24 have lived with their parents, while 30 percent of those from ages 25 to 34 had moved back into the parental home (Carl, 2012).

Focus Point. The ways that parenthood is defined, child rearing is conducted, and parent–child relations are valued vary based on how each family system experiences different ecological factors. Contemporary family life in America has certain features:

- First-time marriages occur later for both men and women.
- A great number of marriages terminate in divorce, usually after 7 years.
- There is a high probability of remarriage following divorce, leading to children growing up in blended families.
- Families tend to be smaller, often with two children.
- Family incomes have increased significantly in the years since World War II, but economic stability has been threatened by global financial recession.
- The generation currently reaching adulthood faces a more unstable economy and gloomier employment prospects than their parents did.
- Poverty and homelessness affect an increasing percentage of families in the United States each year. This situation affects minority families to a greater extent.

DIVERSITY IN CONTEMPORARY FAMILY FORMS AND STRUCTURES

The family is an important source of stability in our rapidly changing and increasingly complex society. It can be a refuge while the storms and challenges of the greater system rage. The importance of pursuing personal happiness is a basic tenet of our American society, and this noble goal is referenced in the U.S. Constitution. We have become more conscious of the diversity in our society; there is endless variety based on factors such as age, gender, race, sexual orientation, special needs, and ethnic group identity, to name a few. With increased respect for diversity and the acquisition of multicultural competence, we know that each group has its own strengths and, as Americans, we can find many threads that connect us in one common fabric. As Nobel Laureate Maya Angelou has so poignantly expressed in her poem “Human Family” (1995), “We are more alike, my friends, than we are unalike.”

These social changes are reflected in family life. For example, a trend reported by the U.S. Census Bureau (2010a) is an increase in the number of nonfamily households and a decrease in the number of family households. In 1970, 70 percent of all American households were family households (at least two persons related by blood, marriage, or adoption), while today, these kinds of households are diminishing. Social conditions, such as the probability of divorce for married couples, have changed the face of the American family. Families have changed in size, structure, form, and function. Today, diversity in family form and structure is the norm. We cannot discuss every variant contained in our society and, therefore, within families because members can belong to many different groups simultaneously. To highlight every type of family where parents and children can claim membership would amount to cataloging differences, whereas we are trying to focus on unifying family trends. In this section, we will therefore
focus on the predominant family types or structures that include children.

**Two-Parent Families**

Traditionally, families are thought to be composed of two opposite-sex, married adults and their children. For generations, this family form has been considered the ideal, normative family form in which to produce and raise children to maturity.

With gender equality on the forefront, there has been a welcome move toward **dual parenting**, with the implication that both parents will contribute whatever the parenting situation demands, regardless of traditional gender role stereotypes. In **dual-income** families, the ideal would be that all tasks are shared, from income-producing work and household-related labor, to the nurturing and raising of the offspring (Hochschild & Machung, 2003). In practice, this is not necessarily true. Dual-income families may have blurred traditional gender role divisions. Dual parenting ideally implies that both parents will contribute equally, responding to what the specific situations may demand, rather than giving a response based on traditional gender roles, even though each parent may bring different strengths to the parent–child relationship. **Androgynous** parenting is sometimes used to describe roles that are either gender neutral or that are performed by the opposite-sex parent from the one who stereotypically assumes the role. An example would be strengthening the nurturing aspect of fathers, whereas in the previous century, mothers were the primary nurturers. The blurring of gender roles in the parenting context, specifically, can enhance a greater sense of gender equality in the children. Members of Generations X and Y are more likely to be **dual centric** or **family centric**, meaning that they **emphasize work and family equally**, actively planning to allocate sufficient time to family life. These are the cohorts who were born in the 1970s and 1980s (Galinsky, 2002).

Much of the information on parent–child relations is derived from research based on individuals living in two-parent families. As such, it continues to be the predominant family form in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010c). In the general population, this family form is declining. This decline is often attributed to changes in attitudes that have made adult **cohabitation**, or living together without benefit of marriage, and divorce less stigmatized and more acceptable throughout American society (Pinsof, 2002). In addition, the downward trend in two-parent families is contrasted with the upward trend in single-parent families in the United States.

Despite the decline in this form of family, most children in the United States experience growing up with two parents (Scommegna, 2002). Many adult couples choose to cohabitate rather than marry, while raising the children of either or both partners. The literature is not clear regarding the effects or outcomes of cohabiting opposite-sex adults who are parenting children (Acs & Nelson, 2002, Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2007). It is clear that

- the number of adults who cohabit rather than marry is increasing (Fields, 2003; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010c).
- the nature of the relationship of a cohabiting couple closely resembles that of a married couple (Brown, 2000), although it has been associated with increased risk of divorce and marital distress (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006).
- cohabitation does not necessarily lead to marriage (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004).
- about one in nine cohabiting couples is in a same-sex partnership (Carl, 2012).

See Figure 2–2.

**Single-Parent and Binuclear Families**

One of the more common types of families in the United States today is composed of one adult parent and one or more children under age 18. Whether headed by a man or a woman (most often a woman), this unit is called a single-parent family. A **binuclear** family refers to children who have **access to two families**, usually as a result of parental divorce. The number of single-parent families is increasing more rapidly than any other family form today as a result of divorce, as well as the many unmarried women who are choosing to have children (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2011b). In 2010, there were about 75 million minor children ages 0 to 17. The proportion of children under age 18 who were living with two parents decreased from 77 percent in 1980 to 66 percent in 2010, while another 3 percent lived with two biological or adoptive cohabiting parents. Older children were less likely to live with two parents. Of these children in single-parent households in 2010, 23 percent lived only
Part I Parent–Child Relations in Social Context

is a crisis event that forces many short- and long-range adjustments. The experience of being a single parent differs for women and men. Women generally expect to have financial difficulties, and there are significantly more children who live in poverty because they live in a single-parent family headed by a woman (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2011b). The implications for children growing up in single-parent families, especially those headed by mothers, can be serious. While most studies report that children generally fare well while living in a single-parent family, those who live in poverty are at greater risk for problems at school, teen parenthood, unemployment, and lower wages when entering the labor force.

Life is not easy for most single-parent families. Yet many persons choose divorce over an unhappy relationship, even though a multitude of difficult adjustments are inevitable. This type of family arrangement can be more efficient and harmonious than a household marked by tensions and strife between the adults, especially if abuse is part of the scenario.

A single-parent family is created through (1) divorce, desertion, or separation of the adults; (2) the death of one adult; or (3) having a child while unmarried. The most common means is through divorce. The vast majority of single-parent families are headed by women because U.S. courts typically award full physical custody of younger children to the mother, while also considering the best interests of the child.

Quality of life is a major issue for many single-parent families (Hildebrand, Phenice, Gray, & Hines, 2008). Any type of disruption in family life can produce a crisis, and divorce is one of the most stressful experiences of adulthood. It can also be traumatic for children. Although divorce has become commonplace, it

with their mother, 3 percent lived only with their father, and 4 percent lived with neither parent (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2011b). Single-parent families accounted for about 26 percent of all families with children in 2010. Single-parent families are more prevalent among African Americans as a group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007a, U.S. Census Bureau, 2007b).

A single-parent family is created through (1) divorce, desertion, or separation of the adults; (2) the death of one adult; or (3) having a child while unmarried. The most common means is through divorce. The vast majority of single-parent families are headed by women because U.S. courts typically award full physical custody of younger children to the mother, while also considering the best interests of the child.

Quality of life is a major issue for many single-parent families (Hildebrand, Phenice, Gray, & Hines, 2008). Any type of disruption in family life can produce a crisis, and divorce is one of the most stressful experiences of adulthood. It can also be traumatic for children. Although divorce has become commonplace, it

is a crisis event that forces many short- and long-range adjustments.

The experience of being a single parent differs for women and men. Women generally expect to have financial difficulties, and there are significantly more children who live in poverty because they live in a single-parent family headed by a woman (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2011b). The implications for children growing up in single-parent families, especially those headed by mothers, can be serious. While most studies report that children generally fare well while living in a single-parent family, those who live in poverty are at greater risk for problems at school, teen parenthood, unemployment, and lower wages when entering the labor force.

Life is not easy for most single-parent families. Yet many persons choose divorce over an unhappy relationship, even though a multitude of difficult adjustments are inevitable. This type of family arrangement can be more efficient and harmonious than a household marked by tensions and strife between the adults, especially if abuse is part of the scenario.
Support networks of the military and the social cohesiveness of military families contribute to their emotional resilience. The deployed parent in a military family may have to coparent from a distance.

Parenting Reflection 2–3

You have been elected mayor of a large city, having run your campaign on social reform. What are some of the things that you can do in your official capacity to improve the quality of life for single-parent families headed by women?

Military Families

Military families face many unique challenges and their parenting has been aptly described as coparenting at a distance (Huebner, 2009). During deployment, they share some of the stresses and challenges with families who function as single-parent units, but they are also subjected to a military environment that, in some ways, is a world of its own. Military life (even without deployment) is characterized by some unique qualities that affect marital and family functioning. These are closely related to parenting and child rearing (Willerton, MacDermid Wadsworth, & Riggs, 2011). During the post-9/11 period (2001–2010), about 2 million U.S. service men and women had been deployed once (Willerton et al., 2011), while half a million plus had been deployed twice (Huebner, Mancini, Bowen, & Orthner, 2009a). By 2007, about 20,000 had been deployed five or more times (Olson, 2007). If one includes extended family, millions of Americans have experienced the deployment of a family member (Willerton et al., 2011). Considering that the period of deployment is about 15 months on average, the spouses and children in these families are under a significant strain for extended periods of time. They worry about the safety of the family member who is deployed, and they suffer from what has been called ambiguous loss, which is the temporary loss of a family member combined with the risks, threats, and vulnerabilities associated with injury and permanent loss of life (Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007). To quote the Military Child Education Coalition (2011): “More than 40,000 military-dependent children have been affected by the injury, death or illness of a service member as a result of combat and deployment, a number that does not even include the young brothers, sisters and relatives of service members.” Whether we concentrate on the qualities of temporary single-parent households or the characteristics of coparenting at a distance, these families face stressors that affect many areas of family functioning, and these stressors seem to increase with repeated deployment (Lincoln, Swift, & Shorteno-Fraser, 2008).
Part I  Parent–Child Relations in Social Context

Significantly, many of the military children tend to be young; more than 4 in 10 military families report having children under the age of 5. Almost 2 million children are the offspring of parents in active or reservist roles in the military, and many of them have experienced a parent leaving for a war zone (Military Child Education Coalition, 2011). Between 40 and 50 percent of the soldiers are married, and of the unmarried ones, many are in serious and permanent relationships (Huebner et al., 2009a; Huebner, 2009b; Willerton et al., 2011). The sustaining and positive factors in these families are the strength and stability of the marriage relationship, combined with their social connectedness to a network of supportive and significant others, such as friends, family, and other military spouses and their families (Huebner et al., 2009a). In the work of Karney and Crown (2011), they find that, paradoxically, deployment increases the stability of many military marriages, but there are many variables that contradict generalizations because marital stability varies according to gender, race, length of deployment, and age at the time of marriage. To quote Karney and Crown: “In short, for the vast majority of the U.S. military, the longer that a service member was deployed while married, the lower the subsequent risk of marital dissolution. In these groups, deployment appears to enhance the stability of the marriage. The beneficial outcomes in terms of marital stability seem to increase with length of deployment” (2011, p. 37). Multiple and prolonged deployments appear to escalate difficulties (Lincoln et al., 2008). Soldiers who return with post-combat mental health problems affect the entire family, which can precipitate poor adjustment in the children of these families (Willerton et al., 2011).

Clearly, the excellent support networks of the military and the social cohesiveness of military families contribute to emotional resilience. In fact, Huebner et al. (2009a) state that the communities’ capacity and ability to support military families is crucial in positive outcomes, as well as in providing support for the children in these challenging situations. As civilians, we should understand that there is an immense positive power contained in our expressions of care, support, and appreciation toward military families. Their well-being is also the concern of the greater community, even though the military has built excellent and exemplary support systems and provides expertise in many areas of social concern (Chawla & Solinas-Saunders, 2011).

Military personnel, as well as their families, face significant adjustment when the family member returns from deployment. There may be post-traumatic stress to deal with, the possibility of an injury is a reality, and the entire family has to readjust and rebalance to find a new equilibrium (Willerton et al., 2011). For some of the families, this adjustment cycle is repeated with redeployment and its subsequent challenges.

There are five priorities for research about military families:

■ Studying marital and family relationships longitudinally.
■ Studying the effects of deployment on child well-being and parent–child relationships.
■ Studying the renegotiation process in military families as they readapt after deployment.
■ Examining coping with the psychological and physical wounds of combat.
■ Studying the impact of family members and help-seeking behavior in soldiers who are not married (Willerton et al., 2011).

It is clear from the research thus far (Willerton et al., 2011) that the support given to military families needs to incorporate the research findings to ensure efficacy. Among some of the preliminary recommendations are the use of systemic and evidence-based approaches and the power of education to inform and to teach as this will have a trickle-down effect by information and best practices being dispersed more widely. Service members, as well as their spouses, require information and training to safeguard the psychological health of their children and to optimize parent–child relations.

Blended Families

Blended families are formed when at least one of the adult partners remarries (Hildebrand et al., 2008) or when a couple cohabitates and children are involved. Because the vast majority of single-parent families are headed by women, the person usually filling the vacant adult role in the new blended family is a man. He may or may not have been divorced and may have children of his own.

Remarriage is popular, although these relationships have a higher risk of ending in divorce than first marriages (B. N. Adams, 2004; Carl, 2012). The median length of first marriages in the United States is about
Families with Renested Adult Children

Families with renested adult children are a modern phenomenon. The renested family emerges when children who have been launched into adult lives of their own return to the home of their family of origin (Steinmetz, Clavan, & Stein, 1990). Young adult children are also referred to as boomerang kids (Mitchell, 2006; Mitchell & Gee, 1996). Some estimates suggest that more than 60 percent of all young adults between age 18 and 30 will, at some time, return to their family of origin to live temporarily (Piper & Balswick, 1997). It is estimated that about 50 percent of men and 43 percent of women between age 18 and 24 live with one or both parents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010b); during extended economic downturns, these numbers tend to increase.

The phenomenon of renested families occurs primarily when young adult children experience some type of economic or personal crisis or transitional life event, such as job loss or divorce, and turn to their families for support. Some renested families are also formed when adult children return to their elderly parents’ homes in order to care for them (Mitchell, 2006).

Very little is known about the patterns of interaction or lifestyles of renested families (Mitchell, 1998, Mitchell, 2006; Mitchell & Gee, 1996). This type of family system needs to be adaptable to respond effectively to the developmental level of a young adult. Family rules may need to be changed and new boundaries established as parents and young adult children work through interaction issues. The kind of arrangements derived will involve new definitions of parent–child relations that depend less on the social power of the parents. Parents feel more positive about the arrangement when their boomerang kids reciprocate by contributing to the household financially and in kind, and are respectful of family rules. It is beneficial to all parties if the adult children can maintain their autonomy, even while returning to the parental home (Bold, 2001).

The sandwich generation refers to adults who are looking after their own parents, as well as their offspring; they are the middle generation with a generation on each side (Pierret, 2006).

Kinship Families: Custodial Grandparents and Grandchildren

“For a growing number of Americans, contemporary grandparenthood involves assuming responsibility for parenting and meeting the basic needs of one or more grandchildren” (Dolbin-MacNab, 2009, p. 207). This recent variation in family structure was first noticed in the early 1990s by researchers, public policy makers, and the media (Bryson & Casper, 1999). This family structure typically involves grandchildren who live in grandparent-maintained households, although it also includes extended family members who are caring for related children. In 1970, there were about 2.2 million of these households involving children 18 years of age and younger living with at least one grandparent. By 1997, this number increased to about 3.9 million children and constituted about 5.5 percent of all American children under age 18 (Casper & Bryson, 1998). By 2010, this number reached about 7 percent of all children in the United States, or 4.9 million children living with a grandparent. Twenty percent of these children are exclusively dependent on their grandparents. A breakdown of these figures indicates that 51 percent of the children in grandparent-maintained households are Caucasian, followed by about 24 percent African American and 19 percent Hispanic/Latino (AARP, 2010; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010b).

The family that encompasses three generations faces special challenges for all parties involved (Pierret, 2006). For the grandchildren, there may be very real reasons why their biological parents cannot raise them; they are absent and for some reason they cannot parent their offspring. The grandparents find that their lives are also transformed in unexpected ways, and that considerable
financial stressors may accompany these ongoing grandparenting responsibilities (Dolbin-MacNab, 2009). It is not surprising that a significant number of the grandparents find themselves overburdened and feel overwhelmed, especially if the children display behavioral issues, or if the grandparents have failing health. The scenario is more positive if the grandparents are healthy, coping, and have the resources to fulfill this variation of the parenting role. For some, it adds meaning to their lives in a joyful and rewarding manner (Dolbin-MacNab, 2009).

The grandmother maintains the household in the large majority of co-resident grandparent–grandchild families (Fields, 2003). Co-resident grandparent–grandchild families typically are created when parents experience some type of personal problem that prevents them from performing effectively in their caregiving role. Examples of such debilitating personal problems include incarceration, addiction and related disorders, child abuse, chronic physical or emotional illness, or even death. Economic stressors over the past few years have also added their toll. Grandparents often step in to assume custody of grandchildren under such circumstances rather than having the children placed in foster care. The motivation for assuming primary caregiving responsibilities is to provide their grandchildren with a stable environment. The children in these families (1) are likely to be age 6 and under, (2) are mostly Caucasian, (3) live in poverty, (4) lack health insurance coverage, and (5) are likely to receive some form of public assistance (Fields, 2003).

Co-resident families have difficult challenges that are not usually faced by other family structures (Edwards & Daire, 2006; Robinson & Wilkes, 2006; Ross & Aday, 2006; Smithgall & Mason, 2004). Many grandparents, while acting compassionately in the best interests of their grandchildren, find that their plans for a serene retirement must be postponed or abandoned to provide for their grandchildren. Others find it necessary to apply for public assistance upon assuming custody of grandchildren because of the increased expenses involved that tax an already-limited fixed income. The grandchildren may also arrive with multiple problems that can be traced to parental problems such as divorce, addiction and related disorders, and inconsistent parenting behavior. Additionally, grandparents in co-resident households are more likely to be poor and to experience all of the negative aspects associated with poverty. Furthermore, grandparents may not be able to cope with providing for the educational needs of grandchildren. Many have not completed high school and may not be completely aware of how to guide children’s educational experiences.

Focus Point. Diversity, in structure and form, is the principal characteristic of contemporary American families. Significant variations in the ways that families are defined and how they are composed reflect changes occurring in the larger society. The most commonly observed family types are:

- two opposite-sex adults with an intact marriage and their children.
- single-parent adults and their children.
- blended families composed of two opposite-sex adults who have remarried and the children of one or both.
- renested families composed of adult parents and their adult children who have returned to the home.
- Custodial (co-resident) grandparent–grandchild families.

It can be noted that ultimately the quality of the relationships within the diverse families are key indicators of overall well-being. Rather than making a value judgment about one particular family form or configuration over another, it is important to note how well the members of the family are functioning within their particular family group. Family wellness is affected by so many factors, from the economic to the emotional. An entire range of resources are required to ensure that the family unit avoids the pitfalls of becoming a fragile family.

A sociologist at New York University, Judith Stacey (1998a, p. 80), provides her perspective concerning the diversity of family forms:

The most careful studies and the most careful researchers confirm what most of us know from our own lives: The quality of any family’s relationships and resources readily trumps its formal structure or form. Access to economic, educational, and social resources; the quality and consistency of parental nurturance, guidance, and responsibility; and the degree of domestic harmony, conflict, and hostility affect child development and welfare far more substantially than does the particular number, gender, sexual orientation, and marital status of parents or the family structure in which children are reared.
Ethnic identity influences how family systems are organized and how they function.

ETHNIC DIVERSITY AND CONTEMPORARY FAMILIES

Cultural diversity has always been a hallmark of American society; it is the product of the immigration of various ethnic groups to the United States since pre-Colonial times. In recent years, ethnic identity has been reemphasized as Americans have become more curious about their family roots. Americans have always considered themselves to be a culturally diverse society. This diversity is reflected in the numerous ethnic and racial groups that have emigrated from other countries to make their new home in the United States (Glick, 2010).

Ethnic identity is a central family ecological factor that influences how most of these family systems are organized and how they function. It continues to play a role in each subsequent generation. Many ethnic minority families have created new lives and discovered new opportunities, but they have also struggled with the prejudice and discrimination that limits educational experiences, job opportunities, and the ability to function fully in communities. Because of these issues, family systems with minority ethnic and racial backgrounds experience problems that are not usually shared by those with a Caucasian, middle-class background.

Researchers examining family structure and functioning have tended to classify minority families according to the stereotypes promulgated within the larger society. Early researchers examining Hispanic families, for example, identified the concept of *machismo* as the prime factor shaping the dynamics of this ethnic group’s family life (Staples & Mirande, 1980). Later research refuted this and other findings as not relevant to the contemporary Hispanic family (J. H. Skinner, 2001). Families are increasingly affected by mainstream cultural influences within their country of residence because the mass media is so powerful in exposing individuals to a variety of values, cultural norms, and marketing pressures.

Today, we are concerned about building bridges between all families that make up American society (Glick, 2010). Diversity, and its essential importance in our society, is not just a politically correct term; it is a critical element that has made American society what it has become today, and it predicts how the future will unfold. Ethnic diversity is a part of the sociocultural ecological system in which we live. It encompasses people’s values, how their families operate as a social system, how they teach their children to function effectively, and how resources are used to promote daily functioning. While diversity is a hallmark of family systems in American society, it is important to examine these family systems from the perspective of discerning how each attempts to accomplish a common goal but in different ways: for example, how to raise children in a diverse society, in the midst of great uncertainty about the future, to become effectively functioning members of this society (Dere et al., 2010).

We will examine the challenges faced by parents and children within these cultural and racial groups that represent a cross section of families in the United States. Specifically, this section focuses on the parenting and child-rearing practices of Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, Asian American, and American Indian and Alaska Native families.

We will discuss multiracial, interethnic families, as well as newly arrived families who have immigrated to the United States. This examination uses an ethnographic perspective. Some readers will have an *emic*, or culturally specific, view of at least one of these groups by virtue of already being a member. By studying these groups, we are able to develop an *etic*, or culturally universal, perspective. In the United States, we are also connected through a common language. Many families additionally maintain the language from their culture of origin.

In studying the diverse groups within the United States, we should ideally first focus on the generalities that connect us as humans and avoid the trap of...
stereotyping specific groups. There is also the risk of ethnocentrism, whereby we judge people from the perspective of our own cultural heritage. The process of describing the American population in terms of five major ethnicities has been called ethno-blocking and is also informally referred to as “hyphenated Americans” because each group tends to be described by hyphenating or linking these Americans to the original geographic and ethnic roots. The U.S. Census Bureau designations are based on race, rather than ethnicity or cultural background, and comprise the following: Non-Hispanic Caucasian, African American, Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, Hispanic or Latino (Carl, 2012, pp. 40–43).

Caucasian Parents and Children

Characteristics. Our discussion of the ethnic diversity of families in the United States begins with an examination of a few of the major features of the dominant Caucasian ethnic group. This group is also referred to as Non-Hispanic White (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010b). Persons of European extraction make up the majority of the population of the United States and have done so since the colonization process began more than 300 years ago. In 2010, slightly more than 72 percent of the population fit into this ethnic category (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010a). These individuals and their families reside in all areas of the United States, but to a lesser degree in three Southwestern states and the District of Columbia. Most are considered to be middle or working class, holding jobs that are based on educational achievement and having combined household incomes ranging from $25,000 to more than $100,000 annually.

Caucasian persons and their families have dominated American culture for a number of reasons, including their sheer size in relation to other ethnic groups and perhaps their holding positions of power, as well as social and financial stature, in communities. Many individuals and families of this group settled the Colonies that became the United States, as well as the frontier areas that gave rise to the other states that make up the nation. Another large wave of immigrants arrived between 1840 and 1930. The modern-day middle class also emerged from this group following the Great Depression of the 1930s. It is this segment of the Caucasian population whose values became a dominant force in influencing the entire culture of the United States to this day.

Parenting. For the most part, we might assert that, until recently, the majority of what we know about parenting and parent–child relations was based on research using this group of individuals and their children as the point of reference. Until the focus on multicultural competence became more pertinent, researchers focused on the social class configuration of Caucasians as mediating considerable differences in other subcultures in terms of the ways that parenting took place and the outcomes of children exposed to these differences.

One of the fundamental findings of past research that examined social class differences was the assumption that the middle class versus the working class and the advantaged versus the disadvantaged resulted in corresponding differences in the ways that children were raised and the values that they were taught by parents (Davidson & Moore, 1992). Studies in the past indicated that middle-class parents differed from others in a number of child-rearing patterns, such as the greater use of harshness, emphasizing that children must delay the gratification of their immediate desires, the learning of a work ethic at an early age, valuing and achieving academic successes such as earning a high school diploma or a college degree, and valuing and demonstrating the value of cleanliness and neatness in one’s personal life. Researchers have described differences in speech, communication styles, and interaction between middle-class and lower class parents. What realistically may have been at work were family ecological factors, such as significant differences in family income, quality of housing, availability of health care, provision of adequate nutrition, and the availability of time to devote to parenting children. The inherent message coming from these studies was ethnocentric, pointing to the relative success of middle-class parents in raising children to achieve a supposedly equally successful adulthood.

Later researchers refuted these findings, noting that social class variations have been reduced in American society because of the increased exposure of the entire population to media sources that portray middle-class values and an increase in the number of lower class individuals who have become upwardly mobile, moving into the working or middle class as a result of better-paying jobs.

Middle-class values continue to play a major role in providing a template for what is termed success and the status to which many other groups aspire. In some respects, this template comes with a price. The pressure
to succeed may not always bring the happiness imagined (Drum Major Institute for Public Policy, 2006). The degree of materialism associated with middle-class success may not always grant peace of mind (Warren & Tyagi, 2004). The conspicuous consumerism of middle-class Caucasians may eventually lead to an erosion of certain moral and ethical values, although economic pressures have begun to influence this situation. Caucasian families provide one model of parent–child relations that demonstrates both cultural universalism and cultural relativism in child rearing.

**Focus Point.** Parent–child relations are influenced by and take place within a cultural context. Socialization is the way that parents and other societal entities teach culture to children. Socialization is bidirectional in that children participate with their parents in this process.

**Hispanic Parents and Children**

This group is also referred to by race as Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010c). Hispanic families constitute a diverse group. A commonality is the use of Spanish and the use of English as a second language (Hildebrand et al., 2008). Many families who speak a language other than English at home, which is 20 percent of the population, identify with this group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010c). Hispanics may have the distinction of rapidly aspiring to become the largest minority group in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010c). The increases in this segment of the population are largely a result of immigration from Mexico, and other Central American countries.

Another factor accounting for the significant increases in this ethnic group is the large number of children per family, the highest among all ethnic groups in the United States. Many illegal immigrants have “anchor babies,” in the hope that these children can contribute to legitimizing their residence status in the U.S. Hispanics live predominantly in southwestern states such as Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and California, although they are represented in all the states. Most work in service occupations and in construction and earn moderately comfortable incomes. The poverty rate is about 21 percent for all Hispanic families in the United States (Fronczek, 2005). The economic downturn has increased this figure. About 59 percent of Hispanic households reported having one unemployed member, and 28 percent said that they were at risk of losing their home as a result of mortgage payment defaults (Pew Hispanic Center, 2012).
The role of family ecological factors has a significant influence on the nature of parent–child relations in Hispanic families (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2007). While the increasing size of this group is a significant characteristic, Hispanic families may be characterized in other ways (Hildebrand et al., 2008; McLoyd, Cauce, Takenchi, & Wilson, 2000; Therrien & Ramirez, 2000; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010c):

- Hispanic families are more likely to live in large families (four or more persons) as compared with non-Hispanic Caucasian families (three people or fewer).
- There is a greater tendency for the parents and children to experience substandard levels of education. More than half of this group has not graduated from high school, and one-quarter has less than a ninth-grade education.
- About 23 percent of Hispanic parents and their children live in poverty, compared with 8 percent of non-Latino Caucasians. Families with illegal immigration status face many additional stressors.
- Religion plays a significant role in daily family life.
- Hispanics may be more family oriented than Caucasians and use a more extensive kinship-based support network.

Parenting. In matters of child rearing, Hispanic parents are challenged by the traditional scripts that they learned as children that may have a poor fit with the realities of raising children in a different cultural environment. For example, differences in English and Spanish language fluency between parents and children can affect parent–child interactions, resulting in frustration and even resentment (Becerra, 1998). In a similar vein, the conditions produced by having a low income as a result of lack of educational attainment tend to promote a more authoritarian approach to child rearing known as hierarchical parenting. This parenting style combines emotionally warm support for children within the context of demanding exceptional respect for parents and others such as extended family members. This approach is noted for promoting a collective value system among children as opposed to the individualism promoted among Caucasians in their child-rearing approaches (McLoyd et al., 2000).

Within the context of hierarchical parenting, children learn the importance of the “three Rs” of Hispanic family values: personal relationships, respect, and responsibility (Hildebrand et al., 2008). Children also learn the role of cooperation (as opposed to competition) and other-centeredness (as opposed to self-centeredness) in their family relationships. Children are taught to make decisions based on the impact on others in their families. In this manner, they learn about family loyalty and the strength of family bonds in providing support, which in turn spills over into relationships outside of their families (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2007). The emphasis on learning these values promotes the notion of la familia and the high importance placed on the family group and its ability to meet the needs of all members, as well as maintaining some cultural traditions.

Educational achievement is highly valued among Hispanic families. Apart from the desire to improve their immediate and extended families’ economic futures, education serves as an additional motivator fueling the desire to immigrate to the United States from other countries. Education is perceived as providing additional opportunities to the children of these families (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2007). Paradoxically, it is not unusual for educational attainment to be assigned a low priority by parents and other family members if it conflicts with a child’s allegiance to the family (Hildebrand et al., 2008).

Although Hispanic children can initially be socially and educationally challenged by being bilingual, the benefits of bilingualism may surface later. Most learn Spanish as the primary language spoken at home and in the community, while learning English as a second language. For this reason, bilingual education is desirable because it recognizes these children’s needs rather than making them an educational liability (Olmos, Yberra, & Monterrey, 1999). The issue of bilingual education is controversial. Hispanic parents generally favor this approach because it appears to support their children’s cultural heritage, and there is the belief that bilingual classes facilitate children’s learning of the English language. Current research clearly points toward the many advantages of bilingualism (Bialystok, Luk, Peets, & Yang, 2010).

Focus Point. Their strong family structure, values, and family-focused parenting styles give Hispanics a unique position among ethnic minority families in the United States. The high number of children per household contributes to making Hispanics the fastest growing ethnic group.
African American Parents and Children

Family Characteristics. This group is also referred to by race as Black (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010c). The group constituted 12.6 percent of the total population in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010c). In general, marriage is less likely between adults. African American women tend to have a higher fertility rate than Caucasians, and a larger proportion of families in the African American community are headed by women. As such, the poverty rate was higher for African Americans than for Caucasians, with about one-quarter of the African American community living below the poverty level. For the total population (all races), about 13.8 percent live below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010c).

Parenting. The child-rearing practices of African American family systems are found to be similar to other groups in several aspects (Julian, McHenry, & Mckelvey, 1994). When compared with Latino families, African Americans tend to encourage early autonomy of children, are intolerant of wasted time, appear to practice authoritative methods of discipline based on reasoning with children, and encourage egalitarian family roles (Bluestone & Tamis-LeMonda, 1999; Wiley, Warren, & Montenelli, 2002). This approach may vary with the socioeconomic status of the parents and with other factors.

One of the greatest obstacles to effective parenting among African American families relates to economic pressures (Jones, Forehand, Brody, & Armistead, 2002). Despite dire financial circumstances that can exacerbate stress in family life, effective African American parents use encouragement and shared time with children to counteract some of the negative influences of harsh economic family conditions. In spite of the obstacles and challenges facing African American families in general, stable family systems are found throughout these communities with the working class, non-poor forming the backbone of support (Billingsley, 1993).

Ethnicity is a major family ecological factor in child-rearing practices. It contributes to how children are socialized to develop a personal identity that is considered to be appropriate to their ethnic background as African Americans. Because of these and other ecological factors, such as low family incomes and the younger ages of parents compared with other families, the general child-rearing style is seen as parent centered, where children are expected to become responsible and independent at an early age (Hildebrand et al., 2008). As seen with children in other minority groups in the United States, African American children are generally raised by parents who emphasize the importance of educational success as a means of bettering one’s quality of life (Balkcom, 2002; Thompson, 2003; Trosper, 2002). When African American parents consistently use authoritative methods in child rearing, their children generally perform successfully in school. The involvement of African American parents in their children’s schooling is often problematic because of inconvenient meeting times with teachers, parents’ own past experiences with schools that were of poor quality, and feeling intimidated by school personnel (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006; Koonce & Harper, 2005). It should also be noted that religious values and church participation play a vital role in African American family life. The church has played a central role in the socialization of African American children since the days of slavery (Billingsley, 1993).

African American parents, like other minority parents, are challenged in teaching their children to have a positive ethnic group identity (Hughes, 2003). The societal movement toward multicultural competence is gaining momentum. Other aspects of parenting are unique to African Americans. For example, it is estimated that more African American parents spank their children compared with parents in other ethnic groups (Dodge, McLoyd, & Lansford, 2005; McLoyd et al., 2000). Spanking is not likely to be seen as negative, inappropriate parenting behavior among African American parents. Rather, using corporal punishment is more likely to be viewed as an appropriate positive parental behavior by both parents and children.

In addition, parenting frequently occurs within the context of single-parent family structure headed by women who may or may not have been married (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2011b). In addition, many of the custodial co-resident grandparent-grandchild families are composed of African Americans.

Given that some of these family systems are characterized by low-income or poverty-level status, as well as living in an inner-city environment, children can be at risk of experiencing difficulties in some of the underserved schools, participating in high-risk behaviors such as drug use and gang involvement, teen pregnancy, health problems, and other difficulties. Many African American parents are successful in buffering...
their children from these problems by monitoring their leisure time and social contacts and through involvement with organizations such as church groups that also support constructive civic engagement. They may require younger children to tag along with older siblings, who are responsible for their care (Jarrett, 1995). As such, the family relationships are characterized as more intimate, while peer relationships are less intense than those of Caucasian teenagers.

Focus Point. Research indicates many positive aspects of African American parents’ parenting practices. Most problems associated with these family systems can be traced to the insidious effects of poverty; about half are single-parent families headed by a woman. Under-served schools can leave educational deficits. African American parents prepare their children by promoting and encouraging educational opportunities. African American parents possess resilience that enables them to cope with adversity.

Asian American Parents and Children

Family Characteristics. Less information is available about Asian American and Pacific Islander families in comparison with other ethnic groups in the United States. Perhaps this is because these families make up a smaller percentage of the population and are located in fewer geographic areas. The majority live in the western states and in Hawaii, with substantial populations in the largest cities, such as New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Jose (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010c). Like Hispanics, Asian Americans are a diverse ethnic group, including those with Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Southeast Asian heritage. Asians with Chinese and Japanese backgrounds make up the largest and oldest established groups in the United States (Hildebrand et al., 2008). Those from Southeast Asia (including Cambodians, Vietnamese, Laotians, and Hmong) constitute the smallest groups, many having migrated as refugees.

Parenting. Parenting styles among Asian American families appear to be more authoritarian and authoritative rather than permissive, with a greater reliance on verbal rather than physical means for disciplining children (Hildebrand et al., 2008). What appears to be a very strict parenting style to an outside observer is something entirely different to those who reside within such family systems (Gorman, 1988). These family systems typically combine nurture with control in order to shape children’s behavior to conform to the family’s achievement goals (Rosenthal & Feldman, 1992).

Children of Asian American parents are expected to achieve personal maturity at an early age in comparison with those of other family systems in our society (Caplan, Whitmore, & Choy, 1989). Certain behaviors are not tolerated from children, such as acting physically or verbally aggressive, especially with siblings. Older children are expected to serve as good role models of behavior for younger siblings.

Asian American parents can be intensely involved in their children’s academic activities. Educational achievement is highly valued among Asian American parents (McLoyd et al., 2000). For example, more than half of Asian Americans have completed 4 years of college or more, which is an increase from the previous Census. Of all minority groups, these graduates tended to have the highest average earnings (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010c). Some researchers attribute this high level of educational achievement to the Asian American parenting style, which is commonly compared to authoritarianism (Greenfield & Suzuki, 2001). Other Asian American researchers have explained this as the Confucian training doctrine, which emphasizes the blending of nurture, parental involvement, and physical closeness with strict and firm control over children (McBride-Chang & Chang, 1998).

First-generation immigrants from Asia may subscribe to collectivism, whereas mainstream North America tends to be more individualistic. Researchers have investigated the cultural differences between parenting practices in China and the practices of Chinese parents living in Canada and the United States, noting that the information on fathering in these families is extremely limited. In immigrant families, fathers became more prominent in the lives of their children, as influences in the adopted country were subtly changing parenting patterns (Chuang, 2009). Chuang found that some of the parenting strategies that may have been meaningful in China were not as relevant in North American contexts. For example, promoting interdependence, obedience, and cooperation (aspects that support collectivism) was not entirely compatible with the challenges faced in more individualistic environments (Chuang, 2009).
members are charged with discovering the unique characteristics of a child at birth to determine her or his place within the tribe. Infants are carefully observed for several months to learn about their nature. The child’s name, as well as the gender role, is determined based on the characteristics that family members observe. Only then is the naming ceremony conducted, sometimes many months after birth.

Problems indigenous to life on and off of the reservation include high rates of adult alcoholism, homicide rates that are higher than those found in the rest of the U.S. population, accidents, and suicides. These problems put some of these children at a higher-than-usual risk of experiencing the loss of parents, siblings, relatives, and friends. In many tribes, the paternal uncle and male cousins, in addition to the child’s father and brothers, play an important role in a child’s life. Because children continually lose family members as a result of situations that are particular to their lifestyle, they are challenged to acquire coping strategies that are not usually found in children of other ethnic groups. Their response patterns frequently include disruptive, aggressive behaviors at school and at home; depression; feelings of low self-worth and self-esteem; addiction and related disorders; developmental delays; flattened emotional affect; interpersonal distancing; self-destructive behaviors, including suicidal gestures; sexual acting out; and running away from home (Hildebrand et al., 2008).

Because most American Indian and Alaska Native tribes value the personal autonomy and independence of their members, individual differences in children appear to be tolerated and accepted as part of their nature. Children are generally reared through grooming these traits as they are encouraged to learn to make personal choices and learn by the consequences of their actions. This parenting style may appear to be permissive to outsiders because parents often ignore children’s behavior that is considered inappropriate.

Parenting. American Indian and Alaska Native parents might be thought to use more permissive styles of raising their children in comparison with other ethnic groups (John, 1998). Some tribes may use methods that are more punitive and controlling. Like Asian American parents, American Indian and Alaska Native parents tend to combine nurture with control in guiding children’s development, especially when the children are young. Traditional styles of child rearing emphasize...
teaching children to maintain a sense of unity and cohesion with their tribal and immediate family groups and to suppress the tendency to experience conflict with others. While these practices may be useful in facilitating daily life among the people living on reservations, they may not be effective in teaching these children to function well in urban settings when they live in family units away from the reservation.

Contemporary American Indian and Alaska Native parents usually teach their children traditional values based on the practical application of personal belief systems. For example, children are taught to perceive things and people according to intrinsic rather than extrinsic traits and characteristics. Children are taught to be in touch with the rhythms of nature and to be sensitive to the needs of others. Sharing personal resources, thoughts, and knowledge is considered appropriate in smoothing interpersonal interactions.

**Focus Point.** American Indian and Alaska Native parents and children are challenged by sociocultural factors that are not experienced by other ethnic minorities. These relate to reconciling traditional ways and values with the necessity of adapting and acculturating to contemporary society. These parents and children may have competing allegiances to both sociocultural worlds. The family structure and functioning of tribes may be difficult for outsiders to understand and appreciate. American Indians and Alaska Natives appear to have a unique approach to child rearing and family life.

**Multiracial and Interethnic Parents and Children**

The number of multiracial and interethnic married couples has increased significantly; approximately 9 million individuals (or 2.9 percent of the population) described themselves as multiracial (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010c). In the not too distant past, these relationships were frowned upon and as early as 1761, colonial laws prohibited marriage between people of different races. These laws remained in effect until 1967, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled such laws to be unconstitutional.

The reasons why these marriages have increased over the years since 1967 are varied. The general desegregation of American society presents greater opportunities for people of different racial groups to mingle socially and work together. Nowadays, increased socioeconomic opportunities encourage the socially upward mobility of ethnic minorities, which increases contact between people of all racial and ethnic groups in housing, employment, school, work, and leisure activities (McLoyd et al., 2000).

Research is limited on how multiracial children and their parents manage and learn to cope with their situation (Byrd & Garwick, 2006). Many do not experience significant adjustment challenges, but most must resolve issues related to ambiguous ethnicity and their need to define their identities (Dere et al., 2010; Gibbs, 2003). One explanation for the positive outcomes in these children can be found in the efforts of parents to provide support, encourage activities that build ethnic identity, and expose their children to effective adult role models in multi-ethnic and family contexts. A number of very successful and high-profile Americans claim multiracial backgrounds, and they have been very positive role models for the younger generation in promoting strong and respected identities. Generally, there has also been a focus on increased multicultural competence.

The number of multiracial and interethnic families is increasing. Children in multiracial–interethnic families benefit from having multiculturally competent relationships.
Immigrant Parents and Children

The United States was formed by the immigration of many different nationalities and ethnic groups over the centuries. Large numbers of persons arrived in this country to pursue their dreams of freedom, wealth, and personal happiness. Many individuals and families arrived legally and eventually assumed respected positions in their adopted communities. The amalgam of so many different ways of life, languages, family lives, parenting styles, and perspectives has given strength to the diversity of American culture.

Revisions in federal legislation in 1965 changed the criteria for lawful entry into the United States. Priority was given to those who possessed valued work skills, refugees from foreign aggression, and those who already had relatives living in the United States. Family reunification accounts for about two-thirds of legal entrants into the United States (Fix, Zimmerman, & Passel, 2001).

The number of immigrations coming into the United States has increased steadily since 1960 (Fix et al., 2001). In 2010, 20 percent of U.S. born children had one foreign-born parent, whereas 3 percent of children were foreign born themselves, with one foreign-born parent. There has been a steady increase in these figures from 15 percent in 1994, to 23 percent in 2010 (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2011b).

Many individuals and families in the United States have become more aware of immigration issues, both legal and illegal in nature, since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Restrictions are more stringent because of security issues, and immigrant families may be scrutinized more than in the past. Much debate is currently taking place in American society as Congress attempts to revise laws dealing with immigrants who have arrived in the United States illegally.

Economic difficulties are often associated with immigrant parents and children because of language barriers and general acculturation problems (Dere et al., 2010). These challenges affect everyone in a family and hinder parent–child relations. Many parents and children are reported to be living in crowded housing units. Statistics indicate that 33 percent of the foreign-born children with foreign-born parents lived below the poverty level (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2011b).

Immigrant parents encourage their children to achieve high levels of education and become good citizens of their new country (Detzner & Xiong, 1999). Parent–child relations in immigrant families may be strained by negative family ecological factors and by discrepancies observed in parents who may have problems with acculturation, often combined with the difficulties of learning a new language (Aroian, 2006). (See Figure 2–3.) Immigrant children may also experience problems...
with reconciling the traditional standards and expectations of their parents with the consumer-oriented culture of contemporary American society, and it may be difficult to merge the *heritage* culture with the *host* culture (Dere et al., 2010).

**Focus Point.** Issues confronting newly arrived immigrants involve the marginal nature of these families. Economic difficulties, problems in acquiring and using a new language, and general acculturation issues present a special challenge for immigrant parents and children.

**POINTS TO CONSIDER**

- The most significant context in which parent–child relations take place is the cultural context. Culture defines what families value and believe to be important, which guides the behavior of all members. Culture shapes the rules or social norms that outline the appropriate behavior of people in a variety of other contexts, such as the roles they fulfill; the notions of what are acceptable and unacceptable actions; and the individuals, agencies, and institutions that transmit these values and beliefs.

- *Individualism and collectivism* are two cultural conceptions of value systems. These cultural concepts have direct application in parent–child relations because they influence how parents translate cultural values into how they interact with their children.

- In studying parents and children, as well as families, we recognize that there are patterns that are likely to be shared across subcultures; and there are also patterns that are unique. We recognize the role of *cultural universalism* versus *cultural relativism* in influencing our perceptions. *Ethic* (culturally specific) and *etic* (culturally universal) dimensions address this as well.

- Socialization is what parents do to teach children to conform to social rules, acquire personal values, and develop attitudes and behaviors that are typical or representative of their culture at large, as well as their family of origin. Socialization is the way that culture is transmitted to children by parents, the media, institutions, and agencies.

- Socialization is bidirectional in nature because children play a role in this process. Parents change and shape the lessons of socialization on the basis of a number of factors, such as a child’s age, developmental abilities, ability to use and understand language, and gender.

- Families in contemporary American society are diverse in form and structure. Single-parent families are the fastest growing family unit today.

- Military families have unique stressors. After 9/11, over the next decade, approximately 1.5 million service members had spent time deployed. This has significant effects on families and also the children in those families.

- Blended families are usually formed when a biological mother remarries. These families frequently include children from the previous marriage, and remarried couples can have children of their own. Blended family maintenance requires that members rework their former family system into one that is pertinent to new participants. These families have many strengths.

- A renested family is formed when children who have been launched into adult lives return to their home base temporarily. Relatively little is known about how these families function.

- Custodial co-resident grandparent–grandchild families are formed when an adult child cannot function in his or her parenting role. Co-resident grandparents often need help and financial assistance to provide adequate care for their grandchildren.

- Hispanic parents and children come from diverse groups. Children are taught family values such as developing a strong sense of belonging and loyalty, respecting other family members, and cooperation with other family members. Child rearing is characterized by hierarchical parenting, a style based on authoritarianism that combines emotional warmth and strictness. Children learn about the high value placed on family membership.

- Many African American parents raise their children with an authoritative style. Many parents must contend with severe economic conditions but use approaches that temper this severity on family life. Educational advancement is encouraged.

- Asian American parents and children constitute the smallest ethnic group in the United States. Asian American parents typically use a parenting style known as Confucian training doctrine.

- American Indian and Alaska Native parents and children come from even more diverse groups. The
notion of what constitutes a family usually is relative to a particular tribe. A variety of child-rearing approaches may be employed in different American Indian and Alaska Native tribes, but children generally are taught to respect authority and their elders. Because there is a division between those who live on and those who live off of reservations, American Indian and Alaska Native families are challenged by different acculturation issues than other ethnic families. Many families must cope with the insidious effects of poverty and associated problems.

- The number of multiracial, interethnic marriages in the United States is increasing, with the accompanying larger number of multiracial and multi-ethnic children. These children generally fare well, and as a society we are valuing multicultural competence.

- Immigrant parents and children face challenges that are unique to their situation. Many problems arise from severe economic conditions, as well as difficulties in dealing with language barriers and other acculturation issues. Quality of life is at risk, as well as the quality of parent–child relations. Parents want their children to become good citizens and responsible individuals. Children may experience conflict between their parents pressing for adoption of the heritage culture and a contemporary society that encourages assimilation of host cultural values.

**USEFUL WEBSITES**

- **Child Welfare League of America**
  www.cwla.org

  www.unicef.org

- **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)**
  www.unesco.org

- **United States Fund for UNICEF**
  www.unicefusa.org

- **Urban Institute**
  www.urban.org