

Introduction to Special Issue “Parenting in the 21st Century”

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1. Introduction

The nature of parenting and parent–child relationships is often dramatically affected by the historical period in which one raises children. Historical changes in a myriad of possible areas, ranging from gender roles and healthcare to technological innovations and globalization, influence values, norms, and expectations for parents as well as the unique opportunities, pressures, and challenges they face in raising healthy children.

Historical and cultural change over the 20th and 21st centuries has been rapid and all-encompassing. The invention, rise, and pervasiveness of smartphones and social media is only one example of a historical development that has rapidly and dramatically changed the landscape of parenting over the first two decades of the 21st century. Many other technological, scientific, and social changes of the 21st century have affected the task of parenting and parent–child relationships directly or indirectly. The impact of these changes has sometimes been positive, sometimes negative, and sometimes both simultaneously. To make things even more complex, the impact sometimes has universal features, or sometimes varies for parents in different demographic (e.g., racial, ethnic, and economic) contexts.

In this Special Issue, we sought to explore some of the distinctive features of and challenges for parents in the 21st century. The papers include review and reflection pieces as well as new empirical pieces addressing historically important aspects of parenting. Each paper contains interesting details that are worth fully exploring. Here, we point to three overlapping themes from these papers, and their relevance for parents, practitioners, and researchers today. These themes are Managing Stress, Supports for Effective Parenting, and Emphasis on Supporting Children’s Independence and Competence for an Uncertain Future.

2. Managing Stress

We cannot claim that parenting is more or less stressful during one historical period versus another for many reasons, including that we very seldom have direct historical comparisons of parental stress using comparable measures. Certainly, there have been *different* stresses for parents in different historical periods. For example, advances in science, technology, and globalization have reduced stress for many (though certainly not all) parents when it comes to providing food, education, health care, and opportunity to their children. Some of these same or related changes have created new challenges and different stresses. For example, greater global connectedness and mobility, “expert” scientific medical advice, and “fast” or processed foods have contributed to physical—if not emotional—distance among extended families and new health problems. People can more easily move within or across national borders to pursue what they believe will be better educational or employment opportunities, but if they do, extended family members are less available for help with parenting (Atkinson 2022). Parents who live in contexts where modern vaccines are widely available might have fewer worries about children contracting smallpox or polio, but more worries about conditions related to modern

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nutrition or lifestyle practices, such as diabetes or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Many parents in the 21st century now have the ability to keep close track of their children using cell phones, enhancing safety, but they also have to address how to manage children's access to the internet and social media. Therefore, stresses have changed over time, and we cannot say with confidence that parenting is more stressful in the 21st century than it has been in the past.

However, some of the articles in this Special Issue point to evidence of an objectively high level of stress among parents, and a *perception* that the stress of parenting has increased. For example, a majority of parents in a German sample (Walper and Kreyenfeld 2022) reported feeling high or increasing pressure in multiple domains: time, finances, and education of their children. Additionally, Dupont et al. point to indicators that parental "burnout" (exhaustion due to chronic stress, Mikolajczak et al. 2021) is a historically new phenomenon that has increased over recent decades.

Therefore, at a minimum, it is clear from the papers in this Special Issue that 21st century parents feel stressed and that this stress emanates from current realities that reflect both ongoing and new issues for parents, issues to which practitioners and researchers should attend. One newer issue is an increasingly child-centered culture, dubbed by Dupont et al. as the "cult of the child". These authors provide an intriguing and insightful analysis of historical and societal emphasis on children's interests, and the consequences of excessive emphasis on children's needs for both parents and children. Walper and Kreyenfeld refer to a similar phenomenon when they refer to the "intensification of parenting", which they argue has resulted from changes in gender roles and employment, family structure, and changing norms and expectations for parenting. Importantly, non-resident fathers, who have often been neglected in both research and practice (as have fathers in general, Zimmermann et al. 2022), appear subject to these pressures just as other parents are. It might be worth noting that despite historical changes in parenting and expectations for parenting, Zimmermann et al. do not find corresponding changes in children's behaviors towards parents or relative preference of parents. These authors speculate that children's age-specific needs have not changed over time, although given that research does not address children's perspective on expectations for parenting, historical stability in their expectations remains an untested assumption.

Negotiating changing values can also create stress. Kuczynski et al. illustrate how complex and emotionally challenging it can be to engage in positive parenting, which has received increasing emphasis in recent decades. In valuing children's autonomy and assertiveness, and child-oriented and relational goals rather than parental goals, parents tolerate and give legitimacy to children's right to resist them and to express negative emotions, all of which can be taxing. Lansford et al. similarly point to global social changes that have likely increased the number of parents within many countries who possess a mix of individualistic and collectivistic, or authoritarian and progressive, values. Trying to achieve a complicated mix of sometimes new-fangled values in one's larger cultural context is likely not easy and might easily entail ambivalence and stress.

Twenty-first century technology also presents new and ever-changing stressors (Jensen et al. 2021; Lippold et al. 2022). The omnipresence of smart phones and other portable devices for both parents and children creates challenges for parents as they seek to protect their children and raise them to be physically and mentally healthy. Beyond the challenges involving monitoring and regulating exposure to information on these devices, parents' own use of these ubiquitous devices can compromise their parenting if they are not consciously mindful about usage (Lippold et al. 2022); the stress of finding a personal balance in technology use can itself be mentally and physically exhausting. Once children reach adolescence and emerging adulthood, parents struggle regarding how to use technology in a way that promotes healthy communication and parental support while encouraging healthy autonomy. Parents might find it frustrating when their older children do not offer them information, and they might be inclined to push for or demand information (Jensen et al. 2021). Jensen et al.'s findings suggest that waiting for older

youth and young adults to initiate such contact is ultimately more positive for the relationship. Mindful parenting practices might help parents be patient as they wait for their children to communicate (Lippold et al. 2022). Much more research is needed to help guide parents in the challenges regarding ever-changing technology.

Technology and social media have also given parents incredible access to parenting “wisdom” and advice. Atkinson’s engaging photographic history points out that a plethora of parenting “experts” have provided advice that is unfortunately often confusing and stressful for parents, and sometimes outright wrong. The stress such information can create is perhaps especially likely given the historical reality highlighted: trusted experts have often provided guidance that has more to do with “selling” something (from middle-class values to products) than science (Atkinson 2022). Those of us who research parenting clearly believe there is value in gathering scientific data to support effective parenting and healthy child development. Nonetheless, the validity of expert advice that reaches parents—and the motivation for such advice—can be very difficult for parents to discern in the moment. This reality speaks to the continuing importance, in the 21st century, of good communication and collaboration between scientists, practitioners, and policy makers, not only to ensure that the implications and limitations of science are relayed clearly and accurately, but also to implement evidence-based randomized trials that test the effectiveness of practices and programs informed by science.

The research in this volume also highlights how stresses, and effective responses to them, differ for parents of different ethnic and economic groups. Beasley et al.’s work demonstrates how poverty continues to create stressors in many domains (basic food and shelter, education, health care) in the 21st century, and these stressors are a more frequent reality for ethnic and racial minorities as well as parents with lower education (Beasley et al. 2022; Walper and Kreyenfeld 2022). The authors highlight a range of policy measures (e.g., increasing the minimum wage; providing help with childcare and higher education costs) that would help parents in the U.S. to address these stressors.

Several authors (Beasley et al. 2022; Benito-Gomez 2022; Christophe et al. 2022; Updegraff et al. 2022) also address stresses specific to parents who are, and/or whose children are, members of minority and/or marginalized groups. Racism, discrimination, and prejudice in various forms are still facts of life in the 21st century and create stress for parents and children alike. Immigrant parents are commonly confronted with a mismatch between heritage cultural values and the dominant cultural values to which their children are exposed outside of the home (Benito-Gomez 2022), as well as anti-immigrant attitudes and policies that have increased for some groups (Updegraff et al. 2022). Christophe et al.’s work highlights the potential stress of racial socialization required of minority parents, and the value of parents’ critical consciousness in helping with this task. Critical consciousness and effective racial socialization add to the array of knowledge and tasks required of parents to raise healthy children, tasks that White parents can ignore without peril if they so choose. Of course, dealing with racism, prejudice, discrimination, and racial socialization in the U.S. and other places is not new for parents. However, in the 21st century, the critical consciousness and related skills needed might be less obvious or easily obtained, given the purported progress that has been made in civil rights over recent decades and the assumption by many that we live in a post-racial society and that racism is a thing of the past. In other words, it might be harder for parents in the 21st century to understand and articulate the dangers that lurk for their children in such a world. Educators, practitioners, and researchers can contribute to addressing this need for parents of diverse backgrounds through the dissemination of research and the development of programs and policies.

Finally, relevant to the theme of parenting stress, Skinner et al.’s work shows how parents can promote resilience when faced with community-wide stressors such as those that the world experienced with COVID-19. In their study of families across nine countries, surprising results revealed that some parenting practices normally seen as

negative (i.e., psychological control) might have a beneficial effect for children under especially stressful and uncertain situations. These findings suggest the importance of examining the impact of parenting in a variety of different circumstances, not just culturally, but with respect to community-wide threats, in order to provide guidance to parents on the most effective strategies for helping their children through such difficult times.

3. Supports for Effective Parenting

Clearly, there are many stresses faced by parents in the 21st century, perhaps at a level that is unprecedented. Fortunately, there are some supports for parenting that are historically new. We recognized a pervasive focus on relational aspects of parenting in the Special Issue, along with tools for enhancing this relationship. For example, despite its drawbacks, technology can be used to enhance the parent–child relationship. Jensen et al. demonstrate that the availability of texting can indeed be used effectively to support children and to enhance the parent–child relationship as children gain independence and spend most of their time outside of the family. Lippold et al. provide a clear and helpful delineation of both the negative and the positive implications of technology use for mindful parenting. Current attention to mindfulness and applying centuries-old practices and understandings of mindfulness to multiple contexts—including parenting—is also a 21st century development in many Western countries. An emphasis on and the availability of mindfulness tools—in general and specifically for parenting—has the potential to be helpful to parents. However, although in-person mindful parenting interventions have shown promising effects (for reviews, see Lippold and Duncan 2018; Townshend et al. 2016), many popular mindfulness apps are not evidence-based and little is known about their effectiveness (Mani et al. 2015; Schultchen et al. 2020), and therefore more research and app development may be needed.

Another potential support for parents in the 21st century is an increased focus among psychologists on positive aspects of psychology, including the promotion of positive behavior in adolescents in particular. Although excessive emphasis on positive parenting and involvement can become debilitating (as covered earlier, Dupont et al. 2022; Kuczynski et al. 2021), evidence also shows that awareness of and reasonable use of these strategies leads to good outcomes. Several of the articles in this issue articulate the value of positive parenting behavior to the emotional security of the parent–child relationship and to child outcomes (Benito-Gomez 2022; Updegraff et al. 2022; Zimmermann et al. 2022). The increasing focus on positive psychology has extended to research on adolescence, which is reflected in other articles within this issue. Kaniūšonytė et al. illustrate that positive characteristics in areas such as character and caring early in adolescence can have cascading positive effects on adolescents' later perceptions of their relationship with their parents. Their research suggests that efforts to promote prosocial development (and not only to *avoid* negative developments, which has long been the focus with respect to adolescence) might positively affect the parent–child relationship during a developmental time that has been long stereotyped as a time of risk-taking, rebellion, and distancing—if not outright rejection—of parents (Buchanan and Bruton 2016). The authors also speculate that the increasing emphasis on and opportunities for adolescents to be socially engaged might result in overall improved parent–child relationships in the 21st century, which could be an interesting topic of further research. In a similar vein, Jensen et al. illustrate how judicious use of cell phone technology can promote positive parent–child relationships during emerging adulthood. Given their finding that the majority of parents never sent a text providing emotional/esteem support, encouraging parents to do so could have positive payoffs. In summary, although the *existence* of positive parenting and positive youth development is not historically new, a greater recognition and articulation of positive developments and opportunities—in research, media, parenting resources, and by practitioners—can be encouraging to parents and

help, over time, to promote even more positive outcomes among both parents and children.

A final potentially supportive feature of parenting in the 21st century that emerges from these articles is the increasing research, and resulting knowledge, available for parents in contexts other than WEIRD (White, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic; Thalmayer et al. 2021) or mainstream (e.g., one might add “abled” and “neurotypical” to the list above). Atkinson’s article on the history of parenting advice illuminates how, for much of the 20th century, advice and marketing failed to take into account parents outside of the dominant culture. Two multi-country studies in this issue (Lansford et al. 2021; Skinner et al. 2022) illustrate the proliferation of information on parenting outside of the U.S. and other Western cultures, and the growing understanding of important cultural differences and similarities. Other work (Benito-Gomez 2022; Christophe et al. 2022; Updegraff et al. 2022) does the same for parents in minoritized groups within the U.S. McCauley et al.’s work supports the historical move away from negative, “maternal blame” stereotypes in families with autistic children, showing that parents of autistic children look much like parents of non-autistic children with respect to supportive behavior, even despite facing more difficulties engaging their children (McCauley and Solomon 2022), and face more unique parenting challenges in general (Schieve et al. 2007). Overall, the articles give us perspectives on variations in parenting experiences and practices across historical (Atkinson 2022; Dupont et al. 2022), geographic (Lansford et al. 2021; Skinner et al. 2022), family structure (Walper and Kreyenfeld 2022), gender (Dupont et al. 2022; Jensen et al. 2021; Lansford et al. 2021; Walper and Kreyenfeld 2022; Zimmermann et al. 2022), racial/ethnic (Beasley et al. 2022; Benito-Gomez 2022; Christophe et al. 2022; Updegraff et al. 2022), religious (Lansford et al. 2021), socioeconomic (Beasley et al. 2022; Christophe et al. 2022; Lansford et al. 2021; Updegraff et al. 2022; Walper and Kreyenfeld 2022), and neurotypical (McCauley and Solomon 2022) contexts. Such work can potentially help parents in previously neglected or negatively stereotyped groups to feel less alone, less judged, and more understood in their parenting values and practices.

Relevant to the emphasis on diversity and caution about overgeneralizations, several studies in this issue point to the importance of measuring “cultural values” at the individual (parent) level as well as at the group (e.g., ethnic group, country, gender) level (e.g., Benito-Gomez 2022; Lansford et al. 2021; Updegraff et al. 2022). Although both individual and group differences in values such as individualism have no doubt always existed, Lansford et al. point out that the demographic shifts and technological innovations of the 21st century have likely led to increasing variation between individuals within countries. Encouraging parents and those who work with them to recognize that variation might give parents more confidence to trust their instincts, because the standards and values for parenting may feel less monolithic within the larger community or context.

Altogether, these papers indicate a move toward better knowledge and understanding of diverse parenting in the 21st century. This provides hope for a broader array of parents to more easily find support, encouragement, and resources that were not available to them twenty or thirty years ago. For this hope to be realized, efforts are needed to translate research into programs and policies within diverse contexts and populations.

4. Autonomy with Relational Competence: Fostering Competence for an Uncertain Future?

Like parents across the centuries, parents today aim to help their children develop the competencies they will need to be successful adults in the future. In the 21st century, what these competencies are might be less obvious than it has been in earlier times. We noticed that some articles in this Special Issue focused on the development of competencies that might support success in a range of uncertain futures. For the parents

reflected in this set of papers, who were predominantly but not exclusively Western, that seemed to include finding a healthy balance between nurturing personal autonomy and relational skills. Allowing children to exercise expression and practice independence arose as a theme, whether in the context of school-aged children resisting parents (Kuczynski et al. 2021) or communication through texting among emerging adult children (Jensen et al.). However, parents emphasized personal expression that was socially skilled and took others into account (Kuczynski et al. 2021). Altogether, the data support parental recognition of the child as an active agent in relationships who needs guidance toward healthy interconnectedness (see also Kaniūšonytė et al. 2021; Skinner et al. 2022). In general, aiming for this balance seems similar to parenting advice promoted in Western cultures over the past century (i.e., authoritative parenting; Pinquart 2017; Pinquart and Kauser 2018), with the idea that children benefit from independence, but not total freedom, as they learn to engage in socially acceptable ways (Dupont et al. 2022).

However, Lansford et al.'s paper raises the possibility that emphasis on collectivist (e.g., relational) values might be increasing in contexts that were once more individualistic, and that emphasis on individualistic (e.g., personal autonomy) values might be increasing in contexts that were once more collectivistic. Whether this melding of values is reflected in an increasing concern with socializing both independence and relational skills, and whether a balance of these attributes is seen as the best way to position children for success in a rapidly changing world, would be interesting research questions.

5. Conclusions

The set of articles in this Special Issue cover a wide variety of specific topics, and each article articulates in detail the implications of their work for parents, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers in the 21st century. We have identified three themes that emerge across the articles. The first is that there is plentiful evidence for the existence of high parental stress. Whether this stress is higher than in past decades we cannot say, but it is a reality of modern parenting that parents experience and that practitioners and policymakers need to acknowledge and address. Researchers can build on these data to further elucidate and illuminate sources of stress and strategies for management. The second theme is that there are indeed improved supports for 21st century parents in many respects, supports that should be put to use by practitioners and policy makers. However, research is needed that addresses when and how parents in diverse contexts access these supports and use them effectively, and practitioners and policymakers should rely on empirically supported strategies. Additionally, fathers should be included more often in this research (Walper and Kreyenfeld 2022; Zimmermann et al. 2022). Finally, the articles suggest that today's parents continue, like parents in the past, to focus on a balance between socializing children for independence and positive relationships. How parents in the 21st century prioritize these values and attributes might be shifting, perhaps due to uncertainties about the future that awaits 21st century children, but more research is needed to understand how aspects of today's society, within and across cultures, might influence these priorities.

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