2

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON PARENTING

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- To explain the role that theories have for understanding parenting.
- To describe the key theoretical perspectives related to parenting.
- To summarize central differences between the theories.

INTRODUCTION TO THEORY

In the movie *The Libertine*, Johnny Depp portrays the fascinating John Wilmot, Second Earl of Rochester, who lived a short life (1647 to 1680). Wilmot's adult life was largely devoid of morals. He ignored and even spurned culturally acceptable behavior and religious norms. Much of his short adulthood involved drinking excessive amounts of alcohol, chasing women, and partying. He also wrote poetry that today would be called pornographic. However, he is also remembered for a witty sentence attributed to him about theories of child development: "Before I got married, I had six theories about bringing up children; now I have six children and no theories." As he often did, he exaggerated. In reality, he only had four children when he died at age 33 from sexually transmitted diseases and alcoholism. But, his quote underscores two key themes: First, *everyone* has ideas about child rearing. This idea was introduced in Chapter 1 with the description of *lay theories*. Wilmot's second point is that once you actually have children to rear, the task is considerably more complicated than anticipated. Your prior theories often do not hold up.

Lay Beliefs and Parental Behavior

Lay theories or beliefs about parent-child relationships are sometimes captured in aphorisms and clichés. In the English language, several expressions highlight the theme of parental influence: "Like father, like son; like mother, like daughter;" "Chip off the old block;" "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree;" "He's the spitting image of his father;" and "Following in her mother's footsteps." A recent metaphor contrasts two underlying approaches to child rearing: a carpenter versus a gardener (Gopnick, 2016). The carpenter, like a sculptor, works to hammer out the child in the desired image. Gardeners, instead, cultivate children by working the soil (child's developmental context), while recognizing children's individuality.

Theories about child rearing—whether lay or scientific—are important, because they help us understand parenting and prescribe the ways in which parents should behave. For example, some parents are under the mistaken notion that you can spoil infants by giving them too much attention. This lay misperception may have its roots in classical learning theory, but it is obviously an oversimplification of a complex interactional process. Learning theory is the implicit orientation here: If you give infants too much attention, they will learn to want attention all the time. Along those lines, Watson (1928) warned about the dangers of love and affection. He wrote,

> Never hug and kiss them, never let them sit in [*sic*] your lap. If you must, kiss them once on the forehead when they say good night. Shake hands with them in the morning. Give them a pat on the head if they have done an extraordinarily good job of a difficult task. Try it out. In a week's time you will find how easy it is to be perfectly objective with your child and at the same time kindly. You will be utterly ashamed of the mawkish, sentimental way you have been handling it. (pp. 81–82)

Another example of how different child-rearing beliefs result in different actions occurs with sleep problems. Bedtime can be a time of conflict in many households. Most parents

experience problems trying to get a toddler or preschooler to sleep at night. In medieval times, parents sometimes resorted to using a concoction called "quietness" to drug their children, as was mentioned in the last chapter. We can certainly see how this practice has changed! Today, parents tend to deal with bedtime struggles using behavioral means. A mother might ignore the child's cries or bids for a glass of water or another story. Ignoring often requires shutting (or even locking) the child in his room and letting him plead or cry until he falls asleep (see Photo 2.1).

An alternative parental orientation, based on attachment and emotions, would result in a very different course of action. Here, a father might perceive his toddler son could not fall asleep because he was scared of the dark and in need of reassurance. Consequently, this father would comfort the child and soothe the toddler until he fell asleep. The father's behavior and beliefs reflect an attachment orientation, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Parents also have beliefs about discipline. For example, two Australian researchers identified 10 beliefs related to the use of corporal punishment (Kish & Newcombe, 2015). These beliefs clustered around two themes: the disciplinary practice is harmless and is both necessary and effective. The authors labeled these beliefs as "myths" based on the abundance of research into the topic, as will be discussed in later chapters.

In the past, parents were likely to hold simplistic and unidimensional views about their children. For instance, Puritans in colonial America had a clear theory of the source of problems in children and how to deal with them. Children were viewed as inherently evil or sinful and the parents' job was to drive this "evil instinct" away. This religiously driven theory about evil in children colored their perceptions and influenced parental

Source: Photograph by J. P. Bell

PHOTO 2.1: A Kurdish infant in northern Iraq lies in a crib with cloth bindings to keep the baby on the mattress in bed while the cradle is rocked from side to side.

practices. Today, most parents do not see their children in such a unidimensional way. Rather, parents' beliefs about children are varied and eclectic, and they often change over time with experience and changing circumstances.

One of the first theories about children's development was proposed by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). Although Freud is famous for his rich theory of the conscious and unconscious mind, his psychosexual theory (1936) is less well known. Freud paid scant attention to the role that parents play in child development, with the exception of ensuring a smooth transition through each of the five psychosexual stages. Freud hypothesized that children's development progressed in a fixed and orderly sequence through discrete stages of oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital stages. Between the phallic and genital stage is a period (stage) of latency in which the sexual energy is repressed and not located in any body part. During all but the latency stage, child's sexual energy, according to Freud and his followers, was focused on a particular region or erogenous zone.

When the theory was put to the test, researchers found little support. Sewell and Mussen (1952) used Freud's theory to generate predictions concerning infant feeding practices and their development. They hypothesized that children who were breastfed versus bottle fed, those who were fed on demand rather than on a timetable, and those who were gradually weaned (versus abrupt weaning) would be more likely to success-fully pass through the oral stage than other children and therefore be less likely to show personality or behavioral problems. However, they did not detect any significant effects as a consequence of different feeding histories. Due to studies such as that one, Freud's theory lost favor among researchers and was not pursued. Despite the shortcomings of his theory and the failure of other empirical research to support it, Freud's work opened the scientific door to the study of child rearing and parental influences on children.

Scientific Theories Addressing Parenting

There is no comprehensive theory of parenting, although various investigators have attempted to formulate one. As early as 1959, Benedict (1949) recognized parenthood as a developmental phase of life. Sameroff and Feil (1985) proposed four cognitive stages of parents' thinking about their children, with more advanced levels of thinking reflecting increasing differentiation of the parent and child. Ellen Galinsky (1981) developed a the-ory of parenting comprised of six orderly stages that are tied to the age of the child. The stages are (1) *image-making* (preparing for parenthood); (2) *nurturing* (birth–2 years); (3) *authority* (2–5 years); (4) *interpretive*, or helping the child understand the world (5–12 years); (5) *interdependent*, when parents need to develop anew their relationships (ado-lescence); and (6) *departure* (late adolescence). Although there are few empirical efforts to validate this theory, Galinsky's work has been critiqued on both methodological and theoretical grounds (e.g., Demick, 2002, 2006).

How children develop and what influences their development are two of the central questions in psychology. Those two questions span a wide range of theoretical perspec-tives. There are many such theories to choose from. For more than 100 years, theories about children's development—and how parents influence that progress—have been generated. Theoretical approaches to the study of parent-child relationships differ widely on a variety of fundamental dimensions. They contrast in their scope, such as viewing

parent-child relationships either from an **ontogenetic** (development of individuals over their life span) perspective or a **phylogenetic** (development of the species over time) one. Although the multiplicity of theories can, at times, be daunting, they provide a foundation for understanding the research findings described throughout the book. We begin this overview of theories with what can be described as the two classical theories: attachment theory and behavioral theory.

CLASSICAL THEORIES

Attachment Theory

If asked to identify the single most important quality of the parent-child relationship, most people would say "love." Understanding how love between a parent and child develops and affects development is the focus of **attachment theory**. This theory has its roots in Freudian ideas, evolutionary views, and empirical research into the mother-child bond in rhesus monkeys conducted by Harry Harlow (see Box 2.1). Attachment theory addresses the establishment, maintenance, and consequences of affectionate bonds between parents and children. John Bowlby (1907–1990), a British child psychiatrist, initially formulated its central ideas. As the theory developed, it reflected Bowlby's long-term collaboration with Mary Ainsworth (1913–1999), a psychologist.

BOX 2.1 HARRY HARLOW, HIS MONKEYS, AND "MOTHER LOVE"

It is sometimes difficult to test theoretical propositions on children. Due to the slow pace of human development that requires studies to last for many years, the inability to fully control the environment, and ethical considerations, researchers have sometimes used animals. Although animal research must also meet ethical standards and be approved by ethical review boards, there is more latitude given to conducting research with animals. Harry Harlow (1905–1981) was a psychologist who used rhesus monkeys to investigate questions about development.

Harlow's most important studies concerned the nature of love. The prevailing view was based on learning theory, including Watson's views about the dangers of affection. That perspective assumed that infants love their mothers because the nourishment they receive fulfills a basic need. Harlow questioned that view and

designed experimental studies to refute it. Using two wire-mesh "surrogate" mothers, he conducted a series of studies in the 1950s and early 1960s (see Photo 2.2). One of the surrogates was a wire-mesh mother who had a feeding tube attached to its chest so the infant monkey could obtain nourishment from it. The other surrogate mother had no tube but was covered with a soft, terry-cloth material. When Harlow frightened the young monkeys with a robot, they retreated to the surrogate mother who provided them with comfort. The choice was unanimous. Infant monkeys sought the comfort of the terry-cloth covered monkey, not the one with the feeding tube. Based on that investigation and others, Harlow concluded it was the feeling of warmth rather than the nourishment that the infants sought. This, he argued, was the nature of love. A fascinating description of Harlow's work and life can be found in a biography by Deborah Blum (2002).

The core premise of attachment theory is that the relationship between a parent and infant reflects a behavioral system that has adapted to promote survival and competent functioning of the offspring. The behavioral system has two centrals parts: **novelty seeking** and **proximity seeking**. Although the development of the system occurs throughout the first year of life, it is most apparent when infants begin to crawl (typically around six to 10 months of age). When infants feel safe in their surroundings, they explore their environment and play with novel objects. After all, the way an infant grows into an independent and competent adult is through exploring, manipulating, and interacting with people and objects. This is novelty seeking in action.

On the other hand, infants who just set off to explore the environment without any fear would not last long—they might get injured or even killed. This is where the second part of the system comes in: proximity seeking. When infants are upset, distressed, or fearful, they will retreat to the protective arms of a parent. The parent is then able to protect the child—one of the basic functions of parenting identified by Bradley as mentioned in the first chapter.

In this way, parents serve as a secure base for an exploring infant. According to attachment theory, this base enables infants to feel comfortable exploring their environment, because they know they can retreat to the safety of a parent when they need protection. After regaining a sense of well-being, infants can then return to exploring their environment and developing competence. Caregivers establish their role as a secure base over the first year of life by showing **warmth** and love to the infants, being sensitive to their cues, by satisfying their needs, and helping to regulate their emotions. In turn, infants learn to trust that the caregiver will take care of their needs. That trust develops into a secure attachment that encourages exploration of the environment, supports the development of social and cognitive competence, establishes feelings of efficacy, and promotes the development of autonomy (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Easterbrooks, Bartlett, Beeghly, & Thompson, 2013).

Ainsworth, after observing how mothers and infants interacted in the Ganda tribe in Uganda (Ainsworth, 1967) and conducting a **longitudinal** study in Baltimore, designed a clever laboratory procedure to assess the quality of the attachment relationship (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). In this 22-minute procedure, 12-month-old infants were put through increasingly stressful situations. The eight episodes listed in Table 2.1 involve a carefully orchestrated series of departures and reunions of the parent and an unfamiliar adult in order to gauge the infant's quality of attachment with his or her parent. The key episodes are numbers 5 and 8, when the parent returns to the room after the infant has been left with the unfamiliar adult or alone.

Ainsworth's early work was almost exclusively focused on maternal attachment, though now we consider these concepts to apply equally to fathers and other primary caregivers. How infants respond to the parent during these reunions is thought to reveal the essence of children's emotional ties to their parents—that is, children's learned behavior strategy of interacting with the mother. To determine the quality of the parent-child relationships, video recordings of infants in Ainsworth's Strange Situation procedure are painstakingly coded in order to classify a child into attachment types. The classification is based primarily on how infants behave when the mother leaves and returns. Other information that contributes to the coding includes how upset the infants become, how much they cry, and whether and when they show positive emotion.

Episode	Actions	Comments
TABLE 2.1 ■ **Ainsworth's Strange Situation Procedure**		
1	Introduction of Experimenter, Parent, and Child	Lasts only 30 seconds
2	Parent and Child alone	Parent watches Child
3	Stranger enters, talks with Parent, approaches Child. Parent leaves	Stranger silent first minute, then talks to Parent, then in 3rd minute to Child; first separation of Parent
4	Child alone with Stranger	Key question is whether Child gets comfort from Stranger
5	Parent returns, Stranger leaves	Reunion #1 of Parent and Child; Parent leaves at end of episode
6	Child is alone	Episode often lasts less than 3 minutes due to Child's distress
7	Stranger enters	Key question is whether Child gets comfort from Stranger
8	Parent returns, Stranger leaves	Reunion #2

Note: Each episode lasts 3 minutes except for Episode 1 and those episodes where the child becomes very distressed.

One might expect all infants to be upset when their mothers leave them and, upon their return, to eagerly approach and hug them. These children are considered *secure* in their attachment to their mothers. However, depending on the sample, approximately 40% of infants respond quite differently. Some barely notice their mother's re-entering the room or even ignore her return. These children are classified as **anxious-avoidant**. Another pattern of response is to be upset when the mother leaves and, upon reunion, approach her but resist being held. These children are classified as **anxious-resistant**, also called *ambivalent.* The final type of *insecure* attachment does not follow either pattern but instead shows a mixture of responses. These children do not have an organized behavioral strategy to deal with stresses and therefore are labeled **disorganized**.

Attachment theory holds that the way a child responds to the maternal absence is due to the history of parent-child interaction. Infants who received sensitive parenting over their first year of life developed secure attachments. **Sensitive parenting** means that, at a minimum, the parent responds promptly and appropriately as well as is available to help calm a distressed infant and help him or her to self-regulate (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). Furthermore, parents of secure children are also flexible, balanced, and integrated (Solomon & George, 2008). Imagine an infant who is in pain because she is hungry. She begins to cry. If her distress signal is responded to quickly and appropriately (she gets fed), she will begin to trust that caregiver to meet her needs. Over time,

if the caregiver quickly and correctly addresses the infant's needs (such as hunger, boredom, and discomfort), the infant learns that the caregiver can be relied on. In this way, the infant feels secure in the presence of this adult.

Some mothers and fathers do not respond sensitively to their infants. It could be because the parent is depressed, angry, or stressed. Or, the parent could be operating under the erroneous belief that infants do not need responsive care or that such care might even be damaging (for instance, they are afraid of spoiling the infant). In some cases, parents did not plan or want to have children, and they resent the demands of parenting. These parents may provide inconsistent care or even ignore or reject the infant's bids for attention. Parents who fail to respond sensitively are likely to have children who develop insecure attachment relations. If the parent does not attend regularly to the infant's needs, the child will develop an *anxious-avoidant* relationship pattern. Such children learn that the parent cannot be expected to provide for their needs, so they do not bother going to their parents later when stressed or in need.

Other parents may love their infants, but for various reasons, they have a poor sense of timing, misjudge their infants' needs, and are subsequently quite inconsistent in their care. For example, a mother may misread her infant son's fussiness and think he wants to play. Or, a father may be preoccupied with his troubles and so responds inconsistently to his crying daughter. Consequently, the message the infant receives is that the parent is an unreliable caregiver. The infant learns that "my parent is unpredictable and cannot always be counted upon to help me when I am in distress." As a result, that child will show an ambivalent—that is, *anxious-resistant*—pattern of behavior.

The third category of insecurely attached children—*disorganized*—was created to describe children who could not otherwise be classified as *avoidant* or *resistant*. These infants did not show the typical strategies of avoiding their caregivers or responding to them with ambivalence. Instead, these infants did not display any consistent pattern of response. These disorganized children are believed to be survivors of abuse or some **trauma** and thus show peculiar and incoherent response patterns.

In the 1980s and 1990s, hundreds of studies were conducted using the Strange Situation procedure. A wealth of questions addressed such topics as the relation between maternal versus paternal attachment, the relation between child **temperament** and attachment, whether day care causes insecure attachments, the relations between maternal caregiving and attachment classification, cross-cultural differences in attachment patterns, and outcomes of secure attachment patterns in terms of social competence and school success. Some findings from these studies will be examined in subsequent chapters.

The key implication of attachment in infancy for older children and adults is that it informs individuals how valued they are as well as how reliable and trustworthy other people are. Children build an understanding of the world that contains ideas and expectations about how other people will behave toward them. As their social world expands, children carry these views of others with them into their new relationships. These views are called **internal working models** (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008). According to attachment theorists (e.g., Bowlby, 1988; Cassidy, 2008), there is something else infants are learning from interacting with caregivers—their own worth or lack of worth. If a caregiver does not provide sensitive care, then infants get the message they are unworthy of care and perhaps unlovable. The theory has been extended to capture how individuals' internal representation of self and others influence their behavior in later childhood

and adulthood (Ainsworth, 1989). Psychologists (e.g., Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008) also study the influence of early attachment relations as it relates to dating relationships and functioning in married couples.

Here is a rough example of how an internal working model may apply to a college student. Suppose a friend sets you up for a blind date. You show up at the appointed time and at the right place, but your date does not. What is your first thought? Do you suspect that your date was an unreliable person (i.e., suggesting a distrust of others)? Or, do you think that perhaps the date arrived, checked you out from a distance, and decided you were not a good match (i.e., negative view of self)? Our immediate, uncensored reactions provide a glimpse of the working models of ourselves and of others that we carry around in our heads.

According to attachment theory, the implications of attachment classifications are profound because individuals base their interpersonal behavior on their internal working models, even into adulthood. Insecurely attached individuals are expected to behave differently from **securely attached** ones, whether interacting with their parents or others such as peers and teachers. In particular, investigations have linked adults' working models with how they form romantic relationships and how they parent their own children. However, these internal working models are just cognitions, and they can be changed. If an insecurely attached individual reevaluates her thinking, perhaps with the help of a therapist, she can establish new representations about herself and others. Such an individual can then shift into an "earned" secure status.

Attachment theory was developed to account for the development and significance of parent-child love. Another theory centered on the love (or lack thereof) between a parent and child had initially been called parental acceptance-rejection theory but is now been expanded to be labeled **interpersonal acceptance-rejection theory** (IPARTheory (Rohner, 2014)). Developed by Ronald Rohner (1986), the theory was formed around the idea that parental love results in positive outcomes, but rejection negatively affects a child's psychological adjustment and behavioral functioning. It has now been expanded to consider acceptance and rejection across the lifespan. The focus of the theory is on understanding the effects, causes, and correlates of children's perceptions of parental acceptance-rejection. Personality, psychological adjustment, and behavioral development are all examined. For example, the theory correctly predicted about 80% of personality scores. Rejected children are more likely to be fearful, insecure, attention seeking, jealous, hostile, and lonely (Khaleque & Rohner, 2002).

The tenets of Rohner's theory have been tested in more than 4,400 studies around the world since 1975. The best way to review findings and compare studies is through a **meta-analysis**. This review technique involves combining and comparing the results of multiple studies using a common and quantifiable measure of effect size. In an overview of 12 meta-analyses conducted to test different postulates of the theory, 551 studies from 31 countries were examined, that included a total of nearly 150,000 participants (Khaleque & Ali, 2017). Those meta-analyses largely supported the central tenets of the theory and the results were **pancultural**, that is across cultures.

Theories about parent-child love continue to hold interest for researchers and parents alike because they address one of the fundamental experiences of parenting. Next, we move on to a very different approach to the parent-child relationship coming from a behaviorist tradition.

Behavioral Theory

John B. Watson (1878–1958) was a prominent and colorful early behavioral theorist. Though the centerpiece of his theory was observable behavior, Watson's work acknowledged the importance of social learning as well. Known as the "father of behaviorism" because he advocated focusing on actual behavior rather than introspection, which had previously been the purview of psychological inquiry, Watson also fathered the explicit link between social learning and child rearing. He used ideas about conditioning from Ivan Pavlov and Edward Thorndike to formulate his views about how children develop. Watson espoused an extreme environmental and mechanistic perspective, depicting the child as little more than a small conditioning machine, fueled by learning. His well-known boast appeared in his book, *Psychological Care of Infant and Child*, in 1928:

Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in, and I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select—a doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief and yes, even into beggar-man and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations and race of his ancestors. (p. 10)

A few years later, Watson tempered his claim but not his views when he wrote that "it is what happens to individuals after birth that makes one a hewer of wood and a drawer of water, another a diplomat, a thief, a successful businessman or a far-famed scientist" (1930, p. 270). His child-rearing manual, *Psychological Care of Infant and Child* (1928), was intended to guide parents in rearing psychologically healthy children and to be a companion to health-related manuals from pediatricians, such as the one authored by Dr. Holt (discussed in Chapter 1).

Watson's theory was based on classical conditioning. Classical conditioning involves learning a new behavior merely by the process of **association**. In simple terms, two stimuli are linked together to produce a new learned response in a person or animal. Classical conditioning involves pairing a previously neutral stimulus (such as the sound of a bell) with an unconditioned stimulus (the taste of food). This unconditioned stimulus naturally and automatically triggers salivating as a response to the food, which is known as the unconditioned response. Watson recognized the utility of classical conditioning for controlling fears in children and curing such common problems as shyness. He also warned parents of the dangers of coddling (giving too much affection to) infants, because he was convinced it resulted in "learned invalidism." Watson believed that the prudent use of classical conditioning represented a powerful environmental tool to allow parents to influence their children's development (Horowitz, 1992).

PHOTO 2.2: A monkey with the two "surrogate" mothers from Harlow's study.

Missing from Watson's behavioral approach to learning was **operant conditioning**, a form of learning identified and studied intensively by B. F. Skinner. Operant conditioning focuses on whether behavior is more or less likely to recur in the future. Actions that enhance the likelihood that a behavior will recur are **reinforcements**, while actions that result in a behavior being less likely to reappear are **punishments**. Through this process, an association is formed between the behavior and the consequences for that behavior. After its discovery by Skinner (1938), no social learning theory could be complete without it. In fact, Skinner is considered by many to be the most influential psychologist of the 20th century. In his novel, *Walden Two* (1948), he described how to rear and educate children using his principles in order to create happy, creative, and productive adults. Some parents also knew of Skinner for his invention of the *air crib*. High-tech for its time, it not only controlled temperature and humidity, but it also was designed for the easy cleanup of an infant's eliminations. Several companies marketed the product, but it was never a commercial success. Still, Skinner's legacy lives on through his theory of operant conditioning.

Response consequences can be pleasant or reinforcing or they can be unpleasant or punishing. Skinnerian conditioning gets more complex when one considers that reinforcers and punishers can either be applied or removed (see Table 2.2). If one gives a child candy when the child performs a desired response, one is using *positive reinforcement*, and the result will be an increase in the behavior. However, if the same candy is removed when the child does something, the behavior will be suppressed. This is called *negative punishment.* If an aversive stimulus is applied in response to an undesired behavior, such as a spank to a toddler's noncompliance, this too is a punishment, but in this case, it is called *positive punishment* because the response involves an action, rather than removal of a stimulus. In contrast, if an unpleasant stimulus or event is removed, that removal reinforces the preceding action. This type of reinforcement is called *negative reinforcement.* Many people confuse the concept of negative reinforcement with that of punishment. Just keep in mind that reinforcement increases or strengthens the behavior that precedes it whether the procedure involves positive or negative reinforcement.

Just as any procedure that *increases* the likelihood that behavior recurs is a reinforcement, any procedure that *decreases* behavioral recurrence is punishment. So, presenting a positive (pleasant) stimulus (such as attention, candy, or money) is reinforcement. Withdrawing a negative (unpleasant) stimulus (such as nagging, yelling, spanking, or whining) also functions as reinforcement. Presenting an unpleasant or aversive stimulus produces punishment, as does withdrawing a positive stimulus. Whether a procedure

TABLE 2.2 ■ Differentiating Punishments From Negative Reinforcements		
Type of Action		
	Administer	**Withdraw**
Positive Stimulus	Positive reinforcement	Negative punishment (or "omission training")
Negative Stimulus	Positive punishment	Negative reinforcement

involves reinforcement or punishment is based not on whether the stimulus is pleasant or unpleasant but on the behavioral outcome: Does the likelihood of the behavior increase or decrease in the future?

Consider the common example of a child in the supermarket fussing for candy that the parent does not want the child to have. Often, the exasperated parent gives in and buys the candy. When the child stops fussing, the parent's action has been negatively reinforced because an unpleasant stimulus (the noxious child fussing) was withdrawn. The next time the parent takes the child shopping, the parent is more likely to buy candy quickly so as to pre-empt any fussing. In this case, the parent is the one being trained! Interestingly, the candy has also positively reinforced the child's fussing, so the child is more likely to fuss again—and more vigorously—on the next shopping trip unless given the candy. This example highlights the potential **bidirectional** (or dynamic) aspect of something so basic as simple reinforcement of behavior.

To add complexity to the picture, reinforcement may be social as well as material. In fact, most parent-child interactions will involve social reinforcement or punishment rather than material consequences. We can see, then, how Skinner's theory of operant conditioning can be used to uncover the causes of some seemingly mysterious behavioral outcomes. It can be useful in explaining how children acquire bad habits from their parents and how parents inadvertently reinforce behaviors they do not like, such as whining, noncompliance, and temper tantrums.

According to behavior theorists, parents often make at least three basic operant conditioning mistakes. Perhaps most commonly, they give attention to undesired behaviors and thereby reinforce them. A child misbehaves and the parent reacts by reprimanding. The child then gets attention, which can be reinforcing, even if the attention is of an unpleasant form. This is a difficult concept for most parents to grasp—that negative attention can actually be reinforcing to the child. The child may not enjoy the parent yelling at her, but if the child's target behavior increases, it has been reinforced. A second problem is that parents fail to positively reinforce desired behaviors. When a child is playing nicely with a peer, parents generally do not notice and so miss the opportunity to reward the behavior with positive attention and compliments. The third type of error parents commonly make is to overly rely on punishments rather than reinforcements.

There are two types of fundamental problems with punishments. First, they generally are ineffective because parents do not punish correctly. Punishment is only effective if it is used consistently (any time the misbehavior occurs), contingently (right after the misbehavior), and—at least following the initial instance of the misbehavior—firmly and decisively (Gershoff, 2013; Holden, 2002). However, most parents are reluctant to punish firmly, are likely to postpone punishment (i.e., "Wait until we get home!"), and are inconsistent in dispensing punishment. A second type of problem with punishment is that it introduces fear and anxiety into the parent-child relationship and thus does not promote positive interactions.

As with any theory, there is the danger of oversimplifying or misapplying the practice of conditioning. Although candy, allowance, and gold star stickers can function as rewards (material reinforcers), the most powerful parental reinforcer is attention and approval (a social reinforcer). No amount of monetary or material reward can substitute for the attention that children crave. Unfortunately, these days, at least with older children, rewards

for good grades often come in the form of money, iPods, or gift cards. One of the concerns with that practice is that when external rewards are given for educational goals, students will not be internally motivated and will not develop a love of learning. Later, when the reward is no longer offered, children may not continue to want to learn or to be self-motivated to do well in school or college.

Behavioral principles for understanding learning have stood the test of time and continue to be relevant as we seek to understand such topics as child discipline, learning, and behavior change, including therapeutic interventions for problem behaviors including anxiety disorders and phobias. The principles of reinforcement, punishment, and classical conditioning, however, do not address more complex human systems, which we will now explore as we consider other kinds of influences on children's behavior that may inform parents' behavior as well.

PHOTO 2.3: A father kissing his infant.

BIOLOGICAL, GENETIC, AND ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES

Evolutionary Developmental Psychology

Charles Darwin shocked the world and revolutionized the scientific community when, in 1859, he published his theory about the **evolution** of humans and animals. His core conceptualization was deceptively simple. According to the concept of **natural selection**, not all individuals have the same chances for survival in a particular environment. Those better suited for their environment will survive longer, and leave behind more offspring than those individuals who are less well adapted. Characteristics that are a better match for the environment will be more likely to be transmitted to the next generation. They are thus "selected." Through this process, particular traits and characteristics become more or less common in any given population. According to contemporary applications of Darwinian theory, natural selection operates on individuals (and therefore their genetic material) with the goal of having our **genes** survive in subsequent generations. Thus, as the biologist Richard Dawkins (1976) phrased it in his celebrated book, our genes are "selfish."

When the evolutionary approach is applied to parenting, researchers seek to understand how patterns of child rearing have been modified and selected—at least, during the past 35,000 years, when anatomically modern humans emerged and lived in **hunter-gatherer** communities. Given that 99% of human generations (each generation lasts roughly 25 years) have lived in hunter-gatherer societies, the aim of the evolutionary approach is to explicate how contemporary parent behavior evolved and is affected by selection processes within these societies (e.g., Narváez, Gettler, Braungart-Rieker, Miller-Graff, & Hastings, 2016).

PHOTO 2.4:
Evolutionary psychologists argue that the distinctive features of infants that make them appear cute have been selected in order to ensure parental care and investment.

Individuals have evolved to be particularly attuned to certain environmental events or stimuli in order to promote their survival. The fear of heights or fear of snakes are good fears to have if one wants to live long. The same evolutionary theory has led researchers to look for characteristics and behaviors in organisms that promote the survival of the young. It is easy to recognize that the cry of an infant is a powerful and aversive behavior designed to elicit rapid caregiver attention. Thus it is an example of a human behavior that probably evolved to increase the survival prospects of the **altricial** (an organism requiring care and feeding to survive) human infant. Parents may not appreciate the positive aspects of the lusty cries of their newborn, but they certainly know they are effective in getting their attention! There are also more subtle stimuli that have been linked to caregiving behavior. The unique facial characteristics of human infants and other young animals that we perceive as cute (e.g., large forehead, round cheeks, small nose and chin) represent a special class of stimuli that are believed to literally "turn on" caregiving behavior—whether it be in animals or humans (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1970; see Photo 2.4). Who can deny the impulse to cuddle or care for such an adorable creature?

Evolutionary theorist Kevin MacDonald (1992) argued that the feeling of love for a child has been selected over hundreds of thousands of years. That emotion has served to ensure cohesive family relationships and paternal involvement in child rearing, thus increasing the likelihood of child survival. Although love is a complex concept, one can imagine that it can prompt better and more self-sacrificial parenting behaviors. Another concept of interest to evolutionary researchers is **parental investment** (Trivers, 1974). Parents (especially mothers in traditional societies) devote a great deal of time, energy, money, and thought to rearing their children. But, why do some parents spend so much time with some children while other parents may be largely uninvolved? According to evolutionary theory, the answer lies in the amount of shared genetic material, the offspring's likelihood of survival, and the future likelihood that the child will have children (e.g., Geary, 2006). For example, evolutionary psychologists argue that it was adaptive for our ancestors with scarce resources not to care for premature or newborns with disabilities who were unlikely to survive—thus providing a phylogenetic basis for the widespread practice of infanticide. In addition, cultural, social, and environmental factors may also have contributed to the frequent use of this practice.

Differential parental investment offers one explanation of why some parents physically abuse their children. Two researchers (Daly & Wilson, 1996) proposed that serious child abuse—when children are killed—can be explained by evolutionary theory. When they analyzed Canadian child fatality data, they discovered that the annual rate of child homicides was about 500 victims per million for fathers living with stepchildren. In contrast,

the filicide (a parent killing a child) rate for fathers and their biological children was less than 20 victims per million. Stepfathers, then, were 25 times more likely to murder their stepchildren than were biological fathers. Some subsequent investigations (e.g., Harris, Hilton, Rice, & Eke, 2007) but not all (e.g., Malkin & Lamb, 1994), have found support for this theoretical explanation.

From an evolutionary perspective, what females value, with regard to mate selection, can be captured in the "three g's:" good genes, good providers, and good fathers (Chang, Lu, & Zhu, 2017). In contrast, men value physical features indicating fertility, women who will be faithful, good providers, and good mothers. Another concept from evolutionary theory is **alloparenting**, or the provision of infant care by adults who are not biologically-related to the child (Kenkel, Perkeybile, & Carter, 2017). In most societies, alloparenting is essential to meeting the needs of children and can have long-term effects on their physical, social, and mental health (Narváez, Valentino, Fuentes, McKenna, & Gray, 2014).

It is important to point out that an evolutionary view of development does not claim that any action is inevitable. Rather, current proponents of **evolutionary psychology** (e.g., Bjorklund & Jordan, 2013) view our heritage as providing a propensity or bias *toward* behaving or reacting in particular ways due to selection pressures. It is possible to counteract that bias, but a person needs to be conscious of that bias and then work to compensate for it.

Behavioral Genetics Theory

In contrast to big-picture focus of evolutionary theory, the field of human behavioral genetics is more concerned with evaluating the possibility of how human traits and even behaviors might be directly impacted by genetic inheritance. This field of inquiry has often focused on understanding the origins of aggression and other problem behaviors.

Willie Bosket was a bright and appealing child, but by the time he was 15 years old, he was also a double murderer. Willie's violent behavior could be explained by his impoverished childhood, the parenting he received, and his social environment: His mother was a poor, single parent who relied on harsh physical punishment in her efforts to socialize him; as a preteen, he spent considerable time with delinquent peers who encouraged him to be violent.

Behavioral genetics theory takes a different approach to explaining behavior. It focuses on genetic inheritance and environmental contributions to behavior or particular characteristics. The behavioral genetics theory explanation of Willie's behavior would be that he was genetically predisposed to violent behavior. After all, Willie's father, whom Willie had never met, had a long criminal history that had started before he was eight years old. The family history of violence and criminality did not end there. Willie's grandfather and even his great-grandfather also had violent histories (Butterfield, 1995). The fact that four generations of Bosket men had violent criminal records suggests another possible influence on behavior—that of genetic inheritance.

The goal of behavioral genetics theory is to understand both genetic and environmental influences on human behavior (McGuire, Segal, & Hershberger, 2012). This orientation upon genetic determinants began with the English scientist Sir Francis Galton (1822–1911) and was pursued by the American physician Arnold

Gesell (1880–1961). Trained as an educator, developmental psychologist, and physician, Gesell posed a **nativist** (or maturational) theory of development. He believed that children's genetic constitution determined the natural unfolding of their inherited predispositions. Gesell pioneered a variety of photographic methods to carefully document children's growth. Parents' central role was to support this unfolding by providing an environment appropriately matched to the child's state of maturational readiness (Thelen & Adolph, 1992).

Gesell's legacy can be readily seen in contemporary behavioral genetics theory; however, in contrast to Gesell, who was primarily interested in charting the normative course of development, modern behavioral geneticists typically study how variations in genes are associated with variations in intelligence, personality, or behavioral traits. Most behavioral genetics studies involve either *twin studies* or *adoption* research. In twin studies, the similarities in children's characteristics within a family are compared in identical, fraternal, and non-twin siblings. Adoption studies are used to compare the similarities between adopted and biological offspring with their biological and adoptive parents. Clearly, behavioral geneticists are not only interested in a child's **genotype**, or genetic makeup, but they are also focused on the child's **phenotype**, how traits are expressed behaviorally. No child is a perfect copy of his or her parents. Though a child receives 50% of his or her genes from each parent, not even these are all exact copies. Behavioral geneticists also recognize that the environment plays an important role in the child's phenotype, beginning with the environment when the child was *in utero*. **Epigenetics** is the term referring to the study of how phenotypic expression is affected by prior experience.

Through statistical analyses of twin and adoption studies that compare individuals' characteristics, behavioral genetics estimate that for a variety of cognitive and personality variables, the heritability between parent and child is indeed significant and in the range of 30% to 60%. Nongenetic factors, including the environment and measurement error, must account for the rest of the differences. Consequently, behavioral geneticists are increasingly turning their attention to understanding the influence of the environment, such as the impact of child rearing and genotype-environment interactions (McGuire, 2003; Rutter, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005).

For example, investigators now examine the role of specific genes in development and how they may interact with the environment, such as dopamine D4 receptor (DRD4) and monoamine oxidase (MAO-A). MAO-A, a gene that codes for the enzyme that breaks down serotonin (a neurotransmitter), is one of several genes that has been linked to antisocial behavior (Grusec, Chaparro, Johnston, & Sherman, 2013). So depending on whether or not an individual has a particular gene, he or she may react differently to the environment.

So, how *do* an individual's genes relate to one's environment and thus influence one's development? Behavioral geneticists identify three basic ways that children's genetic makeup influences their development, referred to as **gene-environment interaction** (Belsky & van IJzendoorn, 2017; Scarr & McCartney, 1983). First, genes could have a *passive* role in the environment. That means a child's parents, due to their own genetic makeup, create an environment that is independent of the influence of the child's genotype. Parents who are high in intellect will have lots of books in the home and frequently engage in intellectual discussions about a variety of topics. Second, genes could play an *active* role in directing a child to seek out certain environments. An extroverted child will

frequently seek out other children to play with. Third, genes can have an *evocative* role when parents react to a child's phenotype in a particular way unique to that child. An aggressive, impulsive child evokes different responses (such as punitive discipline) than a calm child. Those responses may, in turn, strengthen a child's aggressive tendencies. Thus, the environment can be thought of as interacting with a child's genotype as well as phenotype in a dynamic fashion.

To illustrate these interactions, consider the brilliant composer of classical music, Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791). As a child prodigy, he showed a remarkable musical talent early in life (he began playing the harpsichord by age five and was composing at age six). He likely inherited musical genes from his father, an accomplished musician and composer. In addition to his musical genes, he grew up in a family where he was immersed in music. This is an example of a *passive* gene-environment interaction. The second type of interaction is *active*, whereby the child actively seeks out (consciously or not) a particular type of environment due to his genotype. Amadeus sought out music and other musicians as a young child and thereby influenced his own environment to further stimulate his abilities. Amadeus's growing reputation as a child prodigy also elicited invitations from people in Salzburg, Austria, for him to play music. This type of interaction, where a child's genotype helps to elicit reactions from those in his environment, is *evocative.*

Within any family, a child experiences both a **shared environment** (among family members) and **nonshared environment** (unique to that child). Behavioral geneticists reason that if child-rearing actions truly held the influence that some claim, then all of the children within a family would be similarly affected and develop similar characteristics. However, siblings often differ dramatically from one another on a variety of indices (Dunn & Plomin, 1990). There appears, therefore, to be a strong influence of nonshared, idiosyncratic environmental factors on children's development (see Box 2.2).

BOX 2.2 SHARED AND NONSHARED ENVIRONMENTS

Two key concepts in behavioral genetics are shared and nonshared environments. *Shared environments* refer to parts of the environment that all the children within a family experience. Examples are the **family structure**, the neighborhood, **socioeconomic status (SES)**, and culture. On the other hand, *nonshared environments* are the unique experiences of each child in the family, both within and outside the family. These include the quality of parenting the child receives as well as the friends and school experiences the child has. For example, one middle school child may be athletic and spend a lot of time with his friends playing basketball at a boys club, while his older sister may be musically inclined and join a church choir. It is likely those interests and time spent on them will promote different behavioral outcomes.

Researchers debate the relative importance of each type of environment. Research into shared and nonshared environments reveals that both shared and nonshared experiences are important for a child's development (Rutter & Silberg, 2002) despite the arguments of some behavioral geneticists that the nonshared environment is more critical. However, current evidence indicates that in early development, shared environments are more influential, at least for the development of some characteristics, such as cognitive abilities (Pike, 2004).

The lack of shared child-rearing influences has led some individuals to argue that within the normal range, parenting behavior and parental characteristics have *little* impact on children's development (Rowe, 1994; Scarr, 1992). In 1998, Judith Rich Harris attracted considerable media attention with her book, *The Nurture Assumption.* Based on her experiences with her biological and adoptive daughters and on behavioral genetics research, she developed the thesis that parenting practices have little influence on how children turn out. Instead, she proposed that adolescent peer influences are the key environmental agents that mold children into the people they become. Her controversial **group socialization theory** will be addressed more in subsequent chapters.

Behavioral genetics theory has been useful in recognizing that development is not solely influenced by the environment. Rather, genotypes play an important role. However, the theory has its critics. Gottlieb (2003) and others have argued that the theory, which focuses on populations (phylogenetic development), is not suited to understanding individual development (ontogeny) or capturing the bidirectional pathways involving genes and behavior.

We now move from evolution and genetics to theoretical views about how the child's interactions with the social environment can affect development.

Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological systems theory was created by Urie Bronfenbrenner to capture how the developing child is embedded in a series of environmental systems or contexts that interact with one another and with the child (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). A serious problem with previously proposed theories (such as attachment or social cognitive theories) was that they did not explicitly consider the roles that environment and context play in influencing behavior.

Bronfenbrenner's theory expands on Kurt Lewin's (1935) classic formula of behavior, B = f (P,E), or a person's behavior is a function of (or caused by) a combination of the person and the environment. Ecologists believe that one cannot and should not separate out the person from the environment; the two are integrally connected. This constant interaction between the two is described as **transactional influence**. In the case of parent-child relationships, this means that the child's behavior or characteristics can influence both the parent and the context in which the interactions occur. In turn, the context influences the child's subsequent behavior and characteristics. For example, an athletic child may persuade her parents to allow her to join a soccer team. That involvement, in turn, may result in family trips to attend soccer tournaments, summers at soccer camp, and new friends for both the child and the parents. Those new experiences and relationships then influence the child and result in new encounters and opportunities.

The central contribution of Bronfenbrenner's theory lies in explicating how children's biologically influenced characteristics interact with multiple levels of the natural environment. These levels of context are hierarchically organized and nested, each within the next. The innermost environmental context is called the **microsystem** and refers to the immediate settings that a person encounters and the interactions and activities within those settings. So interactions at home, in the classroom, or in the mall are examples of the microsystem context. The interactions a child has in this context are often bidirectional: The child influences the surroundings, and the surroundings influence the child.

For example, a friendly and attentive child is more likely to evoke positive and patient child-rearing behaviors in contrast to a high-activity child who may elicit more restrictions and reprimands. These bidirectional interactions recur over time and can have a lasting effect on development.

The second level of the model is the **mesosystem**, which refers to the connections or interrelations between microsystems. Children's development is promoted when there are supportive links between microsystems. An example is school success. Performance at school depends, in part, on whether the child is ready for school. **School readiness** depends on what goes on in the home or in childcare centers to prepare the child for school. Thus, the links between the home, the centers, and the school contribute to academic success and represent part of the mesosystem (see Figure 2.1).

The next level, called the **exosystem**, involves the contexts that do not ordinarily contain children but nevertheless affect their development. The parent's place of employment is one such setting. That setting influences children's development through employment policies (e.g., maternity leave, sick leave) as well as the work climate. A parent who has had a hard day at work will come home in a different mood than another

FIGURE 2.1 ■ The Ecological Systems Model
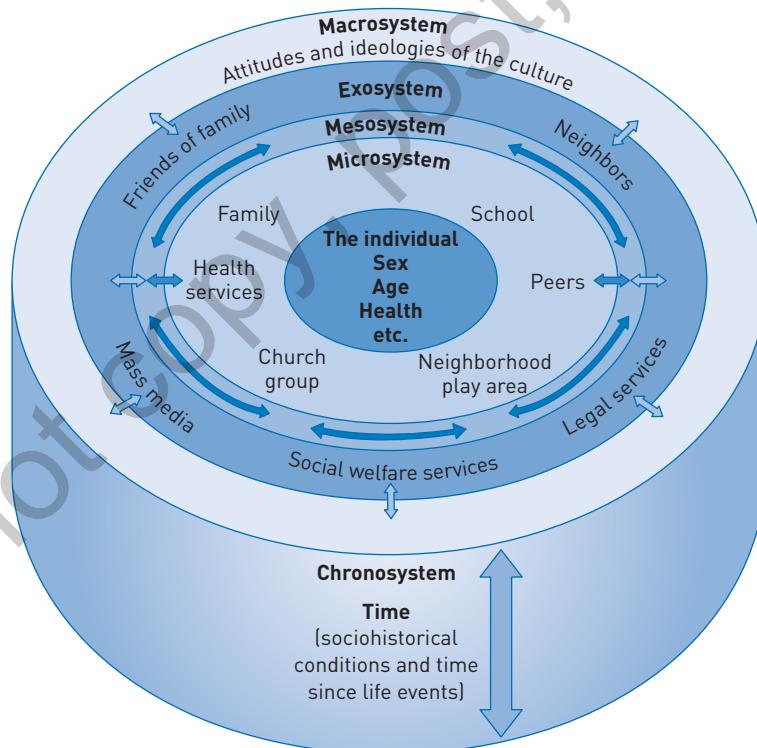
Source: ©Hchokr / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 3.0 https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/us/.

parent who has had a positive day (Matjasko & Feldman, 2006). A parent's group of friends or **social support** network is another example of an exosystem.

The final and outermost level of Bronfenbrenner's model is the **macrosystem**. This level refers to the subcultural or cultural context in which microsystems, mesosystems, and exosystems are embedded. It includes the cultural values, laws, and customs of a particular society. What happens at this level affects each of the inner levels. Governmental policies about children and cultural institutions (such as the church) and general cultural beliefs about children and parenting are captured at this level of analysis. Simply put, these are the social policies, customs, and practices that have an impact on the society's children. Several examples of the legal/political macrosystem were discussed in Chapter 1, including the banning of infanticide and the instigation of child labor laws.

Bronfenbrenner recognized that past experiences influence present behavior, that environments change over time, and that children change, so he included the **chronosystem** in his model. This system refers to how nested systems of interactions influence future behavior and change as the child gets older. For example, maturational changes that occur in puberty are linked to increased parent-child conflict, as will be discussed in a later chapter.

The ecological systems theory has been particularly influential in at least two ways. First, it has helped to focus attention on the role that context plays in the lives of children and their parents. Second, it has afforded a theoretical structure within which to integrate diverse research results, such as the influence of different types of external environments (e.g., work, social networks, and neighborhoods) on the adaptive and maladaptive functioning of families. Bronfenbrenner's theory provides a useful framework for recognizing the different contextual influences on an individual and how those influences help to shape a child's development. It also recognizes the role that children can play in their own development, a topic we will address later in this chapter.

Bronfenbrenner's multifaceted approach provides a good segue now for us to consider another broad area of theoretical inquiry into children's development: social learning theory. We will look at examples of **social learning theories** and also consider other theories that either put their accent on parental determinants or on children's behavior within the broader context of socialization and social learning.

# SOCIAL LEARNING AND SOCIAL THEORIES

Children change as they grow, and at least some of this change relates to what they learn as they interact with others in their world. This concept is the basis for social learning theories and their derivative, **social cognitive theory**. These theories address how social behavior is modified through social experiences.

Social Cognitive Theory

Contemporary social learning theories evolved from a mixture of previous theories, including psychoanalytic theory, behavioral learning theory, and cognitive theories (Cairns, 1979; Grusec, 1992). These theories fed into what is now labeled **social cognitive theory**. Gerald Patterson was one of the early social learning theorists who recognized the power of operant conditioning in parent-child relationships. For many years,

he carefully analyzed the behavioral interactions of antisocial boys and their families and made several important insights into the development of **conduct disorder** and delinquency. A key concept in his model of social learning is **coercive cycles**, problematic interactions in which parent and child compete to see who can gain the upper hand. The cycle may start with a mundane event, such as a mother nicely requesting that John, her 6-year-old son, pick up the mess of toys and clothes strewn across his room. If he is like most children, he will ignore the first request. When the mother returns to inspect the room, she is not pleased. This time, she escalates her request, perhaps to a demand: "Clean up your room right now!" John may rebuke her with the comment, "I'll do it later." Now, the mother becomes irritated and gives a warning that the room needs to be cleaned now "or else." John refuses. Her strategy to gain compliance is to increase the intensity of her command. She may up the ante by yelling: "If you don't start cleaning up your room by the time I count to three, you'll get a spanking!" At this point, the boy may reciprocate and yell back, "If you hit me, I'll hit you back!" By this time, the mother has inadvertently entered into a power bout (Ritchie, 1999). She may attempt to spank the child, but he will likely retaliate. Thus, both mother and child are trying to coerce the other into backing down. More often than not, the child comes out the winner.

FIGURE 2.2 ■ An Example of a Coercive Cycle
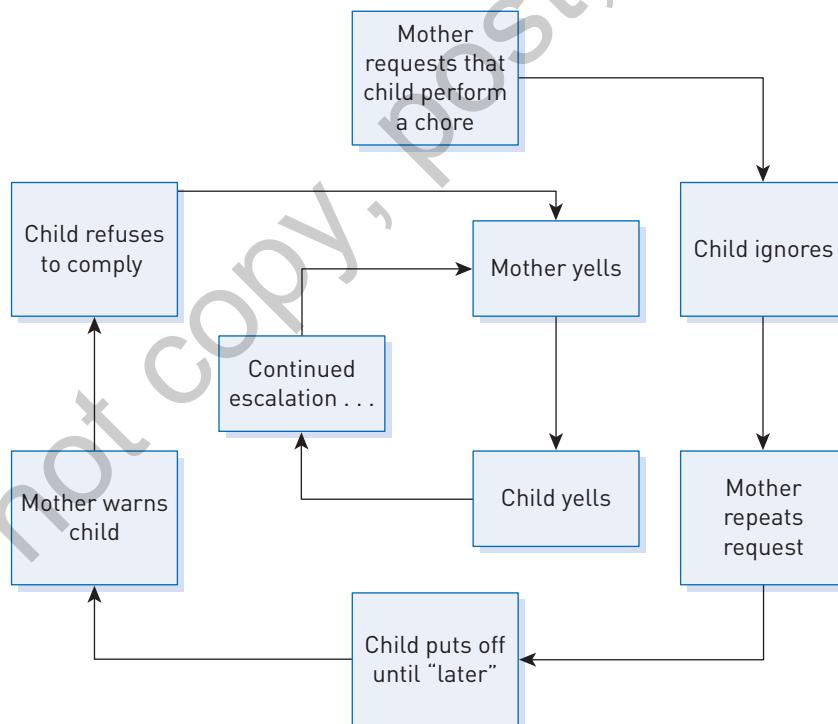
Source: George W. Holden.

According to Patterson (1982), through these coercive processes, the boy is being positively reinforced for noncompliance, and he is negatively reinforcing his mother's giving-in behavior. Figure 2.2 depicts this coercive cycle.

Evidently, it is a bad idea for parents to engage in coercive cycles because (a) it is unlikely the parent will "win" without engaging in very punitive or even abusive behavior and (b) the cycle undermines the parent's authority and power. Children who frequently get into coercive cycles with their parents may be on the pathway to delinquency. Instead, parents need to avoid getting into no-win power struggles. This does not mean not setting limits or being permissive. Rather, parents need to carefully think about what issues are important enough to have conflict over, recognize when the conflict is escalating, and terminate an escalation (such as everyone taking a time out) before the situation gets out of control.

Although Patterson's social learning investigations are insightful, Bandura (2001) is widely regarded as the primary theorist who developed social learning theory. His early work was based on modeling, as illustrated in the photo of a father and son (see Photo 2.5). Bandura's (2001) social learning theory is more comprehensive. Bandura recognized the fundamental roles that direct learning and observational learning play in the establishment of new behavior. In his famous "Bobo doll" studies, Bandura and his colleagues demonstrated that children only need to observe an act in order to acquire it. Simply watching a video of children hitting a Bobo doll incited the observers to become more aggressive (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963). What is observed may or may not be mimicked, depending on a series of cognitive components (e.g., attention, memory, imagery, and motivation). Once a behavior is established, it can then be readily maintained through reinforcement. Bandura also showed that children are more likely to imitate those models whom they perceive as powerful and nurturant—both attributes common to parents.

As Bandura's theory developed over the years, it grew progressively more cognitive; he now calls it *social cognitive theory* (Bandura, 2001, 2018). Bandura's theory emphasizes human **agency** (intentionally producing certain effects) although he recognizes how we act is influenced by a variety of variables, such as personal and environmental determinants. A key personal variable is an individual's feelings of **self-efficacy**, or beliefs about one's ability to effect changes in one's environment. As will be seen in the next chapter, **parental self-efficacy** is now widely recognized as a fundamental component of effective parenting (Bugental, Blue, & Cruzcosa, 1989; Jones & Prinz, 2005).

PHOTO 2.5: A son modeling after his father.

Source: istock.com

Social Relational Theory

Parent-child relationships are shaped by both **child effects** and **parent effects**. For a very narrow theory that focuses on child effects, see Box 2.3 that describes Richard Bell's **Control Theory**. Both parents and children affect each other, thus serving as bidirectional influences (P ↔ C). So, each actor influences the other as well as the ongoing dyadic relationship. For example,

consider a child who is picky eater and does not want to eat vegetables. Chances are, the parent is worried about her child's nutrition and pressures her to eat the vegetable. But, what is the source of the problem—the child's pickiness that the parent is reacting to or the parent's pressure that the child is reacting to? In a review of 25 years of bidirectional research, Pascall and Mastergeorge (2015) concluded that bidirectional effects are common and more sophisticated analytic approaches are needed to assess the mechanisms and magnitudes of bidirectionality.

Bidirectional effects can result in transformations or *transactional effects* (Pettit & Arsiwalla, 2008), so individuals may be changed in subtle ways as a consequence of the interaction. A new theory that tries of capture the dynamic nature of transactional processes inherent in socialization is called the Social Relational Theory (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2014). Both the parent and child are recognized as social agents embedded in relationships. Change and development occur in the course of dealing with contradictions or competing goals or needs.

This theory embraces the fact that parenting is inherently dynamic. There are constant changes occurring that require cognitive or behavioral adjustments. Child rearing is also characterized by frequent conflicts (e.g., parent vs. child needs), expectations (broken as well as met), ambivalence (in the face of competing goals), and ambiguity (e.g., unsure about how the child will behave in the future). Consequently, this theory considers the cognitive demands involved in parenting (such as problem solving to resolve conflicts) a central process in child rearing.

BOX 2.3 CONTROL THEORY

A very different type of theory was developed by Richard Bell to account for parental regulation of child behavior. Rather than focusing on attachment and emotions, control theory concerns the ongoing *reciprocal* nature of interactions (Bell, 1979; Bell & Chapman, 1986). It reflects the view that parents and children regulate each other's behavior. According to Bell, parents have an upper and lower limit of tolerance for the intensity, frequency, and situational appropriateness of their children's behavior. These limits are based on expectations and previous interactions. Parents attempt to keep their children within the ideal boundary set by these upper and lower limits.

Young children often violate a parent's *upper limits.* This might mean the child is too loud, or too active. The parent reacts by reducing or redirecting the child's excessive behavior so it falls back into the acceptable range. Alternatively,

a "couch potato" child violates a parent's *lower limits.* The parent in this case is motivated to engage the child in more activity. Bell argued that the model holds equally well from the child's perspective. If a parent gives a child inadequate attention (violating the child's lower limit), the child might act in such a way as to stimulate the parent to action.

This theory of mutual regulation has received support from observational studies of parents and children, focusing on such child characteristics as activity level, independence, and responsiveness (Bell & Chapman, 1986). However, the model is best suited to account for parent-child relationships during times of disequilibrium. When the parent-child dyad is in a period of stability and the individuals are meeting each other's expectations, the model has little explanatory power (Maccoby & Martin, 1983).

Parental Emphases: Parental Role Theory

A prominent theoretical approach in social psychology and sociology is **role theory**. This theory concerns the status of various family roles and the expectations, behaviors, rights, and obligations that accompany these roles. Role theory is used to account for the development of sex differences (Eagly, Wood, & Diekman, 2000). Gender roles reflect society's views and expectations about men and woman regarding roles, appropriate conduct, power, and status. Two key **constructs** of role theory are **role conflict** and **role strain**. *Role conflict* occurs when an individual experiences conflict between the roles of two different statuses. For example, many parents experience problems negotiating their roles of parent and employee. *Role strain* occurs when there is tension between roles that share the same status, such as caring for a child and caring for an elderly parent.

Role theory is helpful in understanding social expectations and their repercussions. In societies characterized by strong patriarchal orientations, the traditional role for women is to marry, run the household, bear children, and rear them. With the advent of the women's movement, those roles have been questioned. In the contemporary United States, the role expectations for women are considerably less rigid than they once were, thus loosening expectations for women about getting married, becoming mothers, staying home to rear children, or working outside the home. It is much more unusual when a man adopts a role that is non-traditional, such as stay-at-home fathers. In this case, married men choose to stay home to rear their children while their wives go to work. See Box 2.4 for a description of the role these men have taken.

BOX 2.4 STAY-AT-HOME FATHERS

Whether they know it or not, a small fraction of fathers in the United States have chosen to lead countercultural lives. They are stay-at-home fathers (SAHF). According to U.S. Census Bureau information, some 267,000 men are staying home for one year or more to be the primary caregiver while their wives work at jobs outside the home (United States Census Bureau, 2017). This child-rearing role runs counter to the traditional view of men as being the primary breadwinners, career oriented, and competitive. How do the men fare psychologically? A web-based survey was designed to find out the answer. Rochlen and his colleagues (2008) collected data from 213 men who identified themselves as SAHFs. They were mostly White and cared for two children on average. According to the fathers' self-reports, the men were well-adjusted and content with their marriages and their lives. Most of these 30-something-year-old male trendsetters were comfortable in their roles as caregivers and did not feel their masculinity was at risk. This was particularly true for the men who perceived they had a strong social support network of partners, family, and friends. As one father put it,

> I don't think my masculinity is in question. I have two children running around. . . . If my daughter wants me to dress up as a bloody fairy, then I'm going to dress up as a fairy. I don't have a problem with that. Is my masculinity in question? No! (Rochlen, Suizzo et al., 2008, p. 8)

Parental Emphases: Vygotsky's Theory

Although the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) did not live long enough to formulate a comprehensive theory of development, his conception of the role that parents play in their children's development has been influential (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1994). Vygotsky's work focused on understanding how children develop cognitively, and he granted parents and other social agents a prominent role in that developmental process. He believed that social interactions provide the primary arena for development.

The central role that parents play in a child's developmental process is captured by the concept of the **zone of proximal development** (zpd). The zpd refers to situations where children experience engaging in more mature or advanced behavior than they would have been able to on their own. Vygotsky believed that development comes about by having children frequently enter the zone with the help of adults or more mature peers. Such experiences elicit more advanced or mature behavior from children than would surface otherwise. Imagine, for instance, the havoc that would occur if a small child was left unattended in a toy store. Now, consider what a child's behavior is actually like in a toy store. Parents take children to places like toy stores all the time, but only rarely do you see children becoming unmanageable there. Vygotsky

BOX 2.5 SCAFFOLDING OF 2-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN IN THE SUPERMARKET STUDY

Everyone has witnessed out-of-control young children in the supermarket. You have seen them running up and down the aisles, fussing for food, or throwing a tantrum. At the same time, other children of the same age are sitting nicely in shopping carts, perhaps assisting their mothers with the shopping task. What differentiates the two types of behavior? Lev Vygotsky, if he were alive today, would say it was the parental behavior that determined their children's behavior. Parents who **scaffold** (or support) positive behavior elicit much more mature behavior from their children than other parents.

To investigate how others did this, the author (Holden, 1983) followed mothers (with their permission) and their 2-year-old children during two weekly trips to the market. After placing a tape recorder in a cereal box in the mother's cart (in order to collect verbalizations), the author followed the mother-child dyad from behind, pushing a shopping cart and taking notes about the mothers' and children's behavior. It was immediately evident that most of the mothers were actively engaged in promoting good behavior. Mothers had a variety of tricks they used to ensure good behavior: They brought toys from home, bought bananas for the child to eat, avoided problematic aisles, or gave the child a task to perform, such as being on the lookout for a certain item. But, the technique used most commonly was to engage the child in the shopping task. By doing this, mothers were structuring and supporting more mature child behavior. Through scaffolding, mothers moved children into the zone of proximal development, an area of more mature behavior than the child would be able to achieve on his or her own. Experiences in the zone were what Vygotsky believed provided a major engine for development.

believed that the zpd was a motor of development. Children learn more advanced behavior by going to places such as toy stores (also, the supermarket, see Box 2.5) or engaging in more advanced tasks (think sports) with adults or older children. These types of experiences teach children how to regulate themselves or learn new skills.

The fundamental way that parents are able to elicit more mature behavior is through the process of scaffolding. Parents erect a structure around a desired behavior to support children's more advanced behavior. As children grow more advanced in their linguistic, cognitive, or social interactional ability, parents no longer need to provide that structure. Eventually, children are able to navigate through a toy store on their own without parents closely monitoring and controlling their every move. Thus, parents occupy a central role in their children's acquisition of mature behavior, according to **Vygotsky's theory**.

Although it may be easiest for adults to relate to their importance and influence in the parent-child relationship, the dynamic nature of human relationships insists that we also consider there may be times when children demonstrate a great deal of agency in their own development. Deci and Ryan's theory (2012), which we now turn to, presents an intriguing counterbalance to the adult-centric emphasis postulated by most theorists.

Child Emphases: Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory is a theory about what motivates individuals to act (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The theory is based on the assumption that all individuals have three basic needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Children want to be able to do things for themselves, master their environment, engage in activities they like, and have positive social relationships. This theory focuses upon the agency of the child, understanding that even from a very young age, children are motivated to become autonomous and competent individuals who can master their environment.

We can see an early example of this in Western culture with the so-called "*terrible twos*" stage of development. Children two years of age (and younger) exhibit a strong will and a desire to do things their own way, in their own time, and as independently as possible. This is a common and vexing problem to many parents: their sweet child is no longer being compliant. However, self-determination theory recognizes that such behavior is not only normative but should be celebrated because it is a clear indication of the child's developing autonomy.

Parents, according to this theory, need to be involved, provide structure, and support the child's developing autonomy. Involvement means showing an interest in, being knowledgeable about, and staying active in their children's lives. Through this, children will feel connected and related to the parent. By structuring the environment to promote competence, the environment becomes predictable and understandable. Children know what is expected of them and how others will respond to them. Autonomy support means taking the child's perspective, encouraging their initiations, and providing them with developmentally appropriate choices. These three parenting qualities help promote children's well-being (Farkas & Grolnick, 2010).
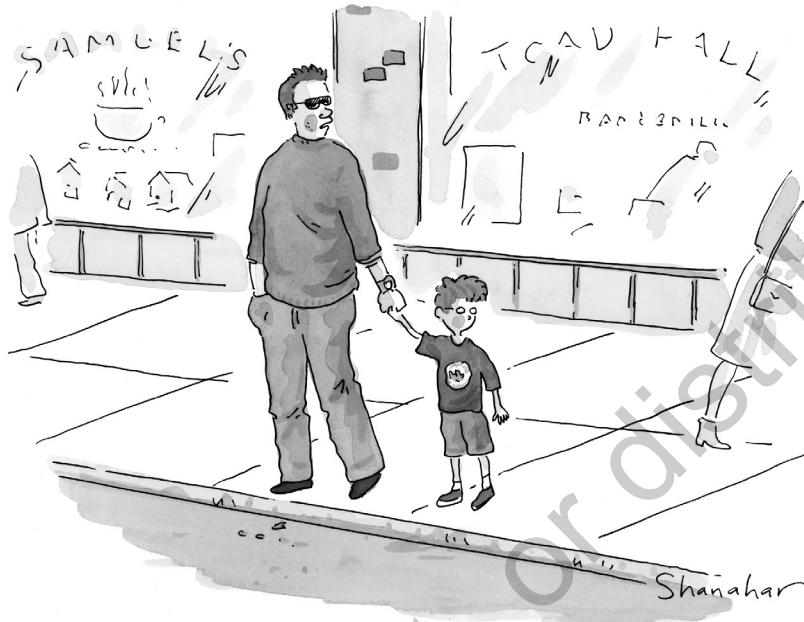
FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY

Murray Bowen (1913–1990) was trained as a psychiatrist. At the time of his education, mainstream psychiatric thinking was exclusively informed by Freudian psychodynamic theory. Bowen's life experiences in World War II caused him to consider a different way of thinking about disease and mental illness. As a result of Bowen's early research at the Menninger Foundation, **family systems theory** was born. In contrast to the individual or even dyadic focus of most child development and parenting theories, systems theory views the *family* as the basic emotional unit. Any change in the emotional functioning of one member of the family is predictably and automatically compensated for by changes in the emotional functioning of other members of that family. Family systems theory attempts to explain social behavior and patterns of social interactions via an understanding of these interacting systems. The theory also posits that multigenerational patterns of family interaction, assigned roles within the family, social triangulation, and the tendency for all emotional systems to seek and maintain homeostasis function to affect behavior and emotional health.

To fully understand behavior in the family, one cannot simply focus on an individual child in isolation or only on the parent-child dyad. Rather, relationships among all members of the family must be recognized in order to understand how the behavior of individuals is supported by, encouraged, or reacted to by other family members (e.g., Carter & McGoldrick, 2005; Minuchin, 1985; Nichols & Schwartz, 2007). For example, the parent-child relationship is often disrupted in families experiencing marital discord. In such a situation, in order to understand the parent-child relationship (and perhaps why a child was experiencing behavior problems), it is not only necessary to recognize the conflict between the husband and wife (e.g., Buehler et al., 1997) but also to understand how the child's behavior may play a role in maintaining family equilibrium. Systems theory might predict that, in such situations, children might develop serious psychological or behavioral problems by diverting their parents' attention. Subsequently, the emotional energy of the parents turns away from each other and toward the child, thus reducing the interparental conflict. A family systems theorist is careful to examine *all* family members and their interrelationships in order to appreciate the behavioral dynamics operating within a family (e.g., Cox & Paley, 2003).

Family systems theory has uncovered a number of useful concepts for understanding triadic family interactions that involve a mother, a father, and a child. For example, **second-order effects** refers to the observation that one parent may interact differently toward a child when someone else—in this case, a spouse—is present. An example of this occurs in violent homes, where mothers or fathers might alter their child-rearing behavior when in the presence of an abusive partner. For instance, mothers report they modify their disciplinary practices when in the presence of an abusive spouse. They did this in order to appease their partners and avoid inciting their anger. There was not one consistent way mothers attempted to pacify their violent husbands; some women used more strict discipline with their children, whereas others became more permissive (Holden & Ritchie, 1991).

The most frequently studied construct in parenting that derives from family systems theory is **co-parenting**. This concept refers to how mothers and fathers function

PHOTO 2.6: Family systems theory considers the interrelationships between all of the family members. This cartoon illustrates the concept of triangulation.

"If your mother asks, we crossed at the corner."

together in their roles as parents and, in particular, whether the parents are mutually supportive and involved. For example, if one parent takes over the tasks of an ill parent, that would be an example of mutual support and cooperation. If one parent disparages the efforts of the other parent, that would be an example of negative co-parenting. Investigators have identified a number of separate components of co-parenting, including conflict, disparagement, cooperation, and triangulation (McHale & Lindahl, 2011). An example of triangulation can be seen in the cartoon (see Photo 2.6).

OTHER EMOTION-BASED THEORIES

The next theoretical orientation we will look at examines a specific application of family dynamics to the problem of interpersonal conflict in families. In particular, it addresses the question of how children are affected by parental conflict.

Emotional Security Theory

This theory focuses on the effects of children's reactions to interparental conflict. According to the formulation by Patrick Davies and Mark Cummings (1994), children who see their parents arguing become fearful that this conflict indicates impending separation and divorce. This fear results in emotional distress. Thus, **emotional**

security theory focuses on children's perceptions of and exposure to parental conflict, as well as its physiological, cognitive, and behavioral consequences (Cummings & Miller-Graff, 2015). If parents engage in frequent acrimonious exchanges, children will feel insecure and anxious. They worry what will happen to themselves. In turn, these children are more vulnerable to developing mental health problems. Alternatively, children who are exposed to little or no marital discord, or to conflict that gets resolved amicably, develop feelings of emotional well-being and develop an improved capacity for regulating their emotions. Further articulation of the theory can be found in Davies and Martin (2014).

This theory has been empirically tested in a number of experimental and naturalistic studies with similar results. Children exposed to adult arguments experience physiological arousal, emotional distress, and health problems (Troxel & Matthews, 2004) as well as behavioral problems (Cummings, Schermerhorn, Davies, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2006). However, if a conflict is resolved in a respectful, constructive way (such as coming to an agreement or agreeing to disagree), the negative effects associated with the conflict are greatly diminished. A recent study identified one long-term consequence of interparent conflict: children with a history of exposure to marital conflict developed fewer friends in adolescence and were less socially competent (Martin, Davies, & Cummings, 2017).

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE THEORIES

We turn our attention now to two developmental stage theories that have informed a large body of research in the 20th century and that have proved important to understanding the ways in which parents view the changing child. Every parent knows that children change dramatically over a short period of time. The tasks, problems, and joys of each stage of children's development require changes in the parent in order to meet children's needs and optimize their development. Both Piaget's and Erikson's theories recognized that children think and behave differently as well as have different motivations at different points in their childhood.

Piaget

Swiss-born Jean Piaget (1886–1980) began his academic career not in the field of psychology, but studying mollusks! He received a doctorate when he was only 21 years old but was unable to obtain a faculty appointment in his field. He moved to Paris and started teaching at a boy's school run by Alfred Binet, a pioneer in the development of intelligence tests. His observations of children's errors led him to develop ground-breaking ideas on the nature of children's cognitive skills as they grow and develop.

It may seem strange to us today, but at the time, Piaget's claim that cognitive development proceeds through a series of universal and invariant stages was both bold and controversial. Piaget's stage theory is found in Box 2.6. His monumental contributions lay in revealing that the ways children think and process information are fundamentally different from adults.

BOX 2.6 PIAGET'S STAGE THEORY

Period	Ages	Core Concept
Sensorimotor	Birth to 2 years	Reflexive responding
Preoperational	2 to 7 years	Symbol use begins
Concrete operational	7 to 11 years	Use of logical relations
Formal operations	Onset at 11 to 15 years	Abstract thought

Source: Miller, 2011.

The core of Piaget's cognitive theory was formed as a result of hundreds of interviews, experiments, and observations of how children think (and what they communicate about that) at various ages. Piaget was not interested in social development and did not consider parents' role in their children's cognitive development. Instead, he adopted a maturational view. Nevertheless, Piagetian theory and his findings have important implications for parenting. Namely that children, depending on their age, process information, think, and reason very differently from adults.

Erikson

Erik Erikson (1902–1994) was a German-born child psychoanalyst who developed a unique personality stage theory. Similar to Piaget, Erikson's early interests had nothing to do with psychology or even children. He was an aspiring artist with little formal schooling when he was hired to teach art to children of Americans studying psychoanalysis in Vienna. This accidental introduction to psychiatry launched what would be Erikson's life's work.

Erikson's work was an extension of Freudian psychoanalytic thinking into the full life span. Much of his focus was on the development of identity, with the concept that each life stage presents humans with psychosocial challenges that must be met and resolved before successfully moving on to the next stage. Each stage consists of a developmental task the individual must struggle through.

Parents play a key role in helping their children successfully navigate through Erikson's early stages. The first challenge involves forming a basic trust of others in infancy (i.e., developing a secure attachment). Here, Erikson mainly focused on the role mothers play in attachment. The second challenge is to develop a healthy autonomy without feelings of shame or doubt. The third stage presents the growing child with the dilemma of identifying with his or her parents or developing a unique identity. As children proceed through the fourth stage, they move beyond the family to a larger social group involving school and peers, with competency and competition being primary foci. Parents can either promote or obstruct movement through each stage, according to Erikson.

TABLE 2.3 ■ Erikson's Eight Life Stages		
Stage	Approximate Age	Psychosocial Challenge
1	Infancy	Basic trust vs. Mistrust
2	1–3 years	Autonomy vs. Shame
3	4–5 years	Purpose initiative vs. Guilt
4	6 years – puberty	Competence industry vs. Inferiority
5	Adolescence	Fidelity identity vs. Role confusion
6	Early adulthood	Intimacy vs. Isolation
7	Middle adulthood	Generativity vs. Stagnation
8	Late adulthood	Ego integrity vs. Despair

CHAPTER CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has reviewed 14 theories that help to reveal the nature of the parent-child relationship. Much of the contemporary research into parent-child relationships is framed around one of the major theoretical approaches presented in this chapter: attachment theory, behavioral theory, evolutionary developmental psychology, social cognitive theory, behavioral genetics theory, ecological systems theory, and family systems theory. The other, more narrowly focused theories, including social relational theory, parental role theory, Vygotsky's theory, self-determination theory, and emotional security theory, also help to shape parenting research. Each theory views the parent-child relationship from a slightly different perspective, asks different questions, and provides different answers. Developmental stage theories also continue to inform research in that the theories capture some of the many changes in children that help to influence the ways in which parents think about and interact with their children.

Although the many theories presented in this chapter are far from integrated (and in some cases, they are contradictory), four themes about parenting can be identified. First, parent and child behavior is influenced by a variety of variables, including genetic predispositions, learning experiences, role expectations, and other family members. Second, the role of context in behavior has to be recognized. Parents and children behave differently in different contexts, and multiple levels of context influence their behavior. A third theme is that children play a key role in eliciting parental behavior: Parenting is not unilaterally determined by the mother or father. Finally, parenting is increasingly recognized as being dynamic and changeable rather than static and rigid. Parental behavior changes in response to different child behavior, different children, different contexts, and across time.

Thought Questions

- What metaphor best captures your views about parenting?

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of each theoretical perspective for understanding parent and child behavior?

- Give an example of a how an older theory continues to inform our current thinking about child rearing.

- Of the theories presented in this chapter, which inform your own perspectives about children or parenting? How so? Which do you wish to explore further?

- Suppose a mother subscribed to an attachment theory of development but her husband believed in a learning theory approach. How might each parent approach the question of whether to hold back their young kindergarten child for another year in kindergarten?