

DEVELOPING TOGETHER: PARENTS MEETING CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENTAL IMPERATIVES

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**DEVELOPING TOGETHER:
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ABSTRACT

It is well known that the parent influences the child, but few realize how much the child changes the adult. This paper reports research that explored how adults change when they learn to nurture their child's developmental needs. It also explores how empathy with the child impacts an adult's ability to move through his or her own unresolved childhood issues into new meaning and relationships. Using qualitative methods and quantitative measures, the research captures perspectives of 20 parents about their own development from using child development principles. Analysis resulted in the identification of five themes: (a) cognitive development in perspective, differentiation from past ways, and new meaning-making; (b) emotional development of trust, empathy, and affective complexity; (c) personal agency of intentional effort and use of critical self-inquiry; (d) adult well-being; and (e) emergence of wisdom. More research is needed to determine the association between child development competence and adult development.

It is well known that the parent influences the child, but few realize how much the child contributes to adult development. This paper reports on research that explored how adults change when they learn to appreciate their child's worldview and nurture their child's developmental needs. It also explores how empathy with the child impacts an adult's ability to move through his or her own unresolved childhood issues into new meaning and relationships.

No action or behavior can be understood in isolation but rather must be seen as part of an organized whole of multi-directional interactions and influences. Using mixed qualitative and quantitative methods, this study employed a multi-directional perspective of development with person-in-environment with an emphasis on shedding light on real-life adult/child interactions and how individuals function, develop, and grow in relationship.

The participants were a self-selected group of adults who had attended one or more programs at a center for experiential learning family programs in Portland, OR. The programs provided structured learning about child development designed to be practical and useful in daily life with children. The programs offer immersion in whole-family experiential learning and use the Natural Learning Relationships (NLR) view of how children grow and learn (Luvmour & Luvmour, 1993). NLR describes in detail the psychological, emotional, and physical components of optimal well-being in the child and how these emerge in relationship.

Little of the literature in human development explores the parent/child relationship as an interconnected system of bidirectional influence, e.g., from adult to child and from child to adult (Kuczynski, Lollis, & Koguchi, 2003), and few researchers have acknowledged how mutual development occurs between the adult and child in the process of parenting.

Prior to the 1960s, the bulk of research on the family was framed as a "flow of influence from the parent to the child" (Hetherington, 1983, p. 59). Only after Bell's (1968) work did the

door open for researchers to explore the bidirectional nature of development. Baltes (1987) and Lerner (1993) proposed that changes in one person or context promote changes in the other. Later, the contextual-transactional view acknowledged multi-directional influences, proposing that individuals develop in relation to the regulating and deselecting framework of their context (Demick, 2002; Fischer & Bidell, 2006; Stevens-Long & Michaud, 2002). Thus, mutual development depends on the characteristics of each individual, the complexity of interactions, communication, and the social context of those involved. In this vein, Dillon (2002) offered evidence that children are catalysts for cognitive development in adults. Benedek (1959, 1970) maintained that emotional investment in the child stimulates reciprocal intra-psycho processes in the parent, i.e., developmental changes in the parent's personality, explaining that adults can achieve a new level of maturation in helping the child accomplish developmental goals.

Meaning in life appears to increase if personal agency uses available opportunities for growth (Baltes & Smith, 1990; Baltes & Staudinger, 1993). By transforming the subject-object relationship, we make new meaning and create new knowledge (Kegan, 1982). This lifelong process sets the stage for emergent self-knowledge (Kegan, 2000). Moreover, adults look to emotion to give them signals for personal (intra-individual) meaning and common (inter-individual) meaning (Malatesta & Izard, 1984).

Empathy is also a motivator for change and an organizing factor in adult development (Ickes, 1997; Malatesta & Izard, 1984; Stevens-Long & Macdonald, 1993). There is a distinction between projection (transferring one's own feelings onto another) and empathy (feeling knowledge of the other) (Fromm, 1956; Katz, 1963; Paul, 1970). Parental projection occurs when adults give insufficient attention to addressing their own emotional past (Paul, 1970). As Erikson noted (1963), lack of attention to the emotional past results in fear of conflict with the

child. Fear impedes empathic connection and leads to parental concern about maintaining control. True empathic appreciation of others moves one beyond projection or control and into direct experience of relationship wisdom and unity (Josselson, 2000).

Research in the literature shows that parents are responsive to educational intervention efforts (Sandy, 1983; Thomas, 1996). Parent education helps parents learn to nurture the child's developmental process, which promotes cognitive-structural growth in the adult.

Methods

Participants in this study were graduates of an experiential family-development learning program at a center in Portland, OR, who had been educated in child development and the language of the developmental approach used in this study. Names were randomly selected from old program records of the center.

The participants (n=20; male=5, female=15) came from geographically diverse areas in the United States and had a mean age of 46 years (SD = 8.4). Of the participants, 20% had one child, 60% had two children, and 20% had three or more children. Five (4 female, 1 male) were single parents (25%), 14 (7 females, 7 males) were married parents (70%), and one female was in a lesbian domestic partnership (5%). One single parent was the father of an adopted son. All participants were Caucasian. This demographic is circumstantial because it is a self-selected group. The group was also educated: 15% had an associate's degree or equivalent, 40% had a bachelor's, 35% had a Master's, and 10% had a doctorate. All participants selected a pseudonym for the presentation of data in this study.

Depth interviews were administered with questions focused on how adults develop when they attend to the developmental needs of their child/children. This type of research is

particularly useful when studying adult development and processes of change as described by Selltiz, Wrightman, and Cook (1976).

Focused open interviews were used in this study. This methodology assumes that truth is a co-construction among all involved stakeholders (study participants and researcher). In this view, knower and subject mutually create understandings in the natural world (Camic, Rhodes, & Yardley, 2003). There are no assumptions about objective reality or predetermined truth; that does not mean that truth is created by consensus; it simply means that the reality is shared. The interview questions were designed to draw forth the lived experience of adults when they nurture the developmental needs of the child.

Quantitative analysis was done in this project using the Fisher's Exact Test (FET), which was followed by a preliminary ANOVA to statistically test categorical themes that emerged from the data. The FET is commonly used in hypothesis-testing situations to examine the significance of the association between two or three variables as described by Siegel and Castellan (1988). Nonparametric statistical tests are used when the sample size is small; when data can be categorized into two simple categories in two or three separate ways, the FET is a good choice (Siegel & Castellan).

Findings

The results of this study found five themes of adult development that arose when the adult willingly made efforts to nurture the developmental imperatives of the child. Each participant reported varying relationships to these five themes.

Finding 1—Adult Development: Cognitive

The participants described several steps that promoted cognitive development by applying child development principles including use of personal agency and willingness to make

intentional effort. Three main signs of adult cognitive development were identified: a) perspective changes, b) differentiation from old ways of being, and c) new meaning-making of the world (see Table I). Most participants reported that shifts in perspective of self were directly related to recalling childhood experiences, and they offered detailed descriptions of how childhood memories were activated as a direct result of nurturing their children’s development.

Table I. Examples of Adult Development: Cognitive (ADC)

Changes in ADC	Participant Comments
<p>Shifts in perspective (of self, of the child, of others)</p>	<p>Sparky: <i>I discovered a lot of things about myself...Many things that I saw as problems with others...were just about me. It shifted my whole perspective...</i></p>
<p>Differentiation from old ways of being and doing (from the past and old identities, from social norms, and from parenting the way they were parented)</p>	<p>Karen: <i>I can step back and assess...I can stop myself from being that pushy, directive person and really look into what I am doing. It’s really freeing to set healthy boundaries with my 4-year-old son.</i></p>
<p>New meaning-making (ability to internally reformulate old ideas/ideals and make new meaning in the world of self and of relationships with others)</p>	<p>Julie: <i>I’ll get done what I need to get done but it’s more about just being in the moment with the child. What had to change in me was the way I was seeing my child.</i></p>

Finding 2—Adult Development: Emotional

Signs of emotional change and maturation included increased awareness of feelings, trust, empathy, and affective complexity. This latter involves the interrelated human capacities of honesty, humility, and complex feelings of greater emotional connection. Parents reported that interactions that involved conscientiously nurturing their child’s development caused them (the adult) to feel emotions (e.g., increased trust or empathy) that were surprising to them (Table II).

Table II. Changes in Adult Development: Emotional (ADE)

Changes in ADE	Participant Comments
<p>Increased feeling awareness (in self, in the child, and in others)</p>	<p>Maria: <i>We were working with my daughter on her feeling [development], then I started to connect with the feelings that I had...I realized how my fear of being helpless keeps me from feeling.</i></p>
<p>Trust (of self, of the child’s feelings, and of others)</p>	<p>Karen: <i>I started paying attention to how to drop down into that feeling place and recognize the importance of feelings in my child. I began to trust his feelings. Now I have a lot of trust in my son’s emotional sensitivity and healthiness.</i></p>
<p>Empathy (with the child and with others)</p>	<p>Alexander: <i>I could feel my son...he was in pain. I knew this because I could see it in his face...also because I felt that from my father. I remembered how it felt...</i></p>
<p>Affective complexity Interrelated feelings of (1) greater emotional connection, (2) increased honesty, (3) humility</p>	<p>MacKenzie: <i>I feel that as I am able to give [my children] what they need developmentally, I feel my own wounds healing. I can just feel it. It's very real.</i></p>

Finding 3—Adult Development: Personal Agency

Participants in this study each began with personal questions, family challenges, or a need to know how to do things differently. For most, a disorienting dilemma triggered awareness of a poor fit between old habits and current life challenges. As demonstrated by Participant Julie’s comment, “I remember having a conscious thought that what I am doing isn’t working.” Many of the participants reported that this realization was an embarrassing and difficult thing to realize. In the face of such concerns, the participants used personal agency to act with intention.

The theme of personal agency appeared at two different stages in the movement toward adult development. The data revealed that the use of personal agency both *promoted* adult development and *was a sign of* adult development. Personal agency that promoted adult

development involved (a) knowledge and/or feelings that something was wrong or off, (b) critical self-inquiry, and (c) intentional action to use child development principles (see Table III). Personal agency that promotes adult development was first signaled by the willingness to make an effort to engage new learning about child development. The qualitative analysis of the data revealed that the majority of participants followed their new learning by applying child development principles in the family context and/or in their profession with clients. This initial intentional effort led to the signs of adult cognitive and emotional development shown above.

Table III. Use of Personal Agency to Promote Adult Development

Intentional Acts	Participant Comments
<p>Knowledge or feeling that something is off (stimulated the initial action to seek new learning)</p>	<p>Molly: <i>I think that the first big step for me was the realization that I couldn’t nurture my children with what they needed...I wanted certain things for them. I did not really know how to provide it.</i></p>
<p>Critical reflection: self-inquiry (a stimulator for change)</p>	<p>Katherine: <i>Where I was parented well as a child, it was easier to nurture my children’s development in that area; but where my own childhood parenting [was lacking], I had a more difficult time. That correlation is very interesting to me to see.</i></p>
<p>Intentional effort (e.g., setting boundaries, and nurturing feeling development in the child)</p>	<p>MacKenzie: <i>In fact, sometimes I meet my children’s needs in places where I would have wanted to have been met...but it was the implementation of child development that healed me.</i></p>
<p>Sustained intentional effort (nurturing the child’s development, engaging in critical self-inquiry, using child development knowledge for others)</p>	<p>Karen: <i>Overall, I think paying attention to my son’s development has motivated me profoundly to be as clear as I can inside...I’m much more motivated to make myself look at my contracted places so it doesn’t get in the way of [my son].</i></p>

Finding 4—Adult Development: Well-Being

The participants reported a sense of well-being that emerged in direct relationship to their efforts to nurture their children's developmental imperatives. Not all participants were convinced they had developed well-being but those who were, were aware of greater self-acceptance, courage with personal strength, resilience and better self-care, more open-minded perspectives, greater connection with self and others, and a sense of being a happier person with more confidence as a parent (see Table IV). In the field of adult development, well-being has been defined as adaptive abilities, life-satisfaction with personal meaning in life, and the ability to maximize positive affect (Labouvie-Vief & Medler, 2002). People living in well-being have a tendency to be more "open-minded" with an "objective attitude" and have emotional awareness and intelligence (p. 581). To live in well-being is to live in accord with "personal integrity" (Young-Eisendrath & Miller, 2000) and to be in accord with one's "awareness," capacity to love, or "greater connection" with others (Fromm, Suzuki, & DeMartino, 1960).

The data revealed that most participants experienced greater self-acceptance and saw themselves as more authentic people in the world. Some expressed a sense of "being in the right place" with a clear sense of "doing the right thing"; these adults felt free to be "real and stay connected" with the child, to be more "authentic" with the child, and to stay "present." One mother spoke of an inner resilience to keep going in the face of difficulties. Others spoke of better self-care from feeling "centered and grounded."

Table IV. Key Aspects of Adult Well-Being (AWB)

Changes in Adult Well-Being	Descriptions of Changes in AWB
1. Self-acceptance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actualize a more authentic self • Access to being a more whole person • Healthy expression of feelings
2. Courage and personal strength	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Courage to let go of old ideals or feelings • Stronger person, more ability to be fully in the world • Able to make mistakes and continue on
3. Resilience and better self-care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staying power to spring back and continue on • Access to better self-care: resting when needed, eating well, etc.
4. Open-mindedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More patience • More acceptance • Able to take in criticism constructively • Able to admit mistakes without self-blame or shame
5. Happiness and better parenting abilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More competent as a parent and as a person • More confident as a parent • More relaxed • More flexible
6. Greater connection with self and with others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More intimate feelings with others • Able to be a better friend • Able to rejoice in another's growth

Finding 5—Adult Development: Emergence of Wisdom

Wisdom was reported by half of the participants; that is, they reported a shift in their quality of being. Intentional efforts to nurture the child's development offered opportunities to re-examine, reorganize, and even transcend earlier development, thereby allowing the parents to shift to more complex forms of development, such as wisdom. The qualitative analysis of the data revealed the emergence of five key aspects of wisdom: (a) service, (b) presence, (c) compassion, (d) insight, and (e) gratitude.

As Mackenzie put it:

Wisdom is a knowing. It's not the kind of knowing I get from my head and my intellect, though my intellect gets to contribute. It's not the kind of knowing I get from my heart and emotions, though my feelings get to contribute. Although there is a spiritual component, it is not a spiritual knowing. There is wholeness to my wisdom that incorporates all of those kinds of knowing. My wisdom is generally very simple. There is rightness to it—not a right/wrong [type of] rightness but simply a deep “is-ness.” I can tell that it's wisdom by how I feel. There's no struggle in wisdom. There may be struggling getting there but one of the ways I know that I am in wisdom is by its simplicity, its wholeness, its rightness. I have a certain peace in wisdom. I might be sad or happy or angry but underlying that is a peace in knowing.

More than half of the participants reported using knowledge of child development for the benefit of others (e.g., at work or in the community). One is using this knowledge in her teaching practice. Another, a school administrator, observed that when a child comes to her office, she is “always thinking about what that child might really need.” A third uses this knowledge in her mediation work with teenage offenders. “I just use the child development information and speak the language of the teens and they respond to me. They just come out.”

Participants also reported developing a new ability to be more present with children while also being less judgmental, and more honest and supportive. Greater presence was described by 12 of the participants as fundamental to their adult development, both with the child and in the world. Moreover, being more present extended beyond the relationships with children to spouses, partners, friends, and others. Participants said they were able to see parts of themselves that they had not known were there. Twelve participants described greater access to insight that was both painful and joyous and in which everything came into focus. One participant noted that “it's all so intertwined...all the things that I have chosen to learn about, have just become a fabric of me.” She went on to report that because of this insight, she feels that she has integrated all the parts of herself into a more whole human being.

During the interviews, participants also discussed shortcomings or mistaken goals in their ordering of the world. The presence of honesty reflected emotional development for many of them. Six participants reported experiencing more compassion for “myself now and for the world, for my parents, and for other human beings.” Two of the fathers described experiences of developing compassion that were directly related to nurturing their children. Participants also expressed feelings of gratitude. One described feeling more whole as a person because the “emotional and psychological understanding completes something for me.” Another said, “In those moments when [my son] came running back to us for affection I felt total gratefulness, such gratitude. Oh, wow, this is what it is supposed to be about; just grateful that we have learned a different way.”

Quantitative results

Five 3x2 chi squares were calculated to determine the association between child-development knowledge/ability (low, moderate, and high) and the presence (low/high, median split) for each thematic finding. Because of the small sample size, an FET was used to determine the statistical significance of these analyses. All of the chi square results were in the expected direction, with higher parenting competence associated with greater levels of adult development. Two of the five chi squares were statistically significant: child development competence (CDC) by personal agency/action taken adult development, and CDC by wisdom adult development. In addition, CDC by emotional adult development showed a trend toward significance (see Table V).

Table V. Results of Chi-Square Analyses of Child Development Competence by Adult Development Thematic Finding¹

Thematic Findings	χ^2	<i>df</i>	<i>P</i>
1. Adult development: Cognitive	3.09	2	0.29
2. Adult development: Emotional	5.77	2	0.09
3. Adult development: Personal agency	8.27	2	0.02
4. Adult development: Well-being	1.80	2	0.46
5. Adult development: Emergence of wisdom	8.27	2	0.02

¹Note. Quantitative results using Fisher's Exact Test

Preliminary Analysis of Variance Test

Although the numbers in this study were small ($n=20$), five preliminary analyses of variance (ANOVA) were also calculated to examine differences in the mean number of times each theme was recorded for participants in the low, moderate, and high child-development competence groups. (Note that there were no participants in the very low group, so this category was not included in the analysis.) First, frequency distributions and plots were examined to check ANOVA assumptions. Because the data for each of the themes were relatively normally distributed and other assumptions were upheld, the use of a preliminary ANOVA was appropriate. As shown in Table 6, three of the five ANOVAs were significant (*adult development: emotional*, *adult development: personal agency*, and *adult development: emergence of wisdom*); and one (*adult development: cognitive*) showed a trend toward significance. All the ANOVAs were in the expected direction, with higher levels of parenting competence associated with greater levels of adult development.

Table VI. Preliminary ANOVAs of Child Development Competence by Mean Frequency of Thematic Finding)¹

Themes	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>p</i>
1. Adult development: cognitive	2, 17	3.34	0.28	<0.06
2. Adult development: emotional	2, 17	4.59	0.35	<0.03
3. Adult development: personal agency	2, 17	10.37	0.55	<0.001
4. Adult development: well-being	2, 17	1.87	0.18	<0.18
5. Adult development: emergence of wisdom	2, 17	8.87	0.51	<0.002

¹Note. Preliminary analyses of variance of child development competence (low, moderate, and high) by the mean number of times each theme was recorded for participants ($n=20$)

This study suggests that adult development is multi-dimensional, involving both cognitive and affective aspects when an adult is willing to make an effort to act. It is also multi-directional: The child affects the adult's development when the adult is oriented to use child development and makes intentional efforts to do so. The chi square statistical analysis indicates that higher levels of adult development are associated with child development competence such as personal agency and wisdom. The trends for all the other themes were in the expected direction.

Discussion

This study demonstrated that positive adult development can occur when the adult is in conscientious relationship with the child. What's more, wisdom often emerged when adults took action to nurture the child's developmental needs. In essence, becoming a parent can be a transformational experience that changes the adult in positive ways. Parents who have

knowledge of child development have more realistic expectations and are more likely to behave in developmentally appropriate ways with their children (Bornstein, 2006). Moreover, the beliefs parents hold about children can directly influence that child's development. This research contributes to the fields of adult development and constructive developmental approaches by providing a lens into the lived experiences of parents as they learned how to nurture the child's development.

Limitations

There are both practical and philosophical limitations to this study. The small number of participants is only suggestive of the idea that adult development results from competence in child development. Further, the participants' demographics limit the generalizability of this study. The participants were all Caucasian and from middle-class American families, and most had completed some level of higher education. The participants were not chosen for diversity but were rather a self-selected group from past clients of an educational center. In addition, the fact that all participants volunteered may indicate a predisposition to change. More research needs to be done on diverse populations. Moreover, the majority of the participants in the study were mothers; including more fathers would be beneficial.

A limitation and strength of this study is that all participants had participated in applications of a particular child development model, Natural Learning Relationships (NLR). The specialized nomenclature that is used in the NLR developmental model is noticeable in some of the interviews and in stories about the participants' experiences. The parenting competence scale scores were derived from the same data as the adult development themes (i.e., the transcripts). This may have increased the chances of significant findings in the quantitative analyses.

Implications for Practice

Erickson's model of development (Erikson & Schlein, 1987) claims that the adult and child are in reciprocal relationship. At the same time, as children develop, different involvement is required from parents and primary caregivers. In the field of human development, there is a call for the applications of developmental science to the concerns of the family and community (Green & Piel, 2002; Lerner, 2002). There is a lack of understanding in our culture as to how to respond to a child's developmental changes. Every parent in this study said that his or her child affected who the parent has become.

More education for adults is needed in practical applications of child development. Parents need this education to become oriented to nurturing the child's emerging developmental capacities. For theory to become useful to the culture, it must be made relational to the context in which it is used. In this way, scholarship about human development can be embedded into family life and community settings by the people who have the most influence on children. This research study has responded to this need by using practical applications of child development to increase adult capacities through program design and delivery. That is the aim of applied science (Lerner, 2002).

Conclusion

The data lend support to the view that adult development occurs when adults take the time to learn child development and then take action with their child. Being in relationship with the child's developmental markers can often bring an adult face to face with a dialogical understanding of unresolved childhood issues. As the child develops, the adult must change to accommodate the child's increasing complexity. Sustained effort in conscientious relationship to the child may allow the caregiver to empathically engage in relationship with others, to trust, to

engage the process of self-inquiry, and to make new meaning throughout life in relationship to the context of his or her world. The data from the present study reveal that wisdom may emerge as an outcome when adults engage their child empathically. Deep involvement with the children in our lives can break open our hearts to greater awareness.

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