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SECTION V

Child Flourishing

14

Childhood Environments and Flourishing

Tracy R. Gleason and Darcia Narvaez

Early childrearing provides a critical environmental context for development. As the authors in this book have illustrated, early life context has implications for all manner of later outcomes, including the management of aggression (see chapter 7), brain development (see chapter 2), participation in relationships (see chapter 4) and mental health (see chapter 3). In all of these chapters, the emphasis is on the nature of the early environment that best prepares the infant for healthy physiological and psychological functioning, not just for a particular physical environment, but for the social, relational world and membership in a community. Perhaps the single most significant goal of early development is this preparation for social interaction and participation in close relationships, a large component of which depends on successful sociomoral functioning.

To achieve "successful" sociomoral functioning, early communal contexts must support development of the individual in a way that emphasizes not only the happiness and goal attainment of the self but also a socially skilled self within changing relational contexts. Healthy relationships are reciprocal and mutually responsive. Thus, raising a child who will interact and

work *with* others rather than against them is a goal of development itself. A child who never learns, or is unable, to focus on the needs and feelings of others will likely have trouble with the fundamental tenets of dyadic and group dynamics, such as negotiation, cooperation, compromise, and empathy. Even if such skills are learned, the facility with which a child functions in a social context probably has a significant range, from necessary interactions that promote *survival* to myriad mutually fulfilling, long-term social relationships that promote *thriving*. In between these poles may lie our current state of parenting in the United States, in which many children—particularly those with resources—reach adulthood relatively unscathed, but the rates of depression, anxiety disorders, behavior problems, and toxic stress are at record levels, even among the middle class (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2011a, 2011b; Shonkoff and Garner, 2012; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 1999).

According to neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory, organisms have three basic aims: survival, reproduction, and dispersal (Williams, 1966), and parenting typically facilitates them. As Halton (chapter 13) points out, our prolonged neoteny as a species and consequent plasticity allow for adaptation to a wide variety of environmental conditions that promote these outcomes. A prolonged childhood gives humans a level of resilience that allows some individuals to emerge physiologically and psychologically healthy despite significant risk factors in their early environments (Masten, Best, and Garmezy, 1990; Wright and Masten, 2005; Zolkoski and Bullock, 2012). However, success in these situations is often identified, not as thriving, but as *average* functioning: showing a lack of symptoms or pathology and meeting developmentally appropriate goals. Furthermore, often in studies of resilience, competence is measured in a single domain, such as education (e.g., graduation from high school), rather than across domains (e.g.,

academic, behavioral, and emotional), thus providing an incomplete picture of individual well-being (Walsh, Dawson, and Mattingly, 2010). If, instead, success were defined as thriving or optimal functioning in many, if not all, domains, the consequences of negative early life experiences might be illustrated in sharp relief.

Certainly developmental outcomes are influenced by a host of environmental factors of which early childrearing is only one, and yet our ever-increasing understanding of the centrality of parenting contexts suggests that the goal of early childrearing should not simply be survival, or avoiding psychopathology and otherwise compromised functioning. As this volume demonstrates, our knowledge of the connections between early childrearing contexts and later outcomes is significant and continually growing, and by attending to this knowledge we have the potential to promote policies and programs that encourage not just survival, or resilience, but *flourishing.*

Flourishing

Flourishing among adults has been defined by positive psychologists as living "within an optimal range of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience" (Fredrickson and Losada, 2005, p. 678). Keyes (2002) has suggested that flourishing requires a combination of three types of well-being: *emotional* (positive emotion and life satisfaction), *psychological* (e.g., self-acceptance, autonomy, purpose), and *social* (e.g., social acceptance, actualization, contribution, integration). The work in this volume and the prior related one (Narvaez, Panksepp, Schore, and Gleason, 2013) suggests that *physiological regulation* is another key aspect of flourishing that underlies the other types of well-being and might be heavily influenced by early social contexts. For the sake of measurement, in research these

factors are often conceptualized in terms of a ratio that has low levels of individual disease and psychopathology but high levels of well-being and happiness (Keyes, 2002).

Our concept of flourishing for *children* includes these same areas of physiological, emotional, psychological, and social health. We explicitly expand the notion of flourishing to include an emphasis on the sociomoral aspects of development, such as strengths in empathy and cooperation. In other words, flourishing is conceptualized with an emphasis on the moral domain, such that it includes considering how actions affect others, taking into account the well-being of others, and including the community when making decisions and selecting actions.

The emphasis on a social sense of well-being is an important distinction between parenting aimed at child survival, child resilience, or even adequate care, as well as the type of parenting that fosters child flourishing within a community. Most childrearing contexts stress the need to distinguish right and wrong and follow through with moral reasoning and empathic behavior (Kochanska and Murray, 2000), and certainly such an orientation is important to nurture. Parenting that fosters flourishing, however, might be conceptualized as equally focused on other aspects of morality identified by Rest (1984), such as recognizing moral issues inherent in situations (i.e., moral sensitivity), prioritizing moral values over other (e.g., personal, religious, patriotic) values (i.e., moral motivation), and the ability and ego strength to follow through on moral decisions (i.e., moral character). In essence, childrearing contexts that promote child flourishing are designed to encourage *proactive*, rather than *reactive*, forms of sociomoral behavior. The childrearing contexts that support child flourishing support a high level of autonomy, but within a strong socially connected community. Such robust functioning prepares the individual for a fulfilling social life and provides the individual with capacities to foster flourishing in others. In this way, flourishing is a communal affair (Aristotle, 1988). This

orientation is evident in some of the hunter-gatherer societies documented in this volume (e.g., Endicott and Endicott).

Parenting that supports child flourishing is also distinguishable from other developmental contexts in terms of its conceptualization of morality as encompassing all human beings, such as the morality that characterizes individuals identified as moral exemplars. For example, individuals who hid Jews during World War II provide accounts of childhood upbringings in which care for all people was emphasized (Munroe, 2004; Oliner and Oliner, 1988). Fostering this perspective starts early and evolves with the changing capacities of the child. Initially, adults treat the infant with tender empathy, generating a similar response in the infant (Schore, 1996; Siegel, 1999; Stern, 1999). Beyond infancy, empathic parents bring to children's attention the feelings and behaviors of specific others (Zahn-Waxler and Radke-Yarrow, 1990), followed developmentally by an emphasis on how the child's behavior affects others generally (Farrant, Devine, Maybery, and Fletcher, 2012). The key here is how "others" are identified. In the somewhat isolated hunter-gatherer tribes described in this volume, relevant others might be the community that gathers into small groups with fluid boundaries (see chapter 5). In the United States, national, religious, ethnic, or geographic boundaries might define the group of moral concern. However, at an abstract level, "others" can theoretically be conceptualized as *all* humans. This idea of humanity as the backdrop for sociomoral behavior can also include consideration of the needs of future generations, as is common among indigenous peoples concerned for "the seventh generation" into the future (Martin, 1999).

Based on examination of hunter-gatherer lifestyles and attitudes, Narvaez (forthcoming) suggests that a focus on the individual or even a set of human beings is an inadequate framing for flourishing. In this view, biodiversity and entities in the natural environment must also be taken

into account. The community thus extends even beyond humanity. By this definition, small-band hunter-gatherers flourished by living sustainably, with the welfare of the natural world in mind (Gowdy, 1998; Ingold, 1999). Parenting supportive of child flourishing might therefore encourage consideration of sociomoral issues from as broad and abstract a perspective as cognitively possible at various points in development.

Contexts for Development

In recent years, research has focused on childrearing environments variously described in the literature as "average" (Baumrind, 1993), "good enough" (Hoghughi and Speight, 1998; Ryan, Martin, and Brooks-Gunn, 2006; Winnicott, 1957), and "positive" (von Suchodoletz, Trommsdorff, and Heikamp, 2011) or on the resilience of children growing up in dangerous, abusive, neglectful, or otherwise compromised environments. The latter, substandard environments are relatively easy to identify based on the presence of factors that clearly undermine, if not threaten, children's development. The features of adequate parenting are less well defined. The initial definition for "good enough" parenting provided by Winnicott (1957) centered on caregiving that was neither overtly problematic nor provided by someone with a clear psychiatric illness—rather low standards. More recent variations have somewhat higher bars, describing adequate parenting as including such components as unconditional love, clear boundaries for behavior, and facilitation of development primarily through the provision of a secure base for exploration (Hoghughi and Speight, 1998). They also may mention requirements such as a mentally healthy parent, with some knowledge of child development and a commitment to putting in the time required to care for the child (Mrazek, 2013).

In general, the outcomes associated with care described as good enough are positive in comparison with care that is less than adequate. For example, work on attachment has clearly

established parental warmth, unconditional love, and the provision of a secure base as essential to a whole host of positive self-regulatory, social, and emotional outcomes and the avoidance of behavior problems (e.g., Eisenberg, Zhou, Spinrad, Valiente, Fabes, and Liew, 2005; Kochanska and Kim, 2012). Positive guidance, or developmentally appropriate limit-setting beyond infancy, has been associated with compliant behavior (Calkins, Smith, Gill, and Johnson, 1998), and of course the importance of parental mental health and supportive parenting for positive child mental health outcomes is well established (e.g., DeMulder and Radke-Yarrow, 1991; Fisher, Rahman, Cabral de Mello, Chandra, and Herrman, 2010; Ge, Best, Conger, and Simons, 1996). Above all, sensitive and responsive care, a basic requirement for adequate childrearing, is heavily implicated in the development of successful stress regulation (Liu et al., 1997), regulation of arousal (Schore, 2001), appropriate social and emotional reactivity (Porges, 2007), and the development of conscience (Kochanska, 2002).

The fact that the outcomes associated with average or adequate (good enough) parenting are positive raises two questions. How is a developmental context that promotes flourishing different from parenting characterized as "good enough"? And if they are different styles, do the developmental and cultural outcomes of these two environments differ significantly? The first question can be addressed by the fact that the characteristics of flourishing defined above are embodied in many of the hunter-gatherer groups discussed in this volume, suggesting that the parenting practices they employ may foster the kind of prosocial, moral stance associated with flourishing (Narvaez, 2013).

PROMOTING FLOURISHING

Among the hunter-gatherer groups described in this book (chapters 4, 5, 6, and, 7) and elsewhere (e.g., Hewlett and Lamb, 2005; Narvaez, Panksepp, et al., 2013), childrearing is intense and

communal. For example, babies are held most of the time, and distress is mitigated quickly. Breastfeeding is infant initiated, shared among women, and lasts for several years. As they grow, children are rarely coerced but given ample time to play, and aggression is either ritualized or met with strong social consequences. Children, and infants in particular, are cared for and conceptualized as the responsibility of the whole group, meaning that parents receive extensive social support and children have many resources from which to elicit caregiving. Children are integrated into the life of the band at whatever level they are capable of participating, which, as Fuentes (chapter 10) points out, may make them integral to the evolutionary adaptations of the species. In this context, children are not "parented" or "reared" so much as supported as they actively develop as individuals within the community (Gray, 2013; see chapter 4).

In this volume, Gray, Morelli et al., and Hewlett and Roulette (chapters 4, 6, and 8) all highlight ways in which cultural values relate to parenting behaviors, such as encouraging play to promote egalitarianism, fostering sharing and cooperative exchange to create connections to others and positive interpersonal relationships, and engaging in co-sleeping to nurture interdependence and foster family bonds. In each case, the behaviors include features of good enough parenting, such as responsivity, secure attachment, mental health, and avoidance of behavior problems. But the caregiving associated with these flourishing cultures goes further to emphasize autonomy and respect for others, even infants and young children (see chapter 5). The critical importance of interpersonal harmony, a characteristic of the social section and cooperative family theory that Roughgarden and Song (chapter 9) show to be a better model of family relations than the dominant competitive theory, centers the community in sociomoral development. In other words, success is not defined as the absence of antisocial behaviors but by the presence of prosocial, cooperative actions and contributing, active membership within the

group. The distinction to be drawn is between the *absence* of the type of psychopathology well described in chapters by Valentino, Comas, and Nuttall (chapter 11), and Bluhm and Lanius (chapter 12), a characteristic of good enough parenting, and the *presence* of optimality or well-being, characteristic of a developmental context that fosters flourishing. After all, a caregiving environment that is not characterized by disadvantage is not the same as one that is characterized by thriving (Baumrind, 1993).

OPTIMIZING DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES

If a distinction can be made between adequate parenting and parenting that promotes flourishing, then the question becomes whether their developmental and cultural outcomes differ significantly. Evidence is mounting that an orientation toward optimizing development with its corresponding expectations leads beyond positive outcomes to actual flourishing. Aspects of the early environment that are not usually discussed in the context of good enough or adequate parenting, such as breastfeeding, touch, alloparenting, and play, are associated with important physiological and psychological outcomes that set the stage for social group membership and flourishing (Narvaez, Panksepp, et al., 2013). In particular, the social context of the neonatal period is emerging as a critical time for psychological and physiological development that leads to flourishing or otherwise (Shonkoff and Garner, 2012; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). Significant changes to and regulation of social functioning in adulthood have been documented in relation to early brain and central nervous system development as a function of neuropeptides, steroids, and hormones (Cushing and Kramer, 2005). These physiological changes might mean the difference between adult behavior that is, for example, reactive rather than proactive with regard to sociomoral demands. Furthermore, parenting practices like breastfeeding and touch

have been associated with physiological regulatory functions (Carter and Porges, 2013), suggesting they might be relevant in fostering flourishing.

Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding has multiple benefits. Although it is protective from disease and is accompanied by increases in maternal focus on the infant in comparison with bottle feeding (Lavelli and Poli, 1998; Newburg and Walker, 2007), it also has significant regulatory functions. Breastfeeding has been implicated in regulation of the sleep–wake cycle, positive emotional tone, and brain functions such as reducing depression (Goldman, Goldblum, Garza, Nichols, and Smith, 1983). Moreover, in our own work (Narvaez, Cheng, Brooks, Wang, and Gleason, 2012; Narvaez, Gleason, Brooks, Wang, Lefever, and Cheng, in press; Narvaez, Wang, Gleason, Cheng, Lefever, and Deng, 2013), we have found connections between breastfeeding and aspects of self-regulation (e.g., inhibitory control) and sociomoral outcomes (e.g., empathy, conscience) in maternal reports of 3-year-olds drawn from both the United States and China. Initiation of breastfeeding is also related to prosociality at 18 months and fewer behavior problems at 24 months. All of these results remained significant even after we controlled for potentially influential factors, such as income, maternal age, and responsivity. Taken together, these findings suggest that either the process of breastfeeding or its components (thousands of ingredients, including all immunoglobulins, probiotics, amino acids needed for brain growth and food for helpful bacteria)—likely both—might be directly related to children's sociomoral outcomes, or influential on factors that influence sociomoral development, such as physiological regulation.

Touch

Copious positive touch in infancy is another behavior that may promote flourishing. Field and others have provided extensive evidence of the benefits of gentle massage to the health and development of premature infants and neonates (see Field, Diego, and Hernandez-Reif, 2010, for a review), the consequences of which have been documented as long as 2 years later in the cognitive and to a lesser extent in the motor domain (Procianoy, Mendes, and Silveira, 2010). This positive impact of massage was observed even in comparison with simple skin-to-skin contact, which has also been demonstrated to be beneficial for infants' cognitive, emotional, and physiological regulation 6 months later (Feldman, Weller, Sirota, and Eidelman, 2002). This documentation of increased benefits of purposeful, positive touch over simply holding a baby suggests that further investigation of touch is warranted. Generally, touch associated with flourishing would be nearly constant in infancy, as practiced among hunter-gatherers, including carrying and co-sleeping. Both touch and co-sleeping have been associated with regulatory processes, possibly through effects on the vagal system and reduction of stress hormones (Carter and Porges, 2013; Field et al., 2010; McKenna et al., 1994). If such effects are cumulative, they are likely to mediate a distinction between adequate parenting and contexts that foster flourishing. Our work supports such a distinction, in that in two cultures (United States and China), we found that maternal reports of positive touch both in terms of behavior and attitudes were positively correlated with their reports of greater empathy and inhibitory control in their 3-year-olds (Narvaez, Wang, Cheng, and Gleason, 2013). These results remained significant even after controlling for maternal education and income, as well as the responsive care associated with good enough parenting.

Alloparenting, Social Support, and Cooperative Childrearing

The idea that alloparenting supports sociomoral development and consequent flourishing is simple: multiple responsive caregivers allow for not only shared responsivity to the child's needs but also greater support for the child's primary caregiver. Multiple caregivers are associated with a higher standard of living and more effective parenting than families with single parents, thus lowering the child's risk for cognitive, social, and emotional problems (Amato, 2005). Traumatized mothers will also have difficulty providing the responsive care their children need (see chapter 12). Such trauma indicates a breakdown in social support at some point in her life. Relatedly, mothers who perceive themselves as living within a supportive social context are more likely to have children with better social skills and fewer behavior problems than those who do not. Presence of multiple adults may well provide good opportunities for the child to engage in beneficial social interactions (Koverola, Papas, Pitts, Murtaugh, Black, and Dubowitz, 2005). Social support is directly related to parenting in that higher levels of parental social support are correlated with less parenting stress and less ineffective parenting. Social support is also negatively correlated with parents' reports of children's behavior problems (McConnell, Breitkreuz, and Savage, 2011).

Although work on adequate parenting and children's resilience under adverse circumstances often mentions the importance of nonparental adults in children's lives (e.g., Masten et al., 1990), the notion of alloparenting as a critical component of childrearing is not typically emphasized. We have found (Gleason, Narvaez, Cheng, Wang, and Brooks, 2013) that mother's attitudes toward alloparenting cohere with attitudes toward responsivity, touch, and play into a singular construct of nurturing parenting. This cohesion emphasizes the importance of positive attitudes toward alloparenting as an important component of the social environment that might predict children's sociomoral outcomes and flourishing.

Play

In contrast to breastfeeding, touch, and alloparenting, whose effects are arguably felt most distinctly if they are missing in infancy, play is central most notably in the preschool- and school-aged years (Rubin, Fein, and Vandenberg, 1983). In the context of child flourishing, play is critical for two functions: (1) the development of physiological regulation, particularly with respect to emotion in social situations; and (2) exposure to and experience in reciprocal social relationships with peers and friends—individuals who, in contrast to adults, are similar to the child in competence and power.

Play is universal and takes many forms, from solitary to fantasy based to the physical interactions typical of rough-and-tumble (R&T) play. Both fantasy and R&T play have been associated with the successful development of emotion regulation in early to middle childhood (Lillard, Lerner, Hopkins, Dore, Smith, and Palmquist, 2013; Pellegrini and Smith, 1998). These forms of play involve intricate interactions with others that require both parties to understand that the nature of the behaviors is playful. Social pretend play, particularly if involving frightening or angry themes, requires appropriate modulation of emotion and arousal (Galyer and Evans, 2001)—as does successful involvement in R&T (Peterson and Flanders, 2005). Although little research has examined the effects on children denied these forms of play over long periods, short deprivation periods are followed by longer and more intense engagement in play and are associated with compromises in attention (Pellegrini and Smith, 1998).

Fry (chapter 7) has described typical R&T play in both humans and other primates and has made the argument for consideration of this type of play as a way of learning restraint in aggressive interactions with others. Similarly, Gray (chapter 8) has discussed play generally as a way of developing and reinforcing egalitarian interactions within hunter-gatherer communities.

Social pretend play has also been discussed in the developmental literature as a forum for practicing important social skills such as negotiation, compromise, and cooperation (Black, 1992; Doyle and Connolly, 1989; Howe, Petrakos, and Rinaldi, 1998). Perhaps more important, play in childhood typically involves peers, a critical context for social development, and is an important basis for friendship (Hartup, 1992). Because successful creation of close, egalitarian, social relationships is a hallmark of flourishing, provision of opportunities for play in order to develop such relationships is a critical component of the nurturing caregiving environment.

Conclusion

Social relationships are the cornerstone of human development. From the moment of existence, each individual is nested in a network of ties to others that both create and modulate a whole host of biological and behavioral systems (Reis, Collins, and Berscheid, 2000). Although survival after childhood is possible without a complex network of social relationships, both physical and psychological functioning are seriously compromised in those who are socially isolated (Berscheid and Regan, 2005). What is more, even a close connection to a single adult is typically insufficient for optimal development (Amato, 2005). For children, particularly infants, entrenchment in a social context is a critical step toward survival, but flourishing requires a community. As the chapters in this volume illustrate, the quality of the nurturing environment is key to whether children endure, adapt to, or actively benefit from it. Flourishing must therefore be defined not just in terms of the successful formation and maintenance of close ties to others, but also in terms of the child's resultant sociomoral orientation toward others and active, positive participation in the community.

Although warm, sensitive, and responsive care is the foundation of sociomoral behavior (Kochanska, 2002; Kochanska and Kim, 2012; Kochanska and Murray, 2000), consideration of

other parenting and communal practices, such as breastfeeding, touch, alloparenting, and play might illustrate the difference between adaptive and optimal development. These behaviors, common to the small-band hunter-gatherers, are associated with important physiological and psychological outcomes that significantly raise the likelihood of a child interacting with others in prosocial ways. Most important, a community of individuals who receive the kind of parenting that is associated with sociomoral flourishing is more likely to create a community in which joy and well-being are fostered by and for all.

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