# Parenting Interacts with Social Setting

**David J. Smith** examines comparisons of family functioning and delinquency.

There is a large body of evidence to show that family functioning is related to adolescent delinquency and adult criminal careers. Yet most of this research has grown out of a psychological tradition that imagines the family as an enclosed microsocial environment. As pointed out by Bronfenbrenner (1979), himself a psychologist working within this tradition, it is unrealistic to view the family as a sealed container in that way. Each family is located at the centre of a series of widening social circles, not neatly arranged in concentric fashion, but overlapping in complex patterns. Also, there are power relationships between different levels in hierarchies which correspond only vaguely to these widening networks of relationships.

It is natural to expect that family functioning will have different effects depending on the social context, because parents are not alone in socialising their children. Plausible theories of parenting, such as the social learning theory of Patterson *et al.* (1992), propose that well-defined norms and boundaries are important, and that parents who successfully establish control not only articulate these norms, but also follow through consistently in their responses to the child's behaviour, so that the child's experience confirms that only behaviour within the boundaries is rewarded. Adults in the neighbourhood, teachers at school, and authority figures elsewhere may or may not share the norms

the school they attend, or use their contacts to help with getting a job or a college place. Parents who can do more to help their child in the wider world are likely to have a different relationship with them as a consequence. This external influence probably can be used to strengthen parental influence over the child. Notoriously it can also trigger a rejection of parental influence if naked threats are used in authoritarian style.

These arguments suggest that family influences need to be studied within a wider social context, and this raises questions about the relationship between social structure and criminal offending. Backed by evidence from their reanalysis of the Gluecks' longitudinal data on two cohorts in Boston, Sampson and Laub (1993) argued that lack of resources influences criminal offending primarily through its influence on family process. On this account, poverty and deprivation have little direct effect on the likelihood of offending by the individual young person, for example by blocking legitimate opportunities. However, they do have a substantial indirect effect, by creating conditions in which it is difficult for families to function well.

Single mothers with badly-paid jobs have little time, energy, or patience for good parenting, and living in cramped conditions with few labour-saving gadgets adds to their difficulties. Poverty and

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of the individual family and the moral perceptions underlying them. If they do not, then the parents will be swimming against the tide in their efforts to control their children.

Presumably family influence will be greater where it is backed up by broadly similar influences in the neighbourhood, school, and other social circles, and lesser where it is discordant with the social definitions and practices embodied in these wider relationships. Concordance between the family and its social setting emphasises horizontal relationships among those at a similar level in the social structure, such as families in a particular neighbourhood. Vertical relationships between different levels of a power hierarchy may also be important.

Parents having access to sources of power and influence have a greater capacity to do things for their children than those who are deprived or disadvantaged: for example, they can get them into a good school, secure special help or attention within

deprivation are therefore associated with poor parenting which in turn is associated with higher rates of delinquency. These links between social structure and the family may have important implications for the way we interpret the best research on family functioning.

Patterson and colleagues (e.g. Patterson *et al.* 1992) have argued that children behave 'coercively' (for example, whine until they are given a sweet) because they get what they want that way. Effective parents use strategies that discourage coercive behaviour, essentially by consistently ensuring that it is not rewarded. Effective monitoring and discipline involves accurately tracking and classifying problem behaviours; ignoring trivial coercive events; and using effective back-up consequences when punishment is necessary.

One reading of the work of the Oregon team is that the explanation for coercive family functioning lies fundamentally in the balance of power within the family. In coercive families, parents and children have roughly equal power, and alternate in assuming the

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roles of victim and aggressor. Parents allow children to win about as often as they do. In normal families, power is unequal, and the parent usually wins. There is a corresponding difference in the clarity of rules and boundaries. Coercive exchanges are more likely in families where the rules for child behaviour or the roles of family members are not well defined. On this account, parents do not secure compliance by authoritarian tactics: not by aggression, violence, instilling fear (the tactics of absolutist government). In fact, it is the parents who are not in control who tend to use these tactics.

Control is secured by unruffled consistency, whereas random aggression does not secure control but stimulates intensified sequences of bad behaviour in the child. Even in the best-regulated families there is conflict; there are challenges to parental authority. But 'positive parenting' provides the flexibility needed to avoid a coercive response to coercive behaviour, and to negotiate shifts of boundaries.

This model is founded on social learning theory, yet also expresses democratic ideals, and it is supported by an impressive weight of detailed empirical research, including experiments as well as longitudinal studies. Yet the practical application of the model is uncomfortably reminiscent of those 'internal missionaries' of the Victorian period who sought to carry middle class ideals of respectability and good behaviour into poor and lawless neighbourhoods. The usual criticism of missionaries is that the religious or cultural practices that they promote may be inappropriate or ineffective among the 'natives', or may be reinterpreted in ways that negate the original intention. This raises the question whether a model of good parenting such as the one proposed by Patterson and colleagues will work in deprived neighbourhoods. It may be that people in these neighbourhoods do as well as they can in the circumstances, and adopt the practices that are most appropriate to the social setting.

Against the missionary ideal it can be argued that notions of good and effective parenting have to be rooted in local culture and local practice, and cannot be imposed from outside. Analysis of the first four annual sweeps of the *Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime* supports the theory that parenting interacts with the local neighbour-hood. This is a longitudinal study of a single cohort of 4,382 young people aged 12 at the

first sweep in 1998 (Smith and McVie, 2003; Smith *et al.*, 2001). It is combined with a study of the social geography of Edinburgh, and the spatial distribution of recorded crime. For this purpose, Edinburgh has been divided into 91 'natural' neighbourhoods which can be characterised from census data, police-recorded crime data, and the responses of cohort members and residents. Regression analyses have shown that family functioning (as described by children and parents) powerfully predicts delinquency. Also, neighbourhood deprivation and incivilities predict delinquency after discounting the effect of a wide range of other factors.

Most interesting, however, is the finding that some aspects of family functioning have different effects, depending on the characteristics of the neighbourhood. For example, parental monitoring of their children has much more effect in reducing delinquency in affluent than in deprived areas; and it has more effect in safe areas than in those with a high level of incivilities. These findings suggest that exporting middle-class styles of parenting to deprived areas will not work. ∎

*David J. Smith* is Professor of Criminology in the School of Law, University of Edinburgh, and the founding editor of the European Journal of Criminology (first issue January 2003).

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