

# Cultural Influences on Parenting

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Cultures, the shared systems of meaning in and through which humans live, shape the expectations and hopes that parents have for their children and how they understand messages about being parents from their families and friends as well as from professionals and the media. The 2009 ZERO TO THREE *Parenting Young Infants and Toddlers Today* survey underscores how far the field has come in communicating the possibilities of the earliest years but also shows how much more work remains to achieve shared understandings with parents in the core area of social and emotional development. Because the parent survey deliberately oversampled African American and Hispanic parents (see p. 7, Research Methodology and Sample, in Lerner & Ciervo, this issue), it provides a unique perspective on the opportunities and challenges that confront parents from these groups. The differences found in the survey are not limited to those between racial and ethnic populations. For example, the survey revealed important differences between mothers and fathers with regard to the parenting challenges they say they confront. Moreover, differences due to socioeconomic factors are often the largest in any of the comparative analyses. The aim of this commentary, however, is to focus attention a little more keenly on some racial and ethnic differences in the survey results on social and emotional development in order to talk more about what these might mean for a more culturally inclusive practice for infants, toddlers, and families.

The survey examines important racial and ethnic differences in parenting beliefs, understandings of developmental milestones, expectations for school readiness, and influences on parenting. Because it is difficult to keep all of the disparate results from the survey in mind, what follows is a brief summary of the main differences that seem especially worthy of comment, followed by a discussion of more general considerations

of culture and parenting that may help us to make sense of these. The summary here is necessarily selective, highlighting some of the major points that emerge from the survey as they may relate to infant and toddler development both globally and historically.

One final caveat: Although the survey did collect information on education and income, the survey results presented in the final report do not analyze racial and ethnic

differences based on income and education. Thus, we do not know how many of these differences would remain after controlling for these factors. Nevertheless, some of these differences do raise intriguing questions about the different expectations parents have for their children and the extent to which these may be shaped by valued cultural goals. The differences are worthy of discussion and consideration in our fields, even if economic influences turn out to be the paramount determinants of some of these perspectives.

## Abstract

**ZERO TO THREE's *Parenting Infants and Toddlers Today* survey presents an opportunity to explore areas where African American, Hispanic, and White parents may differ in their perceptions of infant development. The article highlights some of the differences in these racial and ethnic groups, such as parents' understanding of early social and emotional development, expectations for school readiness, and the sources of support and information that have the most influence on parents. Exploring these differences is an important first step in understanding ways to more effectively engage all parents.**

**Figure 1. Understanding of Experiences That Foster Social/Emotional Development**

Perceptions Vary Among Subgroups

% rating each as a major/strong influence (ratings of 8, 9, 10)

Parenting Behavior	White	African American	Hispanic	First-Time Parents	Repeat Parents
Setting and enforcing rules	87%	77%	77%	81%	86%
Comforting when child is upset	85%	75%	74%	80%	85%
Playing/interacting with other children	84%	79%	82%	85%	84%
Establishing routines	80%	72%	82%	75%	82%
Talking about feelings with child	70%	65%	74%	71%	71%
Encouraging child to keep working at difficult tasks	75%	66%	64%	69%	73%
Following child's lead during play	60%	59%	59%	62%	61%

### A Brief Summary of the Survey on Racial and Ethnic Differences

THE SURVEY INDICATES that parents from different racial and ethnic communities sometimes understand parenting differently. For example, African American parents are less likely than Hispanic and White parents to see routines and discussions of feelings as centrally important in the earliest years, whereas White parents are more likely than African American and Hispanic parents to see setting and enforcing rules, comforting an upset child, and encouraging a child to persist in difficult tasks as important (see Figure 1). In all cases, the majority of parents in any population endorse the importance of these parenting behaviors, but these subtle differences may indicate potential targets for increased dialogue and understanding on how parents can shape early social and emotional development.

The most interesting racial and ethnic differences, however, are seen with regard to developmental milestones in social and emotional development. The results

demonstrated that parents in all racial groups shared some misconceptions about how early and how deeply young children experience emotions and sense the emotions of others (see Figure 2). There were some differences among the groups regarding the age at which children reach certain milestones in social development. For example, 53% of African Americans, 50% of Hispanic parents, and 44% of White parents believe that children can share and take turns by age 2. In addition, African American parents (30%) are more likely than White parents (17%) to expect children to be able to control their temper tantrums by age 2, whereas Hispanic parents (24%) are intermediate in this regard.

There is also an intriguing set of contrasts that emerge in the kinds of social and emotional skills parents think are important for school entry, with each population emphasizing slightly different skills (see Figure 3). Hispanic and White parents are more likely than African American parents to think that the ability to play well with others is important, African American and White parents are more likely than Hispanic parents to think that respecting adults is important, and African American and Hispanic parents are more likely than White parents to indicate that the ability to sit still and pay attention is important.

Finally, there are also important differences with regard to the importance of family, faith, professionals, and media as influences on parenting. African American parents were more likely to see their parenting as shaped by the way they were raised and by their religion than were either Hispanic or White parents (see Figure 4). In turn, Hispanic parents were more likely than African American and White parents to see professionals as an important source of information for parenting. It is interesting that both African American and Hispanic parents were more likely than White parents to get parenting information from media, and both groups were also more likely than White parents to use media for their young children.

**Figure 2. Experiencing and Understanding Emotions**

Percentage of parents who think the ability to experience feelings like sadness and fear occurs after 6 months of age

African American	74%
Hispanic	74%
White	66%

Percentage of parents who think children's ability to sense whether parents are angry or sad, and be affected by this, occurs after the age of 6 months

African American	72%
Hispanic	72%
White	62%

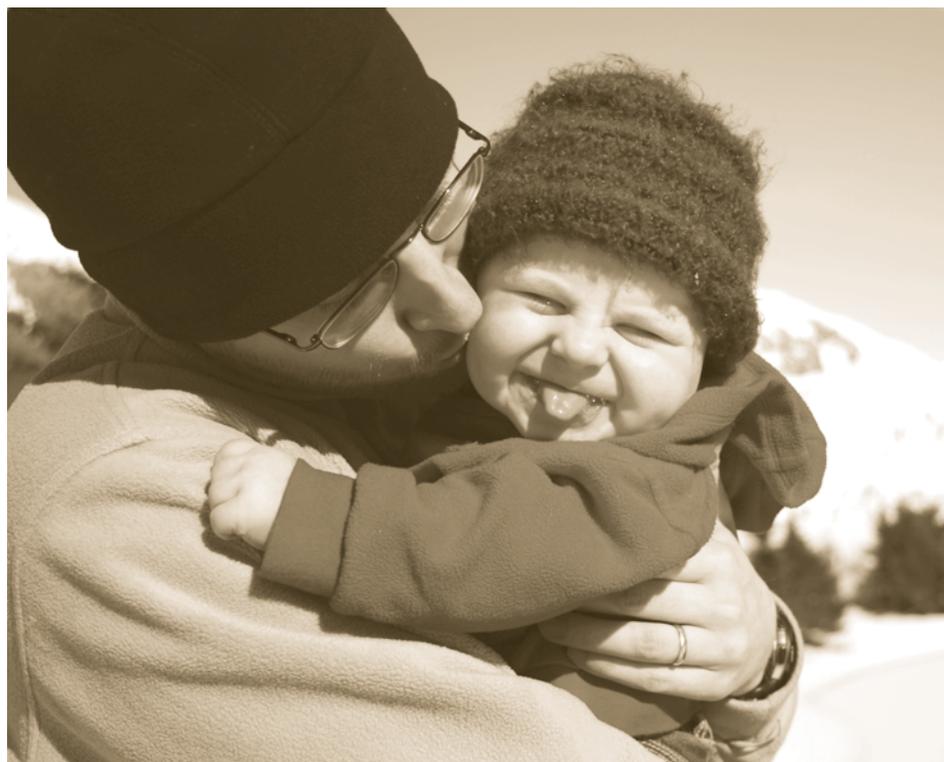


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**Culture shapes the expectations and hopes parents have for their children and how they understand messages about being parents.**

**Figure 3. Perspectives on Preparing Children for Kindergarten**  
One/Two Most Important Skills for Children Entering Kindergarten

Skill	All Parents	White	African American	Hispanic
Plays well with others, shares	46%	48%	34%	45%
Curious, likes to learn	44%	47%	30%	39%
Respects adults	36%	37%	38%	32%
Can sit still, pay attention	25%	23%	30%	30%
Knows most of alphabet	16%	14%	25%	17%
Can separate easily from parents	14%	14%	14%	12%

### The Relativity of Development

ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND DEVELOPMENTALISTS working cross-culturally have long maintained that parents deliberately cultivate the skills needed by their children for the kinds of lives they expect them to lead (e.g., Harkness & Super, 1996). These observations have led to an important reexamination of the assumption that there is any simple and universal way to assess cognitive development (e.g., Cole, 1996; Lancy, 2008), and the survey results presented here suggest that there may be similar limitations in our understandings of social and emotional development that may help us to understand why parents sometimes seem to understand their children's social and emotional lives differently from professionals and also from each other.

**Figure 4. Influences on Parenting**

Parents	Influence of Upbringing	Influence of Faith
African American	61%	49%
Hispanic	49%	35%
White	52%	42%

### Interdependence and Independence

THE MAJOR AXIS of variation to emerge in cross-cultural work on child development concerns the extent to which, as Patricia Greenfield and her colleagues (2003) have put it, children are socialized for independence versus interdependence. From this perspective, the emphasis on sharing at early ages in both African American and Hispanic families may be entirely consistent with socialization for interdependence, with parents in both cultural contexts emphasizing this as a central skill and a priority for early cultivation. The danger, of course, is that these expectations may not be realistic. The understanding of what is and is not realistic is strongly conditioned by expectations of what is normal for White children, who are socialized for independence and for whom sharing may, accordingly, emerge as more of a problem. Indeed, one possible interpretation of the finding that African American parents are less concerned with the ability of their children to play well with others at school entry, and that Hispanic parents are less concerned with respect for adults, is that they have already prepared their children rel-

atively well for these behaviors through their socialization for interdependence. In contrast, the fact that White parents seem less concerned about their children's ability to sit still and pay attention at school entry may equally reflect their socialization for independence, where such skills may be relatively more central.

### Health and Safety

FROM A GLOBAL perspective, an interest in early development and engagement with young children as autonomous individuals is relatively unique to European and European American cultural milieus and, historically, an interest in anything more than survival of infants was likely a diversion from that core task (e.g., Lancy, 2008). Sadly, as the work of Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1993) in northern Brazil reminds us, there are many places in our world today where survival remains the paramount concern for parents. Also, as the results of the survey make clear, this remains true even for American parents, who list health and safety concerns as their highest priorities: Fully 24% of parents list injury prevention and 21% indicate preventing sickness as their top concern. Each of these is nearly double the percentage of parents for whom doing well in school (13%) or discipline (12%) are top concerns. These results, coupled with indications of a relative lack of understanding and engagement with the emotional lives of infants, may show how much work remains to be done in emphasizing the importance of social and emotional development in the early years, but they also emphasize the persistent importance of health and safety concerns as opportunities for engagement with parents from any racial and ethnic population.

### Parenting and Caregiving

THE SURVEY FOUND that a significant proportion of parents rely regularly on someone else to care for their child, and most parents are satisfied with these arrangements. Half of parents (51%) have a regular caregiver for their child other than themselves or their spouse or partner, and these parents most frequently rely on a family member to provide child care. Families in which both parents work—as well as single, separated, or divorced parents—rely on a regular caregiver at much higher rates, as do African Americans and those with incomes higher than \$100,000 (see Figure 5).

As the anthropology of childhood makes clear, such arrangements have, in fact, been the norm in the human experience. The primatologist Sarah Hrdy (2009), for example, argues that humans are the most collaborative of all primates in their approaches to child rearing, and one of the



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**Much work remains to be done in emphasizing the importance of social and emotional development in the early years**

**Figure 5. Percentage of Children in Regular Child Care**

White	47%
African American	49%
Hispanic	55%
Single/separated/divorced parents	71%
Income >\$100K	60%

persistent emphases from ethnographic work is the extent to which individual parents may be much less central in an individual child's experience than we presume on the basis of the experience of White parents in nuclear family households. Thus, among the Gusii of east Africa, so well described by Robert LeVine and his colleagues (1994), many of the responsibilities we commonly assume are maternal are regularly handled by older siblings because mothers are often under significant pressure to quickly return to their agricultural work. Thus, what appears to us as a relatively recent phenomenon, child care with maternal participation in the workforce, has likely been the norm both globally and historically, and the survey reminds us what a vital part of American life such arrangements have become.

## Sources of Support and Information

ONE FINAL SET of findings suggests an alternate approach to expanding awareness of and discussions about

### Learn More

#### CHILDREN AND CHILDHOOD INTEREST GROUP OF THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

[www.aaacig.org](http://www.aaacig.org)

The Web site provides important up-to-date information on global and national cross-cultural research on childhood.

#### A WORLD OF BABIES: IMAGINED CHILDCARE GUIDES FOR SEVEN SOCIETIES

*Edited by Judy S. DeLoache & Alma Gottlieb (2000)*

*New York: Cambridge University Press*

This book provides a light but revealing examination of the ways in which parenting advice varies cross-culturally.

#### OUR BABIES, OURSELVES: HOW BIOLOGY AND CULTURE SHAPE THE WAY WE PARENT

*Meredith F. Small (1998)*

*New York: Anchor Books*

This book provides a wonderful and quite accessible introduction to culture and parenting.



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### Important differences exist between mothers and fathers regarding parenting challenges.

the social and emotional lives of infants and toddlers. African American parents seem to be more likely than other parents to turn to their own parents and their faith communities in deciding how to respond to the challenges of infancy and toddlerhood, whereas Hispanics actually do so less frequently than Whites (see Figure 4). At the same time, African American and Hispanic parents are more likely than White parents to turn to the media for information on parenting, which suggests that mass media offer what is likely our best opportunity to change public discourse on early childhood development. Insofar as these approaches affect broader public discourse, they may also have unique potential to reach the extended families and faith communities that appear to be especially important to African American parents.

### Conclusions and Next Steps

THE SURVEY RESULTS point to the need to engage parents more effectively on social and emotional development, and within that overall strategy, the need to more effectively engage African American and Hispanic parents. The early childhood field would benefit from much more broad-based dialogue and community engagement on the goals of parents, and the ways that their parenting practices may or may not serve those ends. A collaborative approach to

developing new strategies that draw on the wisdom of diverse communities coupled with the evolving knowledge of just how much is occurring in the earliest years would orient the field toward an expanded, but respectful and appropriately humble, approach to all American families. §

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