

Doing What I Teach and Teaching What I Do:
Using the Principles of Effective Parenting to Become an Effective Educator
about Parenting

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ABSTRACT. The journeys of being a family science educator, researcher, and parent are arguably intertwined. This essay describes how the author has used research- and theory- based concepts to inform her instructional practice. Three interrelated instructional devices—a conceptual model, cooperative learning teams, and a class-within-a-class format—are described as they have been implemented in an undergraduate course on parent-child relations. The strength of these devices seems to lie in the way they utilize processes that also underlie effective parenting, such as synchrony, attunement, and scaffolding. The essay describes how these instructional methods play out in the classroom, as well as the ways they facilitate critical thinking processes such as complexity, flexibility, multiple perspectives, self-reflection, insightfulness, and systemic analysis.

I began formally teaching and researching parenting the same year I became a parent. That child recently turned 21, and I have been reflecting on my journey as a parent. I've also been reflecting on my journey to becoming an effective educator and researcher. What I've realized is that these three roles are inextricably intertwined for me.

As long as I can remember, I have been fascinated by children. At a recent reunion, a friend recalled how, when I was 14, we visited a commune in the hills of Tennessee. I jumped out of the van and began playing with the little kids, running through the fields and barns with them. One of the hippie moms apparently proclaimed, "She's juicy!" So I've always had that "juicy passion" for children. I decided I wanted to be a pediatrician because I was interested in children and wanted to help families, and also because I wanted to do something challenging and non-traditional for females. I went to a year of medical school and decided it was not for me; the way we were to learn about children and families, at least in the first year medical curriculum, was through rote memorization. After a bit of an identity crisis, I got permission to take three graduate courses in Child and Family Studies as a special student. I had never had a family science or human development class and knew nothing about the field. But I came home the night after my first class and told my husband, "This is it; this is what I want to do! You get to read these *research articles* and decide for yourself whether they are finding something worthwhile. And you get to study *theories* and use those ideas to figure out what *needs to be studied next*, and then you get to design *your own studies!*" I was thrilled with the opportunity to use both creative and analytic thinking to study children and families. I couldn't sleep that night, and I have been excited about the field ever since.

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Flash forward ten years. In the research arena, I had established my field of study as parent-child interaction—specifically parent-child synchrony and the attunement and scaffolding involved in that—and its relation to the development of young children’s social competence. As an instructor, I had developed and taught regularly an undergraduate course on parent-child relations through the lifespan. I had received no “teacher training” in my doctoral program (I guest lectured twice as a graduate student; that was the extent of my training) but had tried lots of varying approaches over the years. Through trial-and-error learning, I thought I knew what made for good undergraduate instruction and had made a good-faith effort to develop and implement a strong parenting course. However, I needed to do something more to better facilitate student learning. As it turned out, the secret was in applying what I knew about “good parenting” to my instructional approach.

Teaching an undergraduate course in parent-child relations: What I tried and what wasn’t working.

I had been allowed to design the parenting course, and because of my research program, was especially excited about teaching it. I had the additional benefit of having taught our required introductory human development course for years, so was familiar with what the students would—or at least should—know coming into the parenting class. Because it was an upper-division course, students were expected to complete written assignments and essay exams, not just take multiple-choice tests. Enrollment was almost 100 students each semester.

I put together what I considered to be a strong syllabus. I did not “lecture from the book” but chose topics that were supplementary, and never lectured without attempting to elicit student comments. I presented current research in an accessible way. I included a good dose of the kind of “practical application” students tended to be interested in (e.g., “Should babies be put on a sleep schedule?”). I showed interesting video clips. I tied what they had learned in their intro class to what we were talking about in this class. I was enthusiastic and committed to actively engaging the students in learning. In short, I was giving everything I had to this class. Their test scores seemed to indicate the students were learning something in the course. I always felt pretty good about how the class was going... until the end of the semester.

I assigned an end-of-semester project that students were to complete and present to the class. The project required choosing a parenting book written for the lay public and critiquing it based on what we’d learned across the semester. As I listened to the presentations and read their reports, I realized that many students had internalized relatively little of what I thought they had been learning in the class. I sought to determine where I had failed, and ultimately decided that the weakness of the class was at the level of integration: Students were not making connections.

I now believe this failure to make connections was occurring at several levels: (1) Students were not connecting ideas across each section of the course. After taking an exam, that material was compartmentalized or forgotten. For example, when we discussed autonomy-granting in adolescence, students gave no indication that we had learned about autonomy-granting in toddlerhood. I had thought that these connections would occur naturally, simply because of the way I’d structured the course. (This false assumption reminds me of a startling discovery I made the first semester I taught: I

believed my lectures were organized in such a clear and logical manner that students would easily discern the main points and sub-points. I thought their notes would look a lot like mine. This illusion was shattered when I found a notebook a student accidentally left in the classroom. Her notes from the day's lecture were written as one long paragraph, sort of a jargon-seasoned word salad. After that, I posted an outline at the beginning of each class and referred explicitly to each new heading as we moved through the period.) (2) Students were not connecting theory to research. They could not talk about how the developmental changes in adolescence might impact the family as a system, for example, even though they had been able to write about Family Systems Theory on the first exam when we had reviewed theories relevant to parenting. (3) Students were not connecting research and theory to applied issues. When a religiously-oriented parenting book suggested parents need to "change the child's heart," students could not tell me what psychological variable we had learned about that was the equivalent of a child's "heart" (much less why it didn't need to be changed).

My challenge, therefore, was to find instructional approaches that would help students make these connections. My mistake had been assuming students were making these connections themselves; my goal was to find a way to scaffold the connections for the students throughout the semester, so that the connections remained for them at the end. I subsequently have developed and incorporated approaches that I believe have accomplished this purpose, or at least moved us closer to it. I have tried a lot of different things, but have identified three interrelated methods that seem to be the most effective for me and my students: the use of (a) a conceptual model, (b) cooperative learning teams, and (c) a class-within-a-class. I turned to these methods after experiencing a classic ah-ha moment (or, rather, a series of mini ah-has, if that's possible): I realized that I could use what I knew (and taught) about parenting to become a better teacher.

Teaching What I Do: Researching and Teaching about Parenting Concepts

Synchrony refers to mutually focused, balanced, reciprocal interactions (see Brazelton & Als, 1979; Field, Healy, Goldstein, & Guthertz, 1990). It refers to the style rather than the content of interaction (Harrist, Pettit, Dodge, & Bates, 1994; Pettit & Mize, 1993). In developmental science, synchrony has typically been studied among parent-child dyads. This research suggests that children from dyads who engage in high rates of synchrony benefit in multiple ways, including better homeostatic regulation in infancy, easier compliance in toddlerhood, and more competent peer relations in early childhood (see Harrist & Waugh, 2002, for a review). Although synchrony is dyadic, when the child is young, there is arguably a greater burden on the parent for facilitating and maintaining synchrony. Two key processes used by parents who do this successfully are *attunement* and *scaffolding*: Attunement is the process of reading or sensing another's state and adjusting one's behavior accordingly (Dombrowski, Timmer, Blacker, & Urquiza, 2005; Stern, 1985; Strand 2000); scaffolding is the process of strategically guiding and supporting a partner's learning, making adjustments that are contingent on the partner's current state (Leve & Fagot, 1997; Robinson, Burns, & Davis, 2009). So parents can get "in synch" with the child by attuning to the child's needs—expressed both verbally and non-verbally—and adjusting their behavior to meet those needs. If the interaction is a problem-solving or learning type interaction, the parent scaffolds next steps by gaining/maintaining the child's attention and building on the current need and

state of the child. These were concepts I had been researching among parent-child dyads and teaching about in the parenting class. However, as it turns out, they were missing from my interactions with the class.

I believe the three instructional approaches listed earlier—the conceptual model, the cooperative learning teams, and the a class-within-a-class—have been successful because they provide me a way of becoming better attuned to and in synch with students' thinking and level of comprehension. I am therefore able to scaffold their learning of parenting concepts in ways that facilitate multiple forms of critical thinking. Following is a description of how I have used the three approaches and how they appear to aid student learning and development as scientific thinkers, including how they facilitate six critical thinking processes: complexity, flexibility, multiple perspectives, self-reflection, insightfulness, and systemic analysis (see Swartz, 2004).

Doing What I Teach: Enacting Parenting Research Concepts as a Method of Instruction

Building and using a conceptual model of parent-child relations.

I decided I needed something visual that I could refer students to throughout the semester, something that would represent the theoretical and research constructs and variables we were learning about, and how they were interrelated; a concept map. I originally created giant laminated arrows and words in boxes, ovals, and bubbles, and posted it on the back wall of our classroom (see Figure 1). In later semesters, we were moved to a new building that had dual projection screens, so I was able to post a computer-generated version of the model (see Figure 2¹) continuously on one screen while using the second screen for other class material. The model is posted on our class website updated regularly throughout the semester.

Each term in the model represents a concept students have learned about in the course; the arrows represent the interaction among concepts. At the beginning of each class, I add pieces to the model representing what we studied in the previous class meeting. As I add the pieces, I lead students in a discussion that includes (a) a review of the concepts ("We talked about *ethnic socialization* last time; where should that be represented in the model?" "We learned about parenting highly *aggressive children*; what part of *nurturance* or *discipline* variables were related to *child aggression*?) and (b) how the concepts fit with what we've already studied ("You just read about *parental monitoring*. Is *monitoring* a form of *nurturance* or *discipline*? Should the arrow between *monitoring* and *child aggression* be unidirectional or bidirectional?").

I also use the model as an advance organizer when introducing new concepts (see Joyce, Weil, & Calhoun, 2003). For example, if the new topic being introduced is the parents' role in children's adjustment to school, I could begin the class period by having students think about and discuss in small groups which variables in the model might impact the child's experience in kindergarten. Students might choose to discuss (and have, in the past): (a) *culture*, for example the importance of education in different cultures and subcultures; (b) *time*, and what laws currently exist about schooling; (c) *place*, and regional differences in education; (d) *parental goals and values*, and how some parents believe it is important to prepare children academically while other parents leave that up to the school system; (e) *parent education*, and how parents' own school experience might temper expectations they have for their children; (f) *temperament*, and

how transitioning to all-day schooling might be challenging for high-activity or high-distractibility children; (g) *child biological characteristics* and *IQ*, and how some children will find the academic role more challenging than others; and/or (h) *family roles*, and how the child takes on a new role as student and the parent may (or may not) take on the role of teacher or academic supporter or monitor. As students generate these ideas and share them with the full class, I can let them know which of their ideas have been supported or refuted by research, which ideas have not been examined, and so on.

The model is an excellent tool for reinforcing the use of a common terminology. For example, if we are discussing differences in parenting tasks for urban and rural parents and a student says, “A rural parent has to help children find playmates if they don’t live in a neighborhood full of children,” I can ask, “What did we call that particular parent role?” (*viz.*, *social broker*). It also helps students connect theory to research, and research to applied issues. I also use the model to assess, via assignments and test questions, whether students are thinking critically about parent-child relations. Toward the end of the semester, for example, we learn about parenting children with special needs (e.g., disabilities, exceptionalities). On the final exam, I may ask students to write an essay wherein they make an argument about where the *special needs* concept should go in the model, and how other concepts in the model might be impacted by a child’s special needs. In the past, students have written about how parents’ goals are impacted by the child’s particular need; how nurturance and discipline might change; and how child competence is differentially impacted by particulars of the disabling conditions.

What I think is most powerful about the model is the building process. If the model had been posted in its entirety the first day of class, it surely would have been overwhelming to the students. More importantly, the primary purpose of the model is to help students connect one concept with another, one week’s topic with another’s, while at the same timing seeing the “big picture.” By putting the pieces of the model together as concepts are introduced in class, the students see the integrated nature of the course content right before their eyes; they see the big picture both literally and figuratively! The critical thinking processes of *complexity* and *systemic analyses* are scaffolded for the students as the model is being built.

Using cooperative learning teams.

Being in synchrony with students requires a reciprocal give-and-take as part of the learning process. The primary way I do this is through asking questions and facilitating discussions. This is easier said than done. Originally, I had tried addressing questions to the whole class. This either resulted in an awkward silence, or one member of the same small core of students would repeatedly volunteer a response. Students who didn’t volunteer became more and more passive (and irritated by the few talkative students). I have since learned to assign students to teams of four at the beginning of the semester. They are expected to sit with their team for the remainder of the semester. When I ask a question, I use an adaptation of the think-pair-share technique (Lyman, 1981). I pose the question and ask students to discuss it in their teams. (These discussions are invariably animated after a minute or so.) I then ask for students to share with the whole class examples of what they discussed among their teams. There are multiple benefits to this technique. The students have time to think about their responses without being put on the spot in front of the entire class (allowing for the critical thinking process of *self-*

reflection); students can express their own ideas in the small group, even if they are introverted or reticent to speak in a large group (increasing inclusiveness in the classroom); and when I ask them to share what they discussed (I ask, “What is something you *heard* in your team discussion?”), they can share ideas with the larger class and still remain anonymous (because no one knows who, within their team, made the comment). Students get exposed to each others’ perspectives and model various ways of thinking for each other, facilitating the critical thinking process of *multiple perspectives* and *flexibility*.

There are many other benefits to using this team approach. One of the primary benefits is that learning becomes more active and cooperative. If I showed a video clip in the past, for example, students tended to become very still and quiet, zoning out or perhaps worrying about whether they should be taking notes. Now, immediately after viewing the video, I ask students to discuss in their teams the three things they found most interesting. The within-team and whole-class discussions that ensue are always lively and interesting and sometimes quite insightful. We have a policy that anything that is shared with the whole class can be asked about on the next exam. This tends to keep students engaged in a positive way, as the “lesson” flows from their own observations and critical thinking, not from something I am imposing on them. The teams allow for every student voice to be heard, and this helps me be more attuned to where students are in their thinking and adjust my approach appropriately. Also, having multiple 3-4 minute discussions throughout a 75 minute class helps keep students energized. If I see the class’s energy flagging, I stop whatever I’m doing and come up something for them to discuss in their teams. It always works to re-engage them.

I keep students in the same teams throughout the semester for several reasons. First, students get to know their teammates very well. This allows them to feel connected even within in a large class, and can be a safety net (e.g., if a student misses class because of illness). Also, the teams develop a level of intimacy that allows them to easily “go deep” in their discussions. This is especially helpful in a class about parent-child relations: The team members get to know each other’s family histories, and we can draw on that knowledge across the semester. For example, if, late in the semester, we are talking about how parents should best handle their children leaving home for work/college, students can talk within their teams about how their own parents handled that transition, with a shared understanding of each other’s family backgrounds (e.g., whether one student’s parents had been overprotective or distant in earlier childhood and adolescence). The power that comes from students making a connection between an abstract idea and their own personal experience is magnified by four.

Using a seminar style class-within-a-class.

Finally, I have recently added one more method to my repertoire for the parenting class, in an attempt to push (or is it pull?) students a little further toward the outer edge of their respective zones of proximal development. I heard about this idea sometime in the last 10 years, perhaps at a retreat with the theme of “teaching large classes.” Unfortunately, I can’t find a reference to the technique, but what I remembered was someone talking about a “class-within-a-class,” where a small group of students sits on a stage with the professor, and a seminar-style class is conducted while the rest of the class observes. I had wanted to try this for years, but it takes a certain physical set up in

the classroom to be able to do this. When we moved to our new building I had my chance. I created five mini-classes of 20 students each (five of our 4-person teams, assigned the second week of class). The syllabus shows which mini-class sits in the front of the room each class period; across the semester, each student sits up front in their mini-class six times. The students in the mini-class have name tents on their desks so I am able to call them by name (an unexpected outcome for me has been that I was able to learn most of the 100 students names after a few rotations). I still speak to the whole class and we do the team discussions, but I am able to address the mini-class with more difficult, Socratic-style questions. Students know they may be called on by name in the mini-class, so pay closer attention to the readings before class; this allows for a higher-level conversation and practice in multiple forms of critical thinking. Students seem to appreciate that I am interested in what they think and as they struggle with difficult questions, the observing students experience the struggle vicariously. I believe there is a different emotional climate in the classroom because of the mini-class: More students talk to me before and after class and during office hours, for example; they really are acting more like students in a small seminar class would act. And, unexpectedly, the students observing the mini-class do not become passive. In fact, the mini-class experience seems to empower them to share their thinking, such that, when I am trying to engage the mini-class, students in the rest of the class are fairly insistent on joining in. Of course, I am thrilled with that and let them join the conversation.

Conclusion

Despite my best intentions, the journey of being a parent has been a winding one: I've had to be willing to change directions, try new things, admit mistakes, and ask for grace from my two children and my co-parenting husband. My journey as an educator has been a similar winding path: I've learned through trial-and-error, made mistakes, and changed directions. What a nice discovery to realize that some best practices in the realm of parenting can teach us about best practices in university instruction. Thank you to the many students who have taught me so much along the way as we have shared in the learning journey.

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Footnotes

¹The “Culture, Time, and Place” cluster was inspired by the Worlds of Childhood video series (Haines-Stiles & Danielson, 1992); the “Child Needs” cluster was adapted from Brooks (2000).

Figure 1.



Figure 2

