

**Parenting, a Challenge in the New Millennium:  
Implications for Mental Health of Children****I. Sharma**Department of Institute of Medical Sciences,  
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Adolescence is the transition phase between childhood and adulthood, characterized by psychological and biological changes, extending from the onset of puberty to the attainment of physical maturity and adulthood. In our country, it probably starts at 15 years when the preparations for entry into professional courses begin, and not at 11 years as mentioned in text books.

Parenting is a complex activity that includes many specific behaviours that work individually or together to influence child outcomes. It prepares the child to enter into the next phase of life. When we compare the conventional role of a to-day's child with that of yesterday, i.e. two decades back, we find a sea difference. Two decades ago children were reared in a relatively protected environment and taught to be subservient to their elders. The male child was expected to acquire modest education and make a career or else join the family profession. He was to be the bread winner, supposed to help in family work; and, if need be, take up family responsibilities at an early stage. The female child was taught to be submissive, tolerant and compliant; to acquire only minimal education, but to be proficient in domestic work (cooking, tailoring, home keeping etc.) so that she could adopt the primary role of a home maker. Most children did not have exposure to co-education. Introversion was encouraged, and mixing with the opposite sex considered a taboo.

In contrast, today's child is gripped with multitude of stresses such as making career choices, attending 2 schools (regular and tuition), forging a social identity, acquiring social skills to establish meaningful relationships, specially with the opposite sex; choosing a partner, establishing an appropriate sexual identity etc. He/She is expected to excel in his academic pursuits, face stiff competition to get into one of the elite professional courses (such as medical, IT, IAS etc) and make a career. This is despite the deteriorating school standards, the low quota of jobs, increasing corruption; very many distractions such as TV, computer, video games, internet etc and mixed messages from teachers, parents, society at large and mass media. Mounting parental pressure and economic constraints, nuclearization of families, rising number of working mothers and women's equal rights movement, have added to the problems. Parents are willing to bend backs to spend huge amount of money to help their child to make a career. Tuitions and coaching for professionals courses have become a norm, rather than an exception. For the female adolescent the situation is about the same, as for most parents the only way out of the dowry menace is to help their daughters to make a career. Proficiency in domestic chores is hardly a priority.

It is evident that technological advances, modernization and socio-cultural changes have brought about significant changes in the conventional roles of children. These

have been so rapid that most parents find themselves at loss to adapt to them. In some of the developed countries like Hong Kong this has resulted in crisis in child rearing with increase in unwanted children, avoidance and refusal to rear the children, confusion and inappropriateness in child rearing; inappropriate discipline; overprotection and over control; change in sex roles and attitudes, preoccupation with education and endless pressure on scholastic achievement. (Hong, 2001)

Today's parents are faced with a host of the challenges such as how to monitor the child's studies; how to motivate the child to excel in academics so that he can make an elite career; how to much of freedom to be given to the child; to what extent should interaction with opposite sex be permitted, should the child be permitted to choose his/her partner; how to monitor the child's peer group, specially when he/she has been provided with a motor bike and mobile phone; how to prevent the child from succumbing to drug abuse; to what extent should television, video, computer and internet be restricted; how much pocket should be given; how to counter the ill effects of the mixed messages from mass media; how to prevent the child's value system from being corrupted etc.

While many adolescents may be able to face the challenges successfully and pass on smoothly into adulthood, there are a significant number of youngsters, who may develop a gnawing frustration that might blaze into aggression, defiance, insecurity, loneliness, boredom and a feeling of being at the brink of crisis, which may not be severe enough to attract medical attention. Parents may often find themselves helpless in guiding them because they themselves have no experience of facing such problems.

Some of the children may be unable to withstand the stresses and develop diagnosable psychiatric disorders. A WHO sponsored multi-centred study in 4 developing countries reported a prevalence of 12-29% in children (Giel et al, 1983). There is a peak rise in suicide among males in our country in late adolescence. The causes are largely 'social', with only 3.4% attributed to mental illnesses (Unni, 1999). The prevalence rates of drug abuse in students have varied from 5-56.5% (Channabasavanna 1989). Numerous studies have also documented the multiple effects of television on children ranging from cognitive development, obesity, aggressive behaviour and violence, drug abuse, suicide and sexual activity (Diet & Strasburger, 1991). Although one cannot deny the role of biological factors, one must accept the contribution of social stresses and the importance of positive parenting, especially with regard to non-psychotic manifestations.

It remains to be seen whether there has been any rise in the incidence psychiatric disorders or a change in the pattern of psychiatric problems in children over the years. An epidemiological research examined the homicide rates in South Africa following the introduction of TV in 1975. There was more than two-fold rise in homicide rates from 1974 (2.5/100000) to 1989 (5.8/100000). The author hypothesised that if TV had not been developed, there would have been 10,000 fewer homicides; 70,000 fewer rapes and 700,000 fewer injurious assaults in US (Centerwall, 1992).

Mental Health professionals cannot afford to be complacent at this point of time. While assessing children special attention should be paid to coping behaviours and pattern of parenting. It would be interesting to study the parenting styles of parents, whose wards have been high achievers. They could serve as models for other parents.

Also, identification of parents/children who find themselves difficult to cope with demands on parenting is needed, so that they could be provided professional help geared towards sharpening their parental skills. Career counselling sessions, student counselling activities and school mental health programmes should be augmented. They would mitigate many of the problems of children and decrease the burden on parents. Nevertheless, parent guidance centres, workshops for parents, educational packages etc would still be required and are the need of the day.

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