

Parenting and Career Development

The family is a place in which children learn to interpret reality (Way and Rossmann 1996b). Parents serve as significant interpreters for children of information about the world and children's abilities (Hall, Kelly, Hansen, and Gutwein 1996). Researchers have studied the influence of parents and the family on children's career choice and development. Much of this research has demonstrated links between career development and such factors as socioeconomic status, parents' educational and occupational attainment, and cultural background. This Digest highlights a different body of research that considers the effects of family relationships. This research is based on attachment theory, which suggests that close relationships provide experiences of security that promote exploration and risk taking (Ketterson and Blustein 1997), and social learning theory, which views "early experiences as a basis for developing career self-efficacy and interests as well as career goals and choices throughout life" (Altman 1997, p. 241). The Digest looks at the ways in which parenting styles, family functioning, and parent-child interaction influence career development.

The Role of Parenting Styles

Roe, an early theorist, proposed that early childhood experiences play an indirect role in shaping later career behavior (Brown, Lum, and Voyle 1997). She suggested that parent-child relationships influence personality orientations and the development of psychological needs; vocational interests and choices are some of the ways in which individuals try to satisfy those needs (*ibid.*). Although Osipow (1997) and others point out the difficulty of demonstrating links between parenting styles and vocational choices, some research evidence is emerging.

Parenting styles are broad patterns of childrearing practices, values, and behaviors. Four types of parenting styles are *indulgent* (more responsive than demanding), *authoritarian* (highly demanding and directive but not responsive), *authoritative* (both demanding and responsive), and *uninvolved* (low in responsiveness and demandingness) (Darling 1999). The authoritative style balances clear, high expectations with emotional support and recognition of children's autonomy. Studies have associated this style with self-confidence, persistence, social competence, academic success, and psychosocial development (Bloir 1997; Strage and Brandt 1999). Authoritative parents provide a warm family climate, set standards, and promote independence, which result in more active career exploration on the part of children (Kracke 1997).

Although authoritarian parenting is associated with school success, pressures to conform and fulfill parents' expectations regarding education and careers can cause a poor fit between the individual and the chosen career, as well as estranged family relationships and poor mental health (Way and Rossmann 1996a). Families with uninvolved (or inactive) parents "seem unable to function well either because they cannot set guidelines, or because they do not pursue interests that involve places and persons outside the family" (*ibid.*, p. 3). This makes it more difficult for children to develop self-knowledge and differentiate their own career goals from their parents' goals.

Family Functioning and Career Development

Overall family functioning, a broader concept that encompasses parenting style, includes such factors as parental support and guid-

ance, positive or negative environmental influences, and family members' interaction styles (Altman 1997). Family functioning has a greater influence on career development than either family structure (size, birth order, number of parents) or parents' educational and occupational status (Fisher and Griggs 1994; Trusty, Watts, and Erdman 1997).

Parental support and guidance can include specific career or educational suggestions as well as experiences that indirectly support career development, such as family vacations, provision of resources such as books, and modeling of paid and nonpaid work roles (Altman 1997). The absence of support, guidance, and encouragement can lead to "floundering," the inability to develop and pursue a specific career focus. Lack of support can also take the form of conflict, when a parent pressures a child toward a particular career and may withdraw financial and emotional support for a career path not of the parent's choosing (*ibid.*).

Family functioning also includes the response to circumstances such as poverty, alcoholism, marital instability, and illness or death of family members. Sometimes an individual may respond to a stressful or negative family environment by making hasty, unreflective career choices in an attempt to escape or survive (*ibid.*). On the other hand, critical life events can spur a transformative learning experience that may shape a career and life direction (Fisher and Griggs 1994).

Interactions between parents and children and among siblings are a powerful influence. Interactions can include positive behaviors such as showing support and interest and communicating openly, or negative behaviors such as pushing and controlling (Way and Rossmann 1996a). By sharing workplace stories, expressing concern for children's future, and modeling work behaviors, parents serve as a context for interpreting the realities of work (*ibid.*). Parent-child connectedness facilitates risk taking and exploration, which are needed for identity formation in general as well as for the formation of vocational identity (Altman 1997; Blustein 1997). Siblings can be a source of challenge and competition and a basis for comparison of abilities, thus providing a context for identity formation (Altman 1997). Because career development is a lifelong process, "family of origin continues to have an influence through the life span" (*ibid.*, p. 242). Understanding early family experiences and relationships can help adults identify barriers to their career progress.

The Relational Context of Career Development

If the concept of career is considered a social construction, then one of the ways in which children form this concept is through social relationships. Parents' influence on career development stems from the continuous process of relationship with their children (Young et al. 1997). Analyzing career-related conversations between adolescents and their parents, Young et al. found "a reconstruction of the relationship between the parent and the adolescent through some aspect of career exploration" (p. 76). Their research demonstrates "how relationships and family functioning are embedded in career conversations and how the construction of career occurs in families" (p. 84).

Ketterson and Blustein (1997) also support the relational context of career development. They cite research demonstrating that secure

parent-child relationships are associated with progress in career decision making, affirmative career self-efficacy beliefs, and career planfulness. Their study found that students who have secure attachments to parents engage in greater levels of environmental and self-exploratory activity. They conclude that secure, comfortable relationships are critical in helping students take the risks necessary in exploring new settings and roles.

Way and Rossmann (1996a,b) explore the question of differences in individuals' ability to make successful career transitions. Their research used an ecological systems perspective to show how development is influenced by relationships with others and with the environment. Their interviews with youth and adults identified a proactive family interaction style that significantly contributes to career readiness. Proactive families—

- are well organized, cohesive, and expressive
- speak their mind and manage conflict positively
- seek out ways to grow
- are sociable
- make decisions through democratic negotiation
- encourage individual development
- are emotionally engaged

Using an authoritative parenting style, proactive parents help children learn to be autonomous and successful in shaping their own lives. They also transmit values about work and teach important lessons in decision making, work habits, conflict resolution, and communication skills, which are the foundation of career success.

Of course, family systems intersect and interact with other systems such as gender, race, and class. Poverty, lack of access to opportunities, and gender-role expectations can hamper the career development process. However, the work of Altman (1997), Bloir (1997), Blustein (1997), and Fisher and Griggs (1994) shows how close family connections and strong role models can be facilitative factors in confronting these barriers.

Implications

The research reviewed here demonstrates the strong influence that parenting behavior and family functioning have on career development. The findings suggest that career counselors and career educators should (1) shift the focus from the individual to the family system; (2) develop a new and richer view of parent involvement in schools; (3) help families become more proactive; and (4) consider ways of duplicating helpful types of family functioning in schools, especially for children whose families are not proactive (Hall et al. 1996; Way and Rossmann 1996b).

Although proactive, authoritative parenting is demanding and time consuming, parents might consider ways in which their childrearing patterns and family interactions are or are not proactive. They could also support learning strategies that promote career readiness, such as encouraging children to take challenging classes, providing opportunities to instill confidence and expectations that family members will do their best in difficult situations, and making informal contacts for exploration of occupational choices (Way and Rossmann 1996a). Moses (1998) also cautions parents that "children develop many of their initial ideas and beliefs about work on the basis of what they hear from their parents, as well as what they observe for themselves" (p. 245). Parents' intentional career-related actions are important in preparing children to be tomorrow's workers and tomorrow's citizens (ibid.). However, the "day-to-day patterns of family relationship may be the most significant gift a family can make" (Way and Rossmann 1996a, p. 1).

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