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Parents as Developing Adults and Developing Adult Learners

Dana R. McDermott

Abstract

Theories of adult learning and development are reviewed in detail, in order to demonstrate the complexity of the parent and professional roles in caring for children with autism and the many potential opportunities for better outcomes when this information informs practice. A focus on process not just outcome, e.g., on reflection, continuous learning and improvement, experiential learning, and on ongoing parent development, offers an alternative to current problem-focused approaches to working with parents and all who care for children with autism. Examples are provided to elucidate theories whenever possible. Assumptions underlying adult learning are delineated as are implications for practice. Social-cultural context considerations and the perspective of parenting education theory, research, and practice are integrated throughout. Stages of adult learning are presented as are the many rich theories of how parents think (cognitive domain) and feel (affective domain) and how that affects their behavior. Heath's (Planning: the key to mastering the challenges of parenting. Conrow, Philadelphia, 2001; Plan how to get where you want to go nurturing your children. Parenting Press,

Seattle, 2014) caring @decision-making process which synthesizes adult learning, developmental theories, and best practices is described in detail as are the ego processes of parents. Links to additional practical resources are provided including the professional association, the National Parenting Education Network (npen.org).

In this chapter, adult learning theories, models, research, and best practices are reviewed to inform the helping professional's interactions with parents. Taking a mindful approach (Langer, 1998, 2014), i.e., looking at something familiar like interventions with parents, in a novel way, the focus here will be on parents as developing adults and developing adult learners. Kegan (1994), Shanook (1990), and Siegel and Hartzell (2003) have found that it is crucial for successful child development to focus on the developing parent. Belsky (1984), Heath (2006), and Hrdy (1999) have long noted that parents are often seen as an empty box through which one transmits information or training so they can help children. What is going on in their minds has not seemed to matter much, especially to behaviorists. The humanistic, cognitive, and constructivist approaches to adult learning theory provide a different focus and require that professionals

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address the “meaning” of educator expectations for parent action, on parents and those sharing a caring role with their children. Culture and other social contextual variables also must be addressed to understand the meaning of interventions with parents and why they are not always as effective as hoped for (Gonzalez-Mena, 2008; Lynch & Hanson, 2004). As a new psychologist, I learned quickly that the language of empowerment and asking parents of children with autism for their suggestions on an intervention plan could be seen by some culturally diverse parents new to this country as a sign of my incompetence as a professional.

Marienau and Segal (2006) in describing interactions of helping professionals with parents noted that at times “... parents may come to be seen narrowly as representing problem A, B, or C. In contrast, a learning orientation (rather than a problem orientation) to working with the parent would focus on the potential for growth of both parent and child” (p.768). They ask: “What if professionals were to keep at the center of their interactions these two questions:

- What opportunities for learning do these challenges present?
- How can this individual be supported further in developing her or his skills and habits for continual learning or growth (p.768)?”

As a psychology graduate student in the 1970s, I worked in a behavioral clinic for children with autism at Loyola University. I worried about the children’s parents, and I often saw a lack of self-efficacy and even confusion and fear in their eyes. It reflected Mezirow’s (1978) description of a disorienting dilemma that comes about when a significant personal life event can precipitate a crisis in our lives. In addition to behaviorism, I was also learning about humanism (Rogers, 1973), cognitive development (Piaget, 1972), and the growth and development of parents (Erikson, 1963; McBride, 1973). No two theories (behaviorism and humanism) could be more different, but in the long run it helped me to understand how to work effectively with parents of children with autism by providing both information and emotional

support. Simultaneously, others were focusing on developing adult learners (Frieri, 1973; Knowles, 1980; Rogers, 1983). This was reinforced by the family support movement (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dunst & Trivette, 2006; Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1988; Kagan, Powell, Weissbourd, & Zigler, 1987), which has had a tremendous impact on how professionals working with parents see themselves, not as the experts imparting information but as co-learners.

Many parenting educators had also been looking for alternatives to the “expert” approach to working with parents, which often does not take into consideration parent needs (Heath, 2014; Maslow, 1969), goals for children (Dix & Branca, 2003), values (Demick, 2002; Heath, 2000), beliefs (Sigel & McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 2002), feelings (Gottman & DeClaire, 1997), learning styles (Bowman, 1996), adaptation styles (Hinde, 1989), and sociocultural contexts (Bornstein, Putnick, & Lansford, 2011; Lareau, 2011). Myers-Wall (1998) has described moving from the role of expert with parents to facilitator and collaborator. Duncan and Goddard (2011) have added the critical inquirer, interventionist, and eclectic roles of parenting educators. Heath (2006) emphasized that:

...focusing on the parents’ lead role provides professionals with a different paradigm from which to work. The paradigm is no longer telling parents what they should do. Rather, it is asking of professionals, ‘How can I help parents to become more confident about the decisions they are making and to feel more competent in their ability to carry them out?’ (p. 762)

Greenspan, Weider, and Simons (1998, p. 384) also emphasized the parent’s lead role on the team. How do adult learning theories and theories of parents as developing adult learners and developing persons provide an answer to these concerns for the parent?

Adult Learning Theories and Models

The most oft utilized adult learning theories pertinent to parenting and parenting education with support draw from behaviorism, humanism,

cognitive development, social cognitive development, constructivism, and social constructivism. Merriam and Bierema (2014) describe learning as both a process and an outcome (p. 25). When adult and parenting educators focus on outcome or acquired knowledge, skills, or competencies measured in observable behavior, and not also on the associated complex thinking or feelings of the learner, behavioral principles are often applied. Evidence-based practice with a focus on interventions with a quantifiable and observable changed behavioral outcome often stems from a behavioral approach. Unfortunately, sometimes the interventions become so narrow as to not adequately meet the needs of parents and children in complex situations such as is the case with children on the autism spectrum. Greenspan et al. (1998, p. 381) emphasized the need to fit programs to a child's profile rather than a child to a set program. Parents also have a unique set of characteristics that do not respond equally to set programs. Often fidelity to a program supersedes variations to address diverse individual, cultural, or social contexts. Often it is hard for specific parent populations to find appropriate evidence-based programs that meet their intellectual and emotional needs (Darling, Cassidy, & Powell, 2014, p. 168) as well as their family needs.

Taylor, Marienau, and Fiddler (2000) have described adult educator's different approaches to supporting learning: Educators take a behaviorist approach to learning when they focus on arranging the external environment and inputs to effect changes in behavior. A more cognitive developmental approach (Piaget, 1972; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986, 1997) focuses on internal mental processes and working to develop a person's thinking capacity. Thomas, Cooke, and Scott's (2005) Reflective Dialogue Parent Education Design is an example of this approach. They have parents view a video of a parent-child interaction and then reflect on what they might do and why when in a similar situation.

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1989, 1997) focuses on the interactions of thinking parents, their behavior and the environment or social context. It combines behavioral and cognitive

approaches to learning and involves activities such as modeling and mentoring seen in programs like "Parents as Teachers" where parent educators help to discuss why they are responding to the child as they are and discuss how that meshes with a parent's thinking about adopting that behavior, taking into account their resources, beliefs, culture, etc. Bandura also believed that an individual's beliefs about their ability to affect change in the environment was a key ingredient for focus. For many parents of children on the autistic spectrum, helping them avoid cynicism about their ability to change complex institutions and systems' approaches to supporting their children and families is a task we often face. Bandura believed that how parents think about child rearing is combined with the child characteristics and the environment to affect a child's ultimate growth and development. If you have parents who believed in an authoritative parenting style involving discussion with children and explanations for their parenting choices and they have a nonverbal child with autism, how do you help these parents give up that plan and adapt to their child's needs and capacities?

The constructivist approach would put the focus on individuals to construct knowledge and gain meaning from their experiences, even that of dealing with the "loss of their dream" (Bowman, 1994a, 1994b) of how they would communicate with their child. Growth for the parent often only comes when they adjust their image with reality (Galinsky, 1987). The social constructivist approach (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978) focuses also on the context in which this developmental process takes place. The focus on parents as developing adult learners in this chapter is thus less on outcome and more on the best process to facilitate the growth and development of both parents and children. To do that one needs to understand what and how the parent is thinking and feeling as well as what they are doing. The National Parenting Education Network (1996) defines parenting education as "... a process that involves the expansion of insights, understanding and attitudes, and the acquisition of knowledge and skills about the development of both parents and of their children and the

relationship between them” (<http://npen.org/about-npen/>). To conclude, adult learning theories focusing on process may be more helpful in addressing professional–parent relationships than behavior-focused models alone.

The humanistic approach (Rogers, 1983) focuses on the development of the whole person and on relationships. As to actual parenting and/or working with parents, one would use empathy to understand another’s needs and feelings; one then would reflect back what the other is feeling in order to help that person in turn grow in awareness and self-understanding. This was central to Greenspan’s work with children and families (Greenspan & Weider, 2006, pp. 125–129). Jones (2012) has developed an evidence-based humanistic, solutions-focused parenting program for parents of youth offenders that tries to do this. He has worked with parents identifying their feelings and support needs. He found lower rates of repeat offenses in families where he tuned into the feelings and needs of parents. Rogers’ (1983) humanistic learning theory focuses on student-centered learning including not just the outcome of external input on the child but on student’s feelings as well as thinking.

Merriam and Bierema (2014, pp. 29–31) have suggested that Knowles’ (1980, 1984) model of adult learning used by many today was very much influenced by Rogers’ (1969, 1983) writing about lifelong learning, internally motivated learning, and the value of experience and of meaning-making in adult learning. The related concept of constructivism noted above focusing on making sense or constructing meaning from one’s experience is also relevant in relationship-building and development (Driscoll, 2005). Constructivists also believe that learning is affected not only by the context in which an idea is taught but also by a learner’s beliefs and attitudes. Candy (1991) has noted that constructivism has influenced many aspects of adult learning including the proven value of reflection, self-directed learning, and experiential learning. Today’s educational philosophy and practice of “Process Education” to support self-directed learning and growth “integrates many of the tenets of constructivism with personal development, performance measures, and assessment in order to produce learner growth,

promote critical thinking, and nurture continuous improvement” (Burke, Lawrence, El Sayed, & Apple, 2009, p. 37).

Adult educators have often noted that early philosophers focused on educating adults, not children, and many of their techniques (e.g., narrative and dialogue to be discussed below) are still advocated today. Knowles’ (Knowles, 1980, 1984) assumptions about adult learners were influenced by philosophers but especially by Lindeman (1926, 1961), a social philosopher who asserted that the learner’s experiences were the greatest resource to draw upon in adult education. Lindeman was an adult educator, a social scientist, a social worker, and a strong supporter of small group work and community development. This chapter draws from Knowles’ model and assumptions about adult learners as well as from some theories and research on parent learning (e.g., Auerbach, 1968; Campbell & Palm, 2018) and parental thinking (Chapter “[Parental insightfulness into the inner world of the child with autism: its significance for the child and implications for parent-mediated interventions](#)”).

Assumptions About Adult Learners

Knowles and Associates (1984) put forth six assumptions about how adults learn best. Assumptions can be paradigmatic having to do with the big picture of how we see the world, prescriptive referring to what we think ought to be happening or causal focusing on how the world works and conditions under which it can be changed (Brookfield, 2011). Merriam and Caffarella (1999) and Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgarten (2007) list these assumptions and describe other assumptions that have been found to help support adult learning.

1. *As a person matures, his or her self-concept moves from that of a dependent personality toward that of a self-directing person*

This may be especially true for topics about which adults feel very passionate, such as their own child’s development and well-being. Brookfield (1995) postulated that self-directedness

may be more valued in individualistic societies and interdependence more valued in collectivist societies. He was likely also informed by parenting educators' experiences with Hmong families in Minnesota. He cites research findings indicating that, e.g., "for the Hmong tribes people from the Mountains of Laos who are used to working cooperatively and to looking to their teachers for direction and guidance, ways of working that emphasize self-directedness and that place the locus of control with the individual student will be experienced, initially at least, as dissonant and anxiety producing (Podeschi, 1990)" (p. 378). Many of the parents with whom professionals work are often in transition between their culture of origin and a new culture. Thus, the issue of self-directedness needs to also be explored with community members who might provide insights. Brockett and Hiemstra (2012) though have found examples of self-directed learning across diverse social groups and societies.

A related concept, "self-authorship" is the "sense of being in charge of oneself, of being able to set one's own standards, establish one's own values, and make choices based on [these] self-constructed systems" (Taylor et al., 2000, p. 40). See Hurtig and Dyrness (2011) also on their work with parents from diverse cultures and self-authorship.

2. Adults have rich experiences that serve as a great resource for learning

See Brookfield (1987), Frieri (1973), and Kolb (1999) for further support of this assumption. Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) have found that adult learners wanted their own experiences acknowledged and wanted to connect their new learning to their existing or previous experiences. Robertson (1996) encourages us to focus on the experience of both the parent and the helping professional:

the learner's experience arises from a context that includes, among other important elements, a teacher or learning facilitator who is operating on the basis of her or his lived experience or subjective reality. Thus, the teaching-learning encounter involves critical interactions among subjective realities of the participants. The learner's lived experience emerges within this complex, dynamic system. (p.47)

Dewey (1944) adds that "No experience having a meaning is possible without some element of Thought" (p.145). Thus, reflection is also central to this assumption. Mezirow (1991) sees reflection as a process of critical thinking where people examine the content and process of their efforts to interpret their experience. Unfortunately, the typical methods of involving parents in interventions rarely include approaches such as reflective inquiry (Sarason, 1995). Greenspan et al. (1998, p. 359) have advocated helping parents self-observe.

Campbell and Palm (2004, 2018) have provided best practices for adult educators and parenting educators in terms of reflection. They draw upon Dewey (1933) and his focus on the attitudes central to good reflective practice which also apply to parents as teachers. He focused on open-mindedness, which for parenting educators would involve "listening to parents, researchers, and peers to gain a more complete understanding about the complexity of parenting and parent education practice" (Campbell & Palm, 2004, p. 211). Second, a professional or parent needs to be responsible to improve their work, the family and the larger society by working to understand the impact of what they are doing over the long-term. Finally, one needs to be wholehearted in terms of passion for what they are doing and a willingness to take risks and follow their ethical values in spite of challenges from others. The Minnesota Council on Family Relations has provided parenting and family educators with a very user-friendly ethical guide for our thinking and practice (2009). See also http://mn.ncfr.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2014/02/ethical_thinking_and_practice.pdf.

Campbell and Palm (2018) have found that the complexity of working with adults, posed by Schon in 1987, is even more evident today. Schon (1987) emphasized the need for reflective practice to help educators grapple with the complexity of problems facing those they served. He noted that in addition to relying on and respecting traditional research there is a certain art and intuitive nature to an adult educator's work that is harder to measure. Campbell and Palm (2004, 2018) have found that on the novice to master continuum of parenting educator competence, it takes a good deal of

experience to be able to adapt to the individual needs of parents who exist in increasingly diverse, complex, and fragile systems. Often behavioral programs do not allow for that flexibility. This is unfortunate, as Kumpfer and Alvarado (1998) found that 50–80% of program quality was attributable to the person delivering the program. Ballard and Taylor (2012) have found that in terms of program effectiveness, how it is delivered is at least as important as what is delivered. Heath's plan-do-reflect model for parents (Heath, 2014) provides a good way to bring in the unique situations of parents, their goals, needs, feelings, options, characteristics, etc., and the creative adaptability of parenting educators to the parent and the model. Thomas, Cooke, and Scott's (2006) Reflective Parent Education Design is also exemplary in this regard. Rather than telling parents what to do, parent's viewing of vignettes of other parents interacting with children provides them an opportunity to reflect on what they might do and why. This also provides an opportunity for the professional to discuss possible implications of such choices. The design of programs such as these in light of adult learning principles may help compensate for the lack of experience of some parenting educators.

In addition to reflection on parenting practices, reflection on one's prior experiences is very important to address. Greenspan provided examples of professionals helping parents reflect on how their nonproductive interactions with their children with autism or other special needs (Greenspan et al., 1998) might be related to how they themselves were parented. McDermott (2008) highlighted Siegel's contention (2005) that if parents have not reflected on how their own childhood experience affects their parenting, they may be dismissive toward their own child. Parents whose unresolved issues and strong emotions from their own childhood intrudes into their own parenting may be so preoccupied with those issues and emotions that their children may have attachment problems. These unresolved issues interact with and are further complicated by their

reaction to having a child with special needs. He believes that "By offering the opportunity to deepen self-understanding, to make sense of one's life, our hope is that parents could make the choice to enhance the security of attachment of their children while at the same time creating coherence and vitality in their own lives" (Siegel, 2005). Marineau and Segal (2006, p. 779) remind us that when parents tell their stories it is very helpful:

adult education recognizes the power of narrative (i.e. telling of one's story) in helping people make meaning of their experiences as parents, identify new areas for learning and set the stage for further development (Rossiter, 1999). Each parent's story 'is situated in time and place, in society and family, in national religious and ethnic traditions-all of which form the basis of a shared sociocultural meaning system'. (Rossiter, p. 80)

Hurtig and Dyrness (2011) employed critical ethnographic participative action research and found that writing workshops for parents from marginalized communities helped them and schools see the "legitimacy of their experiences and perspectives" (p.540). By sharing their stories about their children's education and their role in it with each other and then via magazines distributed in schools and communities, they saw themselves as active, empowered, creative thinkers, and actors.

Reinke and Solheim (2015) and Fleischmann (2005) have found that online personal blogs for parents of children with autism were a very meaningful way to share and reflect on their life experiences. The sharing helped them learn from others within a context of emotional and informational support and helped them in their own choice making. In my experience with single parents of nonverbal children with severe autism, however, I have found that some seem to find it very difficult to listen to advice on blogs, because they have often tried everything that is suggested and have formed beliefs after painful and frustrating experiences with their children, institutions, and helping professionals that no one can understand their situation or make better decisions than they can.

- 537 3. *If an adult is expected to learn something, the* 580
 538 *instructors must discern that person's readi-* 581
 539 *ness to learn* 582
- 540 This is connected to the assumption about life 584
 541 experiences above. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, 585
 542 and Tarule's (1986, 1997) research with women's 586
 543 different ways of knowing described below will 587
 544 further explain different degrees of parent openness 588
 545 to new learning. Merriam and Caffarella (1999)
 546 and Merriam and Bierema (2014) add that readi-
 547 ness to learn is closely linked to the person's devel-
 548 opmental tasks and social roles. Roles often change
 549 with age. Difficulties may occur when parents are
 550 taking on their roles off-time – too early or late – or
 551 are taking on too many roles simultaneously.
- 552 4. *Adults learn more effectively through experi-* 589
 553 *ential techniques of education such as discus-* 590
 554 *sion and immediate problem-solving than* 591
 555 *from directives or lecturing* 592
- 556 Florin and Dokecki (1983) and Auerbach 593
 557 (1968) describe how this is done. Adults often 594
 558 wish to be able to apply new learning or skills to 595
 559 their own immediate circumstances. Adults may 596
 560 prefer to have these discussions within small, cul- 597
 561 turally homogeneous groups rather than in large 598
 562 groups (DeBord & Reguero de Atilas, 1999). 599
 563 Kypros (1989) found that: 600
- 564 The inductive reasoning used in this method of 601
 565 learning allows the learner to begin with his own 602
 566 particular life problem and situation and move out- 603
 567 ward seeking data and resources in order to assim- 604
 568 late the new experience or to accommodate 605
 569 conceptual structures so that the new experience 606
 570 fits in. (p. 208) 607
- 571 Heath's parent program described later 608
 572 (2014) perfectly demonstrates this process. 609
- 573 5. *Adults are more motivated to turn their learn-* 610
 574 *ing into action if it is internalized and comes* 611
 575 *from within rather than from external sources*
- 576 See Brookfield (1986); Maslow (1969); 612
 577 Merriam and Caffarella (1999); Merriam et al. 613
 578 (2007); and Merriam and Bierema (2014) for 614
 579 examples. As noted in McDermott (2008, p. 90) 615
- “the goal of education and support in parenting 616
 and caring is self-generation for parents, teach- 617
 ers, and all who care for children: the ability to 618
 locate the resources within themselves and in 619
 relationships that would allow for continuous 620
 growth (Belsky, 1984; Flaherty, 1999; Rogers, 621
 1973).” Snell and Rosen's research with parents 622
 of special needs children (1997) supports assump- 623
 tions four and five: 624
- ...the parents saw themselves as doing the ‘normal 625
 stuff’ of parenting but with a heightened sense of 626
 purpose and intentionality. The events of their sto- 627
 ries were both similar and different, but each story 628
 contained the elements of a mastery process that 629
 was on-going and informed by prior experience. 630
 Each family found unique solutions to their own 631
 problems and challenges but the larger theme was 632
 one of a learning process where parent's experi- 633
 ences, perceptions, behaviors, and beliefs inter- 634
 acted to provide the context for healthy adaptation. 635
 (p. 428) 636
- A related construct is self-determination. 637
 Grolnick (2003) explains that: 638
- self-determination theory begins with the idea that 639
 humans are born with innate propensities to be 640
 active and agentic with regard to their surround- 641
 ings. Individuals are born with the energy to pur- 642
 sue challenges and master the environment. 643
 Self-determination theory ... assumes that humans 644
 engage their surroundings in an attempt to elabo- 645
 rate and expand themselves and thus to grow and 646
 develop. (p.53) 647
6. *Adults need to know the reason for learning* 648
something 649
- This is related to the motivation to learn 650
 assumption above. Merriam and Bierema (2014) 651
 also explain that the need to know is often simul- 652
 taneous with significant life changes or role 653
 changes like caring for a child recently diagnosed 654
 with autism. 655
7. *Adults learn best when a listening-dialogue-* 656
critical thinking-action process is involved 657
- Brookfield (1987, 2012), First and Way 658
 (1995), Frieri (1973), and Mezirow (1990) 659
 describe this process. Brookfield (2012) has 660

defined critical thinking as “the ability to assess your assumptions, beliefs, and actions” (p. 222). McDermott (2008) cited Brookfield’s expanded and rich description of critical thinkers: They engage actively with life, are creative, appreciate diversity, and see many possibilities in life. Critical thinkers continually question assumptions and discard inappropriate assumptions. They consider context. Critical thinking happens in positive or negative situations, and it may sometimes cause inner discomfort and confusion. It is emotional as well as rational. It involves both imagining and exploring options, as well as reflection leading to new understanding of self and others (pp. 7–9).

Pertaining to dialogue, McDermott (2008, pp.131–132) calls attention to the work of Janet Gonzalez-Mena (1997) who notes that in dialoging, rather than trying to convince someone of their own viewpoint, people try to understand the other perspective. The idea is not to win but to find the best solution for all people involved. Here are some of the differences she describes between an argument and a dialogue:

- The object of an argument is to win; the object of a dialogue is to gather information.
- The arguer tells; the dialoguer asks.
- The arguer tries to persuade; the dialoguer tries to learn.
- The arguer tries to convince; the dialoguer tries to discover.
- The arguer sees two opposing views and considers hers the valid or best one; the dialoguer is willing to understand multiple viewpoints. (pp. 3–4)

Dialoging is one aspect of what Gonzalez-Mena (2008) describes as an ideal multiethnic view, which also involves transformative education and culturally competent care for children. By transformative education, she means that “when we acknowledge that our experiences with one another are important, when we stretch to understand different points of view, we become transformed by each other’s life experiences to a different level of knowledge and sensitive multi-ethnic care. That’s good for children” (p. 25). Her

definition of cultural competence is also helpful: “Caregivers and parents understand how program and family values may differ and work together toward blending differing value systems” (p. 26).

8. *Adults’ learning is enhanced when they have opportunities to interact with peers during the learning process*

See Brookfield (1986) and Auerbach (1968) for further descriptions. Auerbach (1968) notes:

parent group discussion ...encourages parents to respond freely to one another, questioning, challenging, agreeing, adding, commenting, disagreeing, as they test their own ideas and convictions and gradually take a position for themselves” (p. 27). She adds that “the group discussion approach at no times puts pressure on an individual member to move into a discussion faster than he is prepared to (p. 28).

9. *Adults often like to plan their own learning experiences*

Belenky et al. (1986, 1997), Brookfield (1987), and Kolb (1984) provide further explanation here. This applies to many teachers as well. For people from cultures in which planning one’s own learning is not valued or relevant, this expectation may initially be stressful. One thing they assumed from their own experience was that others would tell them what they needed to learn and how they would do that. While they might eventually appreciate being able to do so they will need some scaffolding in this regard.

10. *Adults need to filter information through the affective domains of beliefs, feelings, and values*

We know from Krathwohl (2002) that the cognitive domains of learning involving remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating information do not produce behavioral change unless learners filter this information through the affective domains of their beliefs, feelings, and value systems (see also Kypros, 1989). The affective

domain includes (1) attending to stimuli (awareness, willingness to hear, selective attention), (2) responding to stimuli (in terms of either compliance, willingness to respond, or a real satisfaction in responding, often referred to as motivation), (3) valuing or being committed to a phenomenon (ranging from acceptance to real commitment and all that entails), (4) organizing a value system (contrasting different values, resolving conflicting values, and creating one's own unique value system), and (5) being characterized by a specific value system (internalizing a pervasive, consistent, and predictable value system unique to the adult learner (Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1973). If the levels of the affective domain are not engaged, people will not go beyond the first level of learning, which is merely receiving basic information. My own experience with some parents of children and young adults with severe autism was that over time, to remain confident in their own choices and behaviors on behalf of their child, they find it hard to hear others or trust them to have better solutions. I have also found that some parents are so emotionally drained from the labor-intensive work of just managing a child on the autistic spectrum that they put their remaining energy into a behavioral program and run out of energy to add other multilevel interventions that could benefit their child and family. Professionals need to help them navigate the affective domain in this regard. We also need to help parents get the respite care they need so much.

Many parents and teachers are just given information, and so they remain at the receiving stage. They do not think about and discuss how the agency or school's directives mesh with their own ideas and goals and what they believe children need. They end up consciously or unconsciously resisting what is asked of them (McDermott, 2008). Robertson (1996) would add that we also need to gain an understanding about the way social relations and culture have shaped one's beliefs and feelings.

Auerbach's Assumptions About Parents as Learners Within Groups

For parenting educators, Auerbach's (1968) assumptions about parents as learners (within groups) provide support of adult learning assumptions noted earlier as well as additional proven assumptions:

1. Parents can learn....
2. Parents want to learn, particularly about those issues and relationships which affect the growth and development of their children....
3. Parents learn best...when they are interested in learning....
4. Learning is most significant when the subject matter is closely related to the parents' own immediate experiences with their children and with one another in relation to their children. ...
5. Parents can learn best when they are free to create their own response to a situation....
6. Parent group education is as much an emotional experience as it is an intellectual one. ...
7. Parents can learn from one another....
8. Parent group education provides the basis for a remaking of experience....
9. Each parent learns in his own way. ... (pp. 23–28).

McDermott (2003) has prepared workshop materials based on the assumptions above and other theories and research to help professionals plan for parent involvement with parents as adult learners. See <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/developing-caring-relationships-among-parents-children-schools-and-communities/book228935#preview>.

Recent Perspectives on Parental Learning and Thinking

What else do we now know about parental learning and thinking? Adult educators and psychologists have theorized the following (as detailed more extensively in McDermott, 2008, 54–67 and 138–156):

Kolb (1999) defined learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 41). He describes four stages of the learning cycle: In concrete

experience, one learns from relating to people and being sensitive to their feelings. In the reflective observation stage, one learns from watching and listening (carefully observing before making judgments, seeing issues from many perspectives, and looking for the meaning of things). In abstract conceptualization, one learns by thinking (logically analyzing ideas and systematically planning and acting on one's intellectual understanding of a situation). Finally, in active experimentation, one learns by doing (getting things done, taking risks, and influencing others through action).

The ideal way of working with parents is not a lecture but a plan-do-reflect process in which caregivers identify concrete experiences in their lives about which they are concerned, reflect on them, become informed about what educators know about the developmental characteristics of those involved, and then actively experiment with strategies inspired by their learning, reflection, and sharing.

Holden and Hawk (2003) have posed a theory of meta-parenting (a class of evaluative parental thought concerning the child-rearing domain that typically occurs before or after parent-child interactions" p. 191). They suggest that parents need opportunities to anticipate, assess, reflect, and solve problems as they adjust and modify their behavior to fit changing situations and changing relationships. Recent research finds evidence for this construct (Hawk & Holden, 2009).

Conditions that facilitate meta-parenting, according to Holden and Hawk (2003), include parents' willingness to be involved with their child and a sense of self-efficacy, that is, a sense that they can control outcomes and make things happen. Besides a willingness to be involved and a sense of self-efficacy, parents need certain "necessary conditions" (Holden & Hawk, 2003, pp. 197–198), such as time and energy for anticipating, assessing, problem-solving, and reflecting. Even with time and energy, we know from the research of Belenky and her colleagues that a parent's "way of knowing" figures into their readiness to do this. Please

note that some of this theory as pertains to child capacity may not be pertinent to certain children on the autism spectrum.

Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986/1997 and Belenky, Bond, and Weinstock (1997) research with women and parents resulted in a description of five "ways of knowing" that have implications for how one works with parents. First, at the stage of "silenced knowing," a parent sees herself as mindless and voiceless, and sometimes, when asked to do something she may not be able to do, she may use "words as weapons." She may have been in relationships with people who called her stupid and never really gave her credit for having good ideas. In terms of others, this parent may be distant and guarded, believing she cannot really learn from dialogue of any kind. She may fear that any talking or sharing she does will lead only to more betrayal. She may tend to use raw power (just as she may have experienced) to influence her child and may see no point in listening or explaining.

Other parents may be described as "received knowers." They receive information from authorities and store it as is without adding their own thoughts or opinions. They receive information from friends if it is similar to their own. They see their children as needing to listen to others and to take in information without questioning it. They expect their child to obey them and do what they do. They may also think the child will learn through rewards and punishments and by imitating adult behavior. They may be seen as cooperative by school and agency staff.

Belenky and her colleagues (1986, 1997, 1997) found that parents who were "subjective knowers" had discovered their inner voice and believed truth comes from within more than from outside authorities. The subjective knower would value individuality and be able to tolerate friends having beliefs different from hers. She can also see that her children have their own inner voice, and she is likely to let her children think for themselves. Even though this may be good for her children, it may cause trouble in the school, which may see this parent as noncooperative or even hostile. Because these parents tend to trust their own concrete experience,

instincts, feelings, and insights when it comes to rearing their children, they may not attend lectures. Sometimes these parents are seen as neglectful. While neither extreme – trusting all authority without question or trusting only the self – is ideal, for some parents, one or the other may be a step along the way to relating more effectively to self and to others in the future.

Next, the authors describe parents who are “procedural knowers.” They are interested in examining thoughts and feelings of both the self and others and searching for systematic ways to do so. They do not mind being in a group in which others do the same. They will help their children use such procedures as gathering information and posing and evaluating alternatives to arrive at answers to their questions. Simply to gather information in an objective, logical way is called separate knowing. Others will seek understanding, not just proof. This is connected knowing and involves trying to understand the feelings, perspectives, and experiences of others, which requires drawing people out to better grasp their thoughts and beliefs and encouraging their confidence in their own abilities and strengths.

Finally, as a constructive knower, the parent not only gathers information but synthesizes it. Parents at this level would not want to get information from just their own concrete experience, intuition, feelings, and insights or from just the school but to combine ideas from all perspectives, come up with a joint solution that could be better ideas, and then share that solution with school staff and others. Belenky and her colleagues (1986, 1997) worked with mothers in rural Vermont in small groups providing the support needed to enhance their cognitive development and effectiveness as parents. Their interventions were successful, but they found success to be moderated by whether or not the boyfriends/partners of these women supported this growth work. Hence, there is the need to focus on the context in which learning takes place.

Sameroff and Feil (1985) in building on Piaget’s model of cognitive development found levels of parental thinking as well. At the symbiotic level, parents rarely would differentiate

between themselves and their child as separate, so it was hard to see the child as developing separate from what they did for the child. At the categorical level, the parent saw the child’s behavior as separate from the parent but often placed children into categories such as good or bad, based on their behavior. Parents could think of only one cause for behavior: either internal dispositions of the child or the environment, but not a combination. In the compensating stage, parents saw children as separate from categories or labels. They could make exceptions and see that some behavior might be related to a child’s age or capacities. Certain attributes might compensate for others. At the perspectivistic level, parents were able to think hypothetically and see the child’s behavior in context. So perhaps a child can sit quietly at home in their room but not in a crowded classroom with fluorescent lights.

Newberger (1980) and Newberger and Cook (1983) described the related construct of parental awareness based on parents’ experiences, needs, feelings, and cognitive abilities. For many, parental awareness progresses from self-centered, egoistic views, to conventionally oriented views reflecting cultural norms, to understanding that individuals are unique and different. The process culminates in an analytic, systems-oriented view of the parent and child in interdependent self-systems. Newberger and Cook (1983) found that levels of awareness were significantly and positively related to age and experience as a parent but not to gender, race, or social class. Sandy (1982) found significant increases in parental awareness in parents who received a parenting education intervention that included child development information and time for discussion.

Kegan (1994) also described parental cognition as thinking that is inseparable from feeling or social relations. According to Kegan, we construct our sense of self in the relationship between our own point of view and others’. His first order of consciousness is childhood. In his second order of consciousness, people focus their knowing or thinking on their own needs, and in the third order of consciousness, on a moral ethical code that comes from our group, family, culture,

race, religion, or society. In the fourth order of consciousness, one respects differences in people's thinking and realizes values are based more on situations and the way each person construes or views situations.

To conclude, theorists studying and working with parents have expanded Piaget's focus on cognitive development over the lifespan. In fact, Mackeracher (2004) has asserted that the highest stage of thinking for Piaget (formal operations) cannot resolve the "uncertainties, doubts, and ambiguities" in adult life today as there are "complex systems of roles and relationships requiring systems thinking" (pp. 120–121). Christian (2006) and Greenspan and Weider (2006, pp. 163–176) have described a systems approach to working with parents. In addition, current research in neuroscience merits our serious attention. Ellison, e.g. (2005), highlights the positive impact of becoming a mother on a woman's thinking capacity.

A Caring Paradigm for Synthesizing Adult Learning and Development Best Practices

It is hoped that helping professionals would manifest constructive knowing and the higher levels of thinking from the theorists above whenever possible. In looking at the theories and research described above, one wonders how to think about best practices going forward. It is suggested that Heath's (1983, 2001, 2014) caring paradigm for working with parents combines the best of research in adult learning and psychology. It has been described by Holden and Hawk (2003) as exemplary and has been proven to enhance higher-order thinking skills in parents (Kypros, 1989). Heath's approach to parent learning and development allows for all Kolb's learning styles while also reflecting Holden and Hawk's construct (2003) of meta-parenting. In addition her theory of parental ego processes (See https://us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-inaries/24029_3___Understanding_the_Elements_of_Parenting_and_Caring.pdf) speaks to the complexity described above.

McDermott (2014) describes her successful parenting programs for children and adults which help develop 17 cognitive skills.

Any group of parents and teachers, with the right preparation, motivation, and support, can use a "planful," caring decision-making process that is culturally sensitive and allows all involved to bring their own thinking, feelings, needs, goals, beliefs, and experiences into the process (McDermott, 2006). Such a process provides a way for parents and teachers to develop and change their behavior if needed because it considers both their cognitive and their affective capacities (Krathwohl et al., 1973).

By walking through the components of this planful process of decision-making in more detail, one will see how this model supports adult learning principles and cognitive and affective development of children and all the adults in their lives. Please note that when referring to Bloom's taxonomy (1956) this review will use Krathwohl's (2002) revision of Bloom. Details of the caring process are expanded in McDermott (2008) and in Heath (2000, 2001, 2014) and are described below.

1. *Describe the situation about which you are concerned.* This activity is based on helping parents develop observation skills important in behavioral programs also. It is comparable to Krathwohl's (2002) first cognitive domain of remembering, which has to do with describing, recalling, listing, recognizing, and data collecting. The cognitive and affective domains (Krathwohl, 2002; Krathwohl et al., 1973) are used here because it often remains a pertinent part of adult and parenting educator training.

We encourage parents to become aware of the situation using nonjudgmental awareness techniques. Parents list a sequence of events objectively. They reflect objectively on questions such as, what happened first? Then what happened? What time of the day does this happen? Does it always happen this way or just when he is tired? The goal is to get parents, teachers (and future teachers) to think about a situation in a new way.

- 1091 As they start to process this information they 1138
1092 move into the second cognitive domain of under- 1139
1093 standing. Here they gain insight into some of the 1140
1094 correlates of the child's behavior. At the next 1141
1095 level of applying, parents and teachers use their 1142
1096 descriptive information in creative ways, such as 1143
1097 changing the environment. They are open to 1144
1098 looking for a range of possible causes and using
1099 these possibilities to begin crafting solutions.
- 1100 2. *Brainstorm choices.* Here, we ask parents, 1145
1101 teachers, or students using this process to 1146
1102 think of all the possible ways to deal with the 1147
1103 problem. We make lists of every single thing 1148
1104 we could do, whether it is good, bad, or in 1149
1105 between. Each member of the group is asked 1150
1106 to come up with ten different ways to deal 1151
1107 with the situation of concern. This is a very 1152
1108 important step because it demonstrates that 1153
1109 there is more than one way to deal with a situ- 1154
1110 ation. Often people get into serious problems 1155
1111 when they think they have only one option. 1156
1112 Several of the most successful problem- 1157
1113 solving programs (Heath, 2000, 2001, 2014; 1158
1114 Shure, 1988, 2004) involve the formulation of 1159
1115 alternative solutions, which taps into the same 1160
1116 creativity present in mindful learning. Next 1161
1117 we consult guides for deciding which option 1162
1118 to choose.
- 1119 3. *Identify goals.* Our goals are crucial when 1163
1120 choosing options. The selection of goals has 1164
1121 to do with long-range thinking. Heath (2000, 1165
1122 2014) provides a list of attributes parents 1166
1123 would want a child to have by age 18. The list 1167
1124 of positive attributes engages the affective 1168
1125 domain (Krathwohl et al., 1973), deepening 1169
1126 parent involvement in the process. Parents and 1170
1127 teachers can keep their list of long-term goals 1171
1128 for the child and refer to it each week as they 1172
1129 gather information and decide on options.
- 1130 Then parents are asked to think specifically 1173
1131 about their goal for the particular situation in 1174
1132 light of their list. This request strengthens the 1175
1133 engagement of the parent's affective domain 1176
1134 because it requires a commitment to one or more 1177
1135 of the goals. With a specific goal or goals in mind, 1178
1136 parents revisit their brainstorming list and omit 1179
1137 the options inconsistent with their values and
- goals (which corresponds to the sixth level of 1180
cognition, which was synthesize for Bloom and 1181
is creating for Krathwohl). If the parents' goal for 1182
their child in a particular situation is to be kind to 1183
the teacher and classmates, for example, certain 1184
brainstormed options like hit the teacher or class- 1185
mate who hurts them can be rejected.
4. *Consider needs* (Heath, 2000, 2014, 1186
pp. 25–28). Looking at the needs of everyone 1187
involved in a situation – child, parent, teacher, 1188
trainer, other children, other family, and some- 1189
times the community, country, and beyond – 1190
is very important and very therapeutic for all 1191
involved. These needs are identified via the 1192
third level of cognition, applying, in which we 1193
use knowledge gained and then take action 1194
based on that knowledge. Information about 1195
all persons' needs enters into a planful and 1196
caring process of decision-making. Parents 1197
deal with the issues of conflicting values 1198
within their own list of goals and conflicting 1199
values between themselves, their family, 1200
school, and society.
5. *Think about feelings.* Heath (2000, 2014) pro- 1201
vides a way to guide parents and practitioners 1202
to think about feelings. Looking at feelings 1203
involves Bloom's and Krathwohl's first four 1204
levels of cognition and Krathwohl et al.'s 1205
(1973) third level of the affective domain 1206
valuing or being committed to a phenome- 1207
non. From a cognitive perspective, parents 1208
and teachers are listing feelings, gaining 1209
insights, and considering a wider range of 1210
feelings than is typically discussed. They 1211
start to see how the feelings of everyone 1212
involved relate to their values and goals. If 1213
they want their son to be a a young adult 1214
capable of independent living someday, they 1215
may begin to question whether how they 1216
respond to his interactions with other chil- 1217
dren helping him toward that goal. This pro- 1218
cess is related to important recent work on 1219
emotional intelligence and emotionally intel- 1220
ligent parenting (Gottman, 1998; Elias, 1221
Tobias, & Friedlander, 1999). Auerbach 1222
(1968, p. 26) adds this insight: 1223

1184	Parent group education therefore encourages	They can decide if it works for that situation or	1230
1185	the expression of feelings, not for their own sake	whether they need to do something different. Our	1231
1186	in a vacuum, but in relation to the substance of	hope is that parents will internalize this caring	1232
1187	parent-child relationships and family living. The	model of making decisions. It would benefit chil-	1233
1188	leaders are always alert to the need for maintain-	dren and helping professionals greatly to know	1234
1189	ing some kind of balance between fact and feel-	where parents stand and what values guide their	1235
1190	ing, between the outer reality and the emotional	decision-making.	1236
1191	responses of parents to their real-life situations.	Some reflections on additional components of	1237
1192	Heath's systematic approach to addressing	the model: As pertains to the influence of energy	1238
1193	feelings accomplishes this goal.	level, as well as a parent's physical condition,	1239
		Snell and Rosen's (1997, p. 439) conclusions to	1240
1194	6. <i>Recognize individual characteristics.</i> Heath	their research with parents of children with spe-	1241
1195	(2000, 2014) provides information about an	cial needs are informative:	1242
1196	important dimension often omitted from		
1197	problem-solving models for parents. This	When working with families who are struggling	1243
1198	area, involves Krathwohl's fourth level, ana-	with how to cope with a child who has special	1244
1199	lyze and Krathwohl et al.'s third level commit-	needs it seems important for the practitioner to be	1245
1200	ment. Parents and teachers identify and	viewed as a resource rather than an intruder who	1246
1201	describe developmental differences and other	saps precious energy from an already burdened	1247
1202	individual characteristics in people and	system....family therapists who work with these	1248
1203	extrapolate those characteristics to the situa-	families may need to examine their own beliefs	1249
1204	tion of concern. Is the child's resistance	and values as a first step towards establishing a	1250
1205	related to temperament or how their brain	healthy therapeutic relationship. (p. 439)	1251
1206	functions? Is a parent's resistance to a lecture		
1207	related to the parent's preferred learning style,	As pertains to looking at parental condi-	1252
1208	which is not auditory but kinesthetic or visual?	tions including one's financial situation in this	1253
1209	Is the child's gender a factor in parent and	model, Brody, Flor, and Gibson (1999) as cited in	1254
1210	teacher expectations?	Luster and Okagaki (2005) found a relationship	1255
		between African American mothers' perceptions	1256
1211	Information on these developmental factors	of adequate family finances and their parental	1257
1212	and other individual characteristics leads to	efficacy and developmental goals for their chil-	1258
1213	understanding. Note how this process involves	dren. When finances were adequate, mothers had	1259
1214	Belenky and colleagues' ways of knowing	more parental self-efficacy and held higher	1260
1215	(1986/1997) and takes parents beyond just receiv-	expectations for their children. They talked more	1261
1216	ing lectures to bringing in their own experience,	about goals. This research supports the view that	1262
1217	instincts, and feelings and then using them to	family-serving professionals must find the other	1263
1218	analyze different options and different points of	actors/resources to improve the conditions in	1264
1219	view. From there, they can engage in connected	which parents do their parenting "work" before	1265
1220	knowing or trying to understand the perspectives	placing generic, one-size-fits-all involvement	1266
1221	of everyone in the situation and then construct	expectations on parents.	1267
1222	options that are based on all the information they	In looking at characteristics, Snell and Rosen	1268
1223	have gathered from their own thinking and the	(1997) add that: "In establishing a therapeutic	1269
1224	thinking of others.	relationship, the therapist needs to understand	1270
1225	The next step is for parents to take action,	and accept the family's unique style of adapting	1271
1226	which corresponds to Krathwohl's fifth level of	and enhance this style while exploring this good-	1272
1227	evaluation. They compare options, justify which	ness of fit" (pp. 438–439).	1273
1228	one is best and most consistent with their goals	In looking at family traditions, McDermott	1274
1229	and values, implement it, and appraise the results.	(2008, chapter 5) poses a list of questions to	1275
		ask before engaging parents of diverse back-	1276
		grounds in learning activities. In thinking	1277

about families in terms of culture, one might ask: Are the parents willing to change beliefs on the basis of new information they might receive? Can the parents only go to their family for all or certain advice? Can they go to experts, books, and other sources outside the family for all, any or certain advice? Is there a shared understanding of events or issues between parents, parents and children, other family members who have decision-making power over children, teachers, counselors, and other parents? Do the parents see themselves as capable of meeting their children's needs? Do the parents see themselves more as observers or as actors in their children's life? Do the parents have an opportunity to observe other parents or professionals interacting with their children or does their culture or situation prevent them from doing so?

Thinking about why there might be disagreements or misunderstandings between parents and teachers is time well spent. Some parents believe that if children are safe and fed, they will develop naturally, without much parental intervention (an approach some teachers may view as neglect). This naturalistic view is found more often in parents of lower socioeconomic status (Lareau, 2011). Lareau also found that middle-class and upper-class families of many cultural backgrounds believe their role is "conscious cultivation" to help their children achieve as much as possible.

McDermott (2008, pp. 152–153; 2014) has used Heath's model with students and parents in several culturally diverse schools in the Chicago area. Parents appreciated the opportunity to bring in their own goals and beliefs into the process. Parents from many diverse backgrounds had only experienced formal lectures in schools and upon reflection, preferred the small group work with Heath's model to lectures. Contrary to expectations, McDermott found that Mexican American mothers in a poor neighborhood were more willing to do the group work of this 8-week-long program than middle-class parents wanting her to provide quick answers.

Conclusions

Mayeroff (1971) has described caring as having someone's development in mind. Adult educators Taylor et al. (2000) research project summarizes some of what has been presented here. They asked teachers and trainers to describe their own caring or developmental intentions for their students. In analyzing the results, they described development as marked by a movement along five dimensions which are listed here as well as an example of one of the several characteristics or indicators listed under each domain and crossing the domains. They saw development as movement: (1) toward knowing as a dialogic process (including perceiving and constructing one's reality by observing and participating), (2) toward a dialogical relationship to oneself (exploring and making meaning of one's life stories within contexts), (3) toward being a continuous learner (reflecting on one's own and others' experiences as a guide for future behavior), (4) toward self-agency and self-authorship (constructing a value system that informs one's behavior), (5) and toward connection with others (engaging the affective dimension when confronting differences and contributing one's voice to a collective endeavor) (pp. 32–33).

Adult learning principles challenge helping professionals who are often asked to use particular curricula that are not always geared to support parent development. Clinicians have known for years that one needs to help the parent to help the child and ensure more long-lasting results. It is hoped that by knowing more about best practices for adult learners and parenting educators (See also McDermott, Heath, & Palm, 2006) one can work to more carefully select interventions or do the preparation/support work to make traditional interventions more effective.

It is clear that no one format can work for all parents. All modes of intervention be they individual (seen often in home visitors, coaching, therapy) the valued small group mode (seen in workshops, seminars or support groups) or the mass mode (via lectures, print and social media including podcasts, webinars, mobile apps, etc.) should be considered in light of relevance for

select parents. Darling et al. (2014, pp. 281–284) reviewed these formats as well as primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention modes. Ideally, one begins to teach children all that is involved in parenting and caring for another human being in school. McDermott (2014) has described several evidence-based programs that do this around the world. Heath's caring paradigm for parents that was described above has been used successfully with students from pre-K-grade 12 for decades (Heath, 1995). Thus before even having a child with special needs, new parents would be prepared to face this challenge with confidence and competence.

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