Introduction

Working as co-editors and with our colleagues on this Handbook during the context of the global pandemic of 2019–2020 was certainly unanticipated and unlike any challenges we have ever known. As parents, we gained new appreciation for our research on how parenting shapes child development even as we struggled to use this knowledge within our own homes and lives. Future generations will have to uncover the role of the Covid-19 pandemic on parenting approaches and impacts on children around the globe. For now, we can honestly say we are both relieved and thrilled to share this work with our community of scholars to advance the goals of science and practice.

We also know that new possibilities are emerging for topics that we have not yet sufficiently addressed, such as how the features of the pandemic including social distancing, separation and isolation, remote learning, compromised health care and access to vaccines, and social connectedness through technology, create a unique and important context through which to view parenting and child development during this time. Just as the years after the Great Depression and the Great Recession provided a window to study impacts on cohorts of children, the pandemic too will likely become one of those historical turning points where shifts in thinking about parental influences will occur and influence our field for the better.

In this Handbook, we have captured the appealing range of topics related to parenting while encouraging our authors to use a culturally and developmentally grounded approach with a pointed consideration of how their work may link to practice or policy implications. In Part I of the Handbook, Foundations of Parenting, we begin with chapters that provide theories and research that cut across age groups and topics, including a history of parenting science, the biology of parenting and attachment, parenting and brain development, and parenting and culture. In this section we also include chapters on parenting behaviors and strategies that influence development across childhood including discipline and punishment, emotion socialization, and parenting and children’s cognitive and language development. These chapters set the stage for Part II, which is organized by developmental age/stage, Parenting across Development: Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Influences. In this section, we begin with a chapter on prenatal bonding and the transition to parenting, and end with a chapter on emerging adulthood. These two chapters bookend chapters on infancy and early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence. Importantly, these chapters bring to light how parenting differs across children’s development, emphasizing how parents and children change and grow together over time.

The chapters within Part III, on Parental Factors that Impact Parenting, provide a deeper examination of the variation within families and contexts that helps to shape the experiences and relationships within a family.
Authors explore a range of topics including parents with mental health challenges, the specific contributions of fathers as parents, and the important context of race and ethnicity. In keeping with our goals for identifying gaps, we see there is much work to be done in considering how parents (including fathers) make positive contributions to children’s development, and how programs and policies can facilitate their success in child-rearing. We learn that parents’ experiences with discrimination and barriers to accessing parenting supports remain an important challenge for researchers to address with their work.

The chapters within Part IV, on Child Factors that Impact Parenting, are a look at specific circumstances impacting children that can require parents to develop particular skills or accommodations to match the unique circumstances of their children. Here, we see an applied lens in examining the issues involved in raising children with disabilities, children with psychological disorders, including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and anxiety and depression. We also address more general situations, including children with histories of adversity and children who identify as LGBTQ+. These chapters offer a deeper understanding of parenting in context and how children and parental transactions over time are a powerful influence on child development.

Finally, Part V, Parent Education, Intervention, and Policy, is a collection of chapters authored by researchers who are working vigorously on issues of intervention, prevention, and policy to create needed supports for parents and families. Examples include a vast array of topics from family engagement in education, immigration policy, employment for parents and access to child care supports, technology supports for parents, and parenting interventions for preventing adolescent risky behavior. Given the number of challenges faced by parents across the development of a child (or more than one), such interventions tested with rigorous scientific methods and approaches that are brought to scale are another deep challenge for the field to continue to work on in earnest.

Upon completion of this project, it was not hard for us to see where we might head next. We applaud our authors’ work, for they have pointed us to many future directions and gaps that must be at the center of our parenting research agenda. These include a true embrace of the biopsychosocial model and how our methods can better capture the lasting influences of parenting practices, while also capturing the moment-to-moment exchanges that build these pathways. We encouraged our authors to draw out possible implications for practice and policy, taking into account the state of the science on the optimal solutions or promising strategies. We see ample room for research on how and when parents serve as advocates and protectors for their children’s rights and healthy development, particularly in the context of discrimination and bias within systems that intend to serve children’s needs. Finally, many areas of the parenting research remain constrained by lack of diversity within the populations of study, and we need more conversations about how to move more rapidly beyond WEIRD (White, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) samples into global, interconnected, and cross-cultural work to develop a complete picture of parenting. Only this will permit us to fully shape practices and policies that can be more responsive and supportive of the needs of our most underserved families, such that we can achieve greater equity in child outcomes.
Part I

Foundations of Parenting
Foundational Theories and the Establishment of Parenting Science Research

George W. Holden

One of the most fundamental, important, and enduring questions in psychology concerns how the dual elements of genes and the environment influence the development of an individual, commonly referred to as nature vs. nurture. Psychology has now moved beyond pitting those two influences against each other and instead is asking the question, How do the two fundamental components of life work together (Anreiter, Sokolowski, & Sokolowski, 2018)? For example, the concept of epigenesis addresses how the environment modifies the expression of the genotype.

Parents are at the hub of the nature/nurture question – due to bestowing the child’s genetic nature (at least for biological parents) and for providing the environment. Although nurturing a child comes from many sources, no manifestation is more important that the child rearing provided by parents. However, it is not well understood what aspects of parental nurture provide the active ingredient for influencing a child’s development. Is it a parental style, one or more particular behaviors, a dimension of parenting, guidance along developmental pathways, or perhaps the experiences that the parent may or may not provide?

This chapter addresses two topics concerning the development of the research into questions about parents and their role in children’s development: the foundational theories and the establishment of the empirical research. In only a little over 100 years – five generations – research into parent–child relationships has developed from a cottage industry practiced by only a handful of methodologically naïve individuals to a major industry engaged in by thousands of PhDs, MDs, and other professionals and researchers investigating a wide range of questions. Every year a prodigious number of research articles are published by this army of investigators in a wide variety of journals, chapters, and books. The goal of this chapter is to provide some structure for understanding this increasingly vast body of research. One framework concerns the theoretical foundations of contemporary research and the second framework concerns the development of discrete approaches undertaken to study parenting.

Foundational Theories

Psychology is replete with theories, and every content area of psychology, whether it be developmental, social, clinical, health or abnormal psychology, is populated with multiple theories. Parenting research has benefited from the fertile land of psychological theories. For example, social psychology theories, such as attribution theory (e.g., Kelley, 1967) and the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) have provided fruitful conceptual tools for understanding parenting behavior. More recently, self-determination theory (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2012), has offered insights into child rearing, parent–child relationships, and the ways parents influence their children’s development of internalization (e.g., Grolnick, Deci & Ryan, 1997). However, none of these
Theorizing about the role of parental behavior on children’s development began with Sigmund Freud. His stage theory (oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital stages) focused on child fixations and parents’ role in helping children successfully navigate through each stage (White, 1960). Despite recognizing the important role that parents play in their children’s mental health, he devoted relatively few words to explicating adaptive and maladaptive child-rearing practices. More problematic was that when Freudian theory was put to empirical tests, it did not fare well (e.g., Chodoff, 1966). Consequently, his model of development fell out of favor.

In contrast, six distinct foundational theoretical perspectives gradually emerged that have been supported by multiple empirical studies and currently form the conceptual underpinning of contemporary research. Not all of the theoretical perspectives reflect or adhere to a single theory; some can be better characterized as theoretical orientations. Nevertheless, distinct conceptions about parents or parent–child relations can be identified. The six foundational conceptualizations are evolutionary theory, attachment theory, socialization theories, behavioral genetics theory, social cognition theories, and systems theories.

Evolutionary Theory

Chronologically speaking, the first foundational theory about parent–child relationships is evolutionary theory. Darwin’s articulation of the concept of natural selection (1859) and sexual selection (1876), created the elements of evolutionary theory and set the stage for thinking about parents and children from this perspective. This model of development views parenting from a distal vantage point. Darwin’s concepts of survival, fitness, and natural selection have led to a distinctive perspective for thinking about parents and children. Specifically, the question at the core of evolutionary theory with regard to parents is how has child rearing evolved over the past 35,000 years, when anatomically modern humans emerged and lived in hunter-gatherer communities. What behaviors optimize the survival of their offspring? Given that 99% of human generations have lived in hunter-gatherer societies, evolutionary theory attempts to explicate how a parent’s behavioral propensities reflects and is affected by selection processes.

One striking example of this theory comes from Konrad Lorenz (1943) and other ethologists, who proposed that the endearing facial features of infants, what is commonly called “cuteness” – a reaction to observing large heads and eyes but small noses and chins – led to increased survival of offspring (see Kringelbach et al., 2016). Those distinctive characteristics result in eliciting caregiver positive affect and attention.

Evolutionary theory has resulted in asking unique questions like: What is an individual’s mating preferences?; Why do parents nurture some children but abuse others?; and What parental roles and behaviors are evolutionarily selected for? Evolutionary theory has led to speculation about parental investment (Trivers, 1974) and mate selection. Parents (especially mothers in traditional societies) devote a great deal of time, energy, money, and thought to rearing their children.

Why do some parents spend so much time with some children while other parents may be largely uninvolved? Taking an evolutionary perspective, Geary (2006) argued that the answer lies in the amount of shared genetic material, the offspring’s likelihood of survival, and the future likelihood that the child will have children. Differential parental investment offers one explanation of why some parents physically abuse their children. According to
at least some evidence (Daly & Wilson, 1996), parents are less likely to maltreat biological children than non-biological children. With regard to mate selection, from an evolutionary perspective, females value the “three Gs” in males: good genes, good providers, and good fathers (Chang, Lu, & Zhu, 2017). In contrast, males seek females with physical features indicating fertility, women who will be faithful, a good provider, and a good mother.

It is important to recognize that contemporary evolutionary views of child rearing (e.g., Bjorklund & Jordan, 2013; Narvaez et al., 2016) are not deterministic; rather they reflect speculation about predispositions that have been selected for over hundreds of thousands of years. The evolutionary perspective focuses on identifying what those genetically inbred inclinations are. Such tendencies are not inevitable and can be overcome by awareness and resistance.

**Attachment Theory**

Evolutionary theory provided an important theoretical influence on the development of attachment theory as developed by John Bowlby (1988). Bowlby, a psychiatrist with ample training in Freudian and neo-Freudian theory, developed his evolution-informed theory that focused on the development of emotional bonds between the parent and child. The core concept is the need of children to develop secure bonds with their parents. This bond is based on caregivers’ responsivity. Children then create internal working models of whether other people are trustworthy and whether they themselves are worthy of love. Bowlby teamed up with Mary Ainsworth (e.g., 1967) who provided initial data to support the theory in Uganda and then Baltimore.

Attachment theory has continued to advance beyond simply the development of affectional ties between a parent and child, and the repercussions of being securely or insecurely attached. The theory has expanded into such topics as the internalization of values and predicting the quality of intimate relations (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016).

The theory has also spawned other attachment-related theories. One prominent theory that is narrower in scope than Bowlby’s is Emotional Security Theory (Davies & Cummings, 1994). This theory was designed to account for children’s emotional reactions to, and the impact of, marital discord. In its latest formulation, the theory goes beyond the parent-child relationship in positing how children react to a variety of familial and extrafamilial social threats (Davies & Martin, 2013). A second attachment-related theory is Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory (Rohner, 2016). The theory is centered around the idea that parental love results in positive outcomes and rejection negatively affects a child’s psychological and behavioral functioning. It has now been expanded to consider the impact of perceptions of acceptance and rejection in other relationships across the lifespan.

**Socialization Theories**

Socialization can be simply defined as “the process whereby the child becomes a social being” (Grusec & Lytton, 1988, p. 161). But it is far from a simple process. It consists of all the ways that children are taught—intentionally or not— or assisted, and become mature, competent, and contributing members of a society (Grusec & Davidov, 2010). Theories that address the ways that parents and other social agents affect their children’s development began with Freud. But it was the provocative work by John B. Watson (1928), who based his views about development on classical conditioning theory, that helped to prompt theorists to account for how children learn from their social environment. Among
the many social learning theories, the two most influential have been those articulated by B. F. Skinner (1976) and Albert Bandura (2018).

Skinnerian theory, also known as operant conditioning theory, focused on analyzing the behaviors that functioned to increase or decrease the re-occurrence of actions. His theory concerned the stimuli that served as rewards or punishers and the behavioral consequences when stimuli were applied or withdrawn. His meticulous empirical animal research underlying his theory led to a rich understanding of the properties of effective actions that serve as reinforcers and punishers.

Skinner’s theoretical explication of operant principles continues to profoundly influence socialization theories – particularly in the area of discipline – and the origins and maintenance of many of children’s behavior problems. His theory helps to explicate the common errors parents make by reinforcing undesired behaviors and failing to reward desired actions (e.g., O’Leary, 1995). His theory has also led to the development of narrower theories, such as Gerald Patterson’s coercion theory, developed to account for coercive cycles in parent-child relationships (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992).

Learning principles also played a key role in Albert Bandura’s socialization theory. His legendary modeling studies with Bobo dolls (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963) set Bandura on a course of understanding the fundamental roles that direct learning and observational learning play in the establishment of new behavior. What is observed may or may not be mimicked, depending on a series of cognitive components (e.g., attention, memory, imagery, and motivation). Once a behavior is established, it can then be readily maintained through reinforcement. Bandura also showed that children are more likely to imitate those models they perceive as powerful and nurturant – both attributes common to parents.

Although his theory can be regarded as a socialization theory, as it developed, it has grown to be progressively more cognitive; its name has changed to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2018) due to his emphasis on motivation, expectancies, and self-efficacy. It now emphasizes the role of human agency in driving actions and an individual’s feelings of self-efficacy. This theory helped to focus attention on parental self-efficacy as a fundamental component of effective parenting (Bugental, Blue, & Cruzcosa, 1989; Jones & Prinz, 2005).

The newest socialization theory is the Social Relational Theory (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2014). This theory is designed to capture the dynamic nature of transactional processes inherent in socialization; both the parent and child are recognized as social agents. The process of child rearing is conceptualized as a series of interchanges based on expectations (broken as well as met), conflicts (between parents’ and children’s needs), solving these conflicts, ambivalence (in the face of competing goals), and ambiguity (e.g., uncertainty about how the child will behave in the future). The inherently dynamic nature of parenting is nicely captured – although such a theoretical model is extremely difficult to study.

Behavioral Genetics Theory

A fourth foundational theory comes from behavioral genetics, which focuses on understanding the role that genes play in individual differences. A foreshadowing of this conceptualization of parenting appeared in 1895, with a paper authored by the mathematician and biostatistician Karl Pearson. Since then, researchers have explored the dual influences of genes and the environment using various methods. The traditional method for investigating human behavioral genetics consisted of twin studies, adoption, and family studies (Sherman et al., 1997). By assessing the
similarities and differences between monozygotic and dizygotic twins, adopted and biological children, and family members sharing different amounts of genes, an estimate of heritability could be generated. Those methods have now been largely supplanted with more sophisticated approaches, including quantitative trait loci analysis, biometric model fitting, and animal models.

Early behavioral genetic conceptions appeared as deterministic and unidirectional views about the effects of genotypes and genetic inheritance. The theory has seen dramatic change, partly due to an increasingly sophisticated understanding of how genes work in relation to the environment. A second factor prompting change was the low magnitude of the correlation coefficients between genes and outcomes, such as the impact of child rearing and genotype–environment interactions (Rutter, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005). Nongenetic factors, including the environment and measurement error, must account for the rest of the differences. Those views evolved into a parallel focus on the role of the environment (e.g., McGuire, Segal, & Hershberger, 2012). For example, the concept of shared and nonshared environment emerged in order to better explain phenotypic differences between twins (Plomin & Daniels, 1987; Turkheimer & Waldron, 2000). Understanding gene–environment interactions has become a prominent focus of the theory. As Scarr and McCartney (1983) explained, genes can play one or more roles—a passive role in the environment, an active role in directing a child to seek out certain environments, or an evocative role when parents react to a child’s phenotype in a particular way unique to that child.

Behavioral genetics theory has been useful for understanding the role of particular genes and gene X environment interactions (McCormack et al., 2009). Investigations now address how genetic variants are related to neurotransmitters and hormones such as dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, and vasopressin, all of which have been shown to influence parental behavior. Researchers are also examining the role of specific genes in development and how they may interact with the environment, including dopamine D4 receptor (DRD4) and monoamine oxidase (MAO-A), a gene that codes for the enzyme that breaks down serotonin (Grusec et al., 2013).

Social Cognition Theories

A very different set of conceptualizations concerning child rearing emerged with social cognition theories, designed to explicate how cognitions about oneself and others impact behavior. The theories have not been specific to parents, but rather reflect concepts about adult social cognition. The early research into parental attitudes foreshadowed the foundational role that these theories would play.

There are a number of social cognitive theories developed by social psychologists. An early and prominent one in parenting research was attribution theory (Kelley, 1967). There are now a large number of investigations into parental attributions about children’s behavior and how those assessments drive both behavior and emotions in parents (e.g., Dix et al., 1986; Lansford et al., 2011). Another prominent social cognition theory is the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). This theory recognizes that behavior stems from behavioral intentions that may or may not be expressed. Those intentions are influenced by an individual’s background, the social environment, behavioral preferences, and perceptions about how normative the behavior is. This particular theory has been
useful for guiding efforts to change parenting behavior by modifying child-rearing attitudes (e.g., Durrant et al., 2014) and helping parents to prevent obesity in their children (e.g., Andrews, Silk, & Eneli, 2010).

A third example of a prominent social cognition theory focuses on social information processing (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1994). This theoretical approach centers on how individuals think about and then respond to problems. Behavior is recognized as developing from a sequential series of steps, starting with an individual’s identification of a problem. Subsequent steps include the assessment of the causes of the problem, generation of potential solutions, evaluation of those solutions, and then testing and evaluating a potential solution. Social information processing theory has been applied to parental problem-solving (e.g., Holden, 1988) and to parents who maltreat their children (Azar et al., 2017; Milner, 2003).

Systems Theories

A final foundational perspective for parenting research comes from systems theories. These theories conceptualize parents as individuals embedded in and potentially influenced by larger systems. There are two prominent systems theories that relate to parents. The single most comprehensive system theory is the Bio-Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Urie Bronfenbrenner conceptualized the developing child as being rooted in a series of contexts that interact directly or indirectly with one another and with the person. Bronfenbrenner’s well-known theory explicates how children’s characteristics network with multiple, hierarchically organized levels of the environment. He identified four levels that range from the immediate setting to the broad, cultural characteristics that reflect how a country’s social policies or customs can affect the context of a child’s development. The theory highlights the connections and interactions between the contextual levels as well as how a child’s development can modify the system of relationships.

The Bio-Ecological Systems Theory helped to focus attention on the role that context plays in the lives of children and their parents. The theory provided a structure to integrate diverse research results, such as the influence of different types of external environments (e.g., work, social networks, and neighborhoods) on the adaptive and maladaptive functioning of families (Gibson et al., 2010). It also provides researchers with a useful framework for studying the different contextual influences on individuals, the interconnections between variables, and how the child-rearing environment helps to shape children’s development.

The second leading systems conceptualization of parent–child relationships is the Family Systems Theory. This theoretical orientation addresses the nature of family dynamics, different family structures, and such concepts as roles, communication patterns, boundaries, triangulation, and power relations (Bowen, 1978; Minuchin, 1985). It focuses on understanding connections between the parents, the parent and child, and the child’s behavior. One of the first developmental psychologists to recognize the importance of family systems as it relates to parenting was Ross Parke (1978), who wrote about how the family constellation and contextual variables influenced the mother–infant dyad.

A key family system concept for parents is co-parenting – how mothers and fathers function together in their roles as parents and, in particular, whether the parents are mutually supportive and involved. For example, if one parent takes over the tasks of an ill parent, that would demonstrate support and cooperation. Alternatively, if one parent disparages and undermines the efforts of the other parent, that
would be an example of negative co-parenting. Investigators have identified a number of separate components of co-parenting, including conflict, disparagement, cooperation, and triangulation, all of which help to better explicate how parents interact together with regard to child rearing (McHale & Lindahl, 2011).

Summary of the Foundational Theories

Each of the six theories reflects a distinctive theoretical foundation for investigating and understanding parent–child relationships. With each theoretical orientation comes a set of lenses with which to view and understand parenting. These lenses provide a distinctive angle of viewing the phenomena, with some theories, notably evolutionary or systems theories, providing a wider angle while others, such as social cognitive theories focus on dyadic relations. Each foundational theory has unique concepts and particular aspects of the parent–child relationship that it focuses on.

These six foundational theories have helped to guide and evaluate parenting research for almost 100 years. However, few researchers stick to one theoretical approach. More common is a researcher using different theoretical perspectives over time or incorporating multiple theories in one study. Two examples of investigations that merge multiple theoretical approaches into one study are the integration of attachment theory with family system theory (Rothbaum, Rosen, Ujiie, & Uchida, 2002) and the combination of attachment theory with a socialization theory (Juffer, Bakermans-Kranenburg & van IJzendoorn, 2017).

The History and Establishment of Parenting Science Research

In his 1998 authoritative account of the history of developmental psychology, Robert Cairns identified three ages of research: the emergent period (1890–1919), the middle period (1920–1946), and the modern period (1947–present). Parenting research proved to be a late-comer in developmental research; virtually no studies about parents appeared during the emergent period. In fact, parents, child rearing, and parent–child relationships were rarely mentioned in early research publications. Much of the work in the emergent period of research was atheoretical and simply descriptive of children’s behavior, often ignoring the parents.

Nevertheless, at least one foundational theory served to initiate or motivate early studies into child development relationships. This was the case with “baby diaries” that were motivated by evolutionary theory (Darwin, 1877; Preyer, 1882). Those diaries ignored parents and even when a researcher carefully observed newborn social behavior, parents went unmentioned (e.g., Blanton, 1917). Parents continued to be mostly neglected through the 1920s, despite adolescent delinquency becoming a topic of inquiry (Harris, 1953). John B. Watson, the father of behaviorism, disregarded the role of parents in many of his journal articles. In their joint paper on studies in infant psychology, Watson and his wife included the word “parent” just five times (Watson & Watson, 1921). In two of the cases, “feeble-minded” parents were described as producing similarly impaired children.

One investigation conducted during the emergent period of developmental research was a questionnaire study about a basic child-rearing practice: discipline techniques. In collaboration with his mentor, G. Stanley Hall, Charles Sears (1899) developed a series of questionnaires to study the attitudes of 486 adults toward the punishment of children. Sears failed to mention the role of parents but he found that adults regarded misbehaviors as most punishable when perceived as intentional, persistent, or due to repeated