Booklet 6: Independence for children

Headlines:
- Supporting independence in children develops their trust and responsibility.
- It can be promoted through effective disciplining, consistently teaching children that they are accepted as they are, and supporting parents to reflect on their own experiences.
- Developing healthy values and beliefs helps children to create a desirable environment to live in for themselves and for others.
- Gaining a sense of community helps stop parents from feeling isolated.

Importance of independence for children

The term "independence" refers to managing things for oneself, including making decisions and accepting responsibility. Developing independence in children is an important way of generating and establishing trust (Cerino, 2021). There are many important things parents can do for their children; supporting them to develop independence can begin from infancy and helps the child to learn about themselves, what they are responsible for and what they are capable of in their life. Developing independence is a crucial part of effectively bringing up children to be healthy, happy, contributing members of society.

The literature on attachment theory, which refers to our ability to form a bond with our caregiver, helps explain that parents and caregivers play a large role in developing independence in children. The attachment system is thought to be a way that humans have developed to increase their chances of survival. The goal of this system is to make sure an infant is safe by keeping them physically close to their main caregiver. This "attachment" provides a safe base from which the child can explore the world on their own (Kraemer, 1992). Children who show a lack of independence in their relationships, as well as less affection and reduced functioning, are often those who in their first three years of life did not have the opportunity for satisfactory and stable attachment (Bowlby, 1955).

Effective disciplining

It is essential to have a balanced approach to disciplining, which is a key part of parenting. Children who are over-disciplined (e.g. are overly controlled) might conform more towards others, and children who are under disciplined (e.g. are not firmly responded to when showing aggression) tend to depend more on others (Baumrind, 1978). Discipline is most successful when caregivers demonstrate emotional comfort, consistency, and compassion to their children (Gershoff, 2010; Stosny, 1998). It is critical that the reason behind the disciplinary action is made clear to the young person as this will promote understanding. According to Bowlby (1955), affection should not be given to children only when they show desirable behavior. Parents must foster an environment of unconditional love and acceptance. It has been noted that parents' own childhoods and complex circumstances can impact the way they parent, including how they discipline (Pasold, 2006).

Values, beliefs, and their importance for child development

Values are defined as the principles of behaviour because they guide and influence our actions. This means that they help us assess and are based on what is important in life. Beliefs, on the other hand, are the conviction that something is true, even when there may not be the evidence. Both values and beliefs powerfully influence behaviour and attitudes in adults and children (Atkin, 1996). This highlights the importance of developing desirable values and beliefs. Doing so requires a process that is referred to as "socialisation" (Grusec, 2011). This is a process whereby children learn social, physical and psychological identities through effective parenting. For example, a parent might model the value of sharing by sharing something of theirs, like a chocolate bar, with a friend, and at the same time explain to their child how they believe it is good to share with others.

Grusec's (2011) review of socialisation processes in the family proposed that children need to experience their parents as understanding and supportive, have good regular routines, and have some power over their own behaviours (referred to as their autonomy).

Open communication is an important way of supporting the process of socialisation. Talking about how to interact, engage, and respond to social situations helps children develop a better understanding of their values and beliefs. Conversations that help children think about their experiences contribute to their development of values and beliefs. These are the very same processes that are used by many psychological treatments. Narrative therapy (Russell & Cohn, 2012) is one example. This treatment helps people understand and deal with their problems by thinking about the personal stories that have been told to them, and others they have experienced in their life. Narrative therapy, like good parenting, aims to encourage people to think about alternate perspectives, broaden their view of themselves, and challenge destructive values and beliefs.

A sense of community

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory claims that the environment in which children develop influences every part of their lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). This theory also explains that their development depends on not only themselves but both the immediate environment (e.g. parents) and the wider environment (e.g. community). Although the responsibility on the shoulders of parents can feel heavy, it is important to encourage parents to look for support the community around them can offer. Building relationships within the community provides access to what is termed "social capital", which is system of shared ideals that helps people to work together to achieve a shared goal, ultimately leading to better resources, support, advice, and social interactions (Lochner et al., 1999).

Parenting is not an easy task. It can put a lot of stress on parents, particularly when feeling isolated. Please refer to Booklet 1 to find out more about the importance of community and gaining external support from others.

Useful links
- https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/9781119331568.ch4
- https://www.northwoodfamilyoffice.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Passing-on-Values-to-the-Next-Generation-Ellen-Perry-GenSpring.pdf
- https://cmr.biola.edu/blog/2015/dec/08/7-ways-traditions-benefit-your-family-pt-1/
- https://www.championyourparenting.com/7-reasons-family-traditions-are-important/

References for whole of Session 6

All references used in this booklet can be found in the separate 'References Booklet'.

Selected references:
- Baumrind, D. (1978). Parental disciplinary patterns and social competence in children. Youth & Society, 9(3), 239-267.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1992). Ecological systems theory. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Grusec, J. E. (2011). Socialization processes in the family: Social and emotional development. Annual review of psychology, 62, 243-269.