Parenthood and Mental Health
A Bridge between Infant and Adult Psychiatry

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*Sam Tyano and Miri Keren*

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*Sam Tyano and Miri Keren*

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Concluding chapter

37 Mental health of parents and infant health and development in resource-constrained settings: evidence gaps and implications for facilitating ‘good-enough parenting’ in the twenty-first-century world

Jane Fisher, Atif Rahman, Meena Cabral de Mello, Prabha S. Chandra and Helen Herrman

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After World War II, the newly created World Health Organization asked a British child psychiatrist to prepare a monograph on the mental health needs of children. The WHO was concerned about the large numbers of children who had been orphaned or experienced extended separations from their parents in the war. John Bowlby reviewed the world’s literature and consulted with experts. His monograph, *Maternal Care and Mental Health* [1], appeared in 1951 and concluded that the quality of parental care which children receive in their earliest years is of vital importance for their future mental health. Specifically, he said, “... essential for mental health is that an infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate and continuous relationship with his mother (or mother substitute...) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment (p. 13).”

Over the next several decades, Bowlby pursued his life’s work of synthesizing a theory of attachment that elaborated these ideas on the importance of early experiences between young children and their parents. Bowlby’s colleague, Mary Ainsworth, operationalized his theory by developing an observational method of assessing the young child’s behavior with attachment figures. This groundbreaking work led to a large body of research that has extended and refined many of the ideas of attachment theory but, in the main, the accuracy of Bowlby’s basic premises seems clear.

Indeed, Bowlby’s emphasis on the importance of early experiences has implications well beyond attachment theory. Much of the excitement in contemporary developmental neuroscience is about attempts to describe the importance and effects of early experiences on human brain development. Moreover, the entire field of infant mental health rests on the premise that relationships between infants and caregivers are the most important developmental context affecting the child’s social and emotional behavior. These relationships are the most important focus of assessment and the most important target of interventions.

Not all have found the emphasis on parenting meaningful. In 1998, Judith Harris published *The Nurture Assumption* [2], asserting that parents were not nearly as important for child outcomes as was generally believed. Instead, she asserted that genetic and peer influences were both underappreciated and far more important than parenting.

The intensity of the reaction to these assertions illustrates how far we have come in the 50 years since Bowlby published his monograph. In 1951, it was big news that parenting was
considered vital for children’s mental health. Fifty years later, Judith Harris provocatively staked out the contrarian position that parenting matters little. Although her selective review of the evidence and debatable conclusions have been strongly challenged, her thesis usefully invites us to reconsider our assumptions about parenting. Indeed, since her book was published, a great deal of research on the extraordinarily deleterious effects of children raised without parents has demonstrated the limitations of her basic thesis. This research redirects us to review what we know about parenting and its effects.

With that in mind, the present volume is timely and much needed. The editors of this book, Sam Tyano, Miri Keren, Helen Herrman, and John Cox, have assembled an outstanding group of international scholars who contributed to this comprehensive review of parenting in the prenatal, perinatal, and early infancy periods. Bridging a gap between infant and adult psychiatry, the volume considers in some depth normal parenting processes, risk factors for parenting, and a variety of special circumstances related to parenting under atypical conditions. Their developmental orientation reminds us that our emphasis on understanding infant trajectories ought to be accompanied by an understanding of parents’ trajectories. For clinicians, the psychological origins of parenting, and the myriad factors that influence their development over time, are critically important topics. Investigators will find the reviews of special topics both interesting and stimulating with regard to questions that need to be addressed, and thus they can guide future research.

The sober assessment of children’s mental health needs that followed the second World War and inspired Bowlby’s illuminating vision has given way to even more complexities and challenges in the 21st century. Good enough parenting has never seemed more difficult nor more important. This volume promises to enhance our understanding of all that we know and all that we need to learn about this most vital human endeavor.

Charles H. Zeanah
January 2010

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