

Two central roles for couple relationships: breaking negative intergenerational patterns and enhancing children's adaptation

CAROLYN PAPE COWAN & PHILIP A. COWAN

Department of Psychology, 3210 Tolman Hall #1650, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA

ABSTRACT *A commonly held belief, supported by therapists' experience, theories of psychopathology, and systematic research, is that without intervention, troubling or negative intergenerational patterns will be repeated in the next generation. It is usually assumed that the mechanisms of intergenerational transmission involve (1) observable transactions between parents and children, and (2) individuals' internal working models about what can be expected in intimate family relationships, based on recollections of relationships with parents or other key attachment figures. This paper presents evidence that couple relationships play a central role in maintaining or breaking intergenerational cycles. Furthermore, preventive interventions focused on strengthening the couple relationships of parents of young children have the potential to affect the parents' relationship quality and their children's social, emotional, and academic development.*

KEYWORDS: *Marital quality; children's adaption; intervention; intergenerational patterns.*

“Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it” (Santayana, 1905).

Introduction

The idea that without some kind of active intervention, patterns tend to be repeated across generations, applies to the understanding of families as it does to the study of history – the context in which Santayana created his widely quoted aphorism. A number of psychological theories propose that, especially in the early years of children's lives, positive family relationships presage positive and supportive relationships in the families children create when they later establish families of their own. A corollary of this hypothesis is that negative and unsupportive family

Correspondence to: Carolyn Pape Cowan, Department of Psychology, 3210 Tolman Hall #1650, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720-1650.

relationships tend to be repeated over time, often over many successive generations (Caspi & Elder, 1988). It is an axiom of the fields of family studies and developmental psychopathology that negative family relationships constitute risk factors for children's development and adaptive functioning (P.A. Cowan & Cowan, in press; Cummings *et al.*, 2000).

Although it does not seem surprising to find repetition of family relationship patterns across generations, both theoretical and practical considerations lead us to search for mechanisms to explain this continuity. If we can identify how intergenerational continuity works or fails to work, we can use that knowledge to develop more precise guidelines for targeting interventions that might help break maladaptive relationship cycles.

Four types of theoretical explanations of intergenerational continuity dominate the current scene. First, it is undoubtedly the case that some of the repetition of relationship patterns across generations is affected by genetic and other biological mechanisms (Caspi *et al.*, 2002; Plomin, 1994). Second, psychoanalytic formulations focus on the child's identification with the same-sex parent and the internalization of that parent's superego, both of which provide guidelines for what constitutes appropriate behavior in family relationships (Fraiberg, 1975; Freud, 1938). Third, attachment theory assumes that adults have developed 'working models' of parent-child relationships based on experiences with key attachment figures in their families of origin, and that these models shape their expectations and reactions during interactions with their children (Bowlby, 1988; Van Ijzendoorn, 1992). In turn, interactions between parents and child result in the child creating working models that lead to the repetition of secure or insecure patterns of attachment in the next generation. Although both psychoanalytic and attachment theories focus almost entirely on children's relationships with their mothers, we will show that intergenerational linkages hold for fathers as well. Fourth, social learning theorists (Bandura, 1977; Patterson, 1975) offer an explanation of intergenerational transmission that does not rely on assumptions about the child's inner world. Rather, in the process of observing adults interact with others and noting which behaviors are reinforced or punished, children learn patterns of family behavior that they tend to repeat when they form their own families. With the exception of genetic theories, each of these explanations of the intergenerational transmission of adaptive and maladaptive behavior assumes that the system is being driven by one or more mechanisms central to the parent-child relationship.

Without attempting to refute any of these formulations of how intergenerational patterns are transmitted, we focus on a fifth alternative - the central role of the couple relationship. By providing experiences of emotion regulation strategies in intimate family relationships, attachment relationships in the family of origin begin to shape the quality of men's and women's intimate relationships with their adult partners (Cohn *et al.*, 1992). Depending on its quality, the couple relationship can (a) act as a protective filter that helps partners avoid the repetition of negative patterns when their relationships with children become stressful, as they inevitably will, or (b) serve as an amplifier of stress, causing it to spill over into parent-child interactions in ways that could be detrimental to both parent and child. We view

the couple relationship, then, at the center of a three-generational transmission system (Fig. 1).

Why focus on the role of couple relationships in the intergenerational transmission of family patterns when parent–child relationships are so obviously important? There are several well-accepted sets of ‘facts’ about the connections among couple relationships, parenting, and children’s outcomes depicted in Fig. 1. First, correlations are consistently found between parents’ behavior and young children’s level of development (e.g., cognitive stage) or adaptation (e.g., depression, aggression). Baumrind (1980) describes an authoritative parenting style as one in which parents are warm and responsive, structure tasks, and set reasonable limits for their children’s behavior, and at the same time grant the children age-appropriate autonomy. In families with authoritative parents, young children and adolescents show more advanced academic achievement, greater competence in relationships with peers, and fewer problem behaviors than peers whose parents have authoritarian or permissive parenting styles (Conger *et al.*, 1994; P.A. Cowan *et al.*, 1998; Parke & Buriel, 1998; Steinberg, 2001). If one is focused on psychopathology and deviations from normal development, the story can be told the other way around: Parents who are authoritarian, punitive, and harsh (structured and limit-setting without warmth and responsiveness) or permissive (warm but laissez-faire) tend to have offspring who are less academically and socially competent and more likely to have behavior problems – as described by teachers, parents, peers, or the children and adolescents themselves in different studies.

Second, high, unresolved marital conflict between the parents is associated with negative indicators of child and adolescent development and well-being (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Parke & Buriel, 1998), just as ineffective parenting styles are. These results hold in families with two parents at home (Lindahl *et al.*, 1997, p. 385; see also Erel & Berman, 1995) and parents who are separated, divorced, or remarried (e.g., Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Johnston *et al.*, 1989).

A third set of facts, perhaps expectable from the first two, is that “virtually every study examining associations between marriage and parenting has found that the quality of parent–child relationships and the quality of marital relationships are linked within families” (Lindahl *et al.*, 1997). In other words, when the parents’ relationship as a couple is troubled, one parent or both are less likely to have a more effective, authoritative parenting style with their children.

Path models (P.A. Cowan *et al.*, 1994) provide evidence that some of the association between marital distress and child outcomes is direct; in divorced and intact families, children are disequilibrated by their parents’ unresolved conflict. Some of the impact of conflicted couple relationships is indirect; one or both parents in a troubled marriage become harsh or disengaged with the child, who in turn becomes angry or depressed (Caspi & Elder, 1988). An example of this cycle

Grandparents ◀▶ Parents' working models of attachment ◀▶ Couple relationship ◀▶ Parenting ◀▶ Child outcomes

FIG 1. Three-generational transmission system for couple relationships.

repeating across generations can be found in a study published earlier by Caspi & Elder (1984), who examined four generations of families in the Berkeley Intergenerational Studies. An irritable adult (G1) in a distressed marriage has a child (G2) who he/she treats negatively, who becomes an irritable adult in a distressed marriage and has a child (G3) who becomes an irritable adult in a distressed marriage and has a child (G4) who has behavior problems.

How can such powerful cycles be interrupted? Quinton *et al.* (1984) took advantage of a 'naturally-occurring experiment' by following girls who were reared as orphans in an institution. On the whole, institution-reared women showed much poorer personal adjustment as adults and more difficult relationships with their children than non-institution-reared women, *unless they entered a good marriage*. That is, the mother's well-functioning relationship with a spouse was able to protect the children from the risks associated with her disadvantaged childhood. These findings have usually been interpreted in causal terms to support the idea that the positive marital relationship functioned protectively, but it could also be that an unmeasured characteristic of some women led them to be able to find a supportive partner. This is not a situation in which random assignment experiments would allow us to test whether assigning women to good marriages actually caused an increase in adaptation.

In the next section we present a brief summary of research illustrating continuity across generations in various aspects of family relationships and child outcomes. Then, we use data from two studies to describe links between parents' working models of attachment and the quality of their relationships with their spouses and preschoolers during the children's transition to elementary school. Finally, we describe evidence from a preventive intervention study that positive couple relationships have the power to affect parenting and children's development.

Research on intergenerational continuity and discontinuity

Evidence for continuity across generations

The continuity hypothesis – that qualities of family relationships are repeated across generations – has received a great deal of support in studies of individuals, couples, and parent–child relationships.

Continuity of individual adaptation. There is no doubt that severe psychological disorders (schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression, anti-social personality, and others) 'run in families'. Given a diagnosed parent as an index, his or her children are more likely to be diagnosed with that disorder than a non-index control of the same age, sex, and general life circumstances (Cicchetti & Cohen, 1995; Mednick *et al.*, 1981). Personality traits in non-diagnosed individuals are also likely to be repeated across generations (Plomin *et al.*, 1994). We are not concerned here with the complexity of explaining how this continuity occurs, but simply note that children tend to grow up to think and behave in ways that are similar to their parents' ways (Bengtson, 1996; Luescher & Pillemer, 1998; Miller, 2005).

Continuity of couple relationship quality. Couple relationship patterns tend to be repeated across generations. For example, large-scale sociological studies and meta-analyses find that adult children whose parents had divorced are more likely to end their own marriages in divorce (Amato, 1996). When unhappy parents stay together ‘for the sake of their children’, the children’s marriages are also more likely to be unhappy (Amato & Booth, 2001; Schneewind & Ruppert, 1998). If we examine the results of these studies from a more positive side, we could argue that when parents have positive relationships as a couple, their children are likely to follow suit when they embark on intimate relationships of their own.

Continuity of parent–child relationship quality. Existing research on whether the quality of parent–child relationships in one generation tends to be repeated in the next suggests an affirmative answer, but the literature is sparse and/or limited in its design. For example, studies using the Adult Attachment Interview (Hesse, 1999; Main *et al.*, 1985) assess the quality of relationships in an adult’s family of origin by assuming that the 90-minute interview elicits adults’ current ‘working models’ of attachment relationships growing out of early experiences with key attachment figures. Thus, parents categorized as having secure working models of attachment, based on detailed coding of their response to the Adult Attachment Interview, tend to have infants assessed as securely attached, based on observations in Ainsworth’s Strange Situation paradigm (Van Ijzendoorn, 1992). The question of direction of effects is always raised when the parents’ attachment to their parents, and the children’s attachment to *their* parents, are assessed at the same time, since it is possible that the relationship with one’s child can influence memories of one’s own earlier family relationships. An important study by Fonagy *et al.* (1991) shows that assessments of parents’ security of attachment obtained before their children are born function as strong predictors of their children’s security of attachment when they are 1½ years old. Despite the fact that the interview responses do not represent the ‘reality’ of the relationships in the past generation, they have usually been interpreted as demonstrating intergenerational continuity of parent–child attachment patterns.

Some new findings from very extended longitudinal studies of clinical populations overcome the problem of retrospective reports by observing parents in generation 1 (G1) as they interact with their children (G2), and then waiting until G2 can be observed as adults parenting their children. For example, Capaldi *et al.* (2003) show that G1–G2 parenting of boys originally chosen for a study of aggression predicted G2–G3 parenting by the now-grown-up fathers of sons (a correlation of 0.46 across generations and over a period of about 12 years). In a useful review of intergenerational transmission, Serbin and Karp (2004) point out that consistency across generations is higher when the assessments of parents and children in G1–G2 occur at approximately the same ages as the parents and children in G2–G3.

As we noted above, the primary mechanisms invoked in the explanation of intergenerational continuity focus on transmissions from parent to child through either genetics or family dynamics – parents acting on children, and children internalizing ideals, values, and behavior patterns from their families of origin. We

turn now to the role of couple relationship quality in understanding when patterns are and are not repeated from one generation to another.

Couple relationship quality and the intergenerational cycle

In this section, we describe evidence from two separate studies of how parents' working models of attachment play out in the family system.

Samples, procedure, and methods

In the first study, the *Becoming a Family Project* (C.P. Cowan & Cowan, 2000), we began with 72 couples in mid-pregnancy who were expecting a first child. Another 24 couples not yet decided about having children were followed for comparison purposes, but they are not included in this report. Couples were not informed before they responded to the project materials that they were going to be part of an intervention study, so the expectant parents entering this study were not seeking help for already existing couple relationship problems (although a substantial minority showed some signs of distress). In a randomized clinical trial, 24 of the couples were randomly chosen to participate in a group of 4 to 5 couples meeting every week for 6 months – from the last trimester of pregnancy through the first three months postpartum (see next section). Another group of 24 couples, also randomly selected, were followed over time but not offered participation in an intervention. Couples in both the intervention and control conditions were interviewed, and each partner completed a set of questionnaires in pregnancy before the intervention began, at 6 months postpartum, and again at 18 months postpartum.

When their children were $3\frac{1}{2}$, in addition to completing interviews and questionnaires, each family was invited to our laboratory playroom for a family visit, where we observed mother and child, father and child, and the whole family as they engaged in a set of difficult and playful tasks (for details see C.P. Cowan & Cowan, 2000). Observers rated parent–child interaction on 17 scales, combined into three dimensions: warmth/responsiveness; structure/limit setting; and support for appropriate levels of autonomy. Similar scales were used to rate the partners' behavior toward one another as they worked and played together with the child (warmth and conflict in the co-parenting relationship).

On a separate day, the couples were given the Adult Attachment Interview (George *et al.*, 1985). In a 60–90-minute narrative, respondents described their past and present relationships with their parents, with questions focused on whether the parents functioned as a secure base for them in times of stress and distress. Coders examined not only the positive or negative aspects of the relationships described, but also whether the narrative presented a coherent account of the (grand)parent–child relationships. Respondents who recounted a positive or negative story in a coherent manner were described as having a secure working model of attachment relationships. Respondents who dismissed their early relationships as unimportant, those who idealized the relationships without providing convincing examples, and those who were so preoccupied with anger at their parents that parts of their accounts were not

coherent, were described as having an insecure working model of attachment relationships. These three patterns, secure, insecure-dismissing, and insecure-preoccupied, resemble the three major strategies that infants display in dealing with separation from an attachment figure (Ainsworth *et al.*, 1978; Bowlby, 1988). Although we could not ascertain whether the descriptions of the parents in our study represented what really happened in childhood, we treated them as representations of the respondents' current schemas about their early attachment relationships.

In the second study, the *Schoolchildren and their Families Project* (P.A. Cowan *et al.*, 2005b), a new sample of 100 families joined the research in the year before their first child entered kindergarten and were followed over the next 10 years. Again, in a random assignment design, some couples were offered one consultation a year, over three years, with the project staff (the control condition). Others were offered a chance to participate in couples groups that met weekly for 16 weeks with project staff; some of the groups focused more on couple relationship issues and some focused more on parent-child issues (see below).

In both longitudinal studies, laboratory observations of couple interaction and parent-child interaction were carried out in the pre-intervention, pre-school period and at the end of the child's kindergarten year. Using the same rating scales as the earlier study, observers described the quality of the parent-child interactions in the dyads, and the quality of the parents' interaction as a couple (co-parenting) during the whole-family session. The children's adaptation to school was assessed by achievement tests, interviews with the children, and a behavior checklist filled out by their teachers, who did not know which children in their classroom were participants in the study (C.P. Cowan & Cowan, 2000). The teacher checklists were used to describe each child's level of internalizing problems (shy, withdrawn, anxious, depressed) and externalizing problems (angry, aggressive, disobedient) during the spring of kindergarten year.

Results

The findings of the two studies of different samples were remarkably similar (Cohn *et al.*, 1992; P.A. Cowan *et al.*, 2005a). Because the second study had more participants, allowing us to analyze the data separately for sons and daughters, we focus on the results of the Cowan *et al.* (2005a) study. When fathers or mothers in our study of non-clinical families were described as having insecure working models of attachment with reference to relationships with their parents, they were more likely to be observed as having high conflict in a couple problem-solving discussion *and* less authoritative parenting in separate mother-child and father-child observations in our project playroom. The data show that the full structural equation model for mothers predicted 54% of the variance in daughters' internalizing problems and 63% of the variance in girls' externalizing problems in kindergarten as reported by the children's teachers. The data from the teachers were gathered one year after the staff had observed the families in our project playroom. The same variables assessed in mother-son pairs accounted for 37% of the variance in sons' internalizing behavior. The model using data on fathers' attachment and parenting quality explained 53% of the variance in

daughters' externalizing behavior, and 43% of the variance in sons' externalizing behavior. By entering and removing specific information from the equations, we found that information concerning the parents' working models of attachment, and information about their observed marital interaction, each contributed independent, unique power to our ability to predict the quality of children's relationships with their peers in the first year of elementary school.

Our earlier study using the Adult Attachment Interview (Cohn *et al.*, 1992) showed that the pairing of attachment security in husbands and wives made a difference. When both partners had secure working models of attachment, their observed marital interaction and parent-child relationships were highly positive. When both partners had insecure working models of attachment, observed marital interaction and parent-child relationships were quite negative. When husbands were characterized as securely attached and their wives were not, both marital and parent-child relationships were positive, and indistinguishable from the secure-secure pairings. Husbands' security of attachment was able to protect against the negative impact of wives' insecure attachment.

Unfortunately in the first study there were only two pairs in which wives were characterized as securely attached and their husbands were not, and so we were unable to examine that combination. In our later study of 70 couples with completed Adult Attachment Interviews, there were more wife-secure and husband-insecure pairs. Unpublished analyses show that the three patterns found in the first study were replicated. The new analyses also showed that when wives were characterized as securely attached and their husbands were not, their interactions as a couple and with their children were negative. In other words, in these couples, the wives' security of attachment did not provide a buffer for their husbands' insecure model of relationships in terms of keeping the marital or parent-child relationship quality more positive.

Finally, there was a difference in the statistical models of links between risks and outcomes depending on the gender of the parent and the gender of the child (P.A. Cowan *et al.*, 2005). When fathers had insecure working models of attachment, they tended to have conflictful marriages and ineffective parent-child relationships; their sons and daughters children had significantly higher levels of externalizing at school. Fathers' attachment as measured by the Adult Attachment Interview was not significantly linked with sons' or daughters' internalizing problems at school (symptoms of depression, somaticizing). By contrast, when mothers had insecure working models of attachment, the links extended through conflictful marriages and ineffective parenting to higher levels of internalizing problems in their kindergarten-age daughters but not in their sons.

We can draw several important conclusions from the pattern of these findings. First, in addition to the fact that marital and parent-child relationships are correlated with children's adaptation to kindergarten, information about the security of each parent's working models of attachment to *their* parents contributed to our understanding of the children's ability to meet the challenges of the transition to elementary school. Although these findings are correlational, not causal, the path models are consistent with the hypothesis that insecure working models of relationships in the family one grows up in make it more difficult to establish a harmonious relationship

with a spouse. It appears that one way in which parent–child relationship patterns are transmitted across generations is through the effect of the parents’ working models on the quality of their relationship as partners. When that quality spills over into the parent–child relationships, the result is a repetition of relationship quality from the parents’ families of origin.

Despite the significant correlation between working models of attachment (Adult Attachment Interview) and marital conflict, the correspondence was far from perfect. Not all people with insecure working models of attachment were in conflictful marriages. Consistent with the results of the study by Quinton *et al.*, (1984), parents who managed to establish warm and cooperative relationships with their partners were also likely to establish positive relationships with their children, who tended to fare well early in their school careers. That is, the quality of the couple relationship can function as a buffer by protecting the child against the risks associated with parents’ insecure working models of attachment.

One condition that promotes buffering appears to be the pairing of a husband with a secure working model of attachment and a wife with an insecure model of attachment. Why would this combination work so well, whereas the pairing of a husband with an insecure model of attachment and a wife with a secure model did not provide the buffering that alters the negative intergenerational pattern? Our speculative answer, based on interviews with many parents, is that when wives have insecure models of attachment relationships, they tend to react to threats to their relationship with a depressive style, and the husbands can take the role of protectors – a pattern that is consistent with cultural stereotypes. By contrast, when husbands have insecure models of relationships, their vulnerability may more often take the form of irritability, anger, and lashing out at others. Despite the fact that this pattern is, in its own way, culturally stereotypic, these behaviors are more difficult for women to contend with, even for those with secure models of attachment. Both the data on the pairing of partners with different working models of attachment and the differences we found in the patterns of linkage depending on whether we were looking at mothers or fathers, daughters or sons, and externalizing or internalizing behaviors, suggest that the transmission of family relationship patterns is related to complex, gendered dynamics that require more systematic exploration.

Couple-focused interventions: breaking intergenerational cycles

Our reports of the pattern of correlations across generations and across time focused on the lifespan trajectory represented in Fig. 1. Our intervention study was more limited, beginning in the center of that diagram and examining how a couples’ group intervention affected parents’ couple relationships, parent–child relationships, and their children’s adaptation to school.

A brief description of the couples groups interventions

In the intervention aspects of the two studies we described above, couples from 28 different cities and towns responded to information about a study of an early family

life transition (to parenthood or to school). In each study, couples were randomly chosen to participate in a couples group that met with clinically trained leaders every week over the transition to parenthood or the children's transition to school. They, and comparable couples with no special intervention, were followed over the next six years to monitor shifts in their relationships – as couples and with their children.

The couples groups were led by a male–female team of trained mental health professionals, who worked with the parents to discuss many aspects of their lives as partners and parents: their well-being or difficulty as individuals; their relationship as couples in terms of parenting, communication styles, and problem solving strategies; the quality of their relationships with their children; the quality of their relationships with their parents; and the balance between the life stresses and social support in their lives. Each of these aspects of their lives was assessed before, and a number of times after, the couples group intervention, and all comparison couples and children were assessed in the same ways, so that we could look for any effects of the intervention on the parents' and children's adaptation over the years.

The intervention has been described in a number of publications (C.P. Cowan & Cowan, 2000; C.P. Cowan *et al.*, 2005; P.A. Cowan & Cowan, 2001; Schulz *et al.*, in press). Each group meeting involved an open-ended 'check-in' and a more structured agenda. The groups were not conducted as didactic communication skills training classes, but rather as opportunities for couples in a similar life transition to share experiences and gain some perspective on family and work issues that were part of their daily concerns. The group leaders attempted to help couples normalize their situation ('we're all in the same boat'), take time to explore 'hot' issues in a safe setting, and try out new strategies each week with feedback from the leaders and other group participants.

Results

Both the transition-to-parenthood and transition-to-school couples group interventions showed statistically significant effects. Compared with controls, couples in the transition to parenthood groups showed much smaller declines in marital satisfaction in the years after they had their babies. The impact of groups could still be seen five years later, when the group participants had maintained their level of satisfaction with marriage, whereas the controls in our study (Schulz *et al.*, in press), and couples becoming parents in more than 20 studies in the United States, England, Germany, and Israel, showed significant declines (C.P. Cowan & Cowan, 1995). Despite these positive effects on the parents' marital satisfaction, we could not find positive effects of the intervention on the children's adaptation to kindergarten five years after the couples groups had ended.

In the second study, we offered the couples group intervention in the year before their first child entered kindergarten (C.P. Cowan *et al.*, 2005). The couples groups that emphasized parenting issues resulted in a shift to more effective parenting but no change in marital interaction, according to assessments of mother–child, father–

child, and couple interaction by observers who were blind to whether couples had participated in an intervention or control condition. The couples groups that emphasized marital issues resulted in a reduction in conflict between the parents during a family interaction task, as well as increases in parents' warmth and structuring of tasks with the child. In comparison with children whose parents were in the control condition, children whose parents participated in the groups emphasizing couple relationship issues had higher tested achievement scores in kindergarten, and fewer externalizing behaviors and problems with peers in first grade. Finally, there were links between intervention-induced change and child outcomes. It appears that reductions in marital conflict and increases in effective parenting both played a causal role in children's academic and social adaptation to the early years of elementary school. Preliminary analyses show that the published results of the transition to school intervention from pre-kindergarten to first grade (Cowan *et al.*, 2005) were also found in subsequent follow-ups at fourth grade when the children were $9\frac{1}{2}$ years old.

The results of the intervention design demonstrate that marital relationships play a causal role in shaping the quality of parent-child relationships and children's adaptation. These results also suggest that there may be a directional connection between couple relationships and parent-child relationships. In our study, the intervention focused on couple relationship change was able to produce observed changes in parenting style, but the parenting-focused intervention did not have the reverse effects. If one major goal is to enhance young children's emotional, social, and academic adaptation, the results of this intervention study suggest that there may be more advantages in helping parents with their couple relationship issues than in focusing solely on their parenting strategies.

It would be ideal to report that we could link the two halves of this paper together to show that interventions designed to increase attachment security resulted in improved couple relationships with positive effects on children. As far as we know, there are no studies demonstrating that psychotherapy produces measurable effects on security of attachment. What we have shown is that couples interventions can affect marital and parent-child relationships, and this can help to prevent difficult family relationships from repeating across the generations.

Conclusions

It has been assumed that the primary pathway to enhancing children's well-being is through interventions designed to increase the quality of their parents' skill in parenting. Our findings from two studies of adult attachment suggest that couple relationship quality can play an important role in determining whether parents' insecure working models of attachment will have an impact on marital and family relationships in ways that affect their children's adaptation to school. For now, we can state that this strong causal interpretation is a hypothesis consistent with the correlational data. When we add the findings from the two intervention studies, we can argue more definitively that the quality of the parents' relationship as a couple can have a causal impact on both family functioning and children's adaptation. Enhancing the couple's ability to resolve disagreements and solve problems effectively

in their relationship as partners can produce substantial benefits in terms of enhanced marital interactions, more effective parenting strategies, and ultimately the children's academic achievement and relationships with peers in the early elementary school grades.

Child therapists and parent educators might take the message from these findings that addressing unresolved issues between the child's parents could add to the power of their interventions. Couples therapists might consider that whether or not they see the children or discuss issues that clients have with their children, they may be playing an important preventive mental health role in promoting children's well being by strengthening their parents' relationships as partners and as parents. Policy makers might consider that while parenting interventions are one way to enhance children's well-being, couple-focused interventions hold the potential to foster children's adaptation by breaking cycles of unsatisfying relationships across the generations and enhancing the quality of family life for parents and children.

References

- AINSWORTH, M.S., BLEHAR, M.C., WATERS, E. & WALL, S. (1978). *Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the strange situation*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- AMATO, P.R. (1996). Explaining the intergenerational transmission of divorce. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 58(3), 628–640.
- AMATO, P.R. & BOOTH, A. (2001). The legacy of parents' marital discord: Consequences for children's marital quality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81(4), 627–638.
- BANDURA, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- BAUMRIND, D. (1980). New directions in socialization research. *American Psychologist*, 35(7), 639–652.
- BENGTSON, V.L. (1996). Continuities and discontinuities in intergenerational relationships over time. In V.L. BENGTSON (Ed.), *Adulthood and aging: Research on continuities and discontinuities* (pp. 271–303). New York, NY: Springer.
- BOWLBY, J. (1988). *A secure base: Parent–child attachment and healthy human development*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- CAPALDI, D.M., PEARS, K.C., PATTERSON, G.R. & OWEN, L.D. (2003). Continuity of parenting practices across generations in an at-risk sample: A prospective comparison of direct and mediated associations. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 31(2), 127–142.
- CASPI, A. & ELDER, G.H.J. (1988). Emergent family patterns: The intergenerational construction of problem behaviour and relationships. In R.A. HINDE and J. STEVENSON-HINDE (Eds), *Relationships within families: Mutual influences* (pp. 218–240). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- CASPI, A., McCLAY, J., MOFFITT, T., MILL, J., MARTIN, J., CRAIG, I.W., et al. (2002). Role of genotype in the cycle of violence in maltreated children. *Science*, 297(5582), 851–854.
- CICCHETTI, D. & COHEN, D.J. (Eds) (1995). *Developmental psychopathology, Vol. 1: Theory and methods*. New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons.
- COHN, D.A., SILVER, D.H., COWAN, C.P. & COWAN, P.A. (1992). Working models of childhood attachment and couple relationships. *Journal of Family Issues*, 13(4), 432–449.
- CONGER, R.D., GE, X., ELDER, G.H. & LORENZ, F.O. (1994). Economic stress, coercive family process, and developmental problems of adolescents. Special Issue: Children and Poverty. *Child Development*, 65(2), 541–561.
- COWAN, C.P. & COWAN, P.A. (1995). Interventions to ease the transition to parenthood: Why they are needed and what they can do. *Family Relations: Journal of Applied Family and Child Studies*, 44(4), 412–423.
- COWAN, C.P. & COWAN, P.A. (2000). *When partners become parents: the big life change for couples*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- COWAN, C.P., COWAN, P.A. & HEMING, G. (2005). Two variations of a preventive intervention for couples: effects on parents and children during the transition to elementary school. In P.A. COWAN, C.P. COWAN, J. ABLOW, V.K. JOHNSON & J. MEASELLE (Eds), *The family context of parenting in children's adaptation to elementary school*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- COWAN, P.A. & COWAN, C.P. (2001). A couple perspective on the transmission of attachment patterns. In C. CLULOW (Ed.), *Adult attachment and couple psychotherapy: The 'secure base' in practice and research* (pp. 63–82). London: Brunner-Routledge.
- COWAN, P.A. & COWAN, C.P. (in press). Developmental psychopathology from a family systems and family risk factors perspective: implications for family research, practice, and policy. In D. CICCHETTI & D.J. COHEN (Eds), *Developmental psychopathology* (2nd ed.). New York: Wiley.
- COWAN, P.A., COWAN, C.P., SCHULZ, M.S. & HEMING, G. (1994). Prebirth to preschool family factors in children's adaptation to kindergarten. In R.D. PARKE and S.G. KELLAM (Eds), *Exploring family relationships with other social contexts. Family research consortium: advances in family research, Vol. 4* (pp. 75–114). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- COWAN, P.A., POWELL, D. & COWAN, C.P. (1998). Parenting interventions: a family systems perspective. In W. DAMON (Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology* (Fifth ed., Vol. 4). New York: John Wiley.
- COWAN, P.A., BRADBURN, I.S. & COWAN, C.P. (2005a). Parents' working models of attachment: The intergenerational context of problem behavior in kindergarten. In P.A. COWAN, C.P. COWAN, J. ABLOW, V.K. JOHNSON and J. MEASELLE (Eds), *The family context of parenting in children's adaptation to elementary school*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- COWAN, P.A., COWAN, C.P., ABLOW, J., JOHNSON, V.K. & MEASELLE, J. (2005b). *The family context of parenting in children's adaptation to elementary school*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- CUMMINGS, E.M. & DAVIES, P. (1994). *Children and marital conflict: The impact of family dispute and resolution*. New York: Guilford Press.
- CUMMINGS, E.M., DAVIES, P. & CAMPBELL, S.B. (2000). *Developmental psychopathology and family process: theory, research, and clinical implications*. New York: Guilford Press.
- FONAGY, P., STEELE, H. & STEELE, M. (1991). Maternal representations of attachment during pregnancy predict the organization of infant-mother attachment at one year of age. *Child Development*, 62(5), 891–905.
- FRAIBERG, S. (1975). Ghosts in the nursery: A psychoanalytic approach to impaired infant-mother relationships. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 14, 387–421.
- FREUD, S. (1938). *The basic writings of Sigmund Freud* (A.A. Brill, Trans.). New York: Modern Library.
- GEORGE, C., KAPLAN, N. & MAIN, M. (1985). *The Adult Attachment Interview*. Unpublished manuscript, University of California, Berkeley.
- HESSE, E. (1999). The adult attachment interview: Historical and current perspectives. In J. CASSIDY and P.R. SHAVER (Eds), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (pp. 395–433). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- HETHERINGTON, E.M. & CLINGEMPEEL, G. (1992). Coping with marital transitions. *Society for Research in Child Development Monograph*, 57(2–3).
- JOHNSTON, J.R., KLINE, M. & TSCHANN, J.M. (1989). Ongoing postdivorce conflict: Effects on children of joint custody and frequent access. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 59(4), 576–592.
- LINDAHL, K.M., CLEMENTS, M. & MARKMAN, H. (1997). Predicting marital and parent functioning in dyads and triads: A longitudinal investigation of marital processes. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 11(2), 139–151.
- LUESCHER, K. & PILLEMER, K. (1998). Intergenerational ambivalence: A new approach to the study of parent-child relations in later life. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 60(2), 413–425.
- MAIN, M., KAPLAN, N. & CASSIDY, J. (1985). Security in infancy, childhood, and adulthood: A move to the level of representation. *Growing points of attachment theory and research. Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 50, 66–106.
- MEDNICK, S.A., SCHULSINGER, F. & GRIFFITH, J. (1981). Children of schizophrenic mothers: The Danish high-risk study. In F. SCHULSINGER, S.A. MEDNICK & J. KNOP (Eds), *Longitudinal research: Methods and uses in behavioral science*. Hingham, MA: Martinus Nijhoff.
- MILLER, B.A. (2005). Intergenerational transmission of religiousness and spirituality. In W.R. MILLER & H.D. DELANEY (Eds), *Judeo-Christian perspectives on psychology: Human nature, motivation, and change* (pp. 227–244). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. [URL:<http://www.apa.org/books>].

- PARKE, R.D. & BUIEL, R. (1998). Socialization in the family: Ethnic and ecological perspectives. In N. EISENBERG (Ed.), *Social, emotional, and personality development* (Fifth ed., Vol. 3) (pp. 463–552). New York: John Wiley.
- PATTERSON, G.R. (1975). *Families: applications of social learning to family life* (Rev. ed.). Champaign, IL: Research Press.
- PLOMIN, R. (1994). *Genetics and experience: The interplay between nature and nurture*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- PLOMIN, R., OWEN, M.J. & MCGUFFIN, P. (1994). The genetic basis of complex human behaviors. *Science*, 264(5166), 1733–1739.
- QUINTON, D., RUTTER, M. & LIDDLE, C. (1984). Institutional rearing, parenting difficulties and marital support. *Psychological Medicine*, 14(1), 107–124.
- SANTAYANA, G. (1905). *The life of reason; or, The phases of human progress*. New York: C. Scribner.
- SCHNEEWIND, K.A. & RUPPERT, S. (1998). *Personality and family development: an intergenerational longitudinal comparison*. MAHWAH, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- SCHULZ, M.S., COWAN, C.P. & COWAN, P.A. (in press). Promoting healthy beginnings: Marital quality during the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Clinical and Consulting Psychology*.
- SERBIN, L.A. & KARP, J. (2004). The intergenerational transfer of psychosocial risk: Mediators of vulnerability and resilience. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 55, 333–363.
- STEINBERG, L. (2001). We know some things: Parent-adolescent relationships in retrospect and prospect. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 11(1), 1–19.
- VAN IJZENDOORN, M.H. (1992). Intergenerational transmission of parenting: A review of studies in nonclinical populations. *Developmental Review*, 12(1), 76–99.

Contributors

CAROLYN PAPE COWAN, PH.D. *Adjunct Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA*

PHILIP COWAN, PH.D., *Professor of Psychology and past Director of the Institute of Human Development at the University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA.*