

KEY FINDINGS FROM A NATIONWIDE SURVEY AMONG
PARENTS OF ZERO- TO THREE-YEAR-OLDS

CONDUCTED BY
PETER D. HART RESEARCH ASSOCIATES

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Between March 21 and April 1, 1997, Peter D. Hart Research Associates conducted an in-depth telephone survey among a representative nationwide sample of mothers and fathers and legal guardians of children age 36 months and younger. The survey includes supplemental "oversample" interviews among African Americans (100) and Hispanics (100), which were then weighted back into the sample in their proper proportions according to U.S. Census figures. A total of 1,022 interviews were completed. Overall, this poll has a margin of error of $\pm 3.5\%$.

In each household, the parent was asked to answer the survey questions by referring to a specific child age zero to 36 months (in households with more than one child age three or younger, the respondent was asked to focus his or her answers on one of those children, as determined by a random process). The poll includes 243 parents of children age zero to eight months, 279 parents of children age nine to 18 months, and 501 parents of children in the oldest and broadest category, age 19 to 36 months.

This report highlights the principal findings that emerge from the research.

ZERO TO THREE SURVEY FACTS AT A GLANCE

1 Parents know that they have an important influence on their infants' and toddlers' development, but they do not fully understand the connection between their own parenting practices and the social, emotional, and intellectual aspects of child development.

Majorities of parents grasp certain fundamental concepts about child development, but many are confused or hold misconceptions about others.

Though they are most likely to believe that their child's *emotional* growth and development is the domain over which they have the greatest influence as parents, this aspect of early child development – along with intellectual and social development – is the area in which parents feel *least knowledgeable*.

While half of parents (53%) say they are totally sure that they know what signs to watch for in their youngster when it comes to physical development, far fewer say this for emotional (38%), social (37%), or intellectual (44%) development.

WHAT PARENTS KNOW ABOUT EARLY CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Most parents understand that babies are learning from the moment they are born; that babies are communicating before they can do so in words; that parents' *emotional* closeness with their baby can strongly affect his or her *intellectual* development; that the brain of a baby who lacks appropriate stimulation – such as being read to, played with, or touched and held – will not develop as well as that of a baby who does receive such stimulation; and that what a child experiences from birth to age three can influence his or her ability to do well in school.

Fewer parents recognize that a baby's intelligence can be increased or decreased by how parents interact with that child; that babies less than six months old can get depressed; that having more rather than fewer caregivers before age three is *not* good for a child's healthy development; and that the *more* stimulation (as opposed to *appropriate stimulation*) a baby receives does not mean he or she is better off.

2 Parents of babies and toddlers expect a great deal of themselves, and many feel that they want to improve as parents. Though many are confident in their ability to respond to the various parenting challenges they face each day, they also identify a number of barriers standing in the way of better parenting.

HOW WOULD YOU RATE YOURSELF AS A PARENT SO FAR?

Just 8% of parents rate themselves as "outstanding" and say they don't feel a need to improve; all others indicate that they'd like to improve their parenting skills.

Forty-seven percent say they are excellent parents but would like to improve just a little; 43% say they are good but definitely want to improve in several areas; and 2% say they are somewhat below average and are working hard at improving.

For families with children age zero to three, two fundamental barriers stand in the way of better parenting. First, from parents' own point of view, time is an acute concern, with over a third saying that one of the top reasons they may need to improve as parents is that they don't spend as much quality time with their child as they'd like to (37%).

A second critical type of barrier to better parenting is the "information deficit": one in five parents, for example, say that they feel they need to improve as a parent because they find it hard to understand their child's feelings and needs (19%) or don't know how to handle difficult situations with their child (19%). One in 10 parents say that they lack confidence in their parenting skills overall.

3 Few parents of young children say that they felt totally prepared for parenthood when they had their first child. Those who are the youngest and have the lowest income, or those who are going it alone as single parents feel particularly unprepared for the daunting new role they've taken on.

HOW DID YOU FEEL WHEN YOU FIRST BECAME A PARENT?

The vast majority of parents say that when they had their first child, they felt "in love" with their baby and happier than ever before. Many also say that they felt stressed and worn out, afraid of doing something wrong, afraid of not being a good parent, and unsure about what to do a lot of the time.

Young parenthood is both a time of deep joy and wonderment and a time of worry, uncertainty, and questioning, and parents seem thirsty for information and advice to help them understand and respond to their child. Not all resources that young families typically turn to, however, provide the quantity or quality of information that parents need at present.

When parents seek information or advice about parenting, they turn to both informal networks – such as their own mother, mother-in-law, another family member, or a friend – and to professionals: namely, their child's pediatrician. They also pay significant attention to the news media's reports about infants and toddlers and their development.

A quarter of all parents of young children say that as brand new parents they felt only slightly or not really prepared, while almost two in five felt totally or quite well-prepared. Among those who are *least* likely to have felt prepared are younger, lower-income, and single parents. Low-income and single parents also are more likely than others to have felt that they lacked emotional support.

4 To be the parent of a baby or toddler as the end of the 20th century approaches is to face myriad challenges and pressures, chief among them the time crunch in trying to “be there” for that young child.

A PORTRAIT OF YOUNG FAMILIES

Sixty percent of children age zero to three currently are cared for on a regular basis by someone other than their parents. Only one in five have been cared for exclusively by their mother or father since birth.

Non-parental care providers for this age group are about equally likely to be a grandparent or other family as they are to be a professional or non-family caregiver.

Though most babies and toddlers today live in two-parent households, 14% are being raised by single parents.

The majority of mothers of very young children work at a paid job: 40% full time and 19% part time; another 8% who aren't working now plan to return to the work force within the next six months.

The facts of daily life and work for America's young families mean that about half of all parents say that they end most days feeling that they spent less time than they wanted to with their young child.

Translated into hard numbers, this finding suggests that, every day, five million infants and toddlers across the country have parents who personally feel that they don't spend enough time with them.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF AMERICA'S YOUNG FAMILIES

To be the parent of a baby or toddler as the end of the 20th century approaches is to face myriad challenges and pressures, chief among them the time crunch in trying to "be there" for that young child.

All across the country, the morning scene in households with children under age three is a similar one: in most cases, both parents are getting ready for work and tending to their child's needs; baby will be handed over to someone else – a relative or a professional caregiver – to be cared for while mom and dad are at work. In most homes, too, there's more than one child to attend to.

For the parents of young children, each day is filled with the multiple and conflicting demands and obligations of work and family. For the young children themselves, each day means being taken care of for some period by someone who is not mom or dad.

Though most babies and toddlers today live in two-parent households, 14% are being raised by single parents. The presence of two adults in a majority of young family households, however, does not mean that most of these children are being raised solely by their parents. In fact,

A SOCIOECONOMIC SNAPSHOT OF YOUNG FAMILIES

✍ More young parents have only a high school education or less (37%) than have a college degree or more (29%).

✍ While three in 10 households with kids age zero to three are headed by a parent who works as a professional or executive, 44% are headed by skilled laborers.

✍ Though 25% of young families in this country have a household income of \$50,000 or more, 13% are barely making ends meet, reporting an annual household income that's roughly at or below the poverty level of \$15,000.

60% currently are cared for on a regular basis *by someone other than their parents*, and only one in five have been cared for *exclusively* by their mother or father since birth. The vast majority of children under age three (80%) have had at least one other non-parental care provider (who is about equally likely to be either a grandparent or other family member or a professional or non-family caregiver) during their brief lifetimes, and half have had two or more. Single parents, African Americans and Hispanics, and – notably – first-time parents are the most likely subgroups to have a regular caregiver for their child under age three.

Indeed, caregivers play a major role in the lives of America's young families. Whether out of economic necessity or personal choice, most mothers of very young children work: 40% full time, 19% part time, and another 8% who aren't working now plan to return to the work force within the next six months. Al-

though the days when most women “stayed home” to raise their children are past, it continues to be the nation’s moms – whether working outside the home or not – who bear the largest part of the day-to-day responsibilities of child-rearing: 64% of parents report that this is the case in their household. Twenty-five percent say mother and father share these duties equally, and only 10% indicate that dad does most of the basic caregiving each day.

Given the simple logistical facts of the workday situation in so many young family households, then, it’s hardly surprising *that about half of all parents say they end most days feeling that they spent less time than they wanted to with their young child* – either a *lot* less time (20%) or a little less time (27%). Given estimates of over 8,800,000 families who have children under age three, with a total of more than 10 million children of age zero to three, this suggests that *it’s likely that, each day, five million infants and toddlers have parents who personally feel that they don’t spend enough time with them*, including two million kids whose moms or dads say that they get *a lot less* time together than they want. There is no question that time is one of the top pressures of family life these days, and that parents are all too aware of this.

The time crunch is especially acute, of course, in families in which the mother is working at a paid job. Half of all parents in households with moms who work full time say the chief reason they may need to improve as parents is because they don’t spend as much quality time with their kids as they’d like.

THE EXPERIENCE OF YOUNG PARENTHOOD

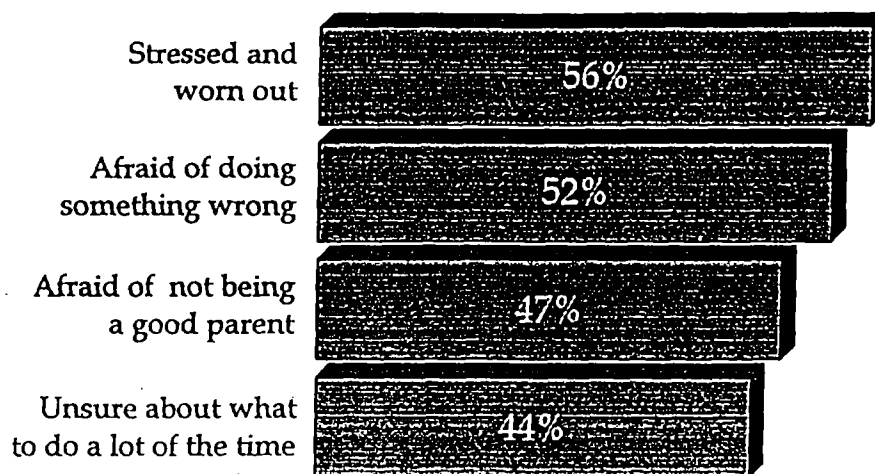
Parenthood, especially for those who are new to the experience, is both a time of deep joy and wonderment and a time of worry, uncertainty, and questioning.

As they think back and recount the array of feelings they experienced when they had their first child, parents say almost universally that they felt "in love" with their baby (96% indicate that this sentiment matches their own experience almost exactly or pretty closely) and happier than ever before (91%). They express, as well, a sense of amazement at their baby's changes and development (70%) and acknowledge the depth and intensity of the newly formed parent-child bond by explaining that they felt as if they couldn't bear to be apart from their baby when they first became parents (68%).

Along with the head-over-heels happiness and excitement of first-time parenthood, however, also come, for many young parents, new stresses, uncertainty about what to do, and a fear of making mistakes or of not measuring up as parents.

How Did You Feel When You First Became A Parent?

(% who say statements match their feelings exactly/pretty closely)



PREPARING FOR PARENTHOOD

Few parents of young children say they felt totally prepared for parenthood when they had their first child. Those who are the youngest, have the lowest income, or who are going it alone as single parents feel particularly unprepared for the daunting new role they've taken on.

Moms and dads approaching their first experience in parenting react in various ways. When it comes to gathering information or advice before their baby's birth, a handful (9%) say they think they "went overboard" in this type of preparation. A third of parents say they did a great deal or quite a bit (34%) to

seek information, a quarter did a moderate amount (27%), and about another quarter say they either did just a little or simply waited to see what it would be like (28%).

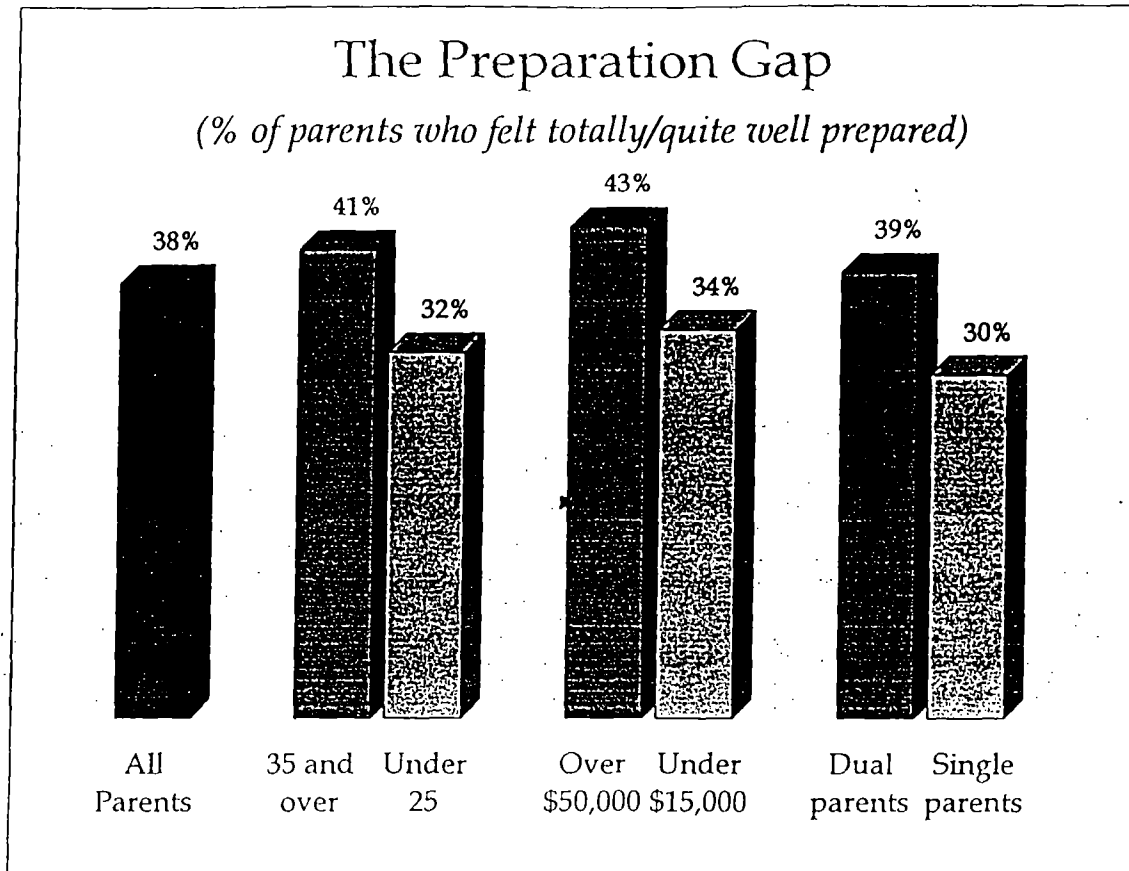
When it comes to how prepared they *felt* for the new experience of parenting once they actually had their first child, only about two in five parents assert that they were either totally prepared (12%) or quite well-prepared (26%) for the job at hand. One in four, on the other hand, report that they felt only slightly prepared (12%) or not really prepared at all (13%), while roughly one in three put themselves in the middle, saying they seemed to be pretty well-prepared (37%).

Perhaps equally important as gaining knowledge and information is having emotional support, and seven in 10 moms and dads say that as new parents they got about the right amount of this kind of support. Some say they actually got more than they really wanted (13%), but 16% say they didn't receive as much emotional support as they needed at the time.

Beneath the surface of these figures lie significant differences in terms of *which* parents felt more prepared and supported and which ones less so. Younger and lower-income parents are as likely to have felt only slightly or not really prepared for their first experience of caring for a child as they are to have felt totally or quite well-prepared.

In the same way, this insufficient preparation hits single parents hard, as they are particularly likely to be young and low-income. Compounding this problem is that single parents, along with low-income parents in general, are

especially prone to feel that they didn't get as much *emotional* support as they wanted when they were new parents.



Preparation improves the chances of a positive parenting experience. The importance of having sufficient information about babies and parenting before the baby's arrival is underscored by the differences between the first-time parenting experiences of those who felt well-prepared and those who did not. Parents who felt only slightly prepared or not really prepared at all are far more likely than are well-prepared parents to begin their lives as mothers or fathers feeling *stressed and worn out*: 59% say that this matches their own feelings *almost exactly*, compared to 31% of totally or quite well-prepared parents who feel this way. The same is true

of feeling *afraid of doing something wrong* (48% of less-prepare parents, 27% of well-prepared parents), *afraid of not being a good parent* (43% versus 23%), and feeling *unsure about what to do a lot of the time* (39% versus 18%).

WHERE PARENTS FIND INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

Essential to caring well for a young child is learning how to understand and respond to that child's needs, changes, and behaviors. Parents seem thirsty for information and advice in these regards.

Not all resources that young families typically turn to, however, provide the quantity or quality of information that parents need at present.

When parents of young children seek information or advice on kids and parenting, they tend to rely on informal networks, turning most frequently to their own families – two in five say they put in a call to mom (or their mother-in-law), and about the same proportion seek another relative's help – even in these days of geographic mobility and long distances between family members. Friends and neighbors also are a source of help for one in five parents of infants and toddlers.

Beyond the realm of family and friends, pediatricians are the professionals that parents consult most (15%) when they feel they need advice in their day-to-day life with their child. Day care providers and baby sitters, on the other hand, do *not* appear to be a significant resource for information, from parents' point of view; only 2% mention their child's caregiver as someone they usually turn to for help.

The news media are an important source of information about babies, toddlers, and parenting today, as nearly half of all parents of kids age zero to three indicate that they pay a great deal or quite a bit of attention to newspaper articles and news reports about issues related to early child development. As well, 36% of parents look for information in magazines, and 39% pick up literature in their pediatrician's office on a very or fairly regular basis.

PEDIATRICIANS AND PARENTS

Pediatricians have the potential to play an increased role in advising parents of young children and helping them better understand child development issues. Though 55% of parents say that their pediatrician discusses their child's *emotional, social, and intellectual* development – as opposed to his or her *physical* health and development – during every visit or most visits, a substantial 40% indicate that their child's doctor talks about these matters only on some visits, rarely, or never. It is these less easily observed or comprehended aspects of development about which parents say they know the least.

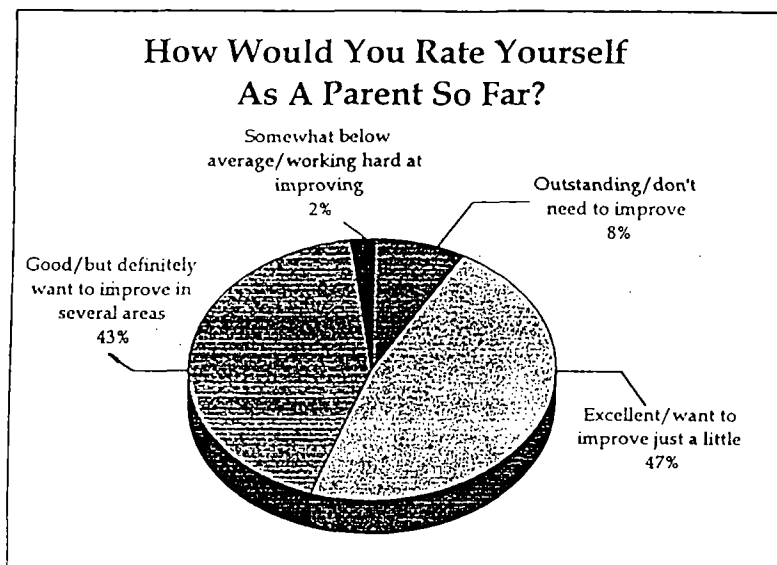
As a potential adjunct to advice and interaction with the pediatrician, the services of a child development expert would appeal to many parents: 65% say it would be a very important consideration to them if they were looking for a new doctor and found one who offered the services of a person whose job it is to get to know them and their child, answer questions, and provide guidance on what to expect in their child's development.

Parents are more likely to seek information very early in their child's life, rather than later. Whether it's looking for tips or articles on parenting in magazines or gathering literature from the pediatrician's office, it is parents of infants (age eight months or younger) who are the most likely to seek out such information. As

parents come to know their child and gain confidence in their own parenting abilities, they become less likely to look for such counsel. It is thus important to get such information to new – and expectant – parents as early as possible.

FACING THE CHALLENGES OF PARENTHOOD

Young parenthood is a time of questioning and learning as parents try to fulfill their parental obligations and live up to the very high expectations they have of themselves. While many parents display confidence in their abilities and think of themselves generally as good parents, they also reveal some uncertainty and concern about child development and parenting practices.



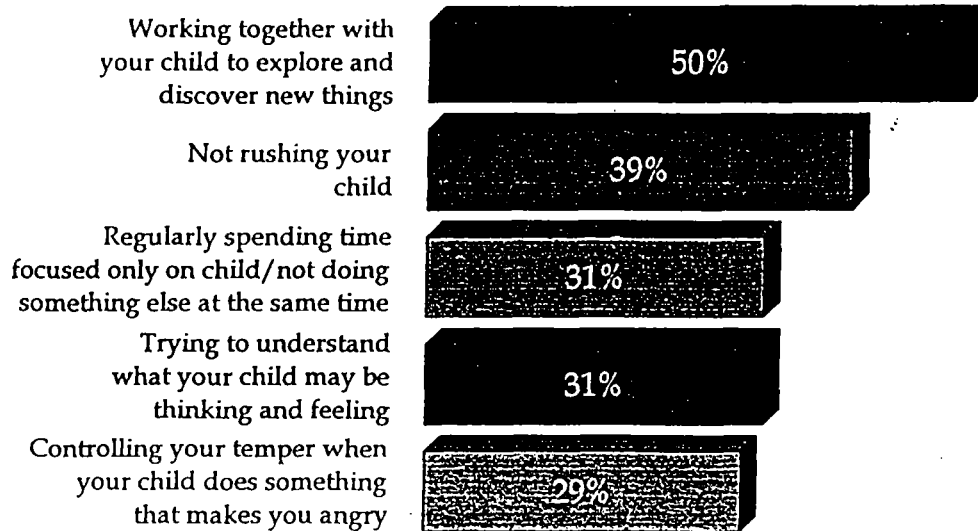
Though just a handful of parents of children age zero to three consider themselves to be an "outstanding" parent, with no need for improvement (8%),

most mothers and fathers feel good about themselves as parents, while also admitting that they could improve in some ways – either just a little (for the 47% who consider themselves "excellent") or in several areas (for the 43% who think of themselves as "good" parents). A few parents (2%) rate themselves as "somewhat below average" so far and say they're working hard at improving.

Similarly, when it comes to some of the specific parenting challenges they face, many parents feel good about how they're doing, although they do *not* give themselves straight "A"s. Parents give themselves the highest marks for one of the most exciting and gratifying aspects of parenting – working together with their child to explore and discover new things – and they are toughest on themselves when it comes to measuring their ability to control their temper when their child does something that makes them angry. Parents of young children are more likely to give themselves "B"s than "A"s for trying to understand their child's thoughts and feelings, and for regularly spending time when they're focused exclusively on their child and not doing something else at the same time. Patience with their youngster is a quality on which as many parents give themselves "A"s as give themselves "B"s.

How Would You Grade Yourself On . . .

(% of parents who give themselves an "A")



When it comes to knowing the most appropriate way to handle particularly puzzling or trying child behaviors, however – from a temper tantrum to a crying child late at night, from a fussy and irritable little one to a baby who's ready to play but can't verbalize what he wants to do -- parents tend more to feel "pretty" confident than "totally" confident that they know the most appropriate ways to deal with such situations.

For families with children age zero to three, two fundamental barriers stand in the way of better parenting. First, from parents' own point of view, time is an acute concern, with over a third saying one of the top reasons they may need to improve as parents is that they don't spend as much quality time with their child as

they'd like to (37%). Related to the time problem is some parents' concern that someone other than themselves or their spouse has more influence on their child (11%) – a significant concern, given that three in five households regularly entrust their child's care to another person. If that care provider is a family member, who may be more likely than a non-relative to be especially close and loving with the child, the level of parents' worry about influence is even greater.

A second, and critical, type of barrier to better parenting is the "information deficit": one in five parents, for example, say that they feel they need to improve as a parent because they find it hard to understand their child's feelings and needs (19%) or don't know how to handle difficult situations with their child (19%). One in 10 parents say that they lack confidence in their parenting skills overall.

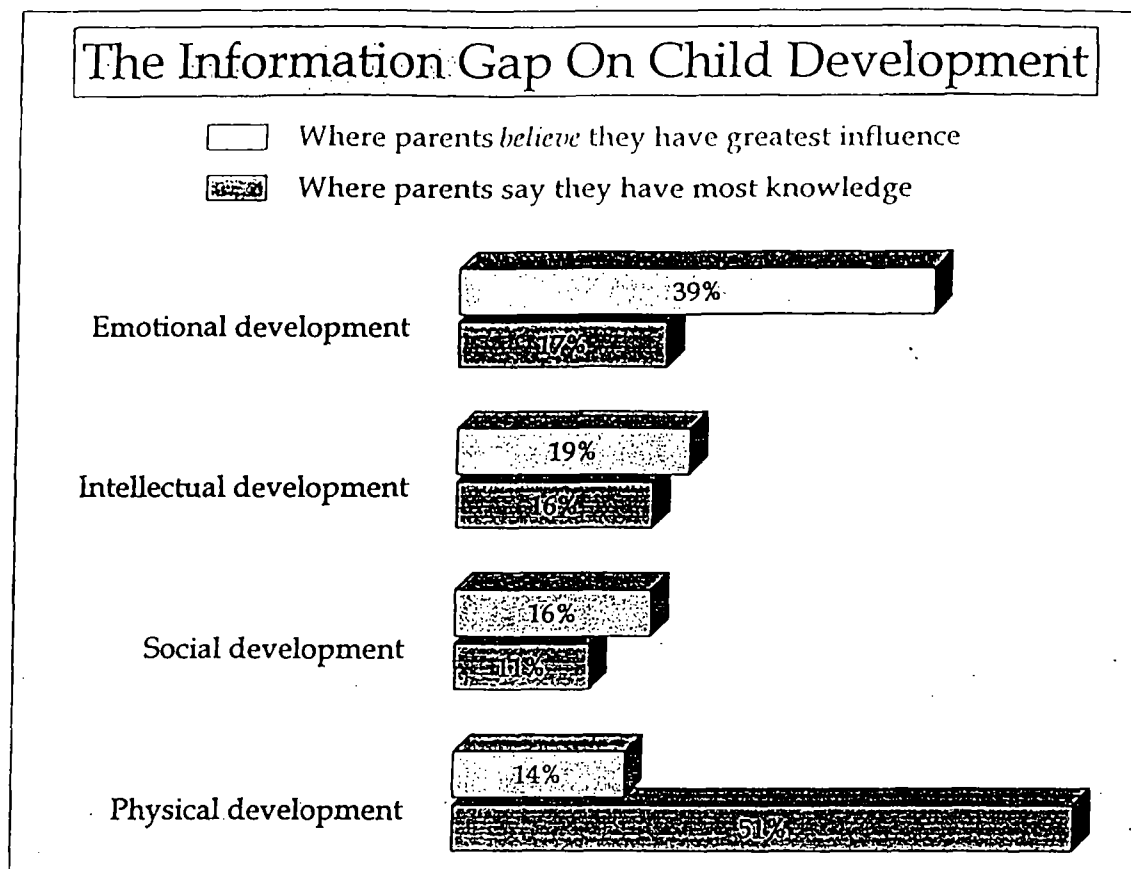
Indeed, life with infants and toddlers gives rise to many questions and concerns, and the questions that these parents articulate have much less to do with day-to-day physical care (*What do I do if my baby is sick?*) and more to do with the emotional, intellectual, and social development of their children.

In their own words, mothers and fathers ask a barrage of questions about what their child's emotional state means, how to prepare their child for school, how to establish an appropriate bed time and sleeping habits, how to deal with discipline issues, how to respond when kids fight or throw temper tantrums, and what's the best way to potty train their child.

PARENTS AND EARLY CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Parents know that they have an important influence on their infants' and toddlers' development, but they do not fully understand the connection between healthy child development and their own parenting practices.

The most observable developmental mileposts – those that are largely physical – are the ones that mothers and fathers feel most knowledgeable about. Well-informed though they may be in this regard, however, parents clearly lack information about the less tangible developmental domains; *indeed, parents report that they know the least about babies' and toddlers' emotional, social, and intellectual development.*



Despite this self-reported information gap, *parents believe they have the greatest influence on their child's emotional development (39%)* – more than twice as many as say their child's intellectual (19%) or social (16%) development is most susceptible to their sway – and the least influence on his or her physical changes and growth (14%).

In more specific terms, parents seem well-apprised of certain parenting concepts (such as the importance of spending quality time with their baby or toddler), but are less familiar with others (such as the importance of continuity of caregivers, or the fact that *quality* of stimulation for young children matters more than sheer *quantity*).

Some fundamental concepts that child development experts believe are important clearly are grasped by most parents, though with varying degrees of certainty. Best understood is that babies are learning from the moment they are born; 97% of all parents of zero- to three-year-olds say that they are sure this is true (87%) or think it's probably true (10%). Similarly, most (94%) correctly acknowledge that parents' *emotional* closeness with their baby can strongly influence that child's *intellectual* development (69% say they're sure it's true, 25% say it's probably true.) In addition, the idea that the things a child experiences before the age of three will greatly influence his or her ability to do well in school is correctly identified as true by 92%, though here parents begin to hedge their bets (54% say they're sure it's true, but 38% guess that it's *probably* true).

Parents Take A Child Development Quiz

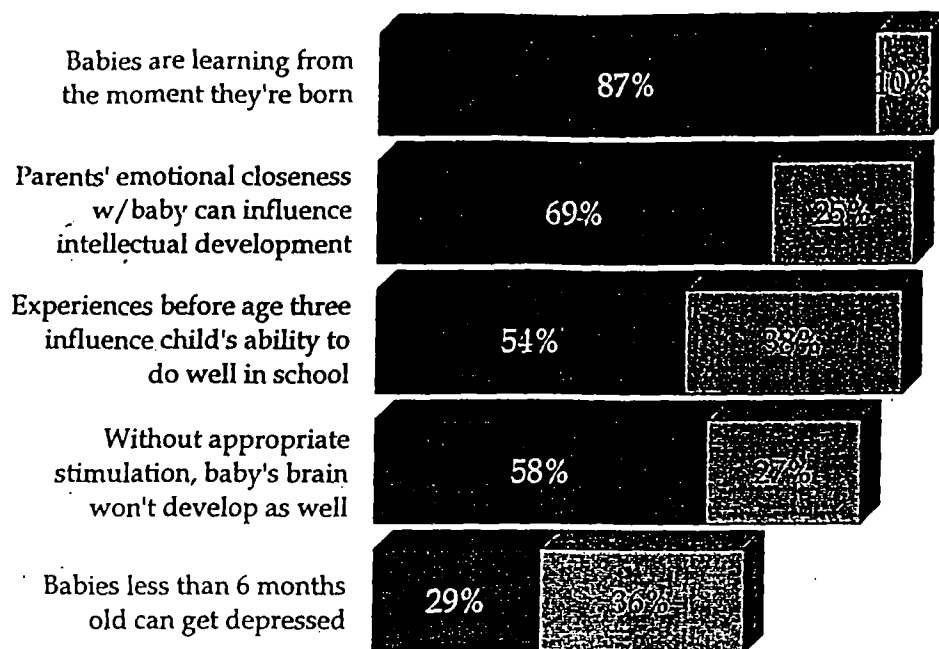
(% of parents who answer correctly)



Sure it's true



Think it's probably true



As both graphs illustrate, other concepts are less understood, whether phrased in their "true" or "false" configuration.

Parents Take A Child Development Quiz

(% of parents who answer correctly)

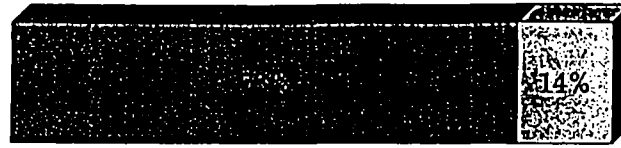


Sure it's false

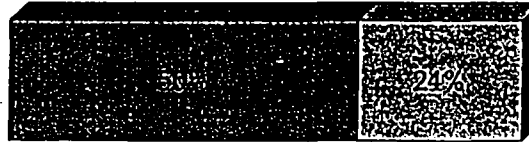


Think it's probably false

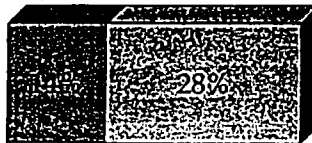
A baby can't communicate much until he or she is able to speak at least a few words



A baby's intelligence can't be increased or decreased by how parents interact with him/her



The more caregivers he has before age 3, the better a baby will be at adapting to change



The more stimulation a baby receives, the better off he or she is



Though understood less universally than the top three ideas, one key concept in brain development, specifically, appears to be comprehended by quite a few parents: more than four in five are sure that it's true (58%) or think it's probably true (27%) that if a baby does not receive appropriate stimulation – such as being read to, played with, or touched and held – his or her brain will not develop as well as the brain of a baby who *does* receive these kinds of stimulation. More unfamiliar to parents is the fact that babies less than six months old can get depressed; just three in ten parents say they are certain that this is true, though an additional 36% guess that this is *probably* true.

A large majority of parents (87%) correctly reject the assertion (73% with certainty) that a baby can't communicate much until he or she is able to speak at least a few words (a false statement). Only half say they're *sure* that it's untrue that parents' interactions with their baby do not play a part in increasing or decreasing that child's intelligence (another quarter take a correct guess on this item).

Two critical child development concepts are not well-understood by parents. First, less than half know that it is *not* true that the more caregivers a child has before age three, the better that child will be at adapting and coping with change – an absolutely essential message that must be communicated to parents, given the need in a majority of young families for non-parental caregivers.

Second, very few parents seem to recognize that it is *not* the case that the more stimulation a baby receives, the better off he or she will be. From an intellectual or emotional (or perhaps even social) development standpoint, this concept is an important one to explain to parents of young children. Parents have reported that they face significant time pressures but don't believe that they have a powerful influence on their child's intellectual growth, and thus may mistakenly think that *any* stimulation they can provide will be appropriate and healthy stimulation.

Information and clearly presented messages about early child development – from research on brain development (60% of parents assert that they'd be extremely or very interested in learning more about this subject) to advice on effective parenting practices to guidance on responding to the most challenging

child behaviors – clearly would be well-received by the audience of parents who have young children or of adults who are planning to start their families.

The survey results in their totality suggest that parents seem well aware of the general importance of the love and time they give their infants and toddlers, but want more information about exactly *how* to influence their children in positive ways. America's moms and dads also feel good about many aspects of being parents to the youngest children. Yet they recognize their ability to improve and display a genuine interest in doing so.

Indeed, the survey data reveal parents' desire to play the most positive role they can in their children's development. They want to understand how to prepare in advance for parenthood; where to turn for day-to-day information, especially when their babies are young; how to provide the best care for their children, even when they cannot always provide it exclusively themselves; how to recognize signals and cues to inform them about their children's development; how they can affect most positively a young and growing brain; and what specific strategies and techniques they can use to help practice better parenting and give their young children the best possible start in life.