



# Effective parenting capacity assessment: Key issues



NSW Department of  
Community Services

## Introduction

This Research to Practice Note has been developed to provide practitioners with an overview of the key issues associated with parenting capacity assessment.

It complements the Research to Practice Note, *Parenting capacity assessment: Improving decision-making*, both of which have been developed from the *Assessment of Parenting Capacity* (DoCS, 2005) literature review.

## Background

Parenting capacity refers to parents' ability to nurture their children, protect them from risk and enhance their developmental experiences.

It is integral to the work of child protection practitioners as assessments are used to inform decisions about whether to remove and/or restore children to the care of their parents.

Effective parenting capacity assessment rests on three key issues:

1. definitional clarity
2. an understanding of the problems that can occur in parenting
3. the quality of the parenting capacity assessment reports.

## Definitional clarity

Without clarity around what is to be assessed and how the findings should be interpreted, determining what constitutes acceptable parenting capacity can be difficult.

### What is parenting?

The purpose of parenting is to facilitate a child's optimal development within a safe environment.<sup>1</sup> It is a 'task' that includes a number of dimensions: sensitivity to a child's needs, social communication, emotional expressiveness and disciplinary control.<sup>2</sup> Parenting occurs within a relationship that is affected by a wide variety of factors. The interaction of these 'determining factors' in relation to increasing risk or acting as compensatory 'buffers' is crucial to an understanding of the parenting process.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to recognise that qualities seen as important to encourage in a child in one culture are likely to differ in another.

### What is competent parenting?

Competent parenting is about *adaptability* to the changing requirements and circumstances of the child.<sup>4</sup> To achieve this, parents need to be able to problem-solve and understand their child's capabilities. Adaptability is related to three underlying dimensions. These are:

- **perceptiveness** - a parent's awareness of their child, and what is happening around them, and the effects of their own behaviour on a situation
- **responsiveness** - the extent to which a parent connects with their child
- **flexibility** - the ability of a parent to respond in different ways according to the needs or demands of specific situations.

### What is 'parenting capacity'?

'Parenting capacity' is the ability to parent in a 'good enough' manner long term.<sup>5</sup> It is different from 'parenting ability' where an individual may be able to parent for a short period of time in specific circumstances but not have the capacity to parent effectively long term.

Parenting capacity varies at different points in time depending on the circumstances facing parents and their children.

### What is 'good enough' parenting?

Models of parenting generally refer to *optimal* parenting competence. 'Good enough' parenting, on the other hand, is a term generally used to describe the minimum amount of care needed so as not to cause harm to a child.

In other words, if a parent is faced by adversity (such as being single, poor or depressed) but the quality of parenting behaviour is still adequate, the outcome for the child should not be compromised. It is the quality of the immediate moment-to-moment behaviour of the parent towards the child that is the major influence on the child's wellbeing.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, although these conditions may be markers of difficulties in parenting among the general population, their presence in a particular case is not necessarily an indication of an inability to meet minimum parenting standards.

Inconsistent community standards, as to what constitutes acceptable behaviour, make it difficult to define and quantify minimum parenting standards and establish benchmarks.

## Problems that can occur in parenting

The capacity of parents to be adaptable can be affected by a wide range of factors for example, substance abuse, marital conflict, stress, mental health problems and learning difficulties. While none of these factors per se predict parenting capacity, they can make parents more vulnerable to reduced parenting capacity. The impact on parents' cognitions, attributions and capacity to empathise has been associated with increased risk for child maltreatment.

Lack of parental empathy is associated with poorer outcomes for children.vii Thus a key requirement of the parenting role is a parent's capacity to empathise with their child and set aside their own needs in order to meet those of their children.<sup>8</sup>

## Quality of parenting capacity assessment reports

Parenting capacity assessment reports are often the vehicle by which the findings of formal assessments are translated through court processes into permanent care plans for children. In many instances these reports are compiled by an outside assessor acting as an expert witness.

A number of concerns about the use of parental evaluations in child protection decisions have been identified, specifically:

- Contemporary parenting models focus on optimal rather than minimal parenting competence and for constructs such as warmth and nurturance, few behavioural indicators have been established.
- Constructs typically assessed by mental health professionals lack relevance to legal questions in child protection cases. Psychological tests assess intelligence, academic functioning and personality but are not designed to assess competence in caring for and interacting with children.
- In the absence of specific referral questions, professionals focus on general information already known or less pertinent to the case.
- Mental health professionals must convey the limitations of instruments they use to the judges.
- There is a lack of consensus on what should be included in parenting assessments.<sup>9</sup>

As parenting capacity assessments form the basis for child protection decision-making, the quality of the reports is crucial.

## Further reading

- *Assessment of Parenting Capacity*. Literature Review. NSW Department of Community Services, 2005. Copies are available on DoCS' intranet and internet – [www.community.nsw.gov.au](http://www.community.nsw.gov.au)

## Endnotes

- 1 Reder, P., Duncan, S. & Lucey, C. (2003) *Studies in the Assessment of Parenting*. London: Routledge.
- 2 Rutter, M. (1985). Resilience in the face of adversity. *British Journal of Psychiatry*. 147: 598-611.
- 3 Woodcock, J. (2003). The social work assessment of parenting: an exploration. *British Journal of Social Work*. 33: 87-106.
- 4 Azar, S.T. & Cote, L.R. (2002). Sociocultural issues in the evaluation of the needs of children in custody decisionmaking: What do our current frameworks for evaluating parenting practices have to offer? *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*. 25: 193-217.
- 5 Conley, C. (2003). A review of Parenting Capacity Assessment Reports. *OACAS Journal*. 47(3): 16-22.
- 6 Scott, S. (1998). Intensive interventions to improve parenting. *Archives of Disease in Childhood*. 79(1): 90-93.
- 7 Kilpatrick, K. (2004). *The Parent Empathy Project*. Presentation for NSW Department of Community Services, Glebe, 30 September 2004.
- 8 Donald, T. & Jureidini, J. (2004). Parenting Capacity. *Child Abuse Review*. 13: 5-17.
- 9 Budd, K.S. & Holdsworth, M.J. (1996). Issues in clinical assessment of minimal parenting competence. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*. 25: 1-14

*The DoCS Research to Practice program aims to promote and inform evidence-based policy and practice in community services.*

### Produced by

Centre for Parenting and Research  
NSW Department of Community Services  
4-6 Cavill Avenue  
Ashfield NSW 2131  
02 9716 2222

[www.community.nsw.gov.au](http://www.community.nsw.gov.au)  
[researchtopractice@community.nsw.gov.au](mailto:researchtopractice@community.nsw.gov.au)

ISBN 0 7310 4387 1