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## Hello Baby, Hello Stress

### Introduction and Overview

In his novel *How to Be Good* (2001), Nick Hornby describes a mother of two who is struggling to keep her family together. Although the emphasis of the novel is on Katie's dissolving marriage, Hornby also offers the following incisive passage as evidence of Katie's insights about her deteriorating relationships with her children: "It hurts me and worries me to say it, but I have become less fond of Tom and Molly. I have been aware of this for a while, and have always presumed that this was perfectly normal—how could I feel the same about this quiet, occasionally surly boy as I did about his smiling, miraculous, two-year-old counterpart? But now I'm not so sure. Now I'm beginning to wonder whether he should not, in fact, be more lovable than he is, and whether the shortfall in lovability is due to something unattractive in him, or something unmaternal in me" (p. 155).

There is more to Katie's story. The novel makes clear that her occasionally hostile feelings toward her children go well beyond a mere lack of fondness. At the same time, this passage encapsulates the important aspects of what I will define and describe in this book as *parenting stress*. Parenting stress includes subjective experiences of distress such as emotional pain and anxiety. It also includes parents' thoughts, beliefs, and attributions—expectations about what is "normal," per-

ceived lack of control and violations of those expectations, and self-doubt. And it includes roles for parents and children as contributing members of enduring and emotionally powerful relationships. However, the other message of Hornby's novel that is not captured by this brief passage is that the struggle of facing family difficulties large and small is worthwhile, and there is happiness in succeeding.

Parenthood, stress, and joy are distinct concepts that at the same time are connected in the experiences of parents around the world. As behavioral models, teachers, socializing agents, and providers for children's many fundamental and idiosyncratic needs, parents are critical to the health and development of their children. Parenthood and "good" parenting can mean very different things to different people, but nearly everyone can agree on this: Parenting is hard work, it is often stressful, and success (in the moment, over several days, or over years) requires adaptation. At the very least, successful parenting involves rearing children who themselves rear children. However, this survival goal is only one of the many goals of parenthood. We strive for many kinds of success for our children, including self-control, self-determination, and other psychological attainments. To reach these goals, our bodies and our cultures have put in place the complex machinery that maximizes the likelihood that we will be successful—no matter what the environment may throw at us.

The same biological and psychological mechanisms that have evolved to maximize our chances of survival as a species—vigilance, emotional reactivity, and physiological arousal, to name a few—can put some parents at risk for distress in their roles as caregivers. Parenting stress can create or exacerbate physical and psychological vulnerabilities, whereby the distress that arises from the day-to-day strain of caregiving becomes a crucial aspect of the mental health and functioning of parents and children themselves, and the functioning of their relationships with each other. The connection between more extreme but rare forms of parenting stress and adults' problems in functioning is only part of the story. In fact, modestly to moderately stressful experiences in parenthood are very common. Yet another part of the story is about individual differences between parents in the subjective experiences they have, in the way in which parents respond to and cope

with parenting stress, and in the way children are affected by parenting stress and parental behavior.

The causes and effects of parenting stress are usually referred to in this book as parenting stress *mechanisms* or *processes*. These can be measured at different levels, ranging from the physiological activity of organ systems within a single individual to population-wide rates of child abuse for a community, state, or nation. I emphasize psychological parenting stress and coping mechanisms at the level of the individual parent and child, and links between the individuals and their relationships with each other, other family members, and the community and broader culture. Although it is not highlighted, the role of biological factors also is described.

## Defining Parenting Stress

What is parenting stress?

Evelyn could tell you. She is a single mother of three-year-old identical twins. Although to outsiders the twin boys seem virtually indistinguishable, they are two very different children to Evelyn. One misbehaves constantly and seems to intentionally push her buttons, while his brother is almost always compliant. Although she has ambivalent feelings about using physical punishment, her more troublesome son gets spanked several times a week, when he hurts his brother or when he persists in dangerous behavior like trying to push over a dresser or crawling beneath their neighbor's truck. By comparison, she has rarely even thought of spanking his brother, who usually needs little more than a frown and mild scolding to stop misbehaving. Evelyn is a busy working mother, and although she enjoys being a parent at times, she is usually exhausted and frustrated. She is always behind at work, and feels badly about not spending more time with her children. She also feels guilty about the growing disparity in her relationships with her sons. On one occasion that she will never forget, she bruised her son's arms by grabbing him and shaking him. Sometimes, she finds herself becoming so livid that she fears she will one day completely lose control.

Bo could also tell you a thing or two about parenting stress. He is

a father of three school-age children. His job involves operating heavy machinery at locations that keep him away from home for up to two weeks at a time, with rest periods at home from three to five days between new locations. His wife always wanted to be at home with the children while they were growing up, but although Bo's job pays pretty well, she must work part-time for them to make ends meet. Bo enjoys fatherhood, but worries every day about the possible negative effects of his work schedule on his children and marriage, especially when he is away from his family. There is not much relief during his rest periods though. His weeklong stints at home have made him realize how difficult and tedious daily life with three children can be. Their seemingly constant demands for his attention tire him out and annoy him nearly every day. He is particularly concerned about his youngest child, who is doing very poorly at school and has been tested for a learning disability. Although Bo wants to be at home with his family, when he is there he finds himself wanting to go back to work within a day or so. In addition, he and his wife argue when he is at home. She needs time to herself after he has been away for a week or two, but he resists because he also wants to get out of the house. Their whole situation has put a very serious strain on their marriage.

Evelyn and Bo are only two parents, but their experiences are like those of many others. Parents face a multitude of different circumstances. Some parents are wealthy and some are poor; some have help, and some are on their own. Yet all of them experience parenting stress to some extent at one time or another, and some are chronically distressed.

Scientists have known for decades that the well-being of adults and children alike is linked to the kinds and degrees of stressful circumstances that they face in their daily lives. Those who experience more stressful events are more likely to suffer from depression and other problems in mental and physical health (Brown and Harris, 1989; Goodyer, 1990). We also are coming to realize that stress in the parenting role is distinct from the stress arising from other roles and experiences—from the workplace, unfortunate events or experiences, and interpersonal relationships with other family members and friends. That is, stress is probably specific to particular roles.

It is likely that parenting stress more strongly affects parenting

behavior and children's development than does stress in other domains of life, such as work-related stress (Creasey and Reese, 1996; Quittner, Glueckauf, and Jackson, 1990). This is exemplified in two distinct studies of families facing multiple difficulties and problems. In one study that followed the development of a group of children (some who had chronic illnesses), parenting stress was the strongest predictor of children's emotional and behavioral problems at four years of age (Goldberg et al., 1997). In another, researchers studied a group of homeless families who were at risk for problems in mental and physical health due to the many sources of stress that they faced in their daily lives (Gorzka, 1999). Among these families, it was those parents with the highest levels of parenting stress that had children with the highest levels of problems in their cognitive and social development (Danseco and Holden, 1998). Parenting stress may be particularly powerful as a cause and consequence of the variation that is found in parenting behaviors and children's outcomes across different families. However, stress in the parenting role is not completely independent from stress in other roles and from other experiences; there is likely to be overlap or spillover in the stress that we experience in these different roles (Barnett, Marshall, and Singer, 1992; Creasey and Reese, 1996).

A core feature in any theory of parenting stress is the idea of a balancing act between the parent's perceptions of the demands of this role and access to available resources for meeting these demands. Indeed, this balance between demands and resources is central to most theories of human stress and coping (Hobfoll, 1998; Lazarus, 1999). Accordingly, parenting stress arises when the parent's expectations about the resources needed to meet the demands of parenting are not matched by available resources (Goldstein, 1995).

As will be explored in this chapter, the *demands* of parenting are many and varied, and involve adapting to the child's unique attributes as well as the social role of parenthood. The demands include meeting children's needs for survival like feeding, sheltering, and protection, but also include psychological demands for attention, affection, and help in controlling or regulating emotions. Parents' perceptions of their children's behaviors (including attributions about why the child is behaving in a particular way), and perceptions of their own competence as parents, are also critical in most theories (Mash and Johnston,

1990). *Resources* for parents are similarly diverse, and include a host of mental and physical factors such as adequate protection for survival (e.g., sufficient housing, food, and income), knowledge, feelings of competence, and instrumental and emotional support from others (Deater-Deckard and Scarr, 1996). Parenting stress can and does arise for parents who in absolute terms have everything they should need to live a life free of stress, such as adequate income, housing, and social resources. Certainly, individual differences in parenting stress arise in part due to concrete, absolute differences between parents in access to these resources. However, parenting stress also has much to do with the subjective experience of childrearing. One parent's "overactive, demanding" child may be another parent's "energetic, assertive" child.

Much of the research on parenting stress has focused on families seeking help from mental health professionals for such problems as parental depression or child attention deficits. However, there also are many studies that have examined families selected from the broader communities in which they live. All parents, regardless of their mental health or social and economic resources, experience parenting stress to some degree. Furthermore, the mundane day-in, day-out hassles of parenting contribute just as much, if not more, to parenting stress as do major stressors such as serious mental or physical health problems, divorce, or sudden loss of income (Creasey and Reese, 1996; Crnic and Greenberg, 1990; Crnic and Low, 2002).

Parenting stress can be defined succinctly as *a set of processes that lead to aversive psychological and physiological reactions arising from attempts to adapt to the demands of parenthood*. This often is experienced as negative feelings and beliefs toward and about the self and the child. By definition, these negative feelings arise directly from the parenting role. Although helpful in its precision, this simple definition should not detract from the fact that parenting stress involves a broad set of complex, dynamic processes linking the child and her behaviors, perceived demands of parenting, parenting resources, physiological reaction to the demands of parenting, qualities of the parent's relationships with the child and other family members, and links with other people and institutions outside of the home. In addition, as I describe throughout this book, the stress process also is about coping—successful adaptation to the demands of being a parent. For many, the de-

mands are manageable, and although the job of parenthood may be hard at times, it is also very rewarding. Even in families that face very serious and chronic difficulties such as child or parent illness, many if not most parents adjust to these challenges successfully. These experiences of meeting challenges and coping with stress are critical to the development of resiliency in the face of severe adversity when it occurs, for parents and children alike (Rutter, 1987).

### **Causes and Effects: Theories of Parenting Stress**

Although parenting stress has been conceptualized in a number of ways (e.g., Abidin, 1992; Belsky, 1984; Crnic and Low, 2002; Webster-Stratton, 1990), there are two predominant approaches to assessing and testing its causes and effects. These include what I call parent-child-relationship (*P-C-R*) theory, and daily hassles theory. These are not opposing or competing theories, but instead are alternative and complementary perspectives about the nature of parenting stress, its causes, and its consequences.

#### **Parent-Child-Relationship (P-C-R) Stress**

The most widely tested theory of parenting stress posits three separate components: a “parent” domain (*P* = those aspects of parenting stress that arise from within the parent), a “child” domain (*C* = those aspects of parenting stress that arise from the child’s behavior), and a “parent-child relationship” domain (*R* = those aspects of parenting stress that arise within the parent-child relationship). According to P-C-R theory, elevations in parent-, child-, and relationship-domain stress will be found in families in which parenting stress is high, and problems in parenting and children’s development will be more prevalent (Abidin, 1990; 1992; 1995).

Parent domain stress is most strongly associated with problems in the parent’s own functioning (e.g., depression, anxiety), child domain stress is most strongly linked with attributes of the child (e.g., behavioral problems), and the parent-child dysfunction domain is tied primarily to the degree of conflict in the parent-child relationship (Bendell, Stone, Field, and Goldstein, 1989; Eyberg, Boggs, and Rodriguez,

1992). These three domains of parenting stress, in turn, cause decrements or deteriorations in many aspects of the quality and effectiveness of parenting behavior. These could include decreases in expressions of warmth and affection, increases in harsh methods of discipline and expressions of hostility toward the child, less consistency in parenting behavior, or complete withdrawal from the parenting role. In turn, these deteriorations in the quality of parenting (in the most extreme instances, defined as child maltreatment and abuse) promote further increases in child emotional and behavioral problems, such as aggression, noncompliance, anxiety, and chronic sadness.

P-C-R theory predicts that there are *bi-directional* parent effects on the child, and child effects on the parent. Accordingly, if a child's emotional and behavioral difficulties increase over time, parenting stress is likely to increase, the result being a promulgation of problems in parenting and child well-being. At the same time, the parent's own difficulties in mental health and functioning (e.g., depression, anxiety, substance abuse) can lead to problems in parenting and resulting increases in child emotional and behavioral problems, which in turn can further increase levels of parenting stress. Although this parenting stress mechanism unfolds over time and involves both the parent and the child, the adult's stress reaction to the demands of parenting is a key causal factor that propels the process forward. Accordingly, as parenting stress increases, the quality of parenting will deteriorate and the child's emotional and behavioral problems will increase. As parenting stress decreases, parenting will improve and so will the child's social-emotional well-being.

The results from many studies testing various mechanisms included in P-C-R theory are described in more detail in subsequent chapters, although a general comment regarding the utility of this theory is worth noting here. P-C-R theory has received strong support, based on many studies conducted over the past several decades. At the same time, this broad conclusion is based on a huge research literature that consists almost entirely of correlational studies (as opposed to experiments) in which parents' self-reports often serve as the sole source of data. More research is needed that uses experimental designs and multiple sources of data collected at multiple levels of measurement including partners' reports, observations, and assessments of the biolog-

ical components (i.e., psychophysiology) of the stress response (Deater-Deckard, 1998).

### Daily Hassles (DH) Theory

Most of the research on parenting stress focuses on the consequences of stressful circumstances or life events such as child illness or economic hardship (Webster-Stratton, 1990). In the majority of studies that have invoked or tested P-C-R theory, researchers have relied on samples of parents or children who have been diagnosed with emotional or behavioral disorders (e.g., depression, conduct disorder). However, there is a critical distinction between the ideas of parenting stress as *disorder* and parenting stress as *typical* or normal. The factors that can lead some parents to become so distressed that they become depressed or chronically anxious are likely to be the same factors that account for typical differences between parents that are found in the wider population of adults who are not suffering from emotional or behavioral disorders. It is interesting that the most widely used measure of parenting stress (*Parenting Stress Index*; Abidin, 1990) is almost always used in studies of clinically referred parents (e.g., depressed mothers), although this instrument was developed using large community samples of parents and children—most of whom were not experiencing serious problems in mental health or functioning.

Understanding how parenting stress develops over time, how it influences parenting and child development, and how it affects the parent's psychological and physical health requires consideration of the typical stress that arises for most parents on a daily or weekly basis. This is the thrust of daily hassles theory, and what makes it distinct from the more general P-C-R theory (Crnic and Greenberg, 1990; Crnic and Low, 2002). Parents must learn to cope with the day-to-day stressors of child rearing. Adaptation is part of the job, and it is so important to family and child functioning that it is arguably tantamount to the very definition of success in parenting. Thinking of parenting stress only as an indication of mental illness or pathology in the family ignores what we already know from decades of psychological research. Parenting stress occurs nearly every day. Thankfully, for most parents, the daily doses of stress are usually small. However, when coping is in-

effective, the effects of minor daily stressors on the parent and child can become persistent and powerful.

Researchers who study parenting and child development have come to recognize the importance of these daily sources of parenting stress. As a result, there is a growing research literature focusing on daily stress and its impact on the family system (Crnic and Greenberg, 1990; Crnic and Low, 2002). Daily hassles theory does not contradict P-C-R theory; it complements and extends those ideas by helping to explain typical parenting stress as it occurs for most parents. This work has shown that the parenting stress that occurs most frequently and that may have the greatest impact on parenting and children's development is the broad array of daily hassles.

Daily parenting hassles are not major stressors when considered in isolation, as compared to divorce or loss of employment. Instead, these are minor stressful events that occur in most families, sometimes daily, and their effects can build over time. These include the typical stress that arises when having to deal with a child's minor misbehavior or problems, when carrying out the many mundane tasks of childcare, and when navigating the complicated and usually conflicting schedules of work and family life. This idea of low-level, chronic parenting stress stems from earlier work demonstrating a similar pattern of results for stress and adult psychological health. Thus, for most adults, it is the accumulation of minor stressful events that arise from day-to-day existence that may matter most in the prediction of problems in mental health and well-being (Kohn, 1996).

At the same time, parenting stress must be distinguished from daily annoyances experienced by *all* parents. In order for daily hassles truly to be part of a parenting stress process (and not merely annoying), their effects must be serious in their more extreme forms and must create a potential threat to the parent's identity or role (Wheaton, 1996). This distinction between annoying and stress-inducing hassles is complex, when you consider that the features of a daily hassle may mean very different things to different parents. For example, consider the common situation of a child's frequent unwillingness to wear what her mother wants her to wear. To one mother, this behavior may be seen as a sign of her daughter's stubbornness and strongly held personal pref-