

# Social Support and Its Effect on Parenting Behavior: A Review

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**Abstract :** It has been repeatedly reported that the quality and quantity of relationships with other people moderate responses to stress and influence health and adjustment. This evidence has stimulated research on the characteristics of social support. In this review, the definition of social support for parents will be discussed. This study also will connect the concept of social support with family theories such as the human ecology theory and the developmental contextualism. The findings from previous studies will be summarized to examine the effects of social support on parenting and to understand the social support within a cultural context.

**Key Words :** social support, quality of parenting, cultural context

The interest on social support has been increased since Cassel, Cobb, Caplan and Killilea published the results of their research on social support in 1976. Over the past few decades, many studies have reported that the quality and quantity of relationships with other people moderate responses to stress and influence health and adjustment (Choi, 1997; Suarez & Baker, 1997; Singer et al. 1996). Social support and family researchers have documented many links between the supportive elements within family relationships and important personal outcomes such as psychological adjustment.

According to McCurdy (2001), social support is one of the important factors for forming parenting attitude and behavior. That is, the perceived social

support of mothers from husbands or friends has strong influence on their parenting. The social network may provide information related to supportive parenting for mothers to understand children's characteristics clearly, and to deal with their children appropriately. If mothers receive some material support on parenting or understanding and encouragement about the difficulty of parenting from the social network, the parenting related stress might be reduced so that mothers perform better quality parenting and their satisfaction as parents may be increased.

Many of the researchers have agreed that the social support concept is multidimensional in nature and the effect of supportive relationships on personal outcomes is complex (Pierce et al., 1996).

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In this review, it will be discussed what is social support for parents and tried to connect the concept of social support with family theories such as the human ecology theory and the developmental contextualism. In addition, the effects of the defined social support on parenting behavior and social support within a cultural context will be examined based on the findings from previous studies. At the end of the review, some implications for research and practice will be presented.

## **I. Background Theories**

### **1. Human Ecology Theory**

Human ecology involves the relationships of humans with the natural physical-biological environment, human built environment, and social-cultural environment (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). The family ecosystem is the basic component system of human ecology, and the family is the most fundamental human organization in this theory.

The family is the microsystem where individual and family needs, values, and goals are represented through dynamic processes such as communication, decision making, and resource management. The family exists in space and time and it transforms energy in the form of resources and information in order to adapt to its various environments. According to the human ecology theory, the quality of life of individuals and families is interdependent with their environments.

In this review, a part of the family ecosystem, the social-cultural environment, will be examined. The social-cultural environment of a family

ecosystem includes the presence of other human beings(e.g., neighbors), abstract cultural constructions(e.g., cultural values, patterns, and norms), and social and economic institutions(e.g., social-regulatory system, agricultural-industrial system, and market economy) (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993).

Social support and its cultural context are parts of the family's social-cultural environment. This study focuses on examining the interdependence between the family (parents and children) and the social-cultural environments of a family ecosystem (social support).

### **2. Developmental Contextualism**

Developmental contextualism stresses that bidirectional relations exist among the multiple levels of organization involved in human life (e.g., biology, psychology, social groups, and culture) (Lerner et al., 1995). Within developmental contextualism, a changing configuration of relationships constitutes the basis of human life (behavior and development).

According to Lerner et al. (1995), the study of children and their parents became increasingly "contextualized". They argue that this focus has led to the study of the bidirectional relations between the family and the other social settings within which children and parents function. It includes the work place, the day care, and the formal and the informal educational and recreational settings in a neighborhood or a community.

Lerner's model shows the idea that both parents and child are embedded in a broader social network and that each person has reciprocal relations with this network. All of these networks

of relations are embedded within a particular community, society, and culture. Also, all of these relations are continuously changing across time and history. His model also indicates that events in settings lying far beyond the child-parent relationship can influence it. For instance, the quality of the parent-child relationship can be influenced by community's resources for child care during parent's working hours, social programs available in a society supporting day care, and the cultural values regarding families who place their children in daycare.

In this review, parts of the relationships among child, parent, social network, and marriage network will be examined because social support includes social and marriage networks. Developmental contextualism is added as one of the background theories because it emphasizes the relation between the individual and his or her context.

## **II. Concepts and Measures of Social Support**

Social support basically refers to the resources provided by an individual's interpersonal ties. Tan (1994) indicates that the concept of social support has been operationally defined and measured in a variety of ways. Many researchers have proposed that social support is a multidimensional concept (Pierce et al., 1996; Tan, 1994).

Some investigators have classified the various social support concepts into either structural or functional components of social support (Tan, 1994). On the other hand, Barrera (1986) attempted to organize the concepts and their

operationalizations into three broad categories: social embeddedness, perceived social support, and enacted support.

### **1. Social Embeddedness**

It refers to an individual's connectedness to other individuals. Measures of social embeddedness are generally considered structural measures which basically describe the existence of relationships and focus on the objective or quantitative dimensions of social support. Measures of social embeddedness include the use of indicators of social ties (e.g., marital status, contacts with friends, number of supporters, etc.) or the use of social network analysis. The early studies of social support described a person's social relationships with individuals (family, friends, relatives) and community organizations (service organizations, clubs, voluntary associations, churches, cultural groups) on parameters such as size, frequency, density, homogeneity, and reciprocity (Tan, 1994).

### **2. Perceived Social Support**

It refers to the "cognitive appraisal of being reliably connected to others" (Barrera, 1986, p. 416). Measures of this concept generally include assessing the perceived availability and adequacy of interpersonal relationships and/or of specific supportive functions, or of satisfaction with support. These measures and other more subjective and qualitative measures are categorized by many investigators as the functional measure of social support (Tan, 1994).

### **3. Enacted Support**

It refers to the behavioral descriptions of support or supportive actions performed by others for an individual (Barrera, 1986). Measures of enacted social support assess what individuals actually do when they render support. Many such measures could be classified under the functional component of support (Tan, 1994).

According to Barrera (1986), measures of the three social support concepts have been found to be only mildly related to each other. Many other researchers have also reported low correlation between structural and functional measures of social support (Tan, 1994). Tan (1994) indicates that the quality of one's supportive network appeared to be a more important factor than the quantitative or structural aspects of social support in buffering individuals from stress.

Wills (1987) mentions that most individuals seek help or use some type of support primarily from informal social networks including spouses, friends, and family for coping with major life events rather than from strangers or professionals. Another point is that the majority of functional support may come from only one or a few resources, although there is not enough evidence on the relative contribution of support functions from different sources.

### **III. Functions of Social Support**

According to Tan (1994), several stress-moderating functions provided by social support have been found. They include:

“helping individuals organize their skills and resources for dealing with the stressors, helping them bear the burden of the stress, and providing emotional support, material goods and other tangible resources, and information and guidance” (p.16).

Choi (1997) believes that social support is viewed as a complex process unfolding in a person - environment interactional context. He indicates that this process involves transactions between individuals and their social networks, for example, providing and receiving tangible (material) or intangible (emotional, informational, or cognitive guidance) support.

On the other hand, Wills (1987) categorized the supportive functions of social support into four types: esteem support, informational support, motivational support, and instrumental support.

#### **1. Esteem Support**

It is also termed emotional or confident support by other investigators. It refers to letting individuals know they are accepted and valued for their own worth as persons. Tan (1994) indicates that esteem support may be manifested through listening sympathetically to one's concerns or problems, understanding the situation, and sharing personal experiences.

#### **2. Informational Support**

It refers to providing help with problem definition and clarification, information and advice about possible alternatives, decisions and courses of action.

### **3. Motivational Support**

It refers to providing encouragement, reinforcement of positive expectations, and reassurance that things will improve.

### **4. Instrumental Support**

It refers to helping with material aids for or assistance with instrumental tasks such as child care, housekeeping, or transportation.

## **IV. Social Support and Parenting Behavior**

Generally, social support researchers have agreed that the presence of a strong social support has been linked with psychological well-being, as well as reduced stress. According to Choi (1997), perceived support promotes physical and psychological well-being, whether or not this perception is accurate.

Burke et al. (1998) argue that it is very important for children's well-being within the family that the parent have satisfactory, functional, and supportive family and peer relationships. McLoyd et al. (1994) indicate that social support makes mothers feel less isolated and overwhelmed by their parenting situation and more satisfied with their children. According to the results of Kwack's study (2000), Korean mothers who have many helpers related to child-rearing and receive the emotional support and child-rearing information from the helpers satisfied with the parenting roles.

Suarez and Baker (1997) study the role of social

support (marital adjustment, spousal support, and global support) in the relationship between child externalizing behavior problems and mothers' and fathers' well-being. They test three models for understanding the role of support: main effect, moderating or buffering effects, and mediating effects. A direct or main effect is obtained when support is beneficial, regardless of the level of the stressor. A buffering or moderating effect is manifested when support is most beneficial in the context of a high stressor. On the other hand, a mediating effect is obtained when support is the intervening variable between the stressor and the outcome. For instance, child behavior would have an effect on parental functioning through its effect on support dimensions.

The result indicates that spousal support emerged as the most important resource variable for their sample of families. There was a main effect of spousal support on all outcome variables for parents. Moreover, spousal support moderated, or buffered, the relationship between child externalizing behavior and parental outcome.

Marital adjustment had only buffering effects on parental stress. However, they found no support for the main, buffering, or mediating effects of global social support on any measure of parent effect. They believe that it has resulted from their measure of support and the nature of their sample. They indicate that social support serves as a secondary resource to spousal support and becomes more important when spousal support is lacking. They also mention that global social support may play a greater role in lower socioeconomic status families.

Simons et al. (1997) document that exposure to

negative life events and low access to social support are important determinants of psychological distress. According to them, most parenting models assume that life stress and access to social support influence quality of parenting through their effect on emotional well-being. Some models posit a direct effect from social support to parenting. They indicate that this may be true for spouse support, but that support from friends and relatives only influences parenting indirectly through its effect on emotional well-being. They found that social support contributes indirectly to quality of parenting by mediating a portion of the effect of community social disorganization on depressed mood.

Singer et al. (1996) found that social support is most salient under the most stressful conditions. It is consistent with the buffering hypothesis. Mothers' distress was greater when infant illness or very low birthweight (VLBW) was accompanied by perceived low social support. They concluded that the perceived availability of support plays a protective role in preventing the pathologic effects of negative events. They also found that high spousal or partner support mitigated maternal psychological distress for mothers with a lower sense of parenting competence.

Simons and Johnson (1996) view spouse support as social support provided by a spouse. According to them, spouse support refers to warmth, encouragement, and assistance provided by the partner. They illustrate a model of the direct, indirect, and moderating influences of social network and marital support on quality of parenting (see Figure 1).

## **1. Spouse Support and Quality of Parenting**

### **1) Direct Effects (Arrow F)**

There is evidence that spouse support directly affects parenting (Simons et al, 1994). A supportive spouse is likely to provide advice and assistance to the other spouse regarding the tasks and responsibilities of parenting (Simons & Johnson, 1996).

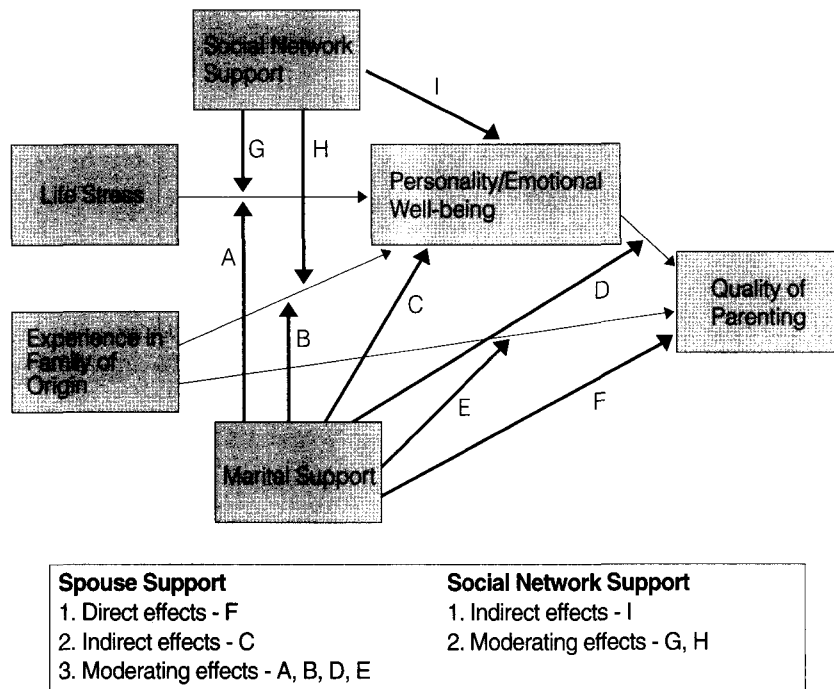
### **2) Indirect Effects (Arrow C)**

There is evidence that spouse support affects quality of parenting indirectly through its influence on the other spouse's emotional well-being (Simons & Johnson, 1996). Belsky (1984) also argues that marital support influences quality of parenting through its effect on psychological well-being.

### **3) Moderating Effects (Arrows A, B, D, and E)**

Simons and Johnson (1996) suggest that spouse support might be expected to operate as a protective factor that buffers parenting against the various potentially disruptive influences. Arrow A shows that a marital partner will be less likely to become emotionally distressed in the face of stressful events when the other partner is a source of understanding, advice, and assistance. Spouse support also serves to buffer the disruptive effects of life stress by reducing the effects of emotional stress on quality of parenting (Arrow D).

Spouse support may moderate the effect of ineffective parenting that their mates learned in their families of origin on parenting practice (Arrow E). For example, Quinton & Rutter (1988)



<Figure 1> Model of the direct, indirect, and moderating influences of social network and marital support on quality of parenting. (Source: Simons & Johnson, 1996, p.274).

found that girls raised in a deprived environment are less likely to engage in inept parenting if they have a supportive mate. A supportive spouse may protect from poor parenting by reducing the likelihood of an adult pattern of antisocial behavior which resulted from experiences in one's family of origin (Sampson & Laub, 1993) (Arrow B).

There are various ways in which marital support may affect quality of parenting directly, indirectly, or moderately. Simons and Johnson (1996) conclude that the level of support received from a spouse is a major determinant of parenting behavior. In Korea, Lee and Cho (2002) investigated the relationship between the social

support and parent-role satisfaction. They found a significant positive relationship between the variables. That is, mothers who received more support related to parenting behavior from husbands and other people tended to have higher level of parent-role satisfaction. The result also indicated that the husband's assistance is the most influential on the parent-role satisfaction. It reflects the increased expectation and dependence of husband's role according to the conspicuous trend toward nuclear families. Specifically, the emotional support had stronger influence on the parent-role satisfaction than the material and informational support.

## **2. Social Network Support and Quality of Parenting**

Simons and Johnson (1996) defined social network support as the extent to which a person receives high levels of warmth, encouragement, and assistance in interactions with friends and extended family.

### **1) Direct Effects**

Friends and relatives are not available in the household to provide assistance with everyday tasks and responsibilities of parenting, although they may occasionally help with child care.

### **2) Indirect Effects (Arrow I)**

Social network support may influence parental behavior indirectly through its effect on emotional well-being (Arrow I). Simons and Johnson (1996) suggest that this effect is likely to be smaller than that of spouse support, although there is evidence that a supportive social network operates to reduce depression.

### **3) Moderating Effects (Arrows G and H)**

As noted earlier, there is evidence that supportive social relationships may moderate the relationship between stressful events and depression (Arrow G). According to Simons and Johnson (1996), support from friends and relatives is less likely to produce this buffering effect than is spouse support. They also argue that social network did not moderate the effect of emotional distress on quality of parenting, although marital support did. On the other hand, supportive relationships with friends and relatives reduce the

probability that persons raised in a high-risk family environment will display behavior problems during adolescence and adulthood (Simons, Whitbeck, & Wu, 1994) (Arrow H).

Simons and Johnson (1996) also indicate that there is evidence of gender differences in the way spouse support affects parental behavior. For instance, while husband support may moderate the association between the wife's emotional distress and quality of her parenting, the reverse probably does not hold true.

Sung (1993) indicated that there are at least three major ways in which the parent's social network influences the performance of the parental role. These are the exchange of emotional and material assistance between parents and network members, the provision of childrearing, and the availability of role models. Parents adopt or modify some childrearing practices as a consequence of watching the behavior of network members,

Social support has been studied in relation to areas such as general responses to stress, at-risk families, mental health, work, and single mothers. According to Wijnberg and Weinger (1998), the research finding on the buffering effects of social support is strong. However, they suggest caution with regard to negative social networks, the limitations of social support, the perceived and received social support, and the level of complexity of research in social support.

## **V. Social Support and Cultural Context**

In this section, cultural factors that shape giving



&lt;Table 1&gt; Cultural Identities and the Context of Social Support

Social support	African-Americans	Asian-Americans	Hispanic-Americans*	Native Americans
Structure				
Informal				
Close kin	+	+	+	+
Distant kin	+	-	-	+
Fictive kin	+	-	-	+
Neighbors	+	-	±	+
Friends	+	-	±	+
Formal				
Place of religion	+	-	-	-
Institutions and agencies	-	-	-	-
Type				
Material	+	-	+	+
Financial	-	+	-	-
Instrumental	+	+	+	+
Emotional	+	+	+	+
Configuration				
Parents	+	+	+	+
Siblings	+	+	+	+
In-laws	+	+	+	+
Friends	+	-	±	+
Distant kin	+	-	+	+

\* (±) Indicators that this characteristic exists in some Hispanic groups, but not in others. Cubans are more likely to have friends as a part of their social support system than are Mexicans. (Source: Dilworth-Anderson & Marshall, 1996, p.69)

and receiving social support among African-American, Hispanic-American, Asian-American, and Native American families will be focused. As Dilworth-Anderson and Marshall mentioned (1996), these groups function within distinct cultural boundaries that define and provide them with a unique identity, although they are a part of American Society.

The issue of diversity has become very important to the American culture since the changing demographic profile of the American population shows a significant increase in the

number of diverse groups.

Keith (1991) defines culture as “a design for living, the shared understanding underlying a shared way of life. The essential attribute of culture is that it is shared, and that it provides a vocabulary of symbols to express and assign meaning to various aspects of social life” (p.95). Under this definition, culture can influence people’s beliefs, attitudes, expectations, and behaviors and the culture of people provides the contextual grounding for social support to be given and received.

Dilworth-Anderson and Marshall (1996) indicate that the contextual grounding and the shared belief system of the group, along with attitudes, norms, and expectations, provide direction and guidance to the form in which social support is given and received.

Dilworth-Anderson and Marshall (1996) focus on the influence of cultural identity on shaping the context of social support. They believe that “the context of social support allows for understanding the structure (informal vs. formal or both) that different groups use to provide social support, the type of support that is given, and the configuration of social support (i.e., who gives it)” (p.68). They provide a summary of their discussion on cultural identities and the context of social support in Table 1.

### **1. African-Americans**

The family and church in the African-American community have played important roles, providing the social support that was often lacking due to discrimination within American society. Social support for African-American families is primarily provided through consanguine relationship networks and nonkin networks. One of the unique characteristics of African-American families is that boundaries of their families tend to be fluid and flexible, and it allows for the acceptance of dependent generations into existing households. Traditionally, family support includes helping with child care, sharing households, and providing emotional support to close, distant, and fictive kin (Dilworth-Anderson & Marshall, 1996).

In African-American society, mothering and parenting occur within extended family networks

as well as settings that include only the biological parents. There are “othermothers” in many African-American families. Dilworth-Anderson & Marshall (1996) identify othermothers as “individuals who assist biological mothers with parenting responsibilities. These othermothers are central to adequate monitoring of children” (p.72). As a result, there are several responsible adults playing parenting roles in many African-American families.

### **2. Hispanic-Americans**

Hispanics are very diverse as a group. However, all of them consider family as the core of their social support system. In their family system, they include close and distant kin and the godparents of children. They usually provide emotional, instrumental, and material exchange to immediate and extended kin relations. In Cuban families, friends are also an important source of social support in addition to family. On the other hand, Mexican-Americans consider the family as a major source of identity, self-worth, and social support. They use support from relatives but not friends (Dilworth-Anderson & Marshall, 1996).

Hispanic families have a child-centered culture. That is, they often consider that parent-child dyad is more important than marital dyad. Parents, aunts and uncles, and godparents are responsible for taking care of children in Hispanic families.

### **3. Asian-Americans**

Asian-Americans are even more diverse than Hispanics. They also have a family-centered social

support system in which emotional, financial, and instrumental support is given. They value family loyalty and the predominance of group over individual concerns. Family of origin and extended family provide support for children in Asian-American families. Asian-American parents place more importance on self-control and academic achievement as compared to other groups. They, therefore, emphasize on using discipline, self-control, and family support for educational achievement (Dilworth-Anderson & Marshall, 1996).

According to Korean studies (Do & Kim, 1997; Lee & Cho, 2002), the context of social support of Korean is similar with that of Asian-American. That is, there were significant relationships between the emotional support, material support, and informational support of social network, and the parent-role satisfaction (Lee & Cho, 2002). Especially, the effect of the emotional support of social network was stronger than the effect of the material and the informational support of social network. Do & Kim's study (1997) also indicated that mothers who perceived more emotional support from the social network, tended to have the higher level of parent-role satisfaction.

#### **4. Native Americans**

Extended families are an important source of support for Native Americans. Extended families provide emotional, material, and instrumental support in parenting, child-rearing, and elderly care. According to Dilworth-Anderson and Marshall (1996), social support is not defined in the Navajo language, however, to give individual

or group support is clearly defined. They suggest that social support includes the culturally determined definitions of family, kinship, and parenthood when it is attributed to the Navajo. Traditional affiliation with their cultural group provides the framework for social support.

Native American children receive care and support from their tribe and community. Most social activities include children because they are highly valued by the kin network in Native American culture.

In summary, cultural context strongly influences the social support among diverse groups, although the context of social support is also affected by gender, age, and social class.

## **VI. Implications for Research and Practice**

First of all, there is the need for social support researchers to focus not only on the amount of support, but also on other important dimensions such as the types and sources of support people receive. Also, there is the need for studies on the stress-social support-psychological well-being relationship.

Intervention with parents could include efforts to promote more open communication and greater support around issues related to childrearing because parents who perceive themselves as working together well would experience a less negative influence on child problem behaviors. In addition, the supportive participation of husbands on childrearing improves the level of maternal parent-role satisfaction in the western and the

eastern culture. Therefore, it will be beneficial for the healthy development of children that fathers make active efforts on childrearing, and practitioners provide programs increasing mutual understanding between the mother and the father, and training the paternal role for fathers.

From the previous findings, marital support contributes to quality of parenting in a number of ways. Spouse support is a significant determinant of parental behavior, and it seems to be more amenable to practitioner influence than most of the other factors that have been found to affect parental behavior. The issue of marital support could be included in parent training as an additional component of treatment. Researchers of parenting behavior suggest that it is beneficial for parents to expand the focus of parent training to include marital support because it may increase the effectiveness of such interventions.

Although previous studies indicated that spousal support played a more important role than social network support did, it would also important to assess the types of social resources available to a family, and then attempt to connect some families to additional support resources.

There is the need for conducting more studies on social support among diverse groups because available information on the subject is limited. It is important in the area of social support that researchers use more culturally sensitive conceptual and theoretical views, diverse sampling strategies, and culturally sensitive instruments.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods need to be developed for understanding social support where diverse cultures are included. It is also important that researchers be careful in interpreting

results, evaluating behaviors of a certain culture, and concluding without questions.

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