

Parenting Styles and Programs: What works for better Parenting in the MENA Region?

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Abstract

This policy brief provides a critical overview on parenting styles in the MENA region. It explores the context, which supports or hinders positive parenting within MENA realities.

The brief analyzes parenting education programs in the region and explores whether it speaks to parenting styles or if there is a dichotomy between the both.

The conclusion provides a set of recommendations for better parenting programs in the MENA region.

Keywords

Parenting Styles, Parenting Education Programs, and Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region,

Introduction

“States Parties undertake to ensure the child such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being, taking into account the rights and duties of his or her parents....”. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Article 3.2

The CRC obligates states to help families care for their children by perceiving the importance of parenting for child wellbeing. Parenting is perhaps the most grounded determinant of child wellbeing, especially during their early years. Neuroscience has demonstrated that early years structure the establishment for cerebrum design, considering the central point for mental health as the communication between children and parents. While the early years of life are a lucky central opening, they also present the danger of helplessness whenever dismissed (Young, 2016).

Poor parenting can change cerebrum design in manners that undermine children development and hinder their future prosperity. Parenting styles fundamentally decide a child's chances for endurance and advancement (Ahmed, Mei, & Iman, 2015). Parenting programs betters parent-child connections and guarantees a defensive, comfortable and sustaining bond that advances child wellbeing and prosperity (Assaad & Levison, 2013). The evidence recommends that parenting programs are crucial over the life-pattern of the child. In many contexts in the world, parents assume they know how to parent and they take parenting as granted. The philosophy of ‘capacity building’ is stereotyped at the institutional and organizational levels and overlooks the family unit as it is considered a private domain. However, extensive accumulated impact assessment studies on children and teenagers’ wellbeing development reinforces the fact that parenting programs are essential for better lives for the future generations.

Typologies of Parenting across the Globe

Literature identifies six central dimensions that parents need to implant into and cultivate to their children, which are; (1) obedience: compliance with orders and requests, (2) responsibility: the sense of feeling responsible and committed, (3) nurturance: emotional and physical nourishment and care, (4) achievement: feeling proud of accomplishing targets, (5) self-reliance: confidence on one's own power rather than those of others (5) general independence: feeling of autonomy.

The intensity of these dimensions might vary from context to another. In individualistic cultures, parenting styles tend to be more focused into self-reliance and general independence, while collective societies emphasize the values of obedience and group nurturance (Wrobel, 2013).

Literature on parenting styles conceptualizes four parenting styles, which are (Smetana, 2017; Morin, 2019)

- [1] Authoritarian: This parenting style is characterized by strict parental authority, firm in control practices, focus on obedience, little communication and directive orders and punishments.
- [2] Authoritative: Parents encourage children to be self-governing, give orders and leaves space for independence, encouraging autonomy and monitored progress.

- [3] Permissive: Frequent expression of warmth, avoid confrontation, low enforcement of rules and high acceptance, almost no punishment.
- [4] Rejecting-neglecting style: Parents neglect their children's needs, little communication and minimal interaction with children.

Parenting within MENA Realities

MENA Realities

Despite the central importance of the family in the MENA region, public investment in family policies in general remains limited. A report by the World Bank presented that investing in early childhood in the MENA region is among the lowest in the world (World Bank, 2015).

MENA milieu portrayed by contrasting settings, vary from high income GCC countries to LDCs and countries confronting humanitarian emergencies. Between prosperity and conflict zones, many countries in the Arab Mashreq, Maghreb and LDCs suffer from economic hardships and lack of appropriate policy responses.

These contexts have implicit reflections on parenting practices and the whole childhood settings. For example, UNESCO reported that children's access to pre-primary education, measured in terms of gross enrolment, varies widely among Arab countries, from GER above 80% in countries like Kuwait and

UAE, to under 5% in countries like Yemen, Mauritania, and Djibouti (UNESCO, 2010).

Parenting practices in the MENA region cannot be understood without poverty, unemployment and lack of effective social protection policies in mind, as well as the impact of wars and conflicts, which forced millions to refuge and become internally displaced. Of the 60 million displaced people, both refugees and people displaced within their home countries worldwide, close to 40 percent originates from the MENA region (Yahia and Muasher, 2018).

Parenting Styles and Impact Assessment in the MENA Region

Empirical evidence on parenting styles in the MENA region theorizes new parenting typologies that question the dichotomy of Baumrind's model of authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive parenting styles and Rohner's acceptance-rejection theory (Dwairy, 2016).

Almost all of MENA countries are described by patriarchal societies, which tend to adopt the authoritarian model of parenting. However, extensive evidence through qualitative, quantitative, mixed method and longitudinal studies conducted through different periods of time, reported numerous parenting styles in the MENA region, which are not classified into the four classic categories.

According to impact assessment studies, while authoritative patterns were associated with more positive mental health outcomes

and child wellbeing, there was no reported impact of authoritarian parenting styles. Males, however, had increased psychological difficulties associated with a permissive and helicopter parenting style. The following parenting styles are the ones reported in literature. (Dwairy, 2004; Dwairy, 2010; Henry et al., 2008; Dwairy, 2016; Wrobel, 2013; Smetana and Ahmad, 2018; Fass et al., 2018):

- [1] Authoritarian Parenting Style: Literature reported that one of the major parenting styles in the MENA region remains authoritarian, where a strict adherence to the rules of adults exists, and disobedience is met with harsh punishment. This model is less intense in urban societies' contexts in comparison to rural contexts in the same country.
- [2] Authoritative Parenting Style: The theory of social stratification illustrates class in MENA region and the lack of social mobility. Authoritative style is mainly found within middle class with high educational backgrounds.
- [3] Helicopter Parenting Style: It is similar to the permissive style, with regards to giving close attention to the children needs. Monitoring child activities and supporting them closely, which affects their self-reliance feeling.

[4] Neglecting-rejecting Parenting Style: Some qualitative narratives reported neglecting-rejecting parenting style in high-income MENA countries. This style is also reported with contexts of children at risk.

[5] Controlling Parenting Style: A combination of authoritarian and authoritative styles, which is reported in tribal societies, particularly reported in Saudi Arabia and Gaza. This style is linked to adherence of patriarchal values.

[6] Flexible Parenting Style: A combination of authoritative and permissive styles, which is reported in middle-income countries in Mashreq and Maghreb, such as Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, and Algeria, with more liberal values and modernity contexts.

[7] Ambivalent/ Inconsistent Parenting Style: Inconsistent mix of authoritarian and permissive styles. Evidence reported this parenting style is due to modernization and exposure to the western culture.

Parenting Education Programs in the MENA Region and Associated Gaps

The Doha International Family Institute conducted a study on “Parenting Programs in the Arab Region”, which mapped the parenting education programs across the Arab countries.

The study reported 108 programs distributed across the region (38 programs in the Arab

Mashreq, 32 programs in the Gulf, 26 programs in the Arab Maghreb, and 12 programs in LDCs). However, these programs are not specifically parenting education programs, as some of them are meant for awareness raising, or capacity building of service providers. The total number of parenting education programs found is 34 programs across the region. The following gaps are highlighted in the study of mapped programs (DIFI, 2019):

- [1] Lack of program evaluation and scientific impact assessment.
- [2] Lack of set criteria governing programs and poor documentation
- [3] Most documented information comes from programs in high-income settings.
- [4] Inadequate use of the internet, media, and written bulletins in the programs.
- [5] Poor coordination among service providers, resulting in duplication of programs.
- [6] Incoherence of the theoretical grounding of programs.
- [7] Challenge of promoting positive parenting practices in vulnerable contexts.
- [8] Disengagement and lack of parents’ retention in the programs and long-term funding.
- [9] Lack of parental programs for families living with disabilities.
- [10] Scarcity of parenting programs for imprisoned persons.

The study conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) to evaluate different parenting programs in Jordan, Oman and Morocco. Below is a critical reading to the commonalities of FGDs' outcomes:

- [1] Majority of participants were females. This outcome is consistent with the stereotype of gender roles in the MENA region, perceiving fathers as breadwinners and mothers as caregivers.
- [2] Enrolment of parents, mostly mothers, in the parenting education programs is driven by the needs to know parenting techniques, especially mothers of children with behavioral issues.
- [3] Some other driving forces behind parents' enrolment in the programs are; protection from technology risks, early childhood needs, and resolving family conflicts.
- [4] Common positive outcomes of parenting programs include, developing children personalities, eliminating negative behaviors, managing time and communicating with children, learning self-control and learning to identify abilities and talents.
- [5] Common negative outcomes are related to absence of adolescence and youth aspects in the programs. Instead, a focus is given to childhood exclusively.

- [6] Raising awareness in various topics at the same program, without enhancing in-depth knowledge and skills in a particular matter/skill.
- [7] Excessive length of sessions and lack of participatory approach and time for discussion.

Conclusion

The investment case for parenting is a call that needs to be addressed. It begins with why positive parenting matters and what the programs could do to fulfill the ultimate goal beyond child wellbeing, which empowers the future generations.

Parenting styles in the MENA region is to be understood taking into consideration countries' contexts. While parenting in some MENA contexts is characterized by authoritarian styles due to the tribal values, yet, permissive/helicopter and neglecting styles are also reported in high-income countries in the MENA region. Parenting in the region faces exacerbated challenges when it comes to national settings of poverty, unemployment, conflicts and displacement.

Evidence from impact assessment studies proved that authoritative parenting style is the most constructive practice with associated positive impact on child wellbeing. How to reach this model in the MENA region, remains a question. Parenting

programs should help in building parents' capacities to parent. However, mapping the parenting programs in the region shows that they are fragmented, lack evidence-based approach, and do not respond to the parents' needs. The evaluation of these programs is very limited in the region due to the lack of impact assessment studies. In addition, the programs do not cover the most vulnerable.

Hence, the following recommendations proposed a framework for better parenting programs in the MENA region.

Recommendations

- [1] Calling national machineries and NGOs to invest in introducing and developing parenting education programs.
- [2] Design evidence-based parenting education programs, beginning with mapping of parenting styles and assessing parental needs.
- [3] Children-at-risk not to be left behind. Specific parenting programs should be tailored for parents/caregivers of children-at-risk.
- [4] Adolescence and youth milestones not to be dismissed from programs' conceptualizations and coverages.
- [5] Research agenda in the region to be enriched by program evaluation and impact assessment studies.

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