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## Challenges of Parenting in an Urban Setting

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## Challenges of Parenting in an Urban Setting

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### Abstract

Child development is affected by the physical and socio-cultural environment, both directly and through parental behavior. This paper examines the characteristics of urban environments in comparison with rural areas, along with their implications for parenting practices. Challenges facing urban parents are discussed, including time scarcity, failure to impart moral values, work/life imbalance, and the lack of emotional bonding. The case of Jakarta as a mega city has been chosen to illustrate these challenges. The paper also suggests some solutions be adopted from experience in more developed countries.

### Keywords

Child development, environmental psychology, parenting, urban planning, urban setting

The central argument of this paper applies the notion of bio-ecocultural influences to child development as initiated by Super and Harkness (1986), which was expanded later on by Worthman (2010). In essence, physical and socio-cultural environments influence child development most profoundly through parental beliefs and practices. This paper is organized into several parts. First, the essentials of parenting are presented as the background to various parenting issues that may surface in different settings. Second, the characteristics of urban vs. rural settings and the implications for parenting are presented. Third, the paper discusses the challenges of parenting focusing on the context of Jakarta as an Indonesian megacity. This focus has been taken because urbanization is increasing enormously and the rapid change witnessed in Jakarta is strikingly different from any rural setting.

### The essentials of parenting

Although parenthood is universal, a child means different things for different parents. Hoffman and Hoffman (in Trommsdorff & Nauck, 2005) termed value of children and suggested it as the core mediator of parenting variables at an individual level. Values, parental beliefs, and parent-child interaction are all influenced by the socio-ecological context. The basic tenets of the ecology of human development were first offered by Bronfenbrenner (1979), and cross-cultural researches have confirmed the role of the environment in shaping an individual, including parents, and the ways they behave and interact with their children (e.g., in Bornstein, 2002).

Previous research on the value of children in Indonesia has demonstrated changes, although such differences may also be a result of sampling issues. Indonesia is a highly diverse country, both geographically and culturally. During research conducted in the 1970s (Darroch, Meyer, & Singarimbun, 1981), parents in Java (West and Central Java) made

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different evaluations of the importance of children based on their location (urban-rural). The economic utility of children was valued more by rural parents than urban parents, regardless of their cultural background (Javanese or Sundanese). Such differences appear to have dissipated in more current research conducted in West Java only (Sundanese), which also collected data from urban and rural areas (Albert, Trommsdorff, Mayer, & Schwarz, 2005). However, the latest research on the value of children conducted in a Sundanese context revealed results similar to earlier research i.e. the different value of children to rural and urban parents (Oktriyanto, Puspitawati, & Muflikhati, 2015). Clearly, more research is needed to conclude this issue. The more recent research has indicated that children are valued emotionally more than in utility terms by their parents. This highlights the different elements of parenting in urban-rural contexts, although it also implies that the micro-processes of childrearing in an Indonesian context are yet to be established.

One of the main goals of adult life in Indonesia is to have children, and educating these children to become good people who are respected in the society is a part of the order of life (Geertz, 1974; Mulder, 1992 in Albert *et al.*, 2005). First of all, Geertz and Mulder's assertions were based on Javanese culture that may not be applicable to other parts of Indonesia. Secondly, the conclusions were made more than a decade ago and thus are unlikely to be applicable to the contemporary context. No recent data or more generalizable data are available on this issue; however, national population trends do not show a significant decrease in the number of newborns. In other words, having children still appears to be an important goal for Indonesian adults, hence parenthood is still commonplace. A more important issue for this paper is how this goal manifests in actual parenting practices. Jones (2001) defined parenting as the "activities and behaviors of primary caretakers necessary to achieve the objective of enabling children to become autonomous" (p. 5, in Reder, Duncan, & Lucey, 2003). This definition refers directly to parenting goals.

Maccoby and Martin (1983) asserted that a primary goal of parenting, regardless of cultural and SES background, is to do what is necessary

to enable children to become competent, caring adults, who are able to function well within society (in Bradley, 2002). Earlier, according to Bradley, LeVine (1977) concluded that there were three universal parental goals: 1) the physical survival and health of the child; 2) the development of the child's behavioral capacity for economic self-maintenance and maturity; and 3) the development of a behavioral capacity for maximizing [other] cultural values. However, there are myriad of other goals involved in this conclusion. Baumrind and Thompson (2002) indicated that the first goal was the responsibility of parents to advocate for their children in a rights-based role. Meanwhile, the second and third goals have been associated with the role of parents as the primary agents of socialization, especially during the early years (e.g., Gruesec & Hastings, 2007).

Combining several concepts, Bradley (2002) proposed the five basic regulatory tasks of a parent: 1) the provision of sustenance is to ensure the survival of the child; 2) stimulation; 3) support; 4) to structure differential responsiveness, stimulation, and support; and 5) surveillance or monitoring. Meanwhile, Smith (2011), quoting the UK Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (Department of Health *et al.*, 2000), identified the fundamental aspects of "parenting capacity" as follows: basic care; ensuring safety; emotional warmth; stimulation; guidance and boundaries; and stability.

Taking these standpoints together, it is reasonable to conclude that parents should provide their children with emotional warmth, ensure their children's safety and basic care, offer them stimulation and support, as well as provide boundaries and monitoring, which enables their children to become economically and personally competent and skilled enough to function well in society. At this point, it is worth mentioning that Belsky (1984), in addition to Laible and Thompson (2007), reminded us that parenting is not a one-way process. Reciprocity or bi-directionality also characterizes a parent-child relationship; however, this paper will not discuss this further.

### **Characteristics of urban vs. rural settings and their relevance for parenting**

**Table 1. Characteristics of urban and rural environment**

Urban	Rural
Very dense population	Lower population density
Greater isolation from nature	Direct contact with nature
Non-agricultural work, trade, commerce or service industries	Agricultural and livestock work
Greater work pressure–inflexible time	Lower work pressure–flexible time
Intensive social mobility	Less intensive social mobility
Core family	Large family

In this section, the characteristics of urban and rural areas and their implications for parenting will be briefly discussed. The characteristics delineated below are general, with examples derived from developed countries. The intention is to present alternative methods for understanding current challenges. Readers are also advised to keep in mind that as the countryside becomes more urbanized and as urban areas become more planned, the distinctions between urban and rural environments are becoming blurred. In many places, there are areas that enjoy a balanced mix of both urban and rural characteristics. Table 1 summarizes characteristics of urban and rural environments.

### **Population Density and Over-Crowdedness**

Population density comes with problems of its own, namely a lack of space in urban areas. A lack of space heightens stress and contributes to the lack of time and resources parents have for their children. On the other hand, the high population density facilitates creative collaborations. In many urban areas, it is not uncommon for unrelated mothers to gather and self-organize a kindergarten group, where mothers take turns looking after all the children (see for example <https://www.familienzentrum-jena.de/>). This phenomenon may not be prevalent in an Indonesian context; however, we should be open to this possibility in the future.

### **Greater Isolation from Nature**

Urban areas are removed from nature, and this lost connection to the natural environment has a negative impact on children’s well-being. In particular, there might be less overall movement

which leads to less developed motor skills. This may impact upon children’s confidence by limiting exploratory behavior that in turn leads to negative health consequences in the future. In addition, a lack of exploratory behavior may lead to lower self-esteem and a fear of taking new opportunities (Krueger & Dickson, 1994). Luckily, many urban areas are actually not too far away from natural areas, and parents are well-advised to take their children on these “escape” trips to compensate for urbanites’ isolation from nature.

### **Non-Agricultural Work, Trade, Commerce, and Service Industries**

The diversity of work available in urban areas is probably their most attractive component, which explains the continuous increase of people migrating to urban areas. This also entails easier access to technology, health, and education. Children’s health problems are detected more rapidly and parents are more aware of their children’s needs, including their psychological needs. However, the downside of non-agricultural work is that it often leads to long office hours.

### **Intensive Social Mobility**

There is intensive social mobility in urban areas, which means that diverse groups live alongside each other. Pettigrew’s contact theory (1998) proposed that heightened contact with others increases tolerance, especially toward minority groups and immigrants. This should mean that imparting moral values would be easier in the urban setting, especially the tolerance of diversity. On the other hand, economic inequality is much higher in urban than in rural

areas. This has consequences for children of all socio-economic classes. Depending on their parents' wisdom, children may develop empathy or become desensitized to inequality.

### Greater Work Pressure–Inflexible Time

Among other parenting challenges in an urban setting, inflexible time schedules come high on the list. Children require the constant attention of their parents and do not understand why work is more important than their immediate needs. Due to the high population density, some creative solutions can develop; for example, by providing spaces for kids, e.g., kindergartens at workplaces. In fact, it is now a common occurrence for companies and universities to provide such services in many parts of the world. For example, see <https://www.unikoblenz-landau.de/de/uni/profil/familienfreundliche-hochschule/kinderbetreuung/kindertagesstaetten>.

In many countries, especially within the European Union, governments grant parents the right to parenting leave, which means employers provide a paid salary for the first year of parenting followed by two more years of voluntarily unpaid leave time, with the assurance the employee can resume their position at the end of the three years (Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, 2019). Of course, the Indonesian situation may be far behind these developed countries; however, early childhood is the most critical window in child development and for child-parent emotional bonding. A country's most important resource is its people, and therefore it is only rational to grant parental leave, as in this way the country will benefit the most from its people.

### Core Family vs. Extended Family

Intensive social mobility means that many urbanites come from elsewhere, which means that often, grandparents are living far away from their grandchildren, unlike those living in rural areas. This, of course, poses a problem, as grandparents are the immediate caretakers after the parents in most families. Fortunately, the high density of people in urban settings could solve this problem by combining people of

different ages in one home, as attempted in Germany, with its *mehrgenerationenhaus* or multi-generations housing project (<https://www.mehrgenerationenhaeuser.de/>). In this project, government housing is rented out with certain requirements, namely that within a building, a certain number of flats are dedicated to the elderly and others for families with small children. In addition to this constellation, a common area is provided for the interaction between people living in the same building. In the so-called multi-generation house, it is hoped that mutually beneficial interactions will take place, with the elderly living away from their children able to participate in meaningful activities such as taking care of small children, and parents of small children having the flexibility to have a more efficient work-life balance. This challenge is managed slightly differently in the Netherlands. As in many other European countries, in the Netherlands, the government gives money to parents for allocation to a daily caretaker while they go to work. Creatively, the government allows grandparents to take lessons and license themselves as professional caretakers. This not only helps to provide grandparents with the latest knowledge and innovations in childcare but also provides financial incentives for grandparents (Acosta, 2016).

### Parenting in an urban setting: The case of Jakarta

Jakarta is a vast and busy city. With nearly ten million inhabitants and limited public transportation, Jakarta is one of the most congested cities in the world. Several intertwined issues that are related to this topic can be identified.

As a densely populated area, many of Jakarta's inhabitants face housing problems (Hudalah, Rahmat, & Firman, 2016). More and more middle-income families live in private housing in clustered and closed neighborhoods where they do not become acquainted with their neighbors at all. On the contrary, the city attracts many new residents, often looking for jobs and opportunities, who lack the necessary socio-economic support. As a result, slum areas keep appearing to provide "safe" havens for this population. Relatively recently, the government

began relocating the inhabitants of slum areas to rented housing in high-rise buildings known as *rusunawa* (*rumah susun sewa*). Along with this housing problem, urban planning does not seem to be working properly either. It is easy to find modern high-rise buildings erected within two hundred meters of a crowded *kampong*, which literally means village, but it is actually a working class and lower-middle class community (see e.g. McCarthy, 2003). Public transportation is still limited; likewise, public spaces for recreation in the city are few, aside from malls. Although we must acknowledge the problems associated with this kind of urban settlement, these issues are way too complex to be the focus of this paper. Therefore, this discussion concentrates on more general city issues and their relevance to parenting.

The first problem is the distance to work and lengthy traveling time entailed. Jakarta is surrounded by supporting cities, such as Bogor, Depok, Tangerang, and Bekasi. Millions of people reside in those supporting cities while working in Jakarta and commute daily. The number of people who commute to/from Jakarta is almost three million, mostly for work. Commuter statistics show that most of them are in the parenting age bracket and most are married. Approximately 41% of commuters spend at least 60 minutes traveling, and 14% of them spend at least two hours commuting one-way (Badan Pusat Statistik/BPS, 2014).

In addition to the problem of traveling time, working hours over the past decade have tended to keep increasing (BPS, 2018). An increasing number of people work more than 40 hours per week. As a result, it is becoming normal to see people leaving home before 6 AM and arriving home after 8 PM. Family time for parenting becomes so scarce it barely exists at all for parents with young children during weekdays. These parents might be doing their best to provide economically for their children. However, although they ensure sustenance, they might fall short in other parenting responsibilities. The availability of advanced communication technology in big cities might help parents to monitor their children, but there are two sides of the coin with such technology. It is a deep concern that more and more children, in Jakarta as well as elsewhere, are being raised by gadgets and become addicted to them from

an early age (e.g., Gayatri, *et al.*, 2015; The Asian Parent Insight, 2015; Novotney, 2016; Sundus, 2018).

As traveling time is often an issue in Jakarta, many families are compelled to be self-sufficient despite the fact that their extended family may also live in the city. In rural areas, where collectivistic culture is still prevalent, more sibling-based and community caretaking can be found (e.g., Farver & Wimbari, 1995). City-culture, especially in megacities like Jakarta, has a much more individualistic cultural pattern, like western countries. When neighbors do not provide a sense of community, family cannot rely on their neighbors for childcare support. Unfortunately, government childcare support is basically non-existent. Families usually resort to hiring a live-in domestic worker, baby sitter, or nanny. However, the further problem is that the domestic workforce has poor skills and/or qualifications. Children's emotional bonding with their parents may be thwarted because their parents are not available and they may also not be able to bond with the alternative caregiver. Furthermore, if they do bond with the caregiver, they are at risk should the caregiver leave the family to work elsewhere.

Despite the notion of quality time, the quantity still matters. Building emotional bonds and the provision of a warm relationship between parents and children cannot happen without dedicated time to spend together. Hence, support can only be minimally provided. Hypothetically, parents in such situations put their children at risk of developing insecurity and mistrust. Bowlby, Ainsworth, and their successors have long studied the effect of childhood insecurity on human development (e.g., Benoit, 2004).

Moreover, lengthy traveling and working time also create fatigue, which in turn jeopardizes the quality of time spent with the family. A study in Australia showed that fatigued parents were more short-tempered, and tended to resort to using harsh discipline (Cooklin, Giallo, & Rose, 2011). They may also have less time to support children at school, both in terms of their direct involvement and indirectly, by supporting children's study habits. However, no data in Indonesia is available to back up this assertion.

Quoting different studies, Bradley asserted

that social and physical environments shape parent-child interaction. Based on a study by Evans, Maxwell, and Hart (1999), we know that parents in crowded homes speak in less complex sentences and respond verbally to their children less frequently, even after controlling for the SES factor (Bradley, 2002). Apparently, given the noisy environment, and the need to convey intention more efficiently and effectively, parents are prevented from using more complex verbal messages. No Indonesian study on this topic was identified during the review for this article.

According to Korosec-Serafty (in Bradley, 2002), the parenting environment is best understood by referring to its instrumental ability to perform childcare and childrearing. This is in line with the concept of "affordance" that was coined by Gibson from a different angle. Gibson (2015) stated that when an environment provides affordance that supports child development and parenting, it is characterized by parents' ability to provide economically, stimulate, support, as well as monitor children. The availability, or lack of, a garden, forest, zoo, library, advanced communication technology and so on, will provide different affordances to parents. A child living in rural Papua who never sees an elephant, either in real life, on TV, or in a book, could not perceive or understand the animal. On the other hand, a family living in well-to-do area in the middle of a bustling city like Jakarta may not have the environment affordance to climb trees or freely cycle around.

Aside from affordance issues, the urban setting in Jakarta also poses safety problems. Urban planning should focus on the development of safe neighborhoods to support urban children's optimal development. When urban planning fails to provide a child-friendly city, parents must work much harder to support their child's development. Less physical activity has resulted in more obesity cases in cities (Djaiman, Sihadi, Sari, & Kusumawardani, 2017). More physical stimulation and exercise are also needed to ensure the optimal development of motor skills. Moreover, Ajisuksmo, Hendriati, and Neidhardt (2018) found that children develop a better sense of direction and navigation skills when their parents are less protective because these parents

permit their children to roam around on their own more than highly protective parents. The long overdue RPTRA (*Ruang Publik Terbuka Ramah Anak* or child-friendly open public space) is now in place but is yet to prove its effectiveness in ameliorating the impact of Jakarta's troublesome urban design. Ultimately, parents manage these spaces who, in this case, belong to low SES background; therefore they also need to be taught how to utilize the provision in the best interests of their child. There have been concerns raised over child abuse incidents around RPTRA, and this anecdotal data must be followed up by solid research.

Unfavorable neighborhood settings that result in a diminishing sense of community may jeopardize the way a child is raised. A sense of community is known to support child development in many ways, including the child's well-being (Francis, Giles-Corti, Wood, & Knuiman, 2012). A neighborhood should be a direct agent of socialization, although parents may choose a developmental niche that does not include their immediate neighborhood. Imparting values to prepare children for their future role in the community cannot be fully exercised without the social and spatial support of the neighborhood. This is especially the case when parents do not have enough time to spend with their children. What kind of children are we raising when they do not develop a sense of community? Do we alienate children by living in urban areas without a sense of neighborhood? Once again, there is no data available to answer these questions.

### **Conclusion: Moving forward**

The physical and socio-cultural environment affects child development, both directly and via the role of parents. Without negating the reciprocity of parent-child interaction, it is well established that parents must take an active role in promoting child development. Since parents also live in the same environment yet assume more responsibility, it is important to understand how the environment affects parenting practices. Parenting practices are driven by the perceived value of children and subsequent parenting goals.

Urban settlements are increasing

enormously. Urban settings have specific characteristics that are relatively distinguishable from rural settings, some of which pose serious challenges for parenting; however, there are ways to maneuver around them. Well-planned urban design is paramount, along with community engineering, be it self-initiated by community members or developed by the local authority. Examples from developed countries demonstrate the possibilities.

Jakarta poses many challenges for parents due to its population density and congestion, lack of safe space, and probable poor sense of community in many areas. Understanding the impact of such an environment on child development is very important for parents since they can then prevent problems arising or resolve them properly. Parents should also be aware that they themselves are affected by living in such a setting. Unfortunately data on this factor are seriously scarce, and this shortcoming must be alleviated soon.

In order to take advantage of population density and diverse resources available in the urban setting, a certain amount of trust between community members is necessary. Without collaboration, none of the advantages mentioned above can be realized. Fortunately, strict and dependable law enforcement is an effective way to replace trust (Panganiban, 2016). Thus, in urban settings, wherein law enforcement or community perceptions of the law being enforced is high, creative collaborations flourish. In other cities, this is unfortunately not yet the case and yet must be seriously considered.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

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