What is “parenting”?  

Parenting has been called the world’s most important occupation. What other task in life has a greater impact on the future of our society and of the human race? Parenting is an enormous responsibility that most people take on at some point in their lives. The majority of the world’s people are, or will become, someone’s parent.

Considering that parenting is such a huge and important task that is undertaken by so many, it is surprising that we receive so little specific instruction on the art of being parents. Although twelve years of compulsory education is the norm in the United States (along with several years of preschool and/or postsecondary school for many), public school curriculum rarely focuses on skills specific to raising children.

If you are reading this, then you are incorporating parenting skills into your education. Through this course, you will gain valuable skills and knowledge that will help you to be a more effective parent when (and if) you take on this significant responsibility for yourself. If you are a parent already, hopefully this class will give you valuable skills that will help you raise your children in a manner that is effective and healthy to both yourself and your children.

Webster’s dictionary defines a parent as “one that begets or brings forth offspring” or “a person who brings up or cares for another.”

For the purposes of this lesson, we will focus on the second definition. A parent is not somebody who simply brings a child into the world, but rather a person who sacrifices the time and resources, over a period of many years, to make sure that the child is nurtured, disciplined, educated, and otherwise prepared to function successfully as an independent adult.
According to this second definition, there is more than one way to become a parent. While traditional families, consisting of parents raising their biological children, are probably most common, there are plenty of other, equal valid, circumstances under which people become parents.

Most notably, many people become parents through adoption. When a parent adopts a child, he or she takes on the full responsibility of raising that child. A person’s parental responsibilities to this adopted child are no less than his or her responsibilities toward biological children. Therefore, an adoptive parent is no less of a parent than a parent who is raising his or her own biological offspring.

There are other circumstances, besides adoption, in which individuals might find themselves in a parenting role toward someone who is not their biological offspring. For example, when a biological parent is unable to provide (either fully or partially) the personal and/or financial obligations of childrearing, other family members may have to take on much of the responsibilities of parenting. Most of us probably know of families where grandparents, stepparents, aunts, uncles, and older siblings are largely responsible for the rearing of children.

Other people find themselves in a parental role when they become foster parents. Children who are in need of parental care are usually assigned to foster parents by the state. The foster parent legally assumes all parental responsibilities toward the child for a limited period of time (although foster parents are usually financially compensated by the government for child-rearing expenses). Children generally stay under the care of their foster parents until one of the following happens:

- The child’s biological parent(s) regains the ability to provide parental support to the child, and the child returns to the full care and custody of the biological parent(s).
- Another of the child’s relatives (such as a grandparent, aunt, uncle, or sibling) legally adopts the child.
- The foster parent(s) adopt the child, becoming his or her permanent legal guardian.
- The child is placed in another adoptive family.
- The child is transferred to a different foster home or living facility.
While the foster parent’s role is often more temporary than that of a biological or adoptive parent, it is important that those who take on the challenge of caring for foster children take their parenting responsibilities every bit as seriously.

01.02: The World Of Parenting

Parenting: Myths vs. Realities

Most new parents have some idea of what they anticipate parenthood to be like. They have some vision of how their lives will be structured when they are parents. They have ideas about how their child is likely to behave, what characteristics the child will have, and what kind of relationship they will share with this child. They anticipate that parenting will consume a good deal of their time and cost them money.

Often, upon becoming a parent, a new father or mother finds that his or her parenting expectations did not entirely match the actual parenting experience.

It is difficult to generalize ways in which the parenting experience differs from the new parent’s expectations. The parent/child relationship is a relationship between two people, and as all people are different, so is every parent/child relationship. Every parent brings in a different set of expectations, and every individual child brings with it a unique set of challenges.

However, here are a few of the more common misconceptions that new parents encounter:

MISCONCEPTION #1:

Good parents are perfect people who have their lives completely figured out:

Parents are, above all, human beings. They have strengths and weaknesses just as all human beings do. Many new parents are young and are still figuring out what they want out of life, even as they are forced to reexamine their priorities to make room for a new family member. Your parents are undoubtedly flawed human beings, and they almost certainly made a few
mistakes while you were growing up. Most likely, this did not stop you from growing up to be a well-adjusted individual. Perhaps you even learned something from your parents’ mistakes along the way.

Not only are parents imperfect people who make mistakes as individuals, but they are also likely to make mistakes as parents. As they enter a new phase of their life, they must learn a lot about being a parent simply by doing. And in learning by doing, a person isn’t likely to do everything right the first time. In time, the new parents will learn about themselves, their new child, and the family solutions that work best for them. Making mistakes is a natural part of the process.

**MISCONCEPTION #2:**

I can organize my new life as a parent so that it will continue much as it has before:

Becoming a parent is a major life change. Yes, people continue their educations, advance careers, pursue hobbies, and maintain social lives even after becoming parents. However, plans will ultimately be altered to adjust for the needs of your new family member. School may be delayed, or you may need more time to complete your studies. Career goals may take a backseat to family needs for a time. You may fall out of touch with some of your friends. In your life as a parent, you will contend with an entirely new set of priorities, and your life will change.

**MISCONCEPTION #3:**

Your child will be a miniature version of yourself.

Your child may not share your enthusiasm for football or your appreciation for great literature. There is no way to guarantee that your child will share any of your interests or have a personality that is similar to yours. Many parents find it especially heartbreaking when a child fails to embrace deeply held political or religious beliefs.
While you may wonder how a friendly and gregarious person like yourself ever produced a bookish introvert like your daughter, this is in no way the result of bad parenting. All you can do is embrace your child for the person that he or she is and celebrate the inherent differences in personalities and interests among individuals.

01.03: The World Of Parenting

Why do people become parents?

Under ideal circumstances, people weigh all of the pros and cons of parenthood before making a decision to become parents themselves. Very often they are married or in a stable relationship with another person who shares their desire to be a parent. (While single adults frequently embark on parenthood by choice, and many well-adjusted people are the products of single-parent households, the physical, mental, emotional, and financial strain of raising a child can be significantly lightened when the burden is shared with a second parent.)

Couples who actively seek to become parents often cite the following reasons for their decision: They desire to build a solid family unit. They view raising a family as one of their topmost life goals and are ready to begin on this quest. They feel they can provide a loving and supportive environment to a child. They may wish to extend their physical and genetic selves beyond their own physical lives. They want to contribute to the future of humanity. Their decision may be the result of deeply felt religious beliefs on the subject of family and childrearing.

Some people may voluntarily enter parenthood for other reasons. Sometimes couples feel that their relationship is lacking, or falling apart, and hope that bringing a child into the equation will compensate for these problems. Other prospective parents may feel pressure to conceive from their own parents (who are eagerly awaiting grandparenthood) or other family members. Some people may feel pressured by their friends or by society as a whole. They have children because everyone else does, or because they are under the impression that having children is a thing that one has to do in order to live as a good, normal, moral person in mainstream
culture. Sometimes one person in a marriage or domestic relationship feels much stronger in his or her desire to have children than the other person, and places pressure on the hesitant partner. People who are considering becoming parents for these reasons may want to examine their feelings on this issue very carefully before trying to conceive or applying for adoption.

Of course, not everyone who becomes a parent has the luxury of planning for it. Unplanned pregnancies happen, but there are other circumstances that can thrust a person unexpectedly into parenthood. Unexpected illness, injury, death, and financial woes are just a few of the events that can force parenting responsibilities on individuals who had not planned for it.

And even the best planned of parental endeavors will not go entirely to plan. After you become a parent, you will continue to encounter the unforeseen challenges that life throws in your direction. You may have to care for an aging parent, recover from an unexpected injury, or deal with the loss of a job. Through all of this, you will have the continued responsibility of caring for your child.

**01.04: The World Of Parenting**

**What is the economic impact of raising a child?**

According to the U.S. department of agriculture, the average child born in 2011, raised by an average family (with an annual income between $38,000 and $64,000) for eighteen years, will cost his or her family more than $200,000. This number is likely to be much higher if the parent plans to support the child through college (and many young people continue to live with their parents and be financially dependent on them even after college graduation).

Remember that this number only includes the **direct costs** of raising a child, such as food, shelter, clothing, healthcare, education, etc. It fails to account for many of the **indirect costs** of raising a child. These include wages that are lost when a parent takes time off of work (or leaves a job entirely) in order to take care of child rearing tasks. Parents who leave the workforce temporarily to care for children may find themselves falling behind their professional
peers on the promotion/raise trajectory later on in life. Therefore, the decision to take time off of work to care for children can negatively affect a parent’s earning potential many years down the line.

While raising a child certainly requires a significant economic investment, it is important to remember that parenthood is not exclusively the domain of the wealthy and privileged. People of modest means routinely raise healthy, well-adjusted people to adulthood.

**Characteristics of a Nurturing Parent:**

Most people intuitively understand that a parent should nurture a child. But what characteristics do nurturing parents and family members have?

To provide the necessary support to their child, parents must properly nurture themselves. The parents must care for their own personal needs and maintain a healthy level of self-respect, so that they can help develop self-esteem in the child.

Nurturing parents try to empathize with their child. They make an effort to see the world through their child’s point of view. They spend time with their child in order to learn about their child’s personality and interests and to create a lasting bond between themselves and the child.

Nurturing parents actively look for ways to effectively enforce disciplinary codes that do not involve unnecessarily harsh punishments.

Nurturing parents develop an understanding about what level of physical, academic, social, and emotional maturity is appropriate at their child’s age. They try to encourage appropriate development of their child, but do not pressure the child with expectations that are unreasonable at his or her age.

**01.05: The World Of Parenting**

What Are the Roles, Responsibilities, and Rewards of Parenting?
While different people have different opinions on the specific roles and responsibilities a parent is expected to play in a child’s life, some parental responsibilities are universally agreed upon:

Providing for **financial needs**: Parents are obligated to provide financially for a child’s basic economic needs. Parents are responsible for ensuring that children have access to nutritious food, shelter, clothing, and health care. Most parents who are able choose to provide their children with luxuries beyond their basic physical needs. Parents may provide their children with postsecondary education and things such as toys and electronics, piano lessons, summer travel, etc.

Providing **safety and security**: Parents should make every reasonable effort to ensure that children are safe from physical harm. Children need a home environment that is free from abuse. Parents should not put their children in the secondary care of individuals whom they do not trust. Young children, in particular, need to be supervised carefully and kept away from common household objects that could hurt them.

Providing for **emotional needs**: Parent should respect their child as a unique human being and help him or her develop healthy self-esteem. Parent are responsible for guiding the child through difficult circumstances in life and comforting the child in periods of emotional distress.

Providing for **educational needs**: Parents are responsible for ensuring that children receive the education they require to function in society. Different families come to different conclusions about how formal education can and should be provided. Are children to be enrolled in public schools, private schools, or schooled at home? What kind of preschool, postsecondary, and extracurricular education should be provided?

But parents are also responsible for making sure that their children receive education that goes far beyond what is learned in school. From birth, children learn from their families about the world around them. Parents teach children—through instruction and by example—how to function in day-to-day life, how to interact with other people, and how to deal with obstacles that life brings their way.
Providing discipline: Opinions widely differ on the role discipline plays in properly raising a child. Most people believe that parents are responsible for setting a groundwork of rules to guide their children. However, people strongly disagree on the level of emphasis that discipline should play in the parenting process and the appropriate punishments or rewards for enforcing rules. Personal beliefs concerning the role of discipline in a family are a major source of controversy (see section on “Parenting Styles”).

Many people find parenthood to be among the most rewarding ventures of their lives. They find that building a strong family unit gives their life meaning. They appreciate the opportunity to make a contribution to future generations. They hope to develop familial relationships with their children that will last throughout their lives.

However, people should not approach parenthood with thoughts of personal gain. A parent must provide for a child’s needs without thought for how his or efforts will be repaid later on down the line. People who become parents principally for self-serving reasons (such as the desire to have one’s children care for them during old age) may place unfair or unreasonable expectations on their children.

01.06: The World Of Parenting

Different Parents, Different Parenting Styles:

Decision-making styles vary greatly from one family to another. Most parenting styles fit one of three basic models: the authoritarian style, the permissive style, or the democratic style.

In the authoritarian style, parents present themselves as the absolute authority in all matters. Children do not argue with their parents’ decisions. Authoritarian parents believe that teaching their children respect for authority will instill strong moral character in them. Children are not encouraged to voice their own opinions or desires on matters.

In the permissive style, parents take a largely “hands-off” approach to parenthood. Rules concerning homework, bedtimes, TV schedules, diet, etc., are not set by parents. Children
and adolescents are free to make these decisions for themselves. Statistically, children raised in the permissive style achieve lower grades in school and are more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors.

The democratic style of parenting exists between these two extremes. In the democratic style, both parents and children are encouraged to voice their needs and opinions. Decisions are usually made after taking the interests of all family members into account, although the final decision-making authority generally rests with the parents. Likewise, all family members are encouraged to take active responsibility for the family’s needs and contribute solutions to obstacles the family faces. Most studies indicate that this open-communication style of parenting leads to the greatest level of academic achievement in children. (However, other studies indicate that the authoritarian style may work well for some families.)

01.07: The World Of Parenting

What makes a person ready to become a parent?

Throughout this module we have discussed some of the positive and negative reasons people become parents, the demands and responsibilities of parenthood, and many of the decisions that parents may be forced to make. Certainly you have formed some of your own opinions about what makes a person ready to become a parent, how one should prepare for parenthood, and how a person should behave in his or her role as a new parent.

Let’s look at some examples of people who are entering parenthood for the first time. All of them are coming to parenthood (or considering parenthood) for different reasons and under different circumstances. How do you feel about each person’s situation? What decisions and preparations do you feel they should be making at this point in their lives?

- Bob and Dianne have been married for five years. They knew all along that they wanted to eventually have children, but they have been putting it off as they both further their careers and save money. Dianne has recently discovered that she is pregnant.
Sarah has been married to Dylan for several years. Lately she has been worried that their marriage may be falling apart. Dylan no longer seems to have interest in Sarah or his relationship with her. He is gone most of the time and they rarely spend time together. Sarah suspects he may be involved with another woman. She hopes that bringing a child into their relationship will draw her and Dylan closer together.

01.08: The World Of Parenting

Please complete the following questions. It is important that you use full sentences and present the questions and answers when you submit your work. The answers to the Review & Critical Thinking questions are worth 10 points. Use the rubric to guide you.

Module One: Text Questions

Review Questions

1. What are the differences between being a biological parent, an adoptive parent, and a foster parent?
2. What financial needs are parents obligated to provide and which are optional?
3. What other needs might a child have that a parent is expected to provide?
4. What are the qualities of a nurturing parent?

Critical Thinking Questions

1. What qualities make a person a good parent? A bad parent?
2. Which parental responsibilities do you think would be the most challenging? Why?
3. Which parental responsibilities do you think would be the most interesting to you? Why?
4. What are some things that people can do to prepare for parenthood?
Assignment 01.08 Review & Critical Thinking

1. Read through all pages of the lesson. Go to the assessment area in the course and complete the 01.08 Review & Critical Thinking questions.
2. Submit the 01.08 Review & Critical Thinking questions for grading.