



**ZERO TO THREE**  
Early connections last a lifetime

ZERO TO THREE  
NATIONAL PARENT SURVEY

# Overview



## Tuning In: Parents of Young Children Speak Up About What They Think, Know and Need

We know so much more today about how and when brain architecture is built and how deeply it is influenced by early experiences. During the first 1,000 days of a baby's life, 700 neural connections are formed in the brain every second.<sup>1</sup> **This is the time of greatest opportunity and highest risk.**

We also know that the way adult caregivers—parents in particular—interact with children during the early years can actually shape their brain architecture for life, for better and for worse. Children who have experienced nurturing and positive connections have more secure, healthy relationships and are more likely to do well academically and socially into adulthood<sup>2</sup> than children who experience insensitive or harsh caregiving.<sup>3</sup>

This information about early, rapid brain growth—and how it is influenced by the quality of caregiving young children receive—may or may not be reaching the people who need it most. If we care about babies and toddlers, we need to care about, listen to and meet the needs of their parents. Any effort to nurture and support young children, and to set them up for success in the long term, will be strengthened by helping their parents put this valuable brain science into action.

That's why **ZERO TO THREE**, with the support of and in collaboration with the **Bezos Family Foundation**, went directly to parents of young children—largely millennials and Generation X



mothers and fathers—to learn more about the challenges they face, the help they seek and how satisfied they are with the parenting support and information they receive. We conducted 10 in-depth discussion groups in the homes of parents from a wide range of backgrounds (moms and dads; single and married, Caucasian, African-American and Hispanic) in Chicago and Dallas in the summer and fall of 2015. The insights from these groups informed the development of a 50-question internet survey. Available in English and Spanish, the survey was conducted in October 2015, with a nationally representative sample of 2,200 parents of children birth to 5 years. More information on the research effort, findings, views and voices of parents of young children and resources for parents can be found at [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org).

## Key Insights

1

**When it comes to attitudes, aspirations and parenting challenges, there is more that unites than divides parents.**

Parents of various backgrounds and circumstances show strikingly similar beliefs, at very similar levels of intensity, about the joys and challenges that parenting brings. They share a strong sense that they are good parents, as well as a universal desire to improve their parenting skills.

- Across different races/ethnicities, income and education levels, 80% of parents agree or strongly agree with the statement: "I feel as if I'm a really good parent."
- At the same time, 87% of parents across the board say they work hard to be an even better parent.
- 91% say parenting is their greatest joy.
- 70% say they feel their life started when they became a parent.
- 73% say parenting is their biggest challenge.

2

**Parents universally believe that parenting can be learned and that if they had more positive parenting strategies they would use them.**

Across demographic segments, parents want to improve their parenting and seek help in doing so:

- 83% of parents from all backgrounds agree that good parenting can be learned.
- 69% of parents say that if they knew more positive parenting strategies they would use them.
- 54% of parents wish they had more information about how to be a better parent.

Of note is that while they understand the importance of the first 5 years of a child's life, 58% of parents find this notion both motivating and terrifying to varying degrees. 1 in 4 parents feel equally terrified and motivated.

### 3

#### Dads are more than babysitters.

They love being involved fathers, and want—and deserve—more credit. The vast majority of dads, across all demographic segments, are passionate about the positive role that fatherhood plays in their lives.

- 90% of dads say being a parent is their greatest joy.
- 73% say their lives began when they became a dad.
- 54% of dads say "I love you" more, 47% participate more in playtime and 47% read more to their child than they recall their own parents did.
- 63% of dads agree that "Dads don't get enough credit for their involvement in raising and caring for young children." 64% of moms also agree with this statement, too.

#### Still, many dads report feeling frustrated and shut out:

- 40% of dads (versus 17% of moms) say that "I'd like to be more involved in raising my child but my parenting partner interferes with my involvement."
- 43% of dads (versus 16% of moms) say that "My parenting partner often takes too much control of parenting."

### 4

#### There is a "missing" first year.

While parents have a general understanding that what happens in a child's early years can last a lifetime, many don't realize at what age babies and toddlers can begin to feel complex emotions. Parents also don't realize how deeply they can be affected by the way parents interact with them in the first months of life. A notable portion of parents miss the mark by months, or even years.

The time of most rapid brain development occurs during the first 3 years. While 63% of parents identified this correctly, more than 34% said that the time of most rapid brain growth is 3 to 5 years, a significant underestimation of the importance of the earliest years.

Parents overall consistently underestimate just how early children can be affected by some critical experiences:

- When asked at what age the quality of a parent's care has a long-term impact on a child's development, 50% of parents said this begins at 6 months or older, when in fact it starts at birth; 57% of parents say this begins at 3 months or older.
- When asked to identify the age at which children can begin to feel sad or fearful, 42% of parents say one year or older. In fact, this happens as early as 3-5 months. The majority of parents—59%—believe this begins at 6 months or older.
- Nearly half of parents think that reading to children starts to benefit long-term language development about a year and a half later than it actually does: 45% say the benefits start at 2 years or older. In reality, benefits begin at about 6 months.
- 34% of parents believe that talking to children starts to benefit their language skills at a year old or later, when in fact it begins at birth. 63% of parents say the benefits of talking begin at 3 months or older.



## 5

### There is an expectation gap when it comes to understanding children's capabilities.

About half of parents believe that children are capable of self-control and other developmental milestones much earlier than they actually are.

- 43% of parents think children can share and take turns with other children before age 2, and 71% believe children have this ability before age 3. In fact, this skill develops between 3 to 4 years.
- 36% of parents surveyed said that children under age 2 have enough impulse control to resist the desire to do something forbidden, and 56% said this happens before age 3. In fact, most children are not able to master this until between 3.5 to 4 years of age.
- 47% of parents want to learn more about how and when children develop self-control. 42% want to know more about what skills to expect at different ages.

## 6

### Parents face a discipline dilemma.

Parents are equally likely to view discipline as a way to nurture their children as it is a way to stop bad behavior. While parents use a range of discipline strategies, many are not seen as the “most effective” approach.

- 68% of parents are as likely to say that they use discipline to nurture. An equal number of parents—68%—use discipline to stop bad behavior. 65% view discipline as a way to protect their children.
- 57% of parents struggle with figuring out the most effective way to discipline.
- 42% of parents say they do not want to yell or raise their voice as quickly as they do, and 35% don't want to lose their temper so fast.

Parents say that that harsh discipline strategies, like spanking and yelling, are not the most effective, including the parents who use these methods frequently.

- 30% of parents say: “I spank even though I don't feel okay about it.”
- 69% of parents recognize that “shaming (verbally putting a child down or calling him or her names) can be as harmful as physical abuse.”
- Of those parents who say they spank their children frequently—several times a week or more—fully 77% do not count it as “one of the most effective methods of discipline.”

## 7

### Parents are drawing a new roadmap.

While moms and dads say that the way they were raised is a primary influence on their own parenting, many say they are more positive and present and use fewer harsher discipline tactics that their own parents used with them.

- The overwhelming majority of parents—9 in 10—report that the way they were raised is a key influence on their own parenting, and 6 out of 10 say that what they learned from their parents is useful.
- Still, roughly half of all millennial and Generation X parents see themselves as being more positive and present, and using less harsh disciplinary strategies with their own children than they recall their own parents using with them. They feel they do the following more with their children than their own parents did:
  - 57% say “I love you”
  - 53% show affection
  - 49% participate in play
  - 49% spend time listening and talking with their children
  - 47% read to their children



They say they do the following less:

- 37% say they spank less.
- 32% say they yell less.
- 29% say they pop or swat less.
- 28% say that they “hit their children with an object” less.
- 21% say they do less name-calling, 23% report fewer put-downs, and 21% intentionally embarrass their children less.
- 41% of parents say they are more likely to explain consequences; 37% say they redirect/distract their children more than their parents did with them.

## 8

### There is a trust gap.

Parents want advice, but are overwhelmed by sources of help and underwhelmed by the quality of what they're getting. Just because parents turn to a particular resource for guidance doesn't mean it's useful. For example, 84% turn to articles specifically aimed at helping parents, but only 49% find them helpful.

- Parents do want guidance from child development professionals. 54% of parents say they would like information from a “special web site or blog from child development experts.”
- However, 58% of moms and dads say there is so much parenting information available that it's hard to know who to trust.
- 63% of parents overall say “I am skeptical of people who give parenting advice and recommendations if they don't know my child and my situation specifically.”
- 47% of dads and 29% of moms say they don't know where to find information they can trust.

## 9

### Almost all parents feel judged, almost all the time.

Moms are more likely to feel judged than dads are, with one important exception: Dads feel more judged by their co-parents than moms do.

- 90% of moms and 85% of dads feel judged. 46% of moms and 45% of dads say they feel judged all the time or nearly all the time.

Parents report that they feel most judged by strangers in the community, with 48% of moms and 24% of dads feeling this way. 33% of moms, versus 19% of dads, feel judged by other parents.

The only time dads say they feel more judged for their parenting than moms do is when judgment comes from their child's other parent (22% of dads versus 17% of moms).



## 10

### Half of parents aren't getting the support they need when they feel overwhelmed or stressed—the time when help is most important.

When parents are overwhelmed or stressed, they lack adequate support, and some get no support at all:

- Almost half (48%) of all parents don't feel they are getting the support they need when they feel stressed. Moms are more likely (57%) to say they have inadequate support than dads (39%).
- 54% of single parents who have no other co-parent involved in their child's care don't get the help they need.
- 8% of parents overall say they get no support at all.

The fact that fully half of parents say they aren't getting the support they need presents a risk and an opportunity. We know from decades of research that, especially during times of stress, the more parents feel supported, the better able they are to provide a caring and healthy environment for their children. Those children then fare better on a variety of academic and social well-being measures in the long-term.

## 11

### Parents want more from the media.

They welcome information about parenting in all kinds of content from expert-informed websites to portrayals of typical parenting challenges and helpful solutions incorporated more broadly into popular media. 54% of parents want information from a website or blog from child development experts. Parents want this information delivered directly to them, via email (39%), in apps (34%) or text message (18%).

The majority of parents want TV shows to provide guidance:

- 64% of parents say they sometimes or frequently get parenting advice, information or guidance from portrayals of parenting on TV.
- 64% of parents agree that they would like to see more examples on TV of parents handling a challenging situation in a positive way.
- 66% want to see more TV shows portraying the realities of parenting young children.

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For more in-depth findings, parent voices and recommendations from **Tuning In: Parents of Young Children Tell Us What They Think, Know and Need**, go to: [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org).

*Methodology. Data presented here are drawn from an online survey of adults, conducted for ZERO TO THREE and the Bezos Family Foundation by SoAct Consulting, an independent research company. The survey was conducted in October 2015 among a nationally representative sample of 2,200 parents of children aged birth through 5 years. The margin of error at the 95% confidence level for a sample of 2,200 is +/- 2.1%*

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