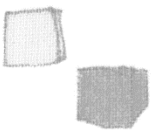
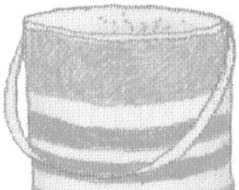
Mothers and fathers : Parenting practices in families with two children

Hallers-Haalboom, E.T.

General introduction





Traditionally, mothers were the primary caregivers of their children and fathers were seen as the breadwinners of the family (Lamb & Lewis, 2010). Because mothers were generally the ones responsible for child care within the family, research on child development primarily focused on the influence of mothers in relation to child behavior (Lamb, 2010). The impact of fathers' behavior was often assumed to be unsubstantial for child development (Gelles, 1995), and as a result, the role of fathers within the family was often neglected in research. It was not until the 1970's that this traditional view of the family changed. The main reason for this change was the increased participation of women in the labor market (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000; Lamb, 2010). Prior to the 1970's, most women stopped working after giving birth to their first child, but from the 1970's onwards almost 70 percent of the Dutch mothers with preschool children participated in any form of paid labor (O'Brien & Moss, 2010; Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau [SCP], 2014). This increase in female employment led to growing pressures on fathers to assume a greater role in the care and socialization of their children (Roggman, Bradley, & Raikes, 2013) and since then, the time fathers spent with their children has increased substantially (SCP, 2011). In response to these changes, researchers became increasingly aware of the need to study fathers in order to address these fast-growing changes in the family, with Lamb (1975) as one of the first researchers who put research on fatherhood on the agenda. Today, there is consensus among researchers that both mothers and fathers are important for child development (e.g., Lamb & Lewis, 2010), but less agreement exists about the differences or similarities between mothers' and fathers' parenting practices. The overall aim of this dissertation is to examine parenting behavior of both mothers and fathers within families with two young children.

Father involvement: causes and consequences

The first major attempt to conceptualize father involvement was undertaken by Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, and Levine (1985), who proposed a conceptualization of father involvement consisting of engagement, accessibility to the child, and responsibility. Although this approach provided the field with a framework to assess the ways fathers are involved with their children, this conceptualization primarily focused on the quantity of involvement with little attention paid to the quality of involvement. Therefore, Pleck (2010; 2012) recently proposed a revised conceptualization of paternal involvement including three primary components: (1) positive engagement activities (i.e., interaction with the child that is likely to promote development), (2) warmth and responsiveness, and (3) control (i.e., monitoring). These three components are seen as the core dimensions of paternal involvement and incorporate important concepts that have long been established in parenting research on mothers. In addition, two supplementary components

include indirect care (i.e., material or social indirect care, bread-winning excluded) and process responsibility.

In modern-day society there is still great variation in the degree and quality of father involvement in child care (Parke 2002, 2013). Lamb and colleagues (1985) proposed a four-factor model for the sources of father involvement, including (1) motivation, (2) skills and self-confidence, (3) social support (especially from the child's mother), and (4) absence of institutional barriers (especially in the workplace). Fathering behavior can be motivated by men's attitudes about fathering and their self-perceptions as father (Pleck, 2012). Paternal behavior is for a large part guided by the extent to which a father believes his role is important in child development (Palkovitz, 1984). To date, there is evidence from a large longitudinal study that the extent to which men valued their role as father predicted the level of their child care engagement, warmth, and control (Hofferth, Pleck, Goldscheider, Curtin, & Hrapczynski, 2013).

Even when men are motivated to be involved in child care, their involvement may be limited by a perceived or real lack of skills. These variations in parenting skills may be related to the level and quality of father involvement. Indeed, intervention studies have shown that fathers who receive training in caregiving, aimed at increasing their parenting skills, spend more time with their children and show higher levels of parenting quality than fathers who did not receive any training (Doherty, Erickson, & LaRossa, 2006; Fagan & Hawkins, 2000; Nowak & Heinrichs, 2008).

Besides fathers' motivation and skills, paternal involvement can also be affected by the amount of maternal support. However, despite increased female employment many women find it hard to actively involve fathers in the daily routines of caregiving (Coltrane, 1996; Sasaki, Hazen, & Swann Jr., 2010). There is a strong notion among mothers that they are indispensable and naturally more suited for child care (Dienhart & Daly, 1997), leading mothers to consciously or unconsciously prevent fathers from being actively involved in child care by criticizing or failing to encourage them when they interact with their children (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Puhlman & Pasley, 2013). As a result, such maternal gate-keeping can seriously undermine the confidence of fathers and may result in less opportunities for involved fathering (Fagan & Barnett, 2003; Puhlman & Pasley, 2013; Schoppe-Sullivan, Brown, Cannon, Mangelsdorf, & Sokolowsky, 2008). It is important to note, though, that although most studies assume that maternal gatekeeping negatively affects paternal involvement rather than the other way around, there are as yet no longitudinal studies that have tested this direction (Adamsons, 2010). Whereas maternal gatekeeping is related to lower paternal involvement, mother’s positive and supportive relationship with their spouse predicts father's active involvement in child care activities. Spousal support (i.e., psychological or instrumental) may help fathers to explore their role as fathers and

to acquire and practice skills that are essential for caregiving (Cannon, Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Brown, & Sokolowski, 2008; Parke, 2013; Schoppe-Sulivan et al., 2008).

Finally, institutional factors may either enhance or prevent fathers from being as involved in child care as they would like to be. For example, during the mid-1990s European governments began to acknowledge the relevance of paternal care at the time of childbirth and in the early years of a child's life (Caracciolo di Torella, 2014; Moss & Deven, 2006). From this moment onwards, parental leave policies emerged to encourage and support fathers to be more actively involved in child care (e.g., Brandth & Kvande, 2002). To date, the majority of the European member states provide a form of paternity leave (O'Brien & Moss, 2010). With some exceptions, the period of leave varies from two to ten days and is usually paid on the same basis as maternity leave (Moss, 2009). Within the Netherlands, Dutch fathers are entitled to two days of paid paternity leave and another three days unpaid paternity leave within the first month after birth, which is relatively limited compared to other European countries. In addition, Dutch fathers have the opportunity to take a total of 26 weeks of unpaid paternal leave until the eight birthday of their child (e.g., Moss, 2009; Rijksoverheid, 2015a; Rijksoverheid, 2015b), but only 23% of the fathers actually made use of this right (SCP, 2014). The main reason for fathers not to take paternal leave is the decline in family income (SCP, 2004). So, even though there are clear trends towards more family-friendly policies, workplace barriers for active involvement in child care remain large for fathers (Parke & Brott, 1999).

When Lamb and colleagues (1985) formulated the paternal involvement construct, they cautiously put forward that paternal involvement potentially had consequences for children, mothers, and fathers themselves. To date, a growing body of research documents the independent influence of the quality of paternal involvement on positive child and adolescent outcomes (Pleck, 2010). In addition, one study that controlled for the reciprocal influence of children on fathers showed that fathers' shared activities and communication with their children predicted fewer internalizing problems and higher academic achievement (Hawkins, Amato, & King, 2007). However, in this study maternal involvement was not controlled for. In addition, although the conceptualization of paternal involvement shifted from its original emphasis on time spent with the child towards a more qualitative focus (e.g., positive engagement activities, warmth, and control), several studies suggest that time spent with children in itself does play a role. More specifically, one study showed that the influence of the time fathers spend with their children on father-child attachment security is dependent unpon qualitative aspects of fathering behavior (Brown, McBride, Shin, & Bost, 2007) The time fathers pent with their children was unrelated to attachment security when fathers engaged in high-quality parenting behavior, but was associated with lower levels of attachment security

when fathers engaged in less adaptive parenting behavior (e.g., little positive emotion, insufficient task structure, excessive overcontrol).

Several studies suggest that paternal involvement benefits not only children, but also mothers and fathers themselves (Eggebeen, Knoester, & McDaniel, 2013; Parke, 2002). For example, a growing body of research points towards long-term positive effects of paternal involvement in child care on marriage quality (e.g., Kalmijn, 1999; Snarey, 1993). In addition, several studies suggest that paternal involvement has positive effects op fathers' well-being and social relationships (e.g., Palkovitz, 2002). However, as fathers increase their involvement in child care they are more likely to perceive higher levels of work-family stress (Parke, 2002). Involved fathers face the dilemma of combining child care with having a job (Allen & Finkelstein, 2014; Winslow, 2005). Many fathers report that they want to spent more time with their children than they currently do (Milkie, Mattingly, Nomaguchi, Bianchi, & Robinson, 2004; Nomaguchi, Milkie, & Bianchi, 2005). However, despite increased female employment fathers still have a strong belief that they should be the economic providers within the family (Pfau-Effinger, 2004; Planting, 2007). Indeed, most fathers are still the main breadwinners within the family (e.g., Ciccia & Verloo, 2012). Today, many fathers struggle to combine the different dimensions of fatherhood (i.e., being accessible and nurturing as well as economically supportive to their children) and how to manage conflicts between having a job and looking after the children (e.g., Brannen, Moss, & Mooney, 2004; Dermott, 2008).

Mothers' and fathers' parenting practices

Quantitative aspects of parenting. Although there is a trend for fathers to spend more time taking care of their children over the last few decades (Maume, 2011), there is clear evidence pointing towards parenting differences between mothers and fathers. For example, mothers are still the primary caregivers of their children in most Western societies. On average, mothers spend two to three times as much time on child care activities than fathers, even when they work full-time (Craig, 2006; Huerta et al., 2013; SCP, 2011). In addition, several studies suggest that the time mothers spent on child rearing activities remained roughly the same, even though maternal employment increased substantially over the last decades (Blakemore, Berenbaum, & Liben, 2009; Craig, 2006). There is evidence that fathers' involvement has increased over the last decades, albeit slowly. While fathers only spend approximately 30% to 45% as much time with their children as mothers in the 1970s and 1980s, the amount of time fathers spend with their children increased substantially (Pleck, 2010; SCP, 2011; Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean, & Hofferth, 2001). For example, Dutch fathers on average spent 65% of mothers' time in interactive activities with their children (SCP, 2011). Further, the time U.S. fathers in intact families are actively engaged with their children is 67% of that of mothers

on weekdays and 87% of that of mothers on weekend days. In addition, the time fathers are accessible to their children (i.e., available to the child but not directly involved with him or her) showed a similar pattern (Yeung et al., 2001). These findings suggest that mothers still shoulder the lion's share of child care on weekdays, but fathers do become more equal partners in caring for the children on weekends (Yeung et al., 2001).

Qualitative aspects of parenting. Although mothers are generally seen as natural caregivers, most fathers adapt positively to their role as parent as well (Henwood & Procter, 2003). Just like mothers, fathers respond with caring and protective behavior when introduced to their newborn infant (e.g., Lamb & Lewis, 2013). In addition, other researchers reported that that both mothers and fathers adjust their speech and singing patterns (i.e., speaking more slowly and at high pitch) when interacting with their child (e.g., Lamb & Lewis, 2013; Parke, 2013; Rowe, Coker, & Pan, 2004).

Mother and fathers differ not only with respect to quantity of time spent with children, they also differ in the naure and quality of their parenting practices. In 1996, Parke already stated that fathers are not simply substitute mothers, but that mothers and fathers show significant differences in their parenting behavior (Parke, 1996). Since then, a growing body of research provides evidence for this assumption. For example, mothers and fathers have been found to adopt different play styles during parent-child interactions. Mothers tend to be more verbal, didactic, and toy mediated during play, whereas fathers use more tactile and physical play with their children (Parke, 2002). In addition, gender differences have been found with respect to parenting style. Mothers are generally more sensitive and less intrusive towards their children than fathers (e.g., Barnett, Deng, Mills-Koonce, Willoughby, & Cox, 2008; Bergmann, Wendt, Von Klitzin, & Klein, 2013; Lovas, 2005; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2006). Moreover, mothers use more supportive speech and less directive and informing speech than fathers (Leaper, Anderson, & Sanders, 1998: Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2003). There is also evidence that mothers are more concerned with disciplining their children than fathers. Mothers have been found to use more verbal and physical discipline strategies in response to child noncompliance than fathers (e.g., Blandon & Volling, 2008; Day, Peterson, & McCracken, 1998; Power, McGrath, Hughes, & Manire, 1994; Xu, Tung, & Dunaway, 2000).

Overall, there is empirical evidence that mothers and fathers show different parenting strategies. However, several studies suggest that the differences between mothers and fathers are relatively small (Lytton & Romney, 1991; Maccoby, 1990; Russel & Saebel, 1997). Even though differences between mothers and fathers may be small, their parenting behavior can still affect child development differently (e.g., Cabrera, Shannon, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2007; Grossmann et al., 2002; Kochanska, Askan, Prisco, & Adams, 2008; LaBounty, Wellman, Olson, Lagattuta, & Liu, 2008;

Martin, Ryan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2007), indicating that parent gender is an important factor to consider in research on parenting and child development.

Biological factors associated with mothers' and fathers' parenting practices

It had long been assumed that hormones play an unimportant role in paternal behavior (Lamb, 1975). However, recent studies suggest that fathers may be more biologically prepared for parenting than previously thought. Just like women, men experience significant hormonal changes during pregnancy and childbirth. More specifically, prolactin levels are higher for both men and women in the late prenatal period than in the early postnatal period, and cortisol levels increase just before birth and decrease in the postnatal period for both men and women (Storey, Walsh, Quinton, & Wynne-Edwards, 2000). In addition, gonadal hormone levels (i.e., testosterone, estrogens) are lower in the early postnatal period, which corresponds to the first opportunity for interaction with their infants (Storey et al., 2000). These hormonal changes in men and women have been found to facilitate positive parenting behavior, such as parental responsiveness to infant cues (Alvergne, Faurie, & Raymons, 2009; Kuzawa, Gettler, Huang, & McDade, 2010; Storey et al, 2000; Weisman, Zagoory-Sharon, & Feldman, 2014).

To date, several biological processes have been linked to gender differences in parenting behavior, with gonadal hormones (i.e., testosterone, estrogens) as the most extensively studied factors (Hines, 2004). One of the most important biological differences between men and women is that high levels of testosterone are primarily responsible for the establishment of the male physical phenotype, whereas the absence of testosterone leads to the development of the female physical phenotype (Blakemore et al., 2009). To date, several studies have shown the importance of gonadal hormones for sexual differentiation of behavior. For example, high levels of testosterone are associated with competitive behavior or mating, whereas low levels of testosterone are associated with parenting (e.g., Gettler, McDade, Feranil, & Kuzawa, 2011; Kuzawa et al., 2010; Van Anders, Tolman, & Volling, 2012; Wingfield, Hegner, Dufty Jr., & Ball, 1990). However, the link between gonadal hormones and behavior might be more complex than previously thought. There is preliminary evidence suggesting that the testosterone system might play a different role in mothers' and fathers' parenting behavior. For example, one study found that lower testosterone levels in fathers and higher testosterone levels in mothers were associated with parental responsiveness to infant cues (Steiner, Fleming, Stallings, Corter, & Worthman, 1998). Unfortunately, the underlying processes explaining this different effect of testosterone on mothers' and fathers' parenting practices are yet unknown and the association between gonadal hormones and parenting behavior might be complicated.

Child characteristics affecting mothers' and fathers' parenting practices

In addition to biological predispositions to parenting, characteristics of the child are also thought to play an important role in shaping parenting behavior. There is ample evidence that parenting behavior is affected by the child's gender, age, and birth order (e.g., Price, 2008; Raley & Bianchi, 2006; Russel & Saebel, 1997). In addition, there is preliminary support that these child characteristics affect parenting behavior of mothers and fathers differently (e.g., Bergmann et al., 2013; Lytton & Romney, 1991; Shanahan, McHale, Crouter, & Osgood, 2007), indicating that it is essential to consider child characteristics in research on parenting behavior of mothers and fathers.

Child gender. It is generally assumed that parents treat sons and daughters differently, and that this is especially the case for fathers (Lytton & Romney, 1991; Raley & Bianchi, 2006; Russel & Saebel, 1997; Siegal, 1987). Gender-differentiated parenting can take various forms and may occur through the direct instruction of the child in specific gendered activities, the type of expectations a parent imposes on the child, the type of opportunities parents provide or encourage in their child, or through the way parents monitor and manage their child's activities (Leaper, 2002). According to Maccoby and Jacklin (1974), the mechanisms underlying these potential gender differences in parental treatment can be attributed to both child-driven effects and parent-driven effects. Children are not just passive recipients of parenting behavior, but they also influence the parent by their own behaviors (Bell, 1968; Avinun & Knafo, 2014). For example, higher levels of disruptive behavior in children have been found to elicit more negative reactions from mothers (McFadyen-Ketchum, Bates, Dodge, & Pettit, 1996; Smith, Calkins, Keane, Anastopoulos, & Shelton, 2004). Since boys display more disruptive behavior than girls (Alink et al., 2006; Archer, 2004; Baillargeon et al., 2007), boys may thus evoke more negative parental responses than girls. However, there is also evidence that gender-differentiated parenting behavior is not necessarily caused by gender-specific behaviors of the child. Instead, parents' own gender stereotypes and attitudes may play an important role in the way parents behave towards their children (gender schema theory; Bem, 1981, 1983). Support for this assumption was provided by the classic study of Culp, Cook, and Housley (1983) in which adults treated the same child differently based on the perceived sex of the child. In addition, another study pointed out that parents were harsher with boys than with girls, even though boys and girls did not differ with respect to child temperament (Bezirganian & Cohen, 1992).

To date, there is some evidence that fathers are more likely than mothers to treat sons and daughters differently and that this pattern is most evident in the area of discipline (Feldman & Klein, 2003; Gjerde, Block, & Block, 1991; Lytton & Romney, 1991). Fathers may be more inclined than mothers to socialize their children into the gender roles proposed by society. In general, gender roles and

gender stereotypes are often more restrictive for boys than for girls, which may cause fathers to be more concerned with their sons conforming to gender roles than with their daughters (Eagly, Wood, & Diekman, 2000). However, there is still relatively little support for the assumption that both parent gender and child gender affects parent-child interactions differently (Russel & Saebel, 1997). In addition, there are also studies that suggest that child gender does not play such an important role in parenting practices during early childhood as was previously assumed (Hyde, 2005; Russel & Saebel, 1997). Instead, the child's age and birth order may be important determinants of parental differential treatment (Blakemore et al., 2009).

Child age. Based on the belief that mothers are naturally more suited for taking care of babies than fathers, fathers generally hold mothers responsible for the care of young infants (Craig, 2006; Yeung et al., 2001). In general, the first year is pictured by fathers as a challenge, which is also illustrated by many parenting books for fathers that provide tips and tricks on 'how to survive the first year of your infant'. Fathers become more involved participants in child care activities when their children become older (Bruce & Fox, 1999; Furman & Lanthier, 2002), suggesting that parenting behavior of fathers may change accordingly.

In general, the literature is inconsistent with respect to the effect of child age on parenting behavior during early childhood. There is evidence that mothers and fathers show stable levels of parenting behavior over time, as they adequately adapt their responses to the changing developmental levels of their child (Bornstein, Tamis-LeMonda, Hahn, & Haynes, 2008; Kochanska & Askan, 2004). Certain types of parenting behavior may be more or less appropriate during specific developmental stages of the child. For example, as the child matures, mothers generally respond with fewer descriptions and exploratory prompts, but at the same time increasingly respond with imitations and expansions, questions, and play prompts (Bornstein et al., 2008). However, in contrast to these findings, there is also evidence pointing towards a change in parenting behavior with increasing child age. For example, as a result of the increasing ability of children to communicate with their environment (Berk, 2003; Bornstein, 2002), it might become easier for parents to adjust their parenting behavior in a way that fits their child´s needs. Indeed, mothers and fathers have been found to show more optimal parenting behavior across time (Bergmann et al., 2013; Braungart-Rieker, Hill-Soderlund, & Karras, 2010; Ciciolloa, Crnic, & West, 2013). In contrast, it has also been proposed that the transition to locomotion during infancy may be associated with more challenges for the parent (i.e., potential for safety and norm violations) and evoke more negative parenting behaviors, such as increased parental control (Bornstein et al., 2010; Kochanska & Askan, 2004).

Overall, the literature seems to support the assumption that parenting behavior is affected by child age, but the way child age influences parenting behavior is not quite clear. In addition, one cross-sectional study provides

preliminary evidence that the effect of child age on parenting behavior might be different for mothers and fathers. Fathers with older children were more sensitive towards their child than fathers with younger children, whereas mothers provided almost equal levels of sensitivity regardless of the child's age (Bergmann et al., 2013). However, due to the cross-sectional design of this study, these findings can not solely be attributed to child age but may also be caused by other characteristics of the children.

Birth order. Most families in Western societies consist of at least two children (Volling, 2012). For example, in the Netherlands 60% of the children grow up in a family with at least one other sibling (Aalders, 2003). When a second child is born, family dynamics change as mothers and fathers are no longer responsible for one child but have to divide their attention and affection between two children (Furman & Lanthier, 2002). The learning-from-experience hypothesis proposes that parents' experiences with their firstborn child have important implications for how they approach childrearing the second time around (Shanahan et al., 2007; Whiteman & Buchman, 2002; Whiteman, McHale, & Crouter, 2003). For example, mothers and fathers have gained more knowledge about child behavior that is associated with particular developmental stages and they may have adapted their childrearing strategies through trial-and-error with their firstborn child. As a result, mothers and fathers may feel more competent in the interaction with later-born children, which in turn might lead to an improvement of parent-child interactions with later-born children (Whiteman et al., 2003).

Although it is generally assumed that parents treat their children differently, research generally focuses on only one child within the family. Those few studies that do include both siblings indicate that parents use different parenting strategies with firstborn and later-born children during infancy and early childhood. For example, mothers and fathers use more gentle guidance with their 46-month-old firstborn child than with their later-born toddler (Volling, Blandon, & Gorvine, 2006). In addition, a recent study showed that mothers and fathers were more sensitive towards their firstborn three-year-old children than towards their second-born one-year-old children (Van Berkel et al., 2014). Unfortunately, most studies examined parenting differences towards two children within the family at one time point, when the children differed in age. As a result, differences in parental treatment of siblings can not solely be attributed to birth order, but may also be related to the age of both siblings (Whiteman et al., 2003). To distinguish child age and birth order effects, longitudinal studies are needed that allow for comparisons of parenting behavior towards siblings when they have the same age.

Aim and outline of the dissertation

The overall aim of the studies presented in this dissertation is to provide insight in the differences and similarities between mothers' and fathers' parenting practices. Further, this dissertation examines the effect of biological factors (i.e., parental sex hormones) and child factors (i.e., gender, age, and birth order) on parenting behavior of mothers and fathers. Previous studies on gender-differentiated parenting have often been limited by the use of between-family designs in which parenting practices in families with boys are compared with parenting practices in families with girls. To solve this problem, the current dissertation adopts a within-family design to allow for comparisons of parenting behavior towards boys and girls within the same family. In addition, by using a longitudinal within-family design, the effect of child age and birth order on parenting behavior can be disentangled.

The research questions are illustrated in Figure 1. In Chapter 2 differences between mothers and fathers with respect to parental sensitivity and nonintrusiveness are studied, also examining child gender and birth order. Further, in Chapter 3 the effect of child age and birth order on mothers' and fathers' sensitivity and nonintrusiveness is examined longitudinally. Chapter 4 focuses on the association between sex hormones (i.e., testosterone) and parental sensitivity and nonintrusiveness of mothers and fathers towards their two young children. In Chapter 5 differences between mothers' and fathers' discipline strategies towards their firstborn and second-born children are examined, also taking into account child gender. Finally, in Chapter 6 the main findings and implications of the studies presented in this dissertation are discussed and suggestions for future research are made.

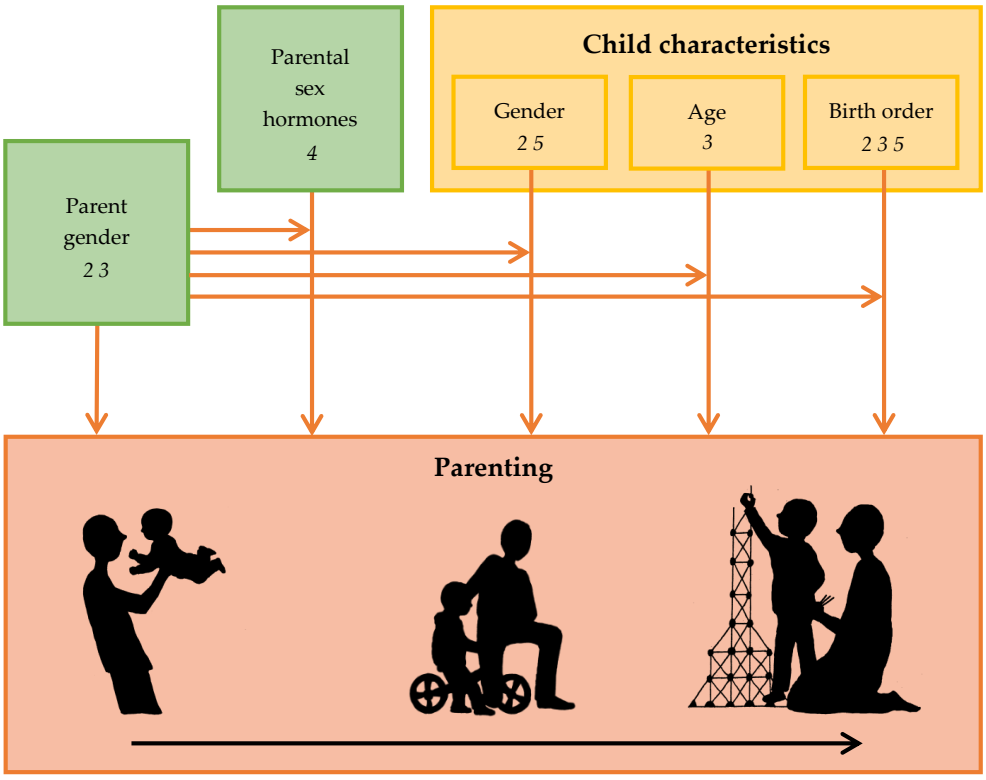


Figure 1. *Illustration of the topics of this dissertation.*
Note. The numbers refer to the chapters focusing on the specific topic.