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Styles of Parenting

Styles of parenting differ along two separate dimensions. One dimension is warmth-coldness; the other is strictness-permissiveness. Warm parents can be either strict or permissive, as can cold parents. The terms *warm*, *cold*, *strict*, and *permissive* are at the extreme ends of these dimensions. This means that, for example, parents are neither absolutely cold nor absolutely warm. The vast majority of parents are somewhere in the middle but closer to one extreme or the other.

Warm or Cold? Warm parents show a great deal of affection to their children. For example, they hug them, and smile at them often. They show their children that they are happy to spend time with them and enjoy their company. Cold parents may not be as affectionate toward their children or appear to enjoy them as much.

Research suggests that children fare better when their parents are warm to them. The children of warm parents are more likely to be well adjusted. They are also more likely to develop a conscience—a sense of moral goodness or a sense of responsibility when they do wrong. Children of cold parents, on the other hand, are usually more interested in escaping punishment than in doing the right thing for its own sake.

Strict or Permissive? If you have younger siblings, you probably know that children do many things that anger or annoy other people. For example, they may make noise when other people are trying to sleep or concentrate on a difficult task. Children may also engage in behaviors that are unhealthy to themselves. They may have poor eating habits or watch too much television. They may neglect their schoolwork or play with dangerous objects.

Some parents are extremely strict when it comes to such behaviors. They impose many rules and supervise their children closely. Permissive parents, on the other hand, impose fewer rules and watch their children less closely. Permissive parents tend to be less concerned about neatness and cleanliness than are strict parents.

Parents may be strict or permissive for different reasons. Some extremely strict parents cannot tolerate disorder. Others fear that their children will run wild and get into trouble if they are not taught self-discipline. Some parents are permissive because they believe that children need freedom to express themselves if they are to become independent. Other parents are permissive because they are less concerned or have little time to monitor their children's activities. Without clear and consistent guidance, these children may become confused about which behaviors are acceptable and which are not.

Strictness can have positive and negative results, depending on how it is used. Strictness is not necessarily the same as meanness; parents can be strict but still love their children. Research suggests that consistent and firm enforcement of rules can foster achievement and self-control, especially when combined with warmth and support. But physical punishment or constant interference may lead to disobedience and poor grades in school.

Authoritative (meaning “with authority”) parents combine warmth with age appropriate rules and responsibilities. The children of authoritative parents are often more independent and achievement oriented than other children. They also feel better about themselves. Parental demands for responsible behavior combined with affection and support usually pay off.

Be careful not to confuse the term *authoritative* with the word *authoritarian*, which means “favoring unquestioning obedience.” **Authoritarian** parents believe in obedience for its own sake. They have strict guidelines that they expect their children to follow without question. Children of authoritarian parents may become either resistant to other people or dependent on them. They generally do not do as well in school as children of authoritative parents. They also tend to be less friendly and less spontaneous.

STYLES OF PARENTING

**QUICK
FACTS**

Styles of parenting lie somewhere in the categories of strict-permissive and cold-warm. Each pair of words in the chart, such as *demanding* and *lenient* or *detached* and *affectionate*, represent ends of a continuum. Most parents do not lie at these extreme ends, but generally fall somewhere in the middle.

Strict	Permissive	Cold	Warm
Demanding Controlling Dictatorial Antagonistic	Lenient Democratic Inconsistent Overindulgent	Indifferent Careless Detached Negligent	Supportive Protective Affectionate Caring

Child Abuse and Neglect

Most parents are kind and loving to their children. Yet child abuse—physical, sexual, and psychological—is relatively widespread. The incidence of child abuse is seriously underreported because children themselves often are unable, unwilling, or afraid to go to the authorities, and abusive parents sometimes try to protect one another.

In 2006, about 3.3 million allegations of child abuse or neglect were made in the United States. About 905,000 children were found to be victims, which comes to approximately 12.1 children per 1,000. In the same year, there were an estimated 1,530 child abuse fatalities, of which 78 percent were children under the age of four.

Physical child abuse refers to a physical assault of a child, including actions such as striking, kicking, shaking, and choking. In 13 states, any child born showing evidence of having been exposed to alcohol or illegal drugs is also legally a victim of child abuse. Child sexual abuse is the sexual victimization or exploitation of a child by an older child, an adolescent, or an adult. More than 80 percent of the time in cases of sexual abuse, the child knows the perpetrator. It is often someone such as a relative, a childcare provider, a family friend, or a teacher.

Neglect is failure to give a child adequate food, shelter, clothing, emotional support, or schooling. More health problems and deaths result from neglect than from abuse.

Why do some parents abuse or neglect their children? Psychologists have found the following factors to be associated with child abuse or neglect:

- stress, particularly the stresses of unemployment and poverty
- a history of physical or sexual abuse in at least one parent's family of origin
- acceptance of violence as a way of coping with stress
- lack of attachment to the child
- substance abuse
- rigid attitudes about child rearing

Studies show that children who are abused run a higher risk of developing psychological problems than children who did not grow up in an abusive environment. For example, they tend to be unsure of themselves. They are thus less likely than other children to venture out to explore the world around them. They are more likely to suffer from a variety of psychological problems, such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. They are less likely to be close to their peers and more likely to engage in aggressive behavior. As adults, they are more likely to act in violent ways toward their dates or spouses.

Child abuse tends to run in families. There are many possible reasons for this pattern. For one thing, children may imitate their parents' behavior. If children see their parents coping with feelings of anger through violence, they are likely to follow suit.

They are less likely to seek other ways of coping, such as humor, verbal expression of negative feelings, deep breathing, or silently “counting to 10” before reacting. These strategies help by giving the feelings of anger time to subside. When parents attempt to cope with anger and stress by abusing alcohol, it can lead to child abuse as well. Alcohol abuse runs in families, and alcoholism is thought to have a genetic component.

Children also often adopt their parents’ ideas about discipline. Abused children may come to see severe punishment as normal. As a result, when they have children, they may continue the pattern of abuse and neglect.

This pattern does not mean, however, that all people who were abused as children will in turn become abusers themselves. Most children who are victims of abuse do not later abuse their own children. One study found that mothers who had been abused as children but who were able to break the cycle of abuse with their own children were likely to have received emotional support from a nonabusive adult during childhood. They were also likely to have participated in therapy and to have a nonabusive mate.

Child Care

In the United States today, most parents—both fathers and mothers—work outside the home. More than half of mothers of children younger than one year of age are working mothers. For this reason, millions of preschoolers are cared for in day-care facilities. Some parents and psychologists are concerned about the effects of day care on the development of children.

The effects of day care depend in part on the quality of the day-care center. One study found that children in day-care centers with many learning resources, many caregivers, and a good deal of individual attention did as well on cognitive and language tests as children who remained in the home with their mothers. A Swedish study actually found that on tests of math and language skills, children in the best day-care centers outperformed children who remained in the home.

Studies of the effects of day care on parent-child attachment have yielded mixed results. Children in full-time day care show less distress when their mothers leave them and are less likely to seek out their mother when they return. Some psychologists worry that this distancing from the mother could mean that the child is insecurely attached. But other psychologists suggest that children may simply be adapting to repeated separations from and reunions with their mothers.

Day care seems to have mixed effects on other aspects of children’s social development. Children in day care are more likely to share their toys and be independent, self-confident, and outgoing. However, some studies have found that children in day care are less cooperative and more aggressive than are other children. Perhaps some children in day care do not receive the individual attention they need. When they are placed in a competitive situation, they become more aggressive to try to meet their needs. Yet some

psychologists interpret the greater aggressiveness of children in day care as a sign of independence rather than social maladjustment.

All in all, it would appear that nonparental care in itself may not affect child development very much. The quality of care seems to be more important than who provides it.

Self-Esteem

[Self-esteem](#), the value or worth that people attach to themselves, begins to develop in early childhood. It is important because it helps to protect people against the stresses and struggles of life. Everyone experiences failure now and then, but high self-esteem gives people the confidence to know that they can overcome their difficulties. Although high self-esteem is important, recent research questions its aggressive promotion, at the expense of other virtues, in modern child rearing.

Influences on Self-Esteem

What factors influence self-esteem? Secure attachment plays a major role. Young children who are securely attached to their parents are more likely to have high self-esteem.

How parents react to their children can also make a difference. Research suggests that authoritative parenting contributes to high self-esteem in children. Children with high self-esteem tend to be close to their parents because their parents are loving and involved in their lives. Their parents also teach and expect appropriate behavior and thus encourage them to become competent individuals.

Psychologist Carl Rogers noted that there are two types of support parents can give to their children—unconditional positive regard or conditional positive regard. [Unconditional positive regard](#) means that parents love and accept their children for who they are—no matter how they behave. Children who receive unconditional positive regard usually develop high self-esteem. They know that even if they do something wrong or inappropriate, they are still worthwhile as people.

On the other hand, children who receive conditional positive regard may have lower self-esteem. [Conditional positive regard](#) means that parents show their love only when the children behave in certain acceptable ways. Children who receive conditional positive regard may feel worthwhile only when they are doing what their parents (or other authority figures) want them to do.

Once these children grow up, they often continue to seek the approval of other people. Excessive need for approval from other people is linked to low self-esteem. It is unrealistic for people to expect everyone to like and respect them. If they understand that it is natural for others to not always appreciate them, they may have higher self-esteem in the long run.

A sense of competence also increases self-esteem. By the age of about four, children begin to judge themselves according to their cognitive, physical, and social competence. Children who know that they are good at something usually have higher self-esteem than others. Children may feel good about themselves if they are good at puzzles or counting (cognitive skills), if they are good at tying their shoelaces or swinging (physical skills), or if they have friends (social skills).

Gender and Self-Esteem

By the ages of about five to seven, children begin to value themselves on the basis of their physical appearance and performance in school. Girls tend to display greater competence in the areas of reading and general academic skills. Boys tend to display competence in math and physical skills.

Does this mean that girls are genetically better in reading and boys better in math? No. It may be that the reason girls and boys show greater competence in these areas is that people around them have suggested that this is what girls and boys are supposed to be good at. So girls predict that they will do better on tasks that are considered to be “feminine.”

Boys predict that they will do better when tasks are labeled “masculine.” When people feel they will do well at a particular task, they often do. People generally live up to the expectations that they have for themselves and that others have for them.

Age and Self-Esteem Children gain in competence as they grow older. Through experience they learn more skills and become better at them. Even so, their self-esteem tends to decline during the elementary school years. Self-esteem seems to reach a low point at about age 12 or 13 and increases again during adolescence. What explains this pattern? It appears that young children assume that others see them as they see themselves. Thus, if they like themselves, they assume that other people like them too. As children develop, however, they begin to realize that some people might not see them the way they see themselves. They also begin to compare themselves to their peers. If they see themselves as less competent in some areas, their self-esteem may decrease.

The Self-Esteem Trap By the 1970s, the dominant feeling among psychologists and in U.S. culture at large was that boosting people’s self-esteem could greatly improve the state of the society. Greater self-esteem would help people solve their personal problems and love themselves and their neighbors. It was thought of by many as a potential cure-all for society’s ills. Parents and teachers were taught that failure, ranking, and unequal rewards for competition were potential death blows to self-esteem. Showering children with praise regardless of performance on a task was the order of the day.

In 2000, a group of psychologists surveyed the published research on the subject and presented findings on the benefits of high self-esteem. The conclusions were surprising. High self-esteem in children did not lead to higher grades. Kids with high self-esteem did have higher grades. But that was because getting good grades promoted high self-esteem, not the other way around. Also, high self-esteem did not make violent kids any less so or keep kids from becoming bullies. The evidence showed that, in general, bullies think highly of themselves. The stereotype of the bully as sullen, self-hating, and desperate for praise was not borne out by the research.

Other results were more predictable. People with high self-esteem were generally happier and more resilient in the face of problems, and they showed more initiative. They were also more likely to stand up to bullies themselves. Although these are positive things, it seems that focusing on building self-esteem at the expense of other qualities, such as self-control or self-discipline, may be misguided.