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Parenting Styles/Children's Temperaments: The Match

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Introduction

When a child is born, parents' lives inevitably change. From the beginning they need to make decisions: bottle or breast feeding; carriage or stroller; nanny or day care, work or stay at home; and the list goes on. As children grow older, the decisions don't stop; they change -- school, meals, allowances, after-school activities, friendships, holidays. Although solutions to these individual daily dilemmas are important, it's the parents' overall style and attitude that count as they influence, teach and socialize their children.

Parenting style—what is it?

Parenting style refers to the *broad overall pattern* of parental actions, rather than to a single act.

Types of parenting styles

Descriptions of parenting styles grew out of the work of Diana Baumrind and other researchers in child development. They looked at children who had the qualities most of us would want in our children: independence, maturity, self-reliance, self-control, curiosity, friendliness and achievement orientation. The researchers then interviewed the parents of these children to ascertain which elements of parenting fostered these qualities.

They identified two important ingredients:

- a) responsiveness, or warmth and supportiveness
- b) demandingness or behavioral control.

Four styles of parenting, as listed below, are based on these elements.

Authoritarian, or extremely strict, parents are highly controlling. They dictate how their children should behave. They stress obedience to authority and discourage discussion. They are demanding and directive. They expect their orders to be obeyed and do not encourage give-and-take. They have low levels of sensitivity and do not expect their children to disagree with their decisions.

Authoritative, or moderate, parents set limits and rely on natural consequences for children to learn from making their own mistakes. Authoritative parents explain why rules are important and why they must be followed. They reason with their children and consider the children's point of view even though they might not agree. They are firm, with kindness, warmth and love. They set high standards and encourage children to be independent.

Permissive, or indulgent, parents are accepting and warm but exert little control. They do not set limits, and allow children to set their own rules and schedules and activities. They do not make demands about behavior as authoritarian or authoritative parents do.

Uninvolved parents demand little and respond minimally. In extreme cases, this parenting style might entail neglect and rejection.

How does parenting style affect children?

Research has found that the best adjusted children, particularly in terms of social competence, have parents with an authoritative, moderate parenting style. These parents are able to balance clearly stated, high demands with emotional responsiveness and respect for their child's autonomy. Both authoritarian and authoritative parents have high expectations of their children and use control, but the overly strict parent expects the child to unquestioningly accept parental judgments and allows the child little freedom of expression. Children of overly strict parents are apt to be reliant on the voice of authority and to be lacking in spontaneity. In contrast, the authoritative parent permits the child enough freedom of expression so that he or she can develop a sense of independence. Permissive parents make few demands and their children have been found to have difficulty controlling their impulses, and can be immature and reluctant to accept responsibility.

One example of the effect of parenting style on the development of children was published in the June 2006 issue of *Pediatrics*. A research team headed by Dr. Kyung E. Rhee, a pediatrician at Boston Medical Center, analyzed data for 872 children collected by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. They assessed the relationship between child-rearing style, assessed when the children were 4 and a half years of age, and their weight status two years later.

By that time more than 11 percent of the children were overweight and an additional 13.4 percent were considered at risk. The children of authoritarian mothers were nearly five times as likely to be overweight as those of authoritative mothers, and children of permissive or uninvolved parents were at more than three times the risk. The researchers stated that an overly strict upbringing can have a negative impact on weight because the children may fail to learn to eat on the basis of hunger and satiety. In such families parents may use food as a reward, insist that children clean their plates, or restrict the kind or amount of food a child can eat.

Parenting styles and some daily dilemmas

Annie, aged 4, has grabbed a ball from Luisa, another child.

Strict parent: You come back right this minute and give that ball back to Luisa immediately.

Moderate parent: The ball belongs to Luisa. I know you want to play with it, but why don't you talk it over with her and try and work out a system to take turns?

Permissive parent, believing that Annie should be allowed to express her impulses freely, doesn't suggest a solution and does not use the opportunity to help her solve a problem.

Richard, aged 12, wants to rent an R-rated DVD that his friends have been talking about.

Strict parent gets mad and tells him he can't rent any more DVDs.
Moderate parent says no and helps him find a more appropriate DVD.
Permissive parent lets him rent it when he pleads.

What about children's styles?

Parenting doesn't happen in a vacuum; parenting is an interactive situation. Children also have styles, or temperaments, which mesh with their parents' style, each affecting the other. Children are born with a tendency toward reacting to people and events in specific ways. This preferred way of responding is called temperament. Children in the same family often have different temperaments, and parents who have several children are likely to recognize the differences and react differently to each child. For example, a parent would probably respond quite differently to an overly active, impulsive child than to a shy, timid child. She probably would discourage impulsive behavior in the overly active child but encourage assertive behavior in the shy child.

Differences in children's temperament can be seen even in infancy. Researchers have delineated three broad styles of temperament, as follows:

Easy children are calm, happy, adaptable, regular in sleeping and eating habits, positive in mood and interested in new experiences.

Difficult children are often fussy, irregular in feeding and sleeping habits, low in adaptability, fearful of new people and situations, easily upset, high strung, and intense in their reactions.

Slow to warm up children are relatively inactive, reflective, tend to withdraw or to react negatively to novelty, but their reactions gradually become more positive with experience.

It's the mix or the "**goodness of fit**" between parent and child that matters most. The match or mismatch between a child and parent determines the harmony between them. Temperament, however, is not set in stone. Although temperament has been shown to be consistent over time, family environment and life experiences can make a difference. Parents who are sensitive to their child's temperamental style and can recognize the child's unique strengths will make family life smoother. For example, when faced with a new situation, a parent of a slow to warm up child may need to be patient and allow him more time to assess a situation. A difficult child may need advance rehearsal of the expected behavior to help her deal with the new situation.

Obviously, all parents and children are unique and not easily categorized. Most will show characteristics of several styles, but over time, one style generally prevails.

What parents should keep in mind

Think about how your own temperament style meshes with your child's temperament style.

Be attuned to your child's temperament and encourage her to accomplish tasks at her own pace.

Make your expectations clear. Setting limits will help your child develop self control.

Encourage children to work with you on generating solutions to problems.

Make communication a priority. Be open to discussion; take time to explain your decisions and motives and listen to your children's point of view.

Make them aware that their opinions are respected, but remain firm in your decisions.

Respect each child's individual strengths and don't compare children.