ASSESSING YOUR PARENTING STYLE

Each of us has our own parenting style that is unique to our particular personality characteristics and philosophies on how children should be raised. Generally, these styles encompass some basic ideas on discipline, relationship building, and expectations. Often our parenting styles are greatly influenced by those we experienced at the hands of our own parents when we were children

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That said, let's examine three basic parenting styles and see how they stack up in moving us toward our goal. To help us in our endeavor, we'll use four basic characteristics for all three styles as points of comparison. Let's begin!

AUTHORITATIVE

As you might have guessed, we are starting with the most favorable parenting style, so that we have a good basis for comparison. The authoritative style is easily the most difficult of the three, mainly because it combines the two tasks of developing and maintaining close, warm relationships with our children while at the same time establishing structure and guidelines that are enforced as is necessary. This is a very tricky balance to obtain, and most of us will find ourselves waffling from time to time toward one end of the spectrum at the expense of the other. Not to worry, this is normal. What we are striving for is a general sense of balance that is achieved most of the time. Let's look at the specifics of this style.

Behavioral Guidelines. Using this approach, behavioral guidelines and a structure for upholding standards are clearly defined by the parent(s). At the same time, parents are flexible in examining and adjusting these guidelines as seems fitting based on the child's growing capacities for decision-making and autonomy. Children (especially teens) are able to participate in open discussions about guidelines, and to voice their views. A good procedure to use is to let your children know that you are open to listening to their arguments and views, and that if they are convincing (make sense, are logical, etc.), you will change your mind. However, it must be accepted that you have the final word. This process not only allows children to feel they have some participation in setting standards, but it provides an opportunity for enhancing higher-level thinking which involves planning for contingencies, using logic, and matching "wants" with reality.

Emotional Quality of Parent-Child Relationship. The relationship between parent and child in this approach is characterized by warmth, friendliness, and mutual respect. Parents and children maintain a sense of closeness, even in the face of conflict. There is a sense on the part of the child that the parent values his or her own special uniqueness, and has his or her best interests at heart at all times. Authority is maintained by the parents, but with a sense of empathy and understanding. Most importantly, much of the parent-child interaction is not focused on authority issues, but is rather used for regular interchange in which the child grows to count on the parent(s)' unwavering interest in all aspects of the child's life.

This is exemplified by regular, daily conversation that is free-flowing and covers a wide range of topics. It may simply mean that the parent allows the child to chatter at length about something that interests him. For a young boy, it may mean hearing in great detail the strategies for playing a video game, or for a teen it may mean hearing about the latest interactions in the peer group at school. In both cases, a sense of interest and empathy is felt by the child to come from the parent. This provides a strong base for effectively working on behavioral issues as they arise.

Behaviors Encouraged. The authoritative parenting style encourages "enabling" behaviors. This means that the primary purpose of guidelines for behavior is to promote the growing sense of autonomy the child has as he or she develops, as well as to enhance the process of individuation. Individuation is part of a larger discussion, but for our purposes here, we will just say that it encompasses the child's growing sense of individuality, especially in terms of separateness from parental figures. Enabling behaviors encourage questions, tolerance, abstract thinking, and explanations. It promotes the development of a healthy and strong ego, in which self-esteem is generally steady.

Levels of Parent-Child Conflict. There is an overall low level of conflict between parents and children using this approach. This is true even for adolescents who are at the height of their quest to build an individual identity. The basic sense of love and respect that has been developed, along with the practice of systematically enhancing the child's capacity for decision-making, results in a system in which children and adolescents seek the advice of their parents rather than feeling as though they need to secretly rebel. The hallmark of this approach is a mutual trust that develops out of closeness, regular guidance, and tolerance for differences.

AUTHORITARIAN

The authoritarian style of parenting is focused primarily on controlling behavior to meet the expectations of the parents. All other aspects of the parent-child relationship are secondary to this focus, and as such, certain aspects of the child's development are hindered. The style is fairly rigid and requires unquestioned obedience without discussion or explanation. Explanations may be offered, however, they are not open for interpretation or exploration. Let's look at this style in terms of the four variables used above.

Behavioral Guidelines. Behavioral guidelines are rigid and highly enforced. They are set by the parents, and are usually presented in a black and white manner so that there is no room for discussion and/or interpretation. The system for enforcing these guidelines is fairly dictatorial, often employing punishments that are severe and beyond the scope of the behavioral infraction. The overall goal in this style of parenting is control as opposed to learning and promotion of the child's development of autonomy.

Emotional Quality of Parent-Child Relationship. The authoritarian style makes it difficult for the development of closeness between parent and child. Real closeness is based on a sense of mutual respect, and a belief on the part of the parent that the child has the capacity to learn self-control and decision making through both behavioral guidelines and his or her own cognitive capacities. The authoritarian style doesn't recognize the child's process of individuation and/or growing need for autonomy. The closeness that may develop with this style is in actuality pseudo-closeness, because it comes from the child's fear of displeasing the parent rather than desire to grow and develop. Children coming from this parenting style are often anxious and have higher levels of depression. They may also have problems with behavior and impulse control, especially when not in the parents' presence.

Behaviors Encouraged. The behaviors encouraged under this style are called "constraining" behaviors. The goal here is to control rather than encourage the process of thinking through a problem and making a productive decision. The overall

quality of the guidelines is prohibitive and negative, and often quite punitive. One feels as though they are being instructed on what not to do rather than on learning a valuable lesson that will help them in future social situations.

Levels of Parent-Child Conflict. Excessive control without true closeness and mutual respect breeds rebellion. In other words, the authoritarian style of parenting can result in a lot of conflict between parents and children, even if not overtly expressed. The conflict may come in the form of children acting out in school, fighting with other children, or becoming involved in deviant behavior such as delinquency or substance abuse. At the other extreme, these children may be perfectionistic and overly focused on achievement at the expense of necessary emotional growth. In either case, the process of individuation necessary for becoming a high-functioning adult is hindered.

PERMISSIVE

The permissive style of parenting is on the opposite end of the spectrum from the authoritarian style. In the former, there are virtually no guidelines for behavior, or very loosely constructed ones that are not enforced. Parents using this style may be found to repeatedly engage in trying to cajole their kids into behaving in some way or another, but without any real strength of intention, and without any reinforcement. Permissive parents tend to be either too involved in their children's minute to minute sense of happiness, or very little involved in any aspect of their children's lives. In both cases, the results are negative and far-reaching for the child.

Behavioral Guidelines. The identifying feature of this style is that behavioral guidelines are very hazy, and may in some cases appear to be absent. Parents may become overly focused on trying to appease their children at every display of seeming unhappiness. This may mean that as soon as the child appears to be upset (particularly when a guideline is presented), the parent gives in and allows the child to do whatever is desired. This may bring an immediate smile, but has long-term negative consequences for the child as he or she basically learns that self-control is not necessary, and that authority is not be respected or paid much attention. Other parents using the permissive approach may just be absent altogether, thereby allowing their children to behave without any structure. These children are unable to develop any sense of self-discipline and have the accompanied problem of feeling uncared for and unloved. These children turn to the peer group for the standards of behavior, and most often choose a peer group whose standards are deviant. These are the children who eventually find themselves in conflict with other figures of authority be it school personnel, other parents, law enforcement officers, etc.

Emotional Quality of Parent-Child Relationship. Just as the behavioral guidelines are unclear for the child of the permissive parent, so too are the roles played by each. In both the authoritative and authoritarian styles, the roles of parent and child are clearly defined. Mostly this has to do with the designation of the parent as the one with final authority, and/or as the one who has the greater ability to provide guidance. For the permissive parent, on the other hand, the roles may become quite blurred. For example, the parents may see themselves more in the role of the child's friend or pal. Or, the parent may become overly involved in the child's life thus living through them somewhat vicariously. In the case of the less involved parent, the child may be seen as having the capacity of an adult to care for himself, and thus not be in need of the parent's guidance or intervention. The result is either a relationship that is inappropriately close such as in the friendship model, or one that is devoid of closeness. In both cases, this leaves the child very susceptible to feelings of depression and emotional distress. In the case of the overly indulged child, strong feelings of entitlement also emerge leaving the child with almost no tools for negotiating the normal give-and-take aspects of a healthy relationship.

Behaviors Encouraged. Neither enabling nor constraining behaviors are encouraged by the permissive parent. Instead, children are often very immature and display a number of regressive behaviors, or they engage in adult-like

behaviors that are not acted out with adult-like maturity. I'm sure you're familiar with an older child who whines and cries to get his way (and succeeds), or who argues with infantile stubbornness every time the parent tries to impose a rule. Conversely, there are the kids who are involved in adult activities (early sexuality, drinking, etc.) long before they are ready to handle the responsibility that goes hand in hand with such activities.

Levels of Parent-Child Conflict. Generally there are low levels of conflict between parents and children with the permissive style. This is especially true for situations in which the parents are virtually absent, and are uninvolved in setting standards of behavior as well as participating in their children's lives. These children tend to become estranged from their parents while looking toward the peer group as the substitute family. These kids may seem to be quite independent, but are in actuality the least independent coming from all three parenting styles. The children who are more enmeshed with their parents may exhibit a higher level of conflict with parents, but the quality of the conflict is not real in the sense that there are true disagreements and deviations from the parents. They are instead manipulative in nature, and only used as a means of keeping the parents in a permissive mode of operation. These kids are not estranged from the parents, but also have very little independence and autonomy. Whereas the authoritative style of parenting is considered to be the best, the permissive style, especially where the parent is emotionally neglectful, is considered to be the most harmful.

GUIDELINES FOR AUTHORITATIVE PARENTING

- Daily Conversation. Engage your child in conversation at least once a day that is non-pejorative, and that allows you to learn something about what's important to him and what is going on in his life.
- Relationship-building. Separate disciplinary discussions from relationship-building discussions.
- Set behavioral standards. Set clear standards for behavior that are well-thought out, and that will allow your child to fit into the general rules of his social setting.
- Establish consequences. Set up clear consequences for infractions of rules, however, make sure that the consequences begin lightly and increase only as same behaviors are repeated. Consequences should fit the nature of the infraction and provide a lesson when at all possible.
- Focus on empathy. Be particularly attuned to behaviors that infringe on the rights and feelings of others.
- Encourage self-expression and high-level thinking. Allow and encourage discussion of your child's feelings about rules and standards, and allow for disagreement. You have the final word, but understanding your child's point of view and giving him the chance to verbalize it will increase his thinking capacities as well as encourage the successful handling of negative emotions.
- Flexibility. Be flexible when the situation calls for it.
- Acknowledge individual differences. Approach your child always with respect for his individual temperament, especially when different from yours.
- Practice high-level discussion. Allow your child to speak freely although respectfully. Don't interrupt until he has finished with a thought, and don't respond until carefully considering what has been said and what your goal is to be. You are teaching your child to internalize your skills at logic, thinking, and caring.

- Teach by example. Remember that ultimately your child will internalize who you are. If you deal with your child from a position of both love and strength, then that's what he or she will take in and own.