

Levels of Parental Influence and the Effects on Children: Too Much, Not Enough, and Just Right

Michelle Gefroh

Abstract: *This paper discusses how different levels of parental involvement determine the type of person a child will be, and explains why authoritative parenting is optimal because it involves a mixture of high and low influence. It reveals that combining high and low parental influence with the authoritative parenting style can lead to the most positive effects on children and adolescents. Numerous sources in relation to this topic are referenced, such as academic journals, books, and an interview with Renee Patrick, an expert in the field of developmental psychology. This paper offers knowledge that can benefit parents and children because it is a topic that is relevant to their everyday lives. Parenting is a monumental part of how children develop, and it is important that they are able to mature into well-rounded and successful individuals. The purpose of this paper is to present the information to parents that authoritative parenting is superior to permissive and authoritarian.*

Potential parents should know how various types of parenting affect how children grow up and mature into adults, because “parents are the ‘final common pathway’ to child development and stature, adjustment, and success” (Bornstein, 2005, p. 311). A mixture of high and low involvement from parents in addition to authoritative parenting has been proven to lead to well-rounded individuals. Potential parents have the opportunity to read and learn what the optimal level of parental influence is in order for children to mature without behavioral or developmental problems. Now that developmental psychologists have distinguished authoritative parenting with a mixture of high and low parental influence as preferential to raise children, parents must consider this knowledge in order to consciously make better parenting choices.

The phrase “parenting styles” is used to clarify and discuss the specific subject of parental influence. According to Marsiglia,

Walczyk, Buboltz, and Griffith-Ross (2007), parenting styles can be defined as “consistent pattern[s] with which parents interact with their children along two dimensions: demandingness and responsiveness” (para. 4). The term “demandingness” is essentially the level of expectations parents have for their children (para 4). Responsiveness is the degree to which parents are “aware [of] and supportive of children’s needs and demands” (para. 4). Established based on the varying degrees of demandingness and responsiveness, three different parenting styles were distinguished by Diana Baumrind (1973): authoritarian, permissive, and authoritative, each of which corresponds to high involvement, low involvement, and mid-level involvement.

The authoritarian and permissive styles are considered the two extremes in terms of parenting, and because of that there have been instances in the media that expose the weaknesses of these styles. For example, George Sachs (2016) gives a new term that goes even farther than an average authoritarian parent, or even a helicopter parent: the drone parent. He goes on to explain that there are people that over-parent to the extent that they purchase drones to follow their children while they go through their daily lives. These children do not learn how to handle conflict, boundaries, or discomfort, because the parent makes sure that their child is untouched by those unfortunate experiences (para. 9). These children are unable to be on their own or be successful in life without any help because their parents never gave them the opportunity to learn how. On the other end of the spectrum are overly-permissive parents. An article about two parents that allowed their children to go to the park on their own, crossing busy streets filled with cars on the way there, provides an example of extreme permissive parenting (Kartalija, 2015). The children were picked up by the police for fear of their safety, and the parents were questioned about why they provide their children with such little supervision. They claimed they were teaching their kids about independence, but that brings up the question: how much independence is too much? The children in this situation are unable to learn boundaries of society in order for them to be safe, and the

parents are not involved enough to change that. While these are extreme situations, the impact on the children with authoritarian or permissive parents remain the same. These effects help support why the authoritative parenting with a mixture of high and low influence is beneficial to children.

I. Descriptions of Parenting Styles

Authoritarian parenting is typically known as the style with the highest level of parental influence and involvement in a child's life. Authoritarian parents have very high expectations and strict rules with severe consequences if violated, as well as a low level of responsiveness to their children's needs and wants (Marsiglia et al., para. 5). Subcategories of this style are more commonly known as "helicopter parenting" and "tiger parenting," or as referenced previously, the "drone parent." According to LeMoyne and Buchanan (2011), helicopter parents are "actively engaged in helping their children to succeed and achieve in life" (p. 402). Helicopter parents also worry for the development of their child's problem-solving and decision making skills, but helicopter parents "act on these concerns by 'doing' for their child," which hinders the child's ability to acquire their own sense of independency and maturity (p. 402). American lawyer and legal scholar Amy Chua (2011) discusses the differences in parenting between "Western parents" and "Chinese mothers," otherwise known as tiger mothers. Tiger parents fall into the authoritarian style based on the fact that they are very involved in the child's life, although tiger parents are more specifically concerned with their child's achievements in academics. Chua reports that American parents raise their children to think of learning as fun and that they should do the best they possibly can, whereas tiger parents believe that a child struggling in school means there were problems with raising the child and that the parents are to blame (para. 9). In the eyes of a tiger parent, higher academic achievement reflects successful parenting (para. 9). A high amount of involvement isn't directly related to the authoritarian parenting style; however, they often coincide. The authoritarian style represents extreme parenting, in that they greatly limit their children's ability to

grow and mature with any form of individuality. If that is one extreme, then the other would be parents who allow their child to develop their individuality, but at the cost of the child learning discipline and control.

Permissive parents, on the opposite end of the spectrum from authoritarian, are known to provide their children with love and support, but with few rules and low expectations (Marsiglia et al., 2007, para. 6). One well-known style called “free-range” parenting falls into this category. Free-range parenting is essentially providing children with basic necessities, including food, shelter, love, and support (Marsiglia et al., para. 6). The minimal involvement in the child’s life causes this parenting style to fall into the permissive style category. Permissive parents are unlikely to have any rules, and if they do then the punishments for breaking these rules are inconsistently applied. Authors Salk and Kramer (1969) claim that these parents “think [children] should have complete freedom in expressing themselves and feel that any inhibition of this freedom would in some way hold the child back” (pp. 132-133). However, this belief often causes children to think they can do whatever they want, whenever they want to, which in turn leads to various behavioral problems that will be discussed later. As emphasized by Marsiglia et al., “by not setting behavioral limits and goals and not holding children responsible for surpassing or falling short of those limits and goals, parents are failing to teach children that they are responsible for their own behavior” (para. 6). Again, permissive parenting doesn’t have a causal relationship with low levels of parental influence; but, they are commonly observed together. Authoritarian and permissive are the two extremes of parenting styles, with authoritative parenting residing in between them.

Authoritative parenting is considered the intermediate because the parents have rules, unlike permissive parents, but with a lower degree of punishment compared to authoritarian (Marsiglia et al., para. 7). The mixture of high and low influence is not synonymous with the authoritative parenting style, but they are most often observed together. These types of parents also have an average amount of responsiveness, which involves

slowly becoming less involved with children as they get older and learn from their mistakes (para. 7). According to Ginott (1965), authoritative parents believe that “responsibility in children starts with the parent’s attitude and skills” and as the child matures they build off of those attitudes to develop their own individual skills (p. 69). These types of parents “recognize children’s individuality, encourage verbal exchange, engage children in joint decision-making, and insist that children progressively assume more responsibility for responding to the needs of other family members within the limits of their capabilities” (Marsiglia et al., para. 7). A subcategory of authoritative parenting is “French style” parenting, which involves allowing children to experience the world in ways that other parents would not, such as exposing their children to new foods or new places but without forcing the child to do anything they wouldn’t on their own (Druckerman, 2012). These parents influence their children to participate in new experiences, such as trying different types of food that the child would be unlikely to taste without their parent’s involvement. French style also put focus on developing children’s patience. Druckerman argued that “most French children, unlike many of their American counterparts, did not need to be entertained constantly by their parents” (para. 10). Authoritative parenting allows children to develop their own sense of self while still learning the boundaries and rules of society.

At this point, the background information on each of the parenting styles as well as the definitions and descriptions of each are evident. It is time now to expand on the effects each of those styles have on children, and which style is superior based on how successful the children are both physically and psychologically.

II. Effects of Parenting Styles

Through research referenced in this section, scientists have found correlations with certain behaviors in children and which type of parenting styles they experienced. More behavioral problems are found alongside the authoritarian and permissive parenting styles, whereas the authoritative style tends to pro-

duce more well-behaved and psychologically healthy children.

Authoritarian parents influence their children to become used to having their parents constantly involved in every aspect of their lives, including socially and academically. Behaviors observed in children raised by highly involved parents typically include that they are more extrinsically motivated, are more efficient when getting work done, and have high success rates in school (Belkin, 2009). Some concerning developments would be that they also have poor social skills, lack independence, and have low levels of self-esteem (Marsiglia et al., para. 5). According to authors Ashner and Meyerson (1990), “competence in childhood grows into adult self-confidence,” and when parents are too involved “they deprive their children of the necessary tools and experiences to build a sense of mastery over their world” that would later lead to high self-confidence (p. 43). Children of authoritarian parents often experience conflicting feelings in their lives, which leads to confusion and discomfort. For example, they “feel entitled to have people do for [them] and care for [them]” and when others do that, they “feel uncomfortable, obligated, smothered, and compelled to push them away” (p. 51). Authors Salk and Kramer (1969) argue that “the children of such parents are children one doesn’t particularly like to have around—inconsiderate and destructive” (p. 79). Salk and Kramer also claim that “parents who only think about their children’s being neat and clean and polite restrict them in such a way that they haven’t enough kinds of experience to learn from” (p. 134). This highlights the main downfall of authoritarian parenting because the parents are too focused on raising the child to be refined, professional, and have a businesslike type of attitude. This causes the children to be limited in exercising their ability to develop their own sense of self or individuality, as well as learning how to succeed and live on their own.

Permissive parents typically choose to have a low level of involvement in their child’s life, and because of that their children tend to develop both good and bad qualities and behaviors. Children raised with low levels of parental influence are more independent and are able to work through problems on

their own, leading to more efficient and higher level thinking (Robinson & Harris, 2014, para. 8). These permissive parenting styles also cause some behavioral problems, such as increased likelihood to give in to peer pressure, underdevelopment of basic social skills, and poor performance in school (Marsiglia et al., 2007, para. 6). Children with permissive parents also tend to have certain behaviors that were caused by a need that went unsatisfied during infancy. To explain that point, Salk and Kramer argue that “there are times in life when certain stimuli are necessary for the development of a pattern of behavior... [and] if those stimuli are not present, the behavior will not develop” (p. 87). When parents do not punish their child, it limits the child’s ability to learn self-control, which leads to behavioral problems later in their life. The missing stimulus in that case would be the punishment, and when that is missing, it causes stress in the child’s life because they are constantly unsure whether their behavior is acceptable or unacceptable. This leads to “very anxious children and often very destructive ones...because they are asking somebody to stop them” if they give in to any “aggressive instincts” (Salk & Kramer, p. 126). When children misbehave, they look to parent figures to see if they will get in trouble. If they are not punished, then they are more inclined to misbehave again which make behavioral problems more likely later in life. Renee Patrick of the University of Tampa (personal communication, April 8, 2016), illustrated that when some children enter the toddlerhood stage of life, they are not easily consoled, and have no impulse control, which causes their parents to back up their discipline with reasoning in order for the child to realize why some of their actions have a negative impact on others. Salk and Kramer acknowledge that “an atmosphere of complete freedom seems to lead to feelings of insecurity and various kinds of provocative ‘testing’ behavior,” which demonstrates that they would be more likely to misbehave with fewer rules (p. 127). Too much freedom is a true possibility when it comes to raising children. In order for adolescents to mature and grow into well-rounded successful adults, parents must provide structure and expectations for their children. Neither permissive nor authoritarian parenting

is the best decision when raising children, which supports the idea that the authoritative style is what parents should follow.

Research cited in this paper supports that authoritative parenting style with a mixture of high and low influences results in the most positive effects on children. According to Salk and Kramer (1969), a good parent could be defined as “one who equips a child to deal with as many of the kinds of situations that come up in life as possible” (p. 133). These authors briefly compared what an authoritative parent does versus an authoritarian or permissive one:

A good parent helps a child learn how to cope with reality and how to master his impulses in relation to the demands of society. He or she is not a parents who pushes, not a parent who overprotects, who always does things for the child. If [parents] go on doing things for him, [they] don't help the child learn to do them for himself. On the other hand, if [parents] make demands a child is not ready to meet, [they're] putting him under pressure to which he may not be able to respond. (p. 133)

This illustrates how parents with mixed amounts of influence are able to raise more successful children, by allowing them to learn how to mature and grow in their own way with parents as guides to help them do that. They need to learn how to be on their own in order to be successful in both their personal and professional lives. Authoritative parenting is the best option for children to be able to develop those specific skills that will help them most later in life. In a study conducted by professors of psychology Padilla-Walker, Carlo, Christensen, and Yorgason (2012), they found that children with authoritative parents demonstrated higher levels of prosocial behavior, which is defined as “actions intended to benefit others” (pp. 400-401). They argue that “children who exhibit high levels of prosocial behavior tend to evidence positive personal and social characteristics such as high levels of...moral reasoning, sympathy, self-regulation, trustworthiness, lower aggression, and good parent-child relationships” (p. 400). Those behaviors are typically observed

in what modern society would consider well-rounded and successful adults. Renee Patrick (personal communication, April 8, 2016) asserted that she believes “inductive discipline, or... authoritative parenting has a good combination of reasoning with the child and also a little bit of demandingness,” which has the best overall impact on the child as they mature. Inductive discipline, also known as induction, can be defined “loosely as parental ‘reasoning’ with the child,” although “specifically [as] highlighting the consequences of the child’s transgression for the victim (such as a peer or the parent)” (Patrick & Gibbs, 2012, p. 973). Induction is commonly observed with authoritative parenting, and it is beneficial in raising children because it causes children to see how their actions impact others, and they are able to learn how to make those impacts positive. In the words of Marsiglia et al. (2007), “by allowing children to learn from their mistakes and to proceed independently when fairing well, parents may be encouraging their children’s future self-reliance” (para. 7). This would be another positive effect of authoritative parenting because it illustrates that by being involved in a child’s life at first, and then allowing them to further develop their skills on their own leads to more successful individuals.

In this paper, three sides of the parental influence debate are discussed: that authoritarian, permissive, or authoritative parenting is most beneficial to children. Even given evidence, such as all that is referenced throughout this paper, there remain pockets of resistance that will not accept that authoritative parenting is superior over authoritarian and permissive.

Author Lisa Belkin (2009) favors authoritarian parenting and argues that children with parents who have a high level of involvement in their children’s life are more likely to be highly involved in school and they are happier with life overall. However, Ashner and Meyerson (1990) directly refute that authoritarian parenting is beneficial to children. They give examples of children with authoritarian parents that experience higher levels of confusion and uncertainty in their lives, which causes them to develop low levels of self-confidence (p. 51). Amy Chua (2011) stated that she was a parent who was very involved in

her child's life, but she wouldn't have it any other way (n.p.). She argued that her children benefitted from her authoritarian parenting and they went on to become highly successful adults (n.p.). Another supporter of this view, author Alice Park (2014), wrote about her experience as a child with a "tiger mom." She argued that because of the high level of parental involvement in her life she developed a great work ethic, achieved high grades, and went on to become a very successful adult (n.p.). She gives a lot of credit to her mom for her triumphs, and even admits at the end of the article "that all that discipline has probably made me a more organized and confident adult" (n.p.). However thankful Park is to her parents, there remains the fact that while children with highly involved parents typically have higher achievements, it is at the cost of their social skills and self-esteem. Marsiglia et al. refute the claims of Chua and Park by providing proof that children with highly involved parents "have poorer social skills, lower self-esteem, and higher levels of depression than do children of authoritative parents" (para. 5). Authoritarian parents are more likely to focus on their child's many academic or work successes, and less likely to see that their child is not fully satisfied with their social life or level of self-confidence.

On another side of this debate, some individuals believe the best way to raise children is to provide the basics, but nothing more. In support of permissive parenting, Robinson and Harris (2014) argue that children benefit more with permissive parents with little influence in the child's life. They use academic achievements to illustrate this point, claiming that "there were more instances in which children had higher levels of achievement when their parents were less involved than there were among those whose parents were more involved" (n.p.). Referring again to Marsiglia et al., their research proved that children of permissive parents are "more likely to be involved in problem behaviors and perform less well in school," whereas Robinson and Harris did not reference any proof to back up their claim. Anthropologist and science writer Gwen Dewar (2010) also supports the belief that permissive parenting is better for children. In an article she stated that "researchers report

that permissiveness was associated with strong academic performance and relatively few behavioral problems" (para. 5). However, Salk and Kramer (1969) stated that children "from overpermissive homes and schools are at a loss because their... environment did not provide them with the capacity to plan for the future" (p. 134). These children became used to doing what they wanted when they wanted to, and that mindset does not lead to academic success (p. 134). Permissive parents didn't provide their children enough stimulation in order to develop their interest in growing up to be a successful adult, and these children go out into the world unprepared for what is ahead. Even though there are small groups that believe otherwise, the evidence cited in this paper supports that authoritative parenting with a mixture of high and low influence is preferable while raising children.

III. Conclusion

Research supports the notion that authoritative parenting is more beneficial when raising children compared to permissive or authoritarian parenting. In contrast with authoritative parenting, the permissive style involves too little influence and not enough structure for adolescents. Children raised by permissive parents tend to develop problematic behaviors, have poor social skills, and have fewer successes in school than those raised by authoritative parents. Authoritarian parenting has been demonstrated to have too much involvement from parents compared to the authoritative style. When a parent becomes highly involved in a child's life, the child is likely to have high academic achievements; however, they also have a high chance of developing poor social skills and have low self-esteem. The superior authoritative style results in children that are responsible, trustworthy, have high self-esteem, and develop prosocial behavior, which leads to exceptional social skills. Should parents have further questions about what optimal parenting is, they should consult a developmental psychologist. In the words of Bornstein (2005), "parents are entrusted with the abiding task to prepare offspring of the next generation for the physical, psychosocial, and economic conditions in which that

generation will eventually fare and hopefully flourish" (p. 311). This emphasizes how important parents are in the lives of children, and the necessity for parents to know the extent to which their influence impacts their child, as well as which parenting style is ideal while raising children.

Note: This essay was composed in Dr. David Reamer's AWR 201 class.

References

- Ashner, L. & Meyerson, M. (1990). *When parents love too much: What happens when parents won't let go*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.
- Baumrind, D. (1973). The development of instrumental competence through socialization. In *Minnesota Symposium on Child Psychology*, 7, 3-46. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Belkin, L. (2009). In defense of helicopter parents. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/>
- Bornstein, M.H. (2005). Parenting matters. *Infant and Child Development*, 14, 311-314. Retrieved from PsycINFO database.
- Chua, A. (2011). Battle hymn of the tiger mother. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/>
- Dewar, G. (2010). The permissive parenting style: Does it ever benefit kids? *Parenting Science*. Retrieved from <http://www.parentingscience.com/>
- Druckerman, P. (2012). What French parents do that Americans don't. *NPR Author Interviews*. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/>
- Ginott, H. (1965). *Between parent and child*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Kartalija, J. (2015). Free-range parenting: Teaching independence, or child neglect? *CBS Baltimore*. Retrieved from www.baltimore.cbslocal.com/
- Lemoyne, T. & Buchanan, T. (2011). Does hovering matter? Helicopter parenting and its effect on well-being. *Sociological Spectrum*, 31(4), 399-418. Retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/>

- Marsiglia, C.S., Walczyk, J.J., Buboltz, W.C., & Griffith-Ross, D.A. (2007). Impact of parenting styles and locus of control on emerging adults' psychosocial success. *Journal of Education and Human Development*, 1(1). Retrieved from <http://scientificjournals.org/>
- Padilla-Walker, L.M., Carlo, G., Christensen, K.J., & Yorgason, J.B. (2012). Bidirectional relations between authoritative parenting and adolescents' prosocial behaviors. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 22(3), 400-408. Retrieved from PsychINFO database.
- Park, A. (2014). The tiger mom effect is real, says large study. *Time Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://time.com/>
- Patrick, R. B. & Gibbs, J. C. (2012). Inductive discipline, parental expression of disappointed expectations, and moral identity in adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 41(8), 973-983. Retrieved from <http://link.springer.com/>
- Robinson, K. & Harris, A. (2014). Parental involvement is overrated. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/>
- Sachs, G. (2016) The drone parent: A helicopter parent on steroids. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from www.huffingtonpost.com/
- Salk, L. & Kramer, R. (1969). *How to raise a human being: A parent's guide to emotional health from infancy through adolescence*. New York: Random House Inc.