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Parenting Styles and Adolescents

This research brief provides an overview of research on parenting styles and their impact on adolescent development. It is intended primarily as a guide for parent educators and other professionals working with parents of teens.

The teenage years are often portrayed as stressful for both parents and teens. Research demonstrates that teens undergo a number of developmental adjustments including biological, cognitive, emotional and social changes on their way to becoming adults. Parenting effectively during the teen years, as in any developmental period, requires a thorough understanding of these normative developmental changes.

Parents can benefit from an understanding that *how* they parent, or their parenting *style*, provides a basis for many healthy developmental outcomes during adolescence. Understanding the different parenting styles and their impact on the parent-teen relationship may help parents—

and their teens—navigate adolescence more smoothly.

Parenting Styles

Psychologist Diana Baumrind (1971, 1991) identified four patterns of parenting styles based upon two aspects of parenting behavior: control and warmth. *Parental control* refers to the degree to which parents manage their children's behavior—from being very controlling to setting few rules and demands. *Parental warmth* refers to the degree to which parents are accepting and responsive of their children's behavior as opposed to being unresponsive and rejecting. When the two aspects of parenting behavior are combined in different ways, four primary parenting styles emerge:

Authoritative Parents are warm but firm. They encourage their adolescent to be independent while maintaining limits and controls on their actions. Authoritative parents do not invoke the “because I said” rule. Instead, they are willing to

entertain, listen to, and take into account their teen's viewpoint. Authoritative parents engage in discussions and debates with their adolescent, although ultimate responsibility resides with the parent. Research demonstrates that adolescents of authoritative parents learn how to negotiate and engage in discussions. They understand that their opinions are valued. As a result, they are more likely to be socially competent, responsible, and autonomous.

Authoritarian Parents display little warmth and are highly controlling. They are strict disciplinarians, use a restrictive, punitive style, and insist that their adolescent follow parental directions. Authoritarian parents invoke phrases such as, "you will do this because I said," and "because I'm the parent and you are not." Authoritarian parents do not engage in discussions with their teen and family rules and standards are not debated. Authoritarian parents believe the adolescent should accept, without question, the rules and practices that they establish. Research reveals that adolescents of authoritarian parents learn that following parental rules and adherence to strict discipline is valued over independent behavior. As a result, adolescents may become rebellious or dependent. Those who become rebellious

might display aggressive behaviors. Adolescents who are more submissive tend to remain dependent on their parents.

Permissive Parents are very warm, but undemanding. They are indulgent and passive in their parenting, and believe that the way to demonstrate their love is to give in to their adolescent's wishes. Permissive parents invoke such phrases as, "sure, you can stay up late if you want to," and "you do not need to do any chores if you don't feel like it." Permissive parents do not like to say no or disappoint their children. As a result, teens are allowed to make many important decisions without parental input. Parents do not view themselves as active participants in shaping their teen's actions; instead they view themselves as a resource, should the adolescent choose to seek their advice. Research findings show that adolescents of permissive parents learn that there are very few boundaries and rules and that consequences are not likely to be very serious. As a result, teens may have difficulty with self-control and demonstrate egocentric tendencies that can interfere with proper development of peer relationships.

Uninvolved Parents are not warm and do not place any demands on

their teen. They minimize their interaction time, and, in some cases, are uninvolved to the point of being neglectful. Uninvolved parents are indifferent to their adolescent's needs, whereabouts, or experiences at school or with peers. Uninvolved parents invoke such phrases as, "I don't care where you go," or "why should I care what you do?" Uninvolved parents rarely consider their teen's input in decisions and they generally do not want to be bothered by their teen. These parents may be overwhelmed by their circumstances or they may be self-centered. Parents might also engage in this style if they are tired, frustrated, or have simply "given up" in trying to maintain parental authority. Research supports that adolescents of uninvolved parents learn that parents tend to be interested in their own lives and less likely to invest much time in parenting. As a result, teens generally show similar patterns of behavior as adolescents raised in permissive homes and they may also demonstrate impulsive behaviors due to issues with self-regulation.

RESEARCH ON PARENTING STYLES

Developmental psychologists overwhelmingly endorse

authoritative parenting as the optimal parenting style for raising adolescents (Steinberg, 2001). Authoritative parenting is associated with healthy adolescent development and provides a balance between affection and support and an appropriate degree of parental control in managing adolescent behavior. This atmosphere provides opportunities for the adolescent to become self-reliant and to develop a healthy sense of autonomy within a set of parental limits, guidelines and rules.

Although an authoritative parenting style is related to positive developmental outcomes, many parents likely use a mixture of different parenting styles when parenting teens. For example, a parent may be more permissive in allowing an extended weekend curfew, but more authoritarian in disallowing their teen to ride in a car with friends after 11 p.m. Thus, parents may modify their individual parenting style to fit particular circumstances.

Parenting styles may also differ between parents (e.g., one parent is permissive while the other parent is authoritarian). In this situation, parents should discuss, in private, acceptable and unacceptable teen behaviors and those areas where they can reach agreement in

parenting their teen. For example, if the teen breaks a curfew, both parents could agree on a consequence that they are willing to enforce together, even if their individual parenting style may not warrant this action. In the case of differing parenting styles, parents should aim for consistency in setting and enforcing rules on specific teenage behaviors.

Adolescent behavior also influences parenting style. Whereas a cooperative, motivated, and responsible teen may be more likely to have parents who exercise an authoritative parenting style, an uncooperative, immature, and irresponsible teen may be more likely to elicit a parenting style that is authoritarian or uninvolved.

Like most important topics in psychology, research on parenting styles is not immune to the nature-nurture debate. On the nurture side, developmental psychologist Eleanor Maccoby admits that many studies in the past have placed too much emphasis on the effects of parenting style and children's psychological outcomes. An overestimation of these environmental results was due, in part, to the fact that researchers focused on one child in a family but almost never studied *more than* one child in the same family. For example, on the nurture

(environmental) side of the debate, researchers interested in examining the effects of parenting styles on adolescents may have focused on a 13-year-old boy in a particular family, but not on his 8- and 10-year old siblings. Discussing particular developmental outcomes based on correlations between parenting style and specific adolescent behaviors by studying only one child in a family does not address whether the parenting style or specific individual characteristics of the child contribute to the observed outcomes. In this example, if the 8- 10- *and* 13-year-old siblings were exposed to the same parenting styles *and* demonstrated similar outcomes then researchers may conclude, based upon correlational data, that parenting style is related to specific behavioral and developmental outcomes.

Conversely, on the nature (genetic) side of the debate, behavioral geneticists tend to be less interested in the home environment (e.g. exposure to a certain type of parenting style) and more interested in inherited, dispositional factors in children. Researchers conducting these types of studies look for differences in children's outcomes despite being raised in a similar environment. Like

environmentalists, behavioral geneticists may have been overstating the effects of genes on developmental outcomes, focusing instead on individual differences while underestimating the impact of the environment on behavior and development.

Researchers who study parent-adolescent relationships are increasingly looking at the importance of the impact of parenting on adolescent development, and how experiences in the family and other contexts *interact* with genetic factors to influence behavioral and developmental outcomes (Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000).

Parenting Styles and Ethnicity

An authoritative parenting style is more common among White families than African American, Asian American, and Hispanic American families while an authoritarian parenting style appears to be more common among ethnic minority families than among White families. Researchers believe these differences in styles might be a sign that parenting is linked to culture and parental belief systems. Although authoritative parenting is less common in ethnic minority families, this parenting style has

been linked with adolescent competence across a wide range of families (Steinberg & Silk, 2002), with adolescents in minority families benefiting as much from authoritative parenting as their nonminority peers (Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992). Interestingly, research also indicates that White youth appear to experience any undesirable effects of an authoritarian parenting style to a greater degree than ethnic minority youth.

Several reasons are proposed for these differences in parenting styles and their outcomes: Ethnic minority families may live in dangerous neighborhoods, where safety is often an issue. In this context, authoritarian parenting, which emphasizes parental control and obedience to parental authority, can be advantageous. This parenting style is potentially less harmful and more beneficial when the context of concerns about unsafe neighborhoods prompts parental behavior. Moreover, most early parenting research was conducted with White, middle-class families, and differences between authoritative and authoritarian styles may not apply as readily to parents from other cultures.

Other Considerations

While research findings support a significant relationship between authoritative parenting and positive developmental outcomes, several factors warrant further consideration:

- Research supports consistent parenting, but parenting behaviors may be influenced by internal factors, such as mood and lack of sleep, as well as external factors such as stress and job responsibilities. Overall, however, one parenting style typically emerges as the dominant style.
- Individual adolescent characteristics, such as personality and temperament, are important factors in research on parenting styles as these characteristics may impact parenting behavior.
- Research studies that examine the effects of parenting styles on adolescent outcomes look at correlations, or associations, between parenting style and specific developmental outcomes. Researchers cannot devise experiments in which one group of teens is assigned to a set of parents who will solely parent in an authoritative manner and another group of teens is assigned to parents who will solely parent in an authoritarian manner. As a

result, researchers can only state that specific measured outcomes are associated, or correlated with, a particular type of parenting style but not *caused* by a particular parenting style. Therefore, the possibility exists that a separate, unexamined variable may be contributing to the findings.

- Parenting style is a broad concept that consists of many factors. Additional research is needed to understand the components of the different styles.

Research findings demonstrate that an authoritative parenting style produces a number of positive developmental outcomes in adolescents. An authoritative parenting style that includes parental monitoring and supervision promotes teen's exposure to positive activities and reduces teen's opportunities for engaging in delinquent, risky behaviors (Wargo, 2007). A warm but firm approach to parenting allows teens to be independent *within* developmentally appropriate parental limits and boundaries.

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