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The Most Important Thing You Need to Know about Parenting

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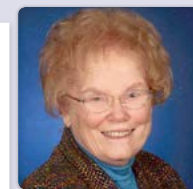
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The most important thing you need to know about **parenting**

The evening meal was the most important meal in Maria and Jorge's home; the only time they ate together as a family. Nothing was allowed to interfere with this cherished family time. Their kids, ages 4 to 13, eagerly anticipated this special time with their father. They knew he was very busy ministering to the people in the church and community, but at this special time of the day, Dad was theirs—no interruptions allowed.

Sometimes Dad even got home a little early, and they could play a quick game of catch or look at an interesting new Web site together before eating. Occasionally, a serious emergency came up and Dad did not make it home for the evening meal, but the kids understood. Their father, the minister, must respond to emergencies or be out of town sometimes on important business.

After mealtime, the family worshiped God before going about their evening activities. Jorge generally visited church families, studied the Bible with interested families, or attended committee meetings; Maria helped the kids with their homework assignments and tucked the younger ones into bed. Jorge tried to get home by nine-thirty, in time to have a quiet conversation

with the older kids and then with Maria after all of the kids were in bed.

Things were different in Elena and Eduardo's home. Elena served the evening meal, but she and the kids generally ate alone. Usually Eduardo felt he was too busy to come home to eat, so most evenings he grabbed fast food and continued working until long after the children had gone to sleep. When he did make it home for the evening meal, he answered the cell phone repeatedly and often ate hurriedly, running out the door for every "emergency." Rarely was there time to play ball with the kids or hear about their day; generally Elena had worship with the kids without him. Eduardo's kids barely knew him.

Elena yearned for support with the child rearing, but Eduardo thought he was too busy to be involved. Most of the time she had to deal with school assignments, misbehavior, family worship, and an endless list of daily decisions alone. Sometimes Eduardo would get involved if there was a serious discipline problem. He was very strict, not inclined to listen to the child's point of view, and favored severe punishment.

Fast-forward 15 years. What are the children from these two pastoral families doing? Do they love the Lord,

and are they serving Him? Or have they wandered away from God and want nothing to do with church?

Parenting style

Though we have no guarantee how our children, when adults, will relate to the Lord, the answers to the above questions should not be that hard to determine. The best predictor of the parenting outcome of these two families is their parenting behavior, generally called "parenting style." Hundreds of studies, beginning in the 1950s and continuing into the twenty-first century, have explored the relationship between different parenting behaviors and different outcomes in the lives of children.¹

Parenting style—the big picture of child rearing—is described by two main aspects of the parent-child relationship: support and control. Support is our responsiveness to the child's needs; control deals with how much power we wield over them. The way parents support and control their children affects the atmosphere of the home and the emotional tone of family interaction, which influences everything else that happens in the family.

Supportive parenting

Supportive parents are child centered and responsive to their children's

needs. They show much love, kindness, and tenderness to their children. They hug and cuddle, say “I love you” frequently, and express love in a way that children can understand. They also notice when their child has had a difficult day and needs an extra dose of love. These parents eat, play, work, and pray with their children every day.

In a supportive home, parents and children talk with each other a lot. Both know how the other feels, and the children understand the reasons for the family’s standards. Parents respect and listen to their child’s viewpoint and show patience with childish mistakes and inconsistencies. They are tactful, sympathetic, understanding, and merciful with their children. An atmosphere of respect for each family member pervades the home. Independence and individuality are encouraged. Supportive parents are messengers of God’s love to all their children.

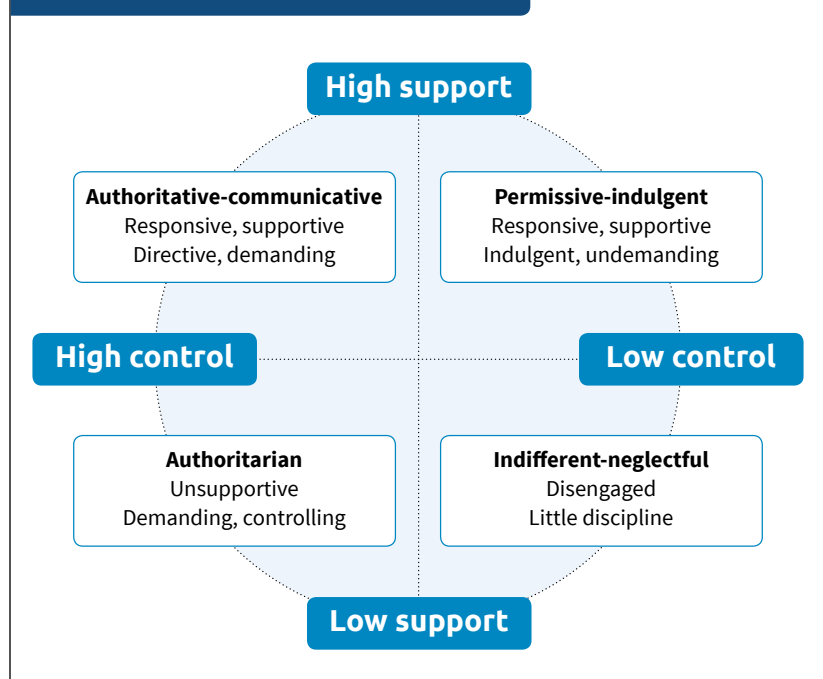
Nonsupportive parenting

Nonsupportive parents are generally centered on their own needs. Adult-centered parents give little consideration to the needs of the children; daily survival or parental power is what matters. The kids are rarely allowed to express an opinion because the parents are afraid of losing control or do not make time to listen. The parents do not show much sympathy and can be unpleasant, cold, and harsh with their children. They are not very interested or involved in their kids’ lives. Put-downs are common. Independence and individuality are taboo.

Emotional climate of the home

The support dimension of the parenting style used and how the parents get along with each other create the emotional climate of the home. This can be either a general atmosphere of warmth and caring or one of coldness and hostility. The emotional climate colors everything that happens in the home, giving family life an aura of joy and happiness or repression and sadness. It plays a significant role in

FIGURE 1 – PARENTING STYLES²



whether children will accept or reject the religion and values of their parents.

Control

Control describes who is in charge of the family—the parents or the children. Control can vary from demanding, directive, high-in-control parenting to undemanding, low-in-control, permissive parenting (see figure 1). Control also plays a role in acceptance or rejection of parental religion and values.

High-control parenting

Demanding parents establish limits for their children’s behavior, explain the limits clearly, and answer any questions the kids may have. Then they consistently enforce these limits. They teach their kids to reason and make age-appropriate decisions, and the kids get plenty of practice making decisions. While these parents are firm and teach clear values to their family, they are reasonable and do not expect their kids to be perfect, even if they *are* the pastor’s kids.

Self-control cuts both ways; parents must also be self-controlled. If they cannot calmly deal with the situation,

they simply say, “We will deal with this later.” Then they exit to pray for calmness and wisdom.

Who is in charge of the family? The parents.

Low-control parenting

Indulgent, undemanding parents think kids do not need limits and guidance. “The kids need to express themselves” is a favorite line. Generally, any behavior is OK, and the limits that they do try to establish are inconsistently enforced. The household has few rules and generally does not function on a schedule. Bedtimes and mealtimes are whenever the children want them. The parents make only weak or unpredictable attempts to teach the kids self-control and decision-making or planning skills.

Who is in charge of the family? The kids.

Parenting styles

The intersecting support and control dimensions identify four quadrants that define the four parenting styles: authoritative-communicative, authoritarian, permissive-indulgent,

and indifferent-neglectful. Each style is described by the *quality* and *amount* of support and control in the parent-child relationship. We will begin with the best.

Authoritative-communicative parenting

Authoritative-communicative parents are seeking to follow God's model for parenting: unconditional love and grace, clear guidelines for moral values and behavior, and disciplinary action when needed.³

Authoritative-communicative parents have warm relationships with their children and are considerate of and attentive to their needs. Parents are

children have choices and independence, and individuality is encouraged.

Authoritative-communicative parents are interested in and involved in their children's lives. They know their kids' whereabouts, activities, and associates when away from home, and they keep up with what is happening at school. Parents and children converse daily. The children know that their parents will listen, consider, and value their opinions.

Children of authoritative-communicative parents tend to be more securely bonded to their parents. Their moral development is strong and firm. They are confident, friendly, happy, and cooperative, and they enjoy

noncommunicative. They tend to rely too much on force and physical punishment. Communication between parents and children is usually one way—parents to children, in stern commands that the children are expected to obey without questioning. Parents rarely explain the reasons for their commands or allow their children to make decisions for themselves. They do not teach decision-making skills. There is very little loving support of the children.

Unfortunately, the authoritarian style is quite common among conservative religious families who justify their own actions by hiding behind a misconception of God's authority. It is easy for the pastoral family to unintentionally

The support dimension of the parenting style used and how the parents get along with each other create the emotional climate of the home.

firm, patient, loving, and reasonable. They teach their children to reason and make decisions. The rights of both parents and children are respected.

For example, John, the pastor of a multichurch district, explained clearly to his children why the members of all his churches want to see his family at their church. It is important for the kids to sometimes go with him to each church. Most of the time they can stay at "their church" because the kids need to feel they belong and want to be with their friends.

The pastoral parents set clear standards and expect mature behavior. The limits are consistently enforced, so children know the boundaries. When punishment is needed, it is reasonable and well understood by the child. The

personal self-respect and self-esteem. Usually they do well academically and are achievement-oriented and successful. Responsible and independent, they often show leadership skills.

Usually they choose to embrace the values and the religion of the pastoral family they grew up in. A strong, reasonable conscience enables them generally to have the strength to resist peer pressure and do what they know is right. Their God is the perfect blend of mercy and justice, a God who continually loves them and draws them closer to Himself.

Authoritarian parenting

Authoritarian parents are adult-centered, power-assertive, demanding, controlling, unresponsive, and

fall into this way of parenting. After all, is not the minister the "voice of God" for the parishioners? It is quicker to command than to explain, teach, and dialog with the kids. In a too-busy life, it is easy to become self-centered and take out one's frustrations on the family.

The children of authoritarian parents usually react in one of two ways: either they rebel against the values of their parents and get out of the home as soon as possible, or they become weak-willed, indecisive individuals incapable of dealing with difficult moral decisions. They do not have a strong conscience and are apt to embrace the negative values around them, or they may try to be "perfect," hoping to earn God's favor through their good works. God, in their mind, focuses on justice;

mercy and grace are not part of their understanding of God.

Permissive parenting

Permissive-indulgent parents have warm relationships with their children and are very interested in their activities, but they are overly responsive to their children's needs. They are their children's friends not their parents, so the kids develop their own values without parental guidance. Because the kids usually can do what they want, when they want, they become impulsive and egocentric.

They have never learned self-control, so moral and conscience development are weak. They have difficulty facing problems and working through tough situations; they prefer to do their "own thing." Their God is an accepting, loving God who looks the other way when humans misbehave. Sin is not a major problem in the universe.

Indifferent-neglectful parenting

Indifferent-neglectful parents make few attempts to guide their children and, basically, ignore them. They are not committed to child rearing and have little interest in their child's needs. They may be physically abusive to their children and may not provide for their physical needs. Other parents in this category may provide well for the physical needs of their children but are too busy or disinterested to be involved emotionally with their children or guide them.

Busy families with two professional careers can easily fall into this style. Often their children are given excessive freedom and unsupervised time too soon (premature autonomy). Recent research shows parents who remain connected with their children through middle school, especially the father-youth connection, reduce substance abuse, risky sexual behaviors, delinquency, and other problem behaviors during the adolescence of their children.⁴

The children of indifferent-neglectful parents are more likely to accept the negative values of society because their moral and spiritual development is weak. They tend to be delinquent and often have deep emotional problems related to the neglect they have experienced. Their God is a distant ruler of the universe who does not really care what happens on earth.

Successful parenting

What is the secret to successful parenting? *Demonstrate the maximum amount of love with the right balance of independence and control.* Authoritative-communicative parenting is the model most resembling God's parenting style and is the most successful, whatever the culture. The positive effects of authoritative, directive parenting are strong for every cultural group studied. Responsiveness or emotional closeness has cultural specific components. Children understand how their culture expresses closeness between parent and child. "Regardless of how specific cultural groups define and express responsiveness, the fundamental premise of the authoritative model that children need to feel loved, respected, and firmly guided while they are maturing into adults seems to be true for all children."⁵

The parenting style used by their parents tends to influence people throughout life. Remembering their parents as authoritative is associated with a positive adjustment even with middle-aged and older adults.⁶

Parenting is learned behavior; we tend to parent like we were parented. The good news is that, with God's help, parenting style can be changed.⁷ Many families are living proof that change is possible. The results of authoritative-communicative parenting are so superior to any other style that it is worth the effort. The future of your children and your grandchildren is at stake. ❏

1 From antiquity, God has described Himself as a Parent. God's

"parenting style," as described in Scripture, could be the model for the best of the parenting styles described in contemporary research. Long before parenting research began, Ellen White also described parenting styles, using different names, but identifying the same parenting behaviors and their results in children's character and spirituality. For starters, see Genesis 18:19; Psalm 103; Proverbs 3:11, 12; 13:1; 13:24; 15:1, 5; 19:18; 22:6, 15; 29:15, 17; Isaiah 49:13; 54:13; 66:12, 13; Luke 15:11–32; Ephesians 6:1–4; Colossians 3:20, 21; and Hebrews 12:5–11; Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1980), 439, para. 4; Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1954), chaps. 41–49; Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1943), 155, para. 2; Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1952), 283, 287–297; Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1942), 384, para. 2, pp. 391, 392; Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1955), 130–134; Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1940), chap. 56; Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), chap. 74; Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, 131–135, 531, 532; and Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, 362, 363.

- 2 Adapted from Eleanor E. Maccoby and John A. Martin, "Socialization in the Context of the Family: Parent-Child Interaction," in *Handbook of Child Psychology*, 4th ed., vol. 4, eds. E. Mavis Hetherington, Paul H. Mussen, and Ellen M. Markham (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 1990), 429–454; and Raymond Buriel, "Socialization in the Family: Ethnic and Ecological Perspectives," in *Handbook of Child Psychology*, 5th ed., vol. 3, eds. William Damon, Richard M. Lerner, and Nancy Eisenberg (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 1998); and Ross D. Parke and Raymond Buriel, "Socialization in the Family: Ethnic and Ecological Perspectives," in *Handbook of Child Psychology*, 6th ed., vol. 3, eds. William Damon, Richard M. Lerner, and Nancy Eisenberg (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2006), 429–504; and Robert E. Larzelere, Amanda Sheffield Morris, and Amanda W. Harrist, eds., *Authoritative Parenting: Synthesizing Nurture and Discipline for Optimal Child Development* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2013).
- 3 In the chapter by Holly Catherton Allen et al., "How Parents Nurture the Spiritual Development of Their Children: Insights From Recent Qualitative Research," in *Understanding Children's Spirituality: Theology, Research, and Practice*, ed. Kevin E. Lawson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012), 204, Sungwon Kim concludes from her meta-analysis of research on parenting styles from the last several decades that "the authoritative parenting style, one that combines a supportive, responsive approach with a directive, even demanding approach, is associated more frequently with healthy spiritual development than are other parenting styles. This style exhibits both loving support and strong boundaries and discipline for children."
- 4 G. M. Fosco, E. A. Stormshack, T. J. Dishion, and C. E. Winter, "Family Relationships and Parental Monitoring During Middle School as Predictors of Early Adolescent Problem Behavior," *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology* 41, 202–213.
- 5 Larzelere, Morris, and Harrist, *Authoritative Parenting*. Chapter 5 reviews the research on parenting styles in different cultures.
- 6 Carol A. Sigelman and Elizabeth A. Rider, *Life-Span Human Development*, 7th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009), 491.
- 7 If you would like to know more about helping families change parenting style, feel free to contact me at donnah@andrews.edu. Please use the word *Ministry* for the topic line.

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