

Chapter X: Authoritative Parents Raise the Best Kids

Every “extreme parenting” approach analyzed in the previous chapter is flawed:

- “Tiger Moms” are too demanding, too rigid, and too narrowly focused on academics... and perhaps violin/piano.
- Helicopter parents are dangerously obsessed with college admissions, teaching kids a cutthroat is-it-on-the-test, whatever-it-takes-to-win mindset toward life by obsessing over report cards and extracurricular triumphs while being undemanding, uninvolved and unsupportive in other areas of life. Their children burn out at high rates, partly because they’re focused on extrinsic rewards, like grades and trophies, rather than intrinsic rewards, like the excitement of learning, growing, and challenging oneself. Their children are also deficient in the self-directed, contemplative, exploratory, creative, spontaneous experiences children choose to entertain themselves with when given unstructured free time. Children who live regimented, adult-driven lives often arrive at college not knowing themselves, how to cope without their parents, or how to pick themselves up after they inevitably fail at something.
- Idle parents naively expect children to learn everything through trial-and-error without distraction from parents, teachers or coaches.
- “French parents” are detached, serious and cold, producing compliant, bland children.
- “Chips all in” parents push a good thing – high expectations and required practice – way too hard too early in a child’s life, imposing a labor camp-style “childhood” on children without their consent.

My criticisms align with expert parenting advice. Parenting styles are broadly classified as “authoritarian” (low warmth, high control), “authoritative” (high warmth, high control), “permissive” (high warmth, low control) and “detached/uninvolved” (low warmth, low control). Scientists and psychologists agree authoritative parenting – warmth/love plus appropriate expectations/control –

produces the happiest, most cooperative, mature, and self-disciplined children. Authoritarian parents are excessively strict/controlling and insufficiently warm. Permissive parents fail to set boundaries that teach kids how to behave properly, take responsibility, contribute to the family, delay gratification, share with others, etc. Detached parents are neither warm nor strict, the exact opposite of authoritative parents; their children are likely to take their cues from other children with detached parents, not a formula for success.

Authoritarian parents confuse parenting with control. Authoritative parents realize parents are family team leaders, and great leaders aspire not to be loved like friends or feared like tyrants but to be respected for their wisdom. Fear is a horrible parenting tool, partly because children who grow up in fear suffer constant stress, which damages body and mind. Also, parenting is not solely about compliance. Parents are teachers, striving to instill in children a desire to do the right thing the right way for the right reasons. Fear can't build a child's character or morality... or even compliance when parents aren't present. A recent study finds:

Authoritarian parents whose child-rearing style can be summed up as "it's my way or the highway" are more likely to raise disrespectful, delinquent children who do not see them as legitimate authority figures than authoritative parents who listen to their children and gain their respect and trust...

"When children consider their parents to be legitimate authority figures, they trust the parent and feel they have an obligation to do what their parents tell them to do. This is an important attribute for any authority figure to possess, as the parent does not have to rely on a system of rewards and punishments to control behavior, and the child is more likely to follow the rules when the parent is not physically present," said Rick Trinkner.¹

At the other extreme, permissive parents confuse parenting with friendship. If kids and young people possessed great wisdom and tremendous self-control, parents could treat parenting like friendship. Our children would always see the wisdom of our advice and follow it automatically without complaint. Such a child has never existed. (Even many adults lack wisdom and/or self-control.) Raising responsible young people sometimes requires tough love. Even if a child intellectually understands the importance of a good night's sleep, she may be unwilling to stop playing until a parent says "Now!" So, relying on friendship is another poor choice. Parents should strive to be neither their children's best friends nor their feared disciplinarians but their most trusted advisors. Scientific studies show that teens with authoritative parents are far less susceptible to peer influence than other teens. Children who trust and admire their parents – even if they don't always pal around together and often

argue about clothes or boyfriends or money – have already found the role models to emulate that less fortunate kids seek amongst their peers.

Fortunately, most kids are resilient and survive poor parenting. But most would likely do better with authoritative parents:

Children of authoritative parents are generally mature, friendly, energetic, confident in tackling new tasks, and able to resist distractions. They have high self-esteem, are self-reliant, and have good social skills. Furthermore, they achieve at high levels academically, are well-behaved at school, and adjust reasonably well to traumatic events (Coopersmith, 1967; Dekovic & Janssens, 1992; Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Lamborn et al., 1991; R. C. Loeb, Horst, & Horton, 1980; L. Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989).²

Experts have long viewed authoritative parenting as the gold standard of parenting because children of authoritative parents do well emotionally, psychologically, academically, and socially and are intrinsically motivated to learn, grow, explore, and create:

Several recent studies have demonstrated that adolescents who are raised in authoritative homes perform better in school than their peers (Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987; Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991; Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989; Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1991). These studies suggest that the link between authoritativeness and school success is (1) causal... (2) evident among both younger and older adolescents... (3) robust across different conceptualizations and operationalizations of authoritativeness... and (4) generalizable across various ethnic, socioeconomic, and family structure groups.... [A]uthoritative parenting also is associated with increases in a number of attitudinal and behavioral indicators of academic orientation during adolescence, including a stronger work orientation, greater engagement in classroom activities, higher educational aspirations, more positive feelings about school, greater time spent on homework, more positive academic self-conceptions, and lower levels of school misconduct, such as cheating or copying assignments (Lamborn, Mounts, Brown, & Steinberg, in press; Lamborn et al., 1991; Patterson & Yoerger, 1991; Steinberg et al., 1989).³

Because authoritative parents relax rules as a child matures and negotiate rules – within reason – with their children, children of authoritative parents generally accept the boundaries their parents impose and rebel/misbehave much less frequently: “Both permissive parenting and, especially, authoritarian parenting are associated with adolescents’ antisocial behavior and poor school performance (Dornbusch et al., 1985; Hetherington et al., 1992; Steinberg, 1987). In contrast, authoritative parenting, as well as other dimensions of parenting that typically co-occur (e.g., supportiveness, inductive reasoning, and nonpunitive discipline), is associated with adolescents’

personal and social competence (Amato, 1989; Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dombusch, 1991).”⁴

So, what is “authoritative parenting”? It’s basically tough love, combining the helicopter parent’s warmth and unconditional love, the Tiger Mom’s demandingness and high expectations, the French parent’s requirement that children learn patience, not indulgence, and the idle parent’s willingness to let children make many of their own decisions and grow through failure. Authoritative parents expect hard work, self-control, good behavior and moral decisionmaking while allowing children flexibility to choose the activities in which they pursue excellence.

Authoritative parents raise expectations as a child’s abilities grow and are always eager to turn problems into learning opportunities. Authoritative parents listen compassionately to their children’s complaints and provide appropriate assistance when asked. But they don’t interfere unless children request their help because it’s usually better for children to resolve problems on their own. As NFL legend Steve Young wrote: “When our boys argue, we encourage them to talk to each other and work things out together. We tell them they have a long future together and will be best friends for life. Like my parents and coaches did for me, my wife and I make an effort to help our children understand their experiences and learn from them. It’s what leaders do.”⁵

Authoritative parents help and advise – especially by asking questions intended to help children solve their own problems – but stop well short of doing their children’s homework, telling the Little League coach to move Johnny higher in the batting order, or trying to resolve every playground scuffle. Parents may “scaffold” a solution by framing the problem in a way that helps the child identify a desirable solution. Authoritative parenting combines love/warmth with expectations/discipline:

Authoritative parenting... is defined by the combination of high levels of parental responsiveness and high levels of demandingness (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Recently, Steinberg and his colleagues have suggested that, in adolescence, three specific components of authoritativeness contribute to healthy psychological development and school success: parental acceptance or warmth, behavioral supervision and strictness, and psychological autonomy granting or democracy (Steinberg, 1990; Steinberg et al., 1989, 1991). This trinity—warmth, control, and democracy—parallels the three central dimensions of parenting identified by Schaefer (1965).⁶

Authoritative parents expect children to get their work done before they play (unless they demonstrate the discipline to play first and still get their work done), work hard at whatever they’re doing, strive to do a good job, play nicely with others, persevere at tasks, and take personal

responsibility for their decisions and actions. A good example is how my parents handled my begging them to play football in 3rd grade. They hated the idea and told me they thought I would be miserable. But I insisted, and they agreed to buy me all the expensive equipment as long as I promised to play the entire season, even if I hated it. I was miserable after the first practice. I was the smallest kid on the field, and I remember once getting completely pancaked by the biggest kid, who seemed twice my size. His eyes lit up gleefully when he saw he was about to blow me up, and I probably suffered a concussion. I remember playing games in the mud. Well, not “playing.” I was the kid coaches don’t want on the field, so I alternated with another misfit running play calls in from the sideline. It was a horrible experience, but I had inflicted it on myself, so I learned a painful lesson. Other parents used a similar technique when their son wanted a motorcycle, agreeing to let him have one in a month if he spent that month reading motorcycle accident reports. Children must learn to make informed decisions before they leave for college.

Authoritative parents often say “no” to children’s requests to buy things. Kids should not get everything they want, and they must learn to accept disappointment. But authoritative parents think carefully before saying “yes” or “no” to a child’s request.

When authoritative parents deny children’s wishes, they do so firmly, respectfully and with a thoughtful explanation: “Sorry, honey, but we can’t afford a swingset; besides, it’s more fun to play at the playground with other kids.” “We don’t buy sugar cereal or soda because it rots your teeth and is bad for your body.” “Whether your friends watch *SpongeBob* is irrelevant. There are much better shows. How about *Toot & Puddle*?” “I know you want this stuffed animal, but you already have many you seldom play with.” “This toy house does look fun, but, unfortunately, we don’t have space.” “Please don’t jump on the sofa because you might break it or hurt yourself.” “You can drink orange juice *after* you eat your dinner, not before.” “If you finish your homework in time, *then* you can watch television.” Authoritative parents can occasionally be talked into changing a “no” into a “yes” if the child offers persuasive arguments or, perhaps, agrees to forgo some other desired purchase.

Authoritative parents strike a balance between control and freedom without ever sacrificing love. They set reasonable rules and routines for children, explain why those rules and routines exist, and adjust boundaries as kids display greater maturity or make persuasive arguments for doing so. Authoritative parents listen to what their children want but don’t always give it to them.

Here's another example of wise, authoritative parenting: Being strict about regular meal times and not letting kids snack at will between meals. This can improve health and teach discipline and patience. It may even improve behavior and academic performance because "Spending more time eating meals [presumably as a family] is associated with a higher score on the letter-word and applied problems tests. It is also associated with a reduction in [all kinds of behavioral] problems."⁷ Kids love to snack, especially on junk food. But they're better off if you say "No" to random snacking – or offer only healthy snacks, like carrots and nuts – and explain why. Few American kids are disciplined, thoughtful eaters, and it shows in America's youth obesity epidemic: "Seventeen percent of children are obese... And one in three kids is obese or overweight. The rate of childhood obesity has tripled to the point that pediatricians say growth charts no longer apply to today's kids.... [S]chool furniture makers are increasing the size of chairs and desks to accommodate larger students."⁸ School furniture is now specially made for the American market with larger dimensions and strengthened support to handle greater weight.⁹ Because parenting and culture profoundly impact exercise, nutrition and schooling, it's no coincidence obesity is strongly correlated with poor parenting and poor academic performance: "40% of Georgia's children are overweight or obese – the second-highest rate in the nation – yet 50% of Georgians don't consider child obesity a problem. What's more, 75% of parents of obese children don't think they have a problem on their hands."¹⁰

Children of authoritarian parents feel helpless and fearful. Rules and harsh punishments are imposed on them arbitrarily, and they learn their wants and feelings aren't important. They learn pleasing mom and dad is the most important thing in the world and the only way to get things they want. They must obey countless rules, many of which make no sense because their parents never told them why the rules exist. When such children eventually leave home, they may barely know how to think for themselves, make decisions for themselves, stick up for themselves, or hold their own in negotiations. They lack self-confidence and self-discipline. Even worse, missing so many opportunities to pursue their interests may have extinguished the natural enthusiasm and curiosity they were born with.

Children of permissive parents learn they can do or have whatever they want whenever they want and that their parents will bail them out whenever they get into trouble. Entitled kids who always get what they want generally turn into spoiled brats and develop no negotiation skills. They don't clean dishes, wash laundry or mow lawns, so they have no sense of duty or obligation to contribute to the

family or society. Everything is given to them, and they don't work part-time, so they don't learn to appreciate money and the hard work necessary to earn it. When they perform poorly in school, their parents may express displeasure not to them but to teachers and principals, so the kids never learn to take responsibility for their mistakes. Permissive parents may grumble about their kids' bad behavior but seldom demand that it change or punish misbehavior. When permissive parents really need their kids to do something, they often must bribe them. Excessively permissive parents can mess their children up as surely as excessively authoritarian parents: "Children in [permissive] families are typically immature, impulsive, demanding and dependent on parents and, not surprisingly, disobedient when parents ask them to do something they do not want to do. These children tend to have difficulty in school, to be aggressive with peers, and to engage in delinquent acts as adolescents (Lamborn et al., 1991; Pulkkinen, 1982)."¹¹

Imagine a child running outside to play in cold weather without their jacket. A detached/uninvolved parent might not even know their child left or care they're not wearing a jacket. An authoritarian parent might yell at their child: "Put on your jacket! Now!" A permissive parent might shout, "Shouldn't you wear a jacket?" and leave it at that. An authoritative parent might say, "Please wear your jacket so you don't catch a cold." If their child resisted, they would insist but perhaps let their child choose to wear either a heavy jacket or a light jacket plus a winter hat. Either option keeps the child warm, but the child feels involved in the decision. Or the authoritative parent might ask, "What do you think could happen if you play in the cold without a jacket?" This gives the child an opportunity to anticipate the consequences of their decision and make the smart choice: "I might get sick. I'll go grab my jacket." Authoritative parents adjust tactics to the maturity of each child, aiming not for compliance but for their children to internalize smart decisionmaking so they make smart choices even when their parents aren't around. Pointing out a problem, rather than telling kids what to do, helps them grow and encourages them to embrace the solution they devise for themselves. Even adults respond better when we figure out how to solve our own problems:

Tindi Miranda... noticed that one little boy kept tripping on the playground. Whenever he came inside, he removed his shoes and said "Ahhhhh," with a great sense of relief. She suspected his shoes were too small. Before learning Touchpoints, she would have told his parents that, and risked causing them to feel attacked. But having learned to use the child's behavior as a language—describing what she saw, rather than drawing a conclusion or passing judgment—she simply told the boy's father what she had observed, and asked him why he thought the boy behaved this way. "The next day," she recalls, "he came in with a new pair of shoes."¹²

Every parent's goal should be helping their child seek not praise – which requires an external observer – but a feeling of praiseworthiness – which comes from within because we live up to our own high personal standards. Society would be far more wonderful if more of us sought to be praiseworthy, rather than just praised:

One... singularly important human impulse was emphasized by Adam Smith in his 1759 book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. This is the desire for praise. We see this plainly in the behavior of the youngest children and the oldest and weakest people...

An enormous literature in modern psychology confirms the importance of self-esteem. But Smith put a different slant on the desire for praise. In mature people, he wrote, it is transformed into a desire for praiseworthiness. Further, he believed that our desire for praise can be truly satisfied only if we deserve it. No one is satisfied merely to look praiseworthy; one wants to be praiseworthy.¹³

A child who seeks praise will do the right thing... when someone else is looking. A child who aspires to be praiseworthy will do the right thing... always.

Because authoritative parents help children internalize good values and decisionmaking, their children learn self-control, perhaps the most important skill to acquire in childhood: “[Self-control]... provides the basis for mental flexibility, social skills and discipline. It predicts success in education, career and marriage. Indeed, childhood self-control is twice as important as intelligence in predicting academic achievement. Conversely, poor self-control in elementary school increases the risk of adult financial difficulties, criminal behavior, single parenthood and drug dependence.”¹⁴

Many, many empirical studies support the beneficial impact of authoritative parenting. For example, “A study by Cohen and Rice (1997), found that students who smoke and drink perceive their parents as less authoritative than students who do not.”¹⁵ Children of indulgent/permissive parents first drank alcohol at 13.9 years of age, children of neglectful parents at 14.7 years, children of authoritarian parents at 15.8 years, and children of authoritative parents at 16.1 years; children of authoritative parents also drank less and binge-drank less, in both high school and college.¹⁶

Another study found adolescents are most satisfied with family life when they perceive: 1) strong family bonding (i.e., “family members report feeling emotionally close and spending time with each other”); 2) strong family flexibility (i.e., “perceived ability to adapt to both predictable and unpredictable changes associated with family life ”); 3) strong parental support (i.e., “use of behaviors

within specific parent-adolescent subsystems that communicate warmth, concern, encouragement, physical affection, or praise toward adolescents”); and, 4) little parental punitiveness (i.e., “a parent using authoritarian behavior as an attempt to force an adolescent to respond in ways that meet parental expectations”).¹⁷

The evidence is overwhelming: authoritative parenting produces better and happier young adults.