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The authoritative parenting style: Warmth, rationality, and high standards

A guide for the science-minded parent

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The authoritative parenting style is about setting limits, reasoning with kids, and being responsive to their emotional needs.

This approach is common in middle class settings throughout the world, and it's linked with the most successful child outcomes.

Kids raised by authoritative parents are more likely to become independent, self-reliant, socially accepted, academically successful, and well-behaved.

They are less likely to report depression and anxiety, and less likely to engage in antisocial behavior like delinquency and drug use.

Research suggests that having at least one authoritative parent can make a big difference (Fletcher et al 1999).

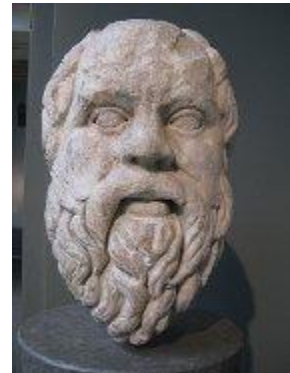
And despite minor controversies, studies consistently report that authoritative parenting is beneficial for kids from a variety of backgrounds and ethnic groups.

But being “authoritative” isn't an all-or-nothing proposition. By its very nature, authoritative parenting occupies a sort of middle ground between granting too much freedom and being too strict.

So what are the criteria of authoritative parenting? And how do researchers distinguish the authoritative parenting style from permissive parenting and authoritarian parenting?

The authoritative parenting style: The original definition

The authoritative parenting style was first defined by Diane Baumrind, who proposed a new system for classifying parents.



Baumrind's idea was to address how parents control their kids (Baumrind 1966).

According to Baumrind's model, there are three major approaches to parental control:

- **Permissive parents** are reluctant to impose rules and standards, preferring to let their kids regulate themselves.

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Authoritarian parents demand a sort of blind obedience from their children.

- **Authoritative parents** take a different, more moderate approach that emphasizes setting high standards, being nurturing and responsive, and showing respect for children as independent, rational beings. The authoritative parent expects maturity and cooperation, and offers children lots of emotional support.

This combination distinguishes the authoritative parenting style from both authoritarianism and permissiveness.

Like permissive parents, authoritative parents are responsive, nurturing, and involved.

But *unlike* permissive parents, authoritative parents *don't let their kids get away with bad behavior.*

Authoritative parents take a firm stand, expecting their kids to behave responsibly.

Like authoritarian parents, authoritative parents enforce rules.

But *unlike* authoritarian parents, authoritative parents *show high levels of warmth, and they emphasize the reasons for rules.*

When kids make mistakes or misbehave, they attempt to reason with their children.

Authoritative parents encourage a verbal give-and-take, and explain the consequences of good and bad behavior.

Authoritative parents are also less likely to control their children through harsh or arbitrary punishments, shaming, or the withdrawal of love.

Put another way, the authoritative parenting style reflects a balance between two values-- freedom and responsibility.

Authoritative parents want to encourage independence in their kids. But they also want to foster self-discipline, maturity, and a respect for others.

Some researchers sum it up this way: Authoritative parents are both highly responsive and very demanding (Maccoby and Martin 1983).

That's the classic definition of the authoritative parenting style. And--using this definition--researchers have identified the authoritative parents throughout the world. But there is some variation. It's not clear that authoritative parenting takes the same form in all cultures.

Cross-cultural variation: The authoritative parenting style isn't always about democracy

In Western countries like Australia and the United States, authoritative parenting includes certain democratic practices--like taking children's preferences into account when making family plans, or encouraging kids to express their own, possibly divergent, opinions.

In other places, these democratic elements may be absent. For instance, a cross-cultural study of parenting styles in four countries found that otherwise authoritative parents living in China and Russia did not take their kids' preferences into account when making family plans. Nor did Chinese parents encourage kids to voice their own opinions--not when they disagreed with those of the parents (Robinson et al 1996).

But one key trait--reasoning with kids--was found in all four countries (Robinson et al 1997). It seems that explaining the reasons for rules, and talking with kids who misbehave, is a widespread practice.

This aspect of the authoritative parenting style has been called "inductive discipline," and there is evidence that it helps kids become more empathic, helpful, conscientious, and kind to others (Krevans and Gibbs 1996; Knafo and Plomin 2006).

Applying the definition to real world parents



How can you tell if you are an authoritative parent?

When researchers want to identify an individual's parenting style, they sometimes observe how parents and kids get along in the real world. For instance, in one study researchers assigned parents and kids a puzzle task, and recorded the way parents interacted with their children (Dekovic and Janssens 1992).

More often, however, researchers rely questionnaires. These questionnaires present a parent (or child) with a series of statements. The respondent is asked to rate his or her agreement with each statement on a four-point scale (1= "almost never true", 4 = "almost always true").

In general, researchers classify a parent as authoritative if he or she agrees with statements like these:

- I take my child's wishes and feelings into consideration before I ask her to do something
 - I encourage my child to talk about his feelings
 - I try to help when my child is scared or upset
 - I provide my child with reasons for the expectations I have for her
 - I respect my child's opinion and encourage him or her to express them...even if they are different from my own
-

Parents are LESS likely to be judged authoritative if they agree with statements like:

- I let my child get away with leaving chores unfinished
 - I bribe my child to get him to comply with my wishes
 - I explode in anger toward my child
 - I punish my child by withdrawing affection
-

But there isn't any one, universally-used questionnaire for identifying the authoritative parenting style. Different studies may use different questionnaires, and this might account for some discrepancies between studies.

For instance, a recent Spanish study has reported that adolescents from permissive families were as well-behaved and academically successful as were teens from authoritative homes.

This result contradicts research in the United States that links permissive parenting with inferior child outcomes.

Does the Spanish study suggest that parenting styles work differently in Spain? Maybe.

But it's also possible that the disagreement reflects the different questionnaires used. As I argue elsewhere, [some of the parents classified as “permissive” in the Spanish study might have been labeled as “authoritative” in other studies.](#)

Why do kids from authoritative families turn out so well?



Each component of the authoritative parenting style seems to have its own benefits.

As noted above, inductive discipline—explaining the reasons for rules—has been linked with more advanced moral reasoning skills (Krevans and Gibb 1996; Kerr et al 2004).

In addition, research suggests the following points.

1. Warm, responsive parenting promotes secure attachments and protects kids from developing internalizing problems.

2. Parents who enforce limits are less likely to have kids engaged in drug and alcohol use, juvenile delinquency, or other antisocial behavior(e.g., Lamborn et al 1991; Steinberg et al 1992; Querido et al 2002).

3. Talking with kids about thoughts and feelings may strengthen attachment relationships and make kids into better “mind readers.”

4. Parents who avoid reprimanding kids for academic mistakes (e.g., “I’m disappointed in you”) may have kids who are more resilient problem-solvers and better learners (Kamins and Dweck 1999; Schmittmann et al 2006; van Duijvenvoorde et al 2008).

5. Encouraging independence in kids is linked with more self-reliance, better problem solving, and improved emotional health (e.g., Turkel and Tezer 2008; Rothrauff et al 2009; Lamborn et al 1991; Pratt et al 1988; Kamins and Dweck 1999).

6. Encouraging independence and showing warmth are also linked with more helpful, kind, and popular kids.

The last point is illustrated by research conducted in the Netherlands. In this study, school kids were observed at home as they worked with their parents on a couple of puzzle tasks. Then researchers

- recorded how often parents uttered their disapproval or tried to take over the task,

- rated how often parents showed warmth, made suggestions, used induction “(What would happen if we tried this?)”, or demanded mature behavior from their kids, and
- asked teachers and peers to rate each child’s social behavior.

The results are compelling. Parents who behaved more authoritatively during the puzzle task had kids who were rated as more prosocial—helpful and kind—by their teachers and peers. The kids with authoritative parents were also more popular (Dekovic and Janssens 1992).

There is even evidence that kids from authoritative homes are more attuned with their parents and less influenced by their peers.

In a study of American students, undergraduates were presented with a series of moral problems and asked how they would solve them. Students from authoritative families were more likely than others to say that their parents--not their peers--would influence their decisions (Bednar and Fisher 2003).

But there are other factors, too.

It’s likely that the benefits of authoritative parenting are maximized when the whole community is organized along authoritative principles. For instance, when the school climate is authoritative, kids from authoritative families may find it easier to fit in (Pellerin 2004).

In addition, some studies have reported ethnic differences--that for African-American and Chinese-Americans, there is little or no difference in academic performance between kids from authoritarian and authoritative homes.

Why? Researchers have posed several different explanations, which you can read about in this article that contrasts the effects of authoritarian parenting with the effects of authoritative parenting.

Nevertheless, there is remarkable agreement across studies. From Argentina to China, from the United States to Pakistan, the authoritative parenting style is consistently associated with superior outcomes, and it has never been linked with bad outcomes (see review in Steinberg 2001).

As researcher Laurence Steinberg has stated, “I know of no study that indicates that adolescents fare better when they are reared with some other parenting style” (Steinberg 2001).

As of March, 2010, this is still seems to be the case.

More information about the authoritative

parenting style

As noted, you can read more about the difference between authoritarianism and the authoritative parenting style in my article [“Authoritarian parenting: What happens to the kids?”](#)

In addition, check out [this article for a discussion of the difference between permissiveness and the authoritative parenting style.](#)

And for a general overview of Diane Baumrind's model--and the research supporting it--see ["Parenting styles: A guide for the science-minded."](#)

For an overview of the research supporting responsive, sensitive parenting, check out my article on the [science of attachment parenting.](#)

And if you are interested in the importance of intimacy and closeness, see these articles about [mind-minded parenting](#) and [the possibility of friendship between parents and children.](#)

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