

Discipline isn't enough

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There's no certainty in child-rearing any more. But research offers some clues to the way forward, writes Tony Davis.

FROM the early 1960s Diana Baumrind, a New York feminist, Marxist and psychologist, began researching parenting styles. She found that children of authoritarian parents tended to be anxious and withdrawn, while permissive parents produced children who were rebellious and lacked persistence.

But children raised in a third style to which Baumrind applied the rather awkward term authoritative consistently proved more contented, with more confidence, better social skills and well-developed emotional regulation.

Parents who raised their children in this way, Baumrind noted, were assertive but not intrusive or restrictive. They set limits but explained and discussed them with their children.

Baumrind called it "a warm, engaged rational parent-child relationship".

"The authoritative model of discipline," she wrote in 1966, "is characterised by use of firm control contingently applied and justified by rational explanation of consistently enforced rules."

Although at times controversial, Baumrind's findings have proven hugely influential and variations on the authoritative style she defined are now mainstream.

Fiona White, of Sydney University's School of Psychology, has conducted extensive research into family dynamics and says there is little doubt the authoritative parenting style shows up in studies as the optimal, particularly during the adolescent years.

"There is such huge support for it in the [body of academic] literature, it has just taken us back."

White admits, though, that most people do not rigidly fit into one style.

"We have variations on the style, depending on the situation. The optimal style is to be authoritative [but] we cannot always be authoritative if our children are disruptive. There might be a time when we have to be authoritarian.

“It's bi-directional, parenting. The child will influence the style the parent adopts and vice versa . . . particularly in later adolescence.

“When they start approaching 13, 14, 15, they should be having some say. If they don't feel they are having a say, that's when the rebellion occurs.”

June Wangmann, director of the NSW Centre for Parenting and Research, is also a supporter of authoritative parenting, but says research is “turning up more limitations in characterising a group of parents on the basis of description”.

The standard categories, Associate Professor Wangmann says, do not take into account things such as the effect of poverty on families, and the temperament of the child. “In fact, it is well known that parents may parent even their own children in different ways, depending on the child.”

Wangmann also believes that categorising of parenting styles and outcomes needs to take into account other cultural forces, as Baumrind's original research mainly looked at Americans of European background.

“Some cultures may have a very authoritarian parenting style which is not seen as having a good outcome for the children,” Wangmann says.

“But because it is part of the culture and the values within that culture . . . it doesn't necessarily follow the kids do less well at school, have low self-esteem and so on.”

The NSW Centre for Parenting and Research set up within the Department of Community Services is strong on another approach which showed up favourably in Baumrind's research: consistency.

“This is something which becomes harder to maintain with the increasing number of broken marriages and an increase in non-parental care.

“It becomes incredibly difficult for children when they have one set of rules at mum's home and another set of rules at dad's,” says Wangmann.

“Children really need to know this is the rule today and it's not going to change tomorrow. Consistency is really important to children.

“Parents should check out child-care centres carefully too; a good child-care centre should be operating in partnership with the parents, not in opposition to them. Parents should say ‘this is the type of thing we do, this is the type of thing we want reinforced’, and so on, and they should require progress reports.

“If, for example, a child is suddenly, for some reason or another, becoming aggressive, it needs to be consistently handled in the same way in the child-care centre as at home.

“Otherwise that child becomes totally confused.”

Sarah Wise, the Australian Institute of Family Studies principal research fellow, further explained Baumrind's categorisation of parenting in a major research paper last year.

“Authoritative parenting is characterised by high levels of both acceptance and control; authoritarian parenting is high on control and low on acceptance; permissive parenting is high on warmth and low on control . . .

“In the United States, authoritative parenting has been linked to children's wellbeing in areas of social competence, behaviour and academic performance across different family structures and across different ethnic groups.”

Support for aspects of the authoritative style turns up in unexpected places. In *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, author Jonathan Glover cites research done on the upbringing of people who helped rescue Jews from the Nazis.

“The parents of the rescuers had set high standards for their children, especially about caring for others, but had not been strict. The emphasis was on reasoning rather than discipline.”

Although parents are today better informed about different approaches to parenting, this can be a curse as well as a blessing, says clinical psychologist Moshe Lang.

“Years back, parents knew exactly what to do. There was a certainty, there was a way of behaving. Today, because of the range of options it can very often lead to more confusion because you don't know which one to take.”

Lang, who is director of Melbourne's Williams Road Family Therapy Centre, points to discipline as an example.

“A few years ago . . . parents were more entitled to discipline their child; the methods of discipline were much more established. Now they are not.

“Punishment is out of fashion. That works very well when you are able to generate a relationship of co-operation with the child but if you can't, then parents find it very difficult to cope with a child without punishment.”

Lang says today's children are often overstimulated. Mark Latham's proposal for discipline classes for the parents of delinquent kids was probably a reaction to “something that is felt by a lot of parents: that they need more power and influence of the children. That makes them feel that if only I could punish more effectively, or punish more, I would be able to discipline my child.

“Many parents feel that they have little say, very little control. And they feel great stress over this.”

Lang does, however, point to what he sees as a very positive trend: the expectation and desire of fathers to be more involved in the education and upbringing of their children.

“Traditionally, a father would leave it to his wife to raise the children, and she would do it the way she saw fit. If the father wants to be involved it is more likely they will see things differently and they will more likely have conflict.

“But that may not be a bad thing, because the conflict itself could be creative and productive.”

Practical tips

Setting the rules

Build your child's self-esteem a child who feels worthwhile is less likely to misbehave and will enjoy better relationships with others.

Acknowledge good behaviour make a habit of encouraging your children when they are behaving well or trying to follow your instructions.

Be fair and consistent when applying rules children lose respect and trust if they think discipline is random, unfair or punitive.

Handle conflict calmly having a negotiated discipline plan in place can help take the heat out of a trying situation.

Teach by example children and young people model what they see, so demonstrate the qualities you would like them to develop.

Show you care try not to be so strict that your child can't feel your love and good intentions.

Hitting or punching a child is never acceptable in NSW it is against the law to use excessive force to punish a child.

Source: NSW Department of Community Services.
See www.community.nsw.gov.au