



The Role of Parenting Styles in Children's Problem Behavior

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Key Concept

Most studies that look at how parenting style effects children's behavior include the dimensions of affection (e.g., responsiveness, involvement, supportiveness) and behavioral control (e.g., maturity demands, monitoring, limit setting). This study of 196 children (aged 5-6 years) focused on the additional dimension of psychological control (e.g., love withdrawal, guilt induction, manipulation).

Key Findings

- A high level of behavioral control predicted low levels of problem behavior *but only when the level of psychological control was low*. This was true primarily for externalizing behavior problems, such as angry and aggressive behaviors.
- A high level of psychological control, *when combined with a high level of affection*, predicted increases in both externalizing behavior problems and internalizing behavior problems, such as anxious or withdrawn behaviors.
- In this young, middle-class, Finnish sample, mothers' parenting seemed to have a greater influence on children's problem behaviors than did fathers' parenting.

How to Use

This study expands our thinking about parenting and the surrogate parenting we provide at camp. Until now, most youth development professionals thought about care-giving along just two dimensions: affection and control. The ideal caregiver was said to provide high levels of both, in what is called an "authoritative" style. This study suggests that the ideal must also include low levels of manipulative psychological control.

Consider a typical problem behavior for a young camper. Perhaps the morning activity period at arts-and-crafts is over, but little Sam is refusing to join his group and head to gymnastics. "I won't go!" he shouts, and throws a wet lump of clay across the room. Here we have a typical externalizing

behavior problem. Let's look at two response options that Sam's counselor has. Each varies in its level of affection, behavioral control, and psychological control.

Choice #1: High Affection, Low Behavioral Control, High Psychological Control

"Sam, you know how much I care about you and I can see how upset you are but you are ruining everybody else's time by making them miss gymnastics."

- According to the present study, this combination of affection (in this case, expressions of care and empathy) and psychological control (in this case, guilt induction) will probably make things worse. Children may experience this approach as contradictory. Sam is likely to lash out more or completely withdraw.

Choice #2: High Affection, High Behavioral Control, Low Psychological Control

"Sam, arts and crafts was a lot of fun and I can tell you don't want to leave just yet. But throwing clay is not OK. You need to clean that up now. [Sends group to gymnastics with co-counselor.] I'll stay here and give you a hand, then we can join the rest of the group in the gym."

- According to the present study, this combination of affection (in this case, expressions of empathy) and behavioral control (in this case, limit setting and logical consequences) will probably help, *but only because there is a low level of manipulative, psychological control*. Sam may not comply right away, but there's no confusion about how his counselor feels about him. He cares about Sam's experience *and* he's not going to tolerate throwing clay *and* he's giving Sam the psychological freedom to feel frustrated. This is what Sam needs to mature. In the long run, this combination of high affection, high behavioral control, and low psychological control may diminish the frequency of Sam's problem behaviors.

There is no magic formula to perfect parenting or perfect camp counseling, but this study suggests that the best care-giving includes lots of love *and* limits without guilt trips, coercion, disgust, giving "the look," or "the silent treatment."

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