

PARENTS IN CONTROL

BEST PRACTICE OR ANOTHER WAY TO BE A BAD PARENT?



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Developmental and social psychologists have long been investigating the nature and nurture of parenting styles and behaviours. For most parents, that means developing a healthy balance in how demanding and responsive we are to our children's development. Most children grow up to develop healthy relational attachments, demonstrate emotional and intellectual competence and self-regulatory behaviours because of these responsible efforts of parents.

For some parents, however, best intentions turn into unhealthy patterns of control, the extreme of which is described as intrusive parenting. Intrusive parents rely heavily on methods of manipulation, constraint, and even physical punishment. In their best attempts to keep children protected and relationally close, these parents use techniques that include excessive overtures of guilt, shame and withdrawal of love. The result, rather than producing children who develop healthy senses of self and autonomous identity, are children who push strongly against these misdirected attempts.

Parents use these patterns of control for a variety of reasons. Some use them because of external forces like economic or familial pressure, others in response to the difficult personalities of their children, and still others because they have their own personal issues of perfectionism or self-criticism. Whatever the origin, intrusive parenting can be overcome by strategies that encourage healthy autonomy-supportive relationships.

This paper explores how parents' use of balanced behavioural control contributes to healthy development in their children but how psychological control can lead to undesirable outcomes for both the parent and the child.

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Are we thinking too much about being parents? Have we found new ways to be bad parents even though our best intentions are to do our best for our kids?

The evidence suggests this might be the case.

Social and developmental psychologists have been studying which parenting style contributes to the best outcomes for children for over thirty years. At its most basic level, the problem for most parents is finding a balance between roots and wings; that is, determining, at each important stage of development how parents can direct the attitudes and actions of their children and how they can allow and even encourage independence and individuality. Psychology weighs in by identifying different healthy and unhealthy parental approaches.

Certainly, today's parenting anxiety is fueled by the plethora of parenting books, training programs, expert opinions (Dr. Spock anyone?), and horror stories of kids gone bad and parents left in shock. The result? A generation of parents who are experiencing increasing self-doubt about both the energy and skill necessary to be a good-enough parent. Add to this the angst many parents have for the simple safety and wellbeing of their children – helmets, seat belts, vaccinations, supervised play dates, police checks, internet predators, etc. – and we have the perfect recipe for why some parents may be resorting to extreme vigilance in parenting.

PARENTING STYLES

Figure 1: A two-dimensional classification of parenting styles

	High responsiveness	Low responsiveness
High demand	authoritative (democratic, accepting)	authoritarian (controlling, restrictive)
Low demand	indulgent (low control, permissive)	neglecting (rejecting, unresponsive)

Source: Adapted from Maccoby & Martin, 1983

A fundamental question that many parents ask themselves is how to give our children every opportunity to develop into healthy, responsible, and competent members of society. Complicating the answer is the tension between what we *want* for our children and what they *need* from us in terms of our parenting behaviour.

The need part of this equation has its origins in the early and influential work of Diana Baumrind.¹ Baumrind distinguishes between types of parents. She sees authoritative

parents (hereafter called democratic parents), permissive parents and authoritarian parents. Democratic parents are essentially the most healthy kind: they offer guidelines and create boundaries but they also offer reasons for the directives they issue to their children. Permissive parents do not provide any directives, while parents who make very direct commands for obedience without explanation and/or openness for discussion are called authoritarian.

Baumrind² and others³ have since compiled significant evidence that democratic parenting is associated with better child outcomes including the development of healthy self-esteem, adaptability, competence, peer confidence, and most importantly internalized control.

Maccoby and Martin⁴ extended this typology by adding a fourth type of parenting style characterized by neglect and lack of involvement (see Figure 1 below). These parents are “motivated to do whatever is necessary to minimize the costs in time and effort of interaction with the child,”⁵ and thus they are parent-centered rather than child-centered. Findings indicate that infants who are neglected have issues of disruptions in attachment, while in older children it is associated with noncompliance, aggression, moodiness, and low self-esteem.

Clearly, parental involvement plays a major role in child development. Having established different kinds of parenting styles, the question remains: How great is the parent’s impact? And how well do these theoretical models capture what parents actually do?

Parenting in tension: What we want for our children versus what they need

As the myriad of popular bookstore shelves and online resources will testify, many parents may be unclear about what they hope to develop in their children as a result of their practices as parents. Ask any parent and they will say they want simple but grand outcomes for their children: happiness, peace, contentment, good health, strong relationships. But how do we as parents get our kids from here to there? Just as there are defensible styles of parenting that find their ebb and flow according to the setting,⁶ the temperament of the child,⁷ or the ethnicity of the family,⁸ so there are debates in the academic literature about what develops from the parent-child relationship that contributes to children becoming productive and happy members of society.”

We begin first by exploring how healthy parenting styles contribute to good outcomes for children – including parent-child attachment, social and intellectual competence, and self-regulation – and then explore how parenting behaviour that is controlling or intrusive can undo our best intentions of producing healthy, happy children.

HEALTHY PARENTING: FINDING THE CONTROL SWEET SPOT

A primary outcome of healthy parenting is parent-child attachment. Developmental psychologists would say that the hallmark of a healthy parent-child relationship is best captured in the quality of attachment that develops between a child and his/her parent. Mary Ainsworth’s classic studies⁹ and the many that followed present convincing evidence that infants who were responded to with sensitivity and immediacy – hallmarks of the democratic parenting style – developed a secure attachment, whereas infants for whom parental responses were inappropriate or inconsistent tended



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to form various kinds of insecure attachments (e.g., resistant, avoidant, or disorganized/disoriented). Almost 40 years of research since these early studies have found that the quality of attachment is correlated highly with later intellectual and social development.¹⁰

The second significant outcome associated with the parent-child relationship is that of competence, both social and intellectual. White and his colleagues¹¹ at Harvard have been studying the relationship between parenting style and the development of competence for almost 40 years. In particular, they have found that parents who designed a safe physical environment at home, provided interesting things to play with and who shared enthusiasm with the child had the most significant effect on their child's development of competence, and that this effect was most pronounced at around the ages of 12 to 18 months of life.

Given these findings on the importance of home environment provided by families, Bradley and colleagues¹² have developed an assessment scale to determine the quality of the home environment for children under age three (called the Home Observation for the Measurement of the Environment; HOME). They have found strong and positive correlations between young preschoolers' HOME scores and their IQ scores, as well as later academic achievement in middle school. Thus, similar to Baumrind's findings about the democratic parenting style, parents who set reasonable and safe boundaries for their children contribute to the development of intellectually competent and achievement-motivated children.

There is a third outcome of the parent-child relationship, however, that has a most profound connection with parenting behaviour and a child's outcome, and it will be shown that this outcome seems to be particularly vulnerable to parenting behaviour that is controlling or intrusive. This child outcome is known as self-determination or self-regulation (the term self-regulation will be used throughout the article). This is the ability for children and youth to be intrinsically motivated.¹³ In her compelling book, *The Psychology of Parental Control*, Wendy Grolnick describes how intrinsic motivation is based on three psychological needs:

- The need to feel autonomous
- The need to feel competent
- The need to feel related to those around us.¹⁴

It is quite evident that this definition of self-regulation encompasses the essence of the other two socialization outcomes described above – attachment and competence – while it also includes a dimension that captures the developmental necessity for children to “master, to be curious, and to be active in the environment... based on the satisfaction of these innate needs.”¹⁵

As has been introduced above, parenting behaviour has great power to shape significant development outcomes for children, and we have seen how the democratic parenting style in particular contributes to at least three positive outcomes: attachment, competence, and self-regulation.

However, if social and developmental psychologists are correct, and self-regulation does indeed encompass a significant portion of what we hope our children develop through our relationships with them, the critical question might be this: What is the impact of parenting

on the development of self-regulation for children? And on the negative side, how might a parent's best attempts at instituting control actually defeat the goal of developing self-regulation in a child?

UNHEALTHY PARENTING: THE DARK AND DARKER SIDES OF PARENTAL CONTROL

The parenting styles outlined above are characterized by the degree of responsiveness and demandingness demonstrated by the parent. More recently, it is suggested that parenting style might also differ in the extent to which parents consistently enact a third dimension, that of psychological control. Brian Barber, in his book *Intrusive Parenting: How Psychological Control Affects Children and Adolescents*, defines psychological control as "parental behaviors that are intrusive and manipulative of children's thoughts, feelings, and attachments to parents."¹⁶ Typically, psychological control is demonstrated to the child through use of parenting practices such as guilt induction, withdrawal of love, or shaming. These behaviors tend to be associated with disturbances in psycho-emotional boundaries between the child and parent, and thus the development of an independent sense of self and identity that are critical to the fullest development of self-regulation are potentially disrupted in parent-child relationships that are characterized by significant psychological control.

Returning for a moment to our parenting styles, it is clear that one key difference between democratic and authoritarian parenting lies squarely within this dimension of psychological control. Both democratic and authoritarian parents place high demands on their children and expect their children to behave appropriately and obey parental rules. Authoritarian parents, however, also expect their children to accept their judgments, values, and goals without questioning. In contrast, democratic parents are more open to give and take with their children and make greater use of explanations. Thus, although democratic and authoritarian parents are equally high in *behavioral control* (known as demandingness), democratic parents tend to be low in *psychological control* while authoritarian parents tend to be high. As will be shown below, it is the heightened use of psychological control that can have significant and negative effects on the self-regulatory development of children.

Intrusive parenting: How, why and where?

Barber indicates that the label intrusive has commonly been used to describe parental psychological control that includes parental behaviour that is controlling, demanding, manipulative, invalidating, possessive, and overprotective.¹⁷ For our purposes, we will narrow our discussion to expand on three of the parenting behaviours most directly related to the development of self-regulation in children: manipulation, constraint, and the ever-controversial corporal punishment.

Manipulative parents attempt to shape or mold their child's behaviour or to adjust the emotional balance between parent and child by using three main strategies: inducing guilt, instilling anxiety, or withdrawing love. Psychological control through guilt has long been a method of parents who are attempting to manipulate their children into submission, as has been the strategy of creating anxiety in the child for the purpose of elevating fear and thus

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obedience. Because children have an inherent need for love, attention, and approval from their parents, love withdrawal is expressed in various ways: Parents withdraw attention or affection, refuse to communicate, or even physically separate themselves from the child. The power of love withdrawal is found in its ability to arouse feelings of guilt, anxiety, and other negative feelings that create an internal pressure – or compulsion – that is antithetical to a feeling of autonomy.¹⁸ The result, beyond gaining compliance from the child, is that the child pressures him or herself so much so that noncompliance is not an option, thus creating collateral psychological pressure that undermines the development of self-regulation. In extreme cases, children learn to avoid having close emotional contact with parents on the chance that this connection will be used against them as a manipulative technique to gain compliance.

Constraining behaviour is characterized by stifling a child's verbal communication and expression of self. Hauser and colleagues¹⁹ emphasize parental binding and constraining behaviours that restrict verbal interactions to parental interests and withdraw or show indifference to the child. Such behaviours are seen to undermine the child's participation in family interaction and thereby discourage involvement with ideas and observations related to self and others.

The effect of this sort of restricted communication on healthy individual and family functioning has been well established. For example, David Olson and colleagues²⁰ have found that communication is a significant psychosocial element contributing to the achievement of balance between cohesion and flexibility in families, and thus any actions that intentionally stunt this dynamic exchange are both significant and long lasting.

The most overt form of psychological control appears on the surface at least, to be very behavioural in form: corporal punishment. From a purely self-determination perspective, physical forms of discipline like spanking, are prototypically controlling.²¹ What is accomplished with the use of corporal punishment is quite simply an association between the behaviour of the child and a negative physical experience (e.g., spanking) that the parent hopes will deter future behaviour. In particular, such tactics have been reputed to "pressure the child to behave in specific ways by using fear of pain and humiliation, and they undermine a sense of choice or autonomy. Furthermore, they undermine the sense of relatedness in that it is inherently contradictory and confusing that a person who loves you inflicts pain."²²

But the evidence supporting the correlational findings between the use of corporal punishment and these adverse long-term effects is rather weak from both a methodological and statistical perspective. For example, Larzelere²³ completed a review of 38 studies of physical punishment conducted between 1995 and 2000. Excluding studies of what he termed abusive punishment, he found that 32 per cent of studies showed a beneficial effect, 34 per cent showed a detrimental effect, and 34 per cent showed a mixed effect. The consequences to the child, however, were found to be generally short-term (e.g., compliance), and there was no evidence in any of the studies that such controlling behaviour by the parent lead to long-term compliance and particularly to the development of high levels of self-regulation for the child.

How parents get “out of control” with control

It is difficult to imagine that any parent would intentionally and repeatedly choose to use any or all of the above intrusive methods as their primary approach to raising and disciplining their children. It is more likely that parents resort to practices that are outside their own comfort level in terms of severity, method, and even consequence, and they inadvertently find themselves saying, doing, and feeling things with respect to their children that interfere significantly with their ability to provide autonomy support to their children.

Wendy Grolnick²⁴ suggests that there are at least three types of pressure that may lead to parents' controlling behaviour: Pressure from above, pressure from below, and pressure from within. With reference to perceived pressures from above, Urie Bronfenbrenner²⁵ has for decades promoted that children, parents, and their families do not develop in a vacuum, but instead are enveloped in an expansive context of other people, their relationships, and even cultural, societal, and global systems that impact on their functioning. As such, some research suggests there is a downward pressure on parents that may result in over controlling behaviour. In one study, Grolnick and colleagues²⁶ looked at predictors of autonomy support versus control in parents of adolescents and found that the more negative life events the mothers reported, the less autonomy supportive they were rated, irrespective of socioeconomic status. Interestingly, there were no significant correlations between stressful events and controlling behaviours in fathers, suggesting that the likelihood of parents using psychological control may be slightly more prevalent in mothers (and especially mothers who are single parents) who find themselves in situation where external pressures are significant.²⁷

Pressure from below

Pressure from below includes those social factors that come from the child and can also contribute to parents' controlling tendencies. The classic theory and research by Thomas, Chess, and Birch²⁸ introduced the tripartite classifications of infant temperament: children who were easy, slow-to-warm up, and most critical for our discussion, difficult. Difficult children were often in a bad mood, had high-intensity reactions, or were slow to adapt to new situations. So what evidence is there between a child with difficult temperament and a parent instituting more controlling parenting behaviour? Bates²⁹ found that, as we saw earlier with White's study, as children entered into the 24-month age, those identified by their mother as having a difficult temperament were more likely to be subjected to power assertion by that mother. Additionally, returning to Grolnick and colleagues' study³⁰ of parents of adolescents, those parents who perceived their own adolescent child as more difficult were more controlling than mothers who rated their adolescents as easier. Interestingly, this did not hold true for fathers in this study, as fathers reacted to their own difficult children by withdrawing rather than increasing their efforts at psychological control. When asked about adolescence (as a period of life) and its difficulty in general, however, fathers who perceived this to be a difficult period of life were more controlling than mothers. Thus, whether in general perception or in the reality of their own child's difficult temperament, the balance swings toward more rather than less control by parents.

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Pressure from within

A final view on how control can get out of control in parenting behaviour comes from considering the intrinsic forces at work within a parent. Parents, as they are both biologically and socially engaged with their offspring, are apt to be very psychologically close to their children. As such, parents who do not have flexible boundaries with their children (i.e., that family members are not allowed to be separate people or develop their own identities) results in parents being overly intrusive into their children's lives and feelings.³¹ In extreme cases, this can mean that the psychological control instituted by parents results in various severities of maladaptive outcomes: over protectiveness, possessiveness, and ultimately separation anxiety.³² Common to these accounts is the idea that controlling parenting may result from parental intolerance of their children's increasing separation and independence. Parental control is thus used as a means to make children emotionally and psychologically dependent on the parent.

Controlling parents have also been described as being highly self-critical and perfectionist, and to demonstrate a high fear of failure. As these parents pressure themselves to overachieve and thus perceive failure as a threat to their own self-worth, they are likely to behave in controlling ways towards their children. Soenens and colleagues found that parents who experienced events signaling parent-child distance as threatening and who anticipated their child's increasing independence with feelings of resentment and anxiety reported using more psychologically controlling tactics to keep their child within close physical and emotional boundaries.³³ Further, it was found that dependency-oriented control was uniquely related to family enmeshment, providing further support that families with inadequate boundaries are more likely to engage in psychological control that comes into play whenever the child makes advances towards either physical or psychological independence.

The study also found interesting connections that help to explain parent control issues as it pertains to such activities as sports, academics, or vocational choice. As it was with dependency-oriented control, Soenens and colleagues³⁴ found that achievement-oriented control was uniquely related to parental perfectionism, where family members are compared and evaluated in terms of their performance or achievement. The authors interpreted this finding to suggest that "perfectionist parents project their own standards onto their children and use manipulative pressure as a means to impose their achievement-oriented standards onto their children."³⁵ The effect of achievement-oriented control was also found to be specifically related to adolescent self-criticism, a construct thought to develop when parents make their approval contingent upon meeting strict parental standards and when they induce guilt for performing less than perfectly.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PARENTS, CHILDREN, AND PUBLIC POLICY

The issue of parenting style and parental control is both troubling and pervasive in terms of its causes and effects. Indeed, if one were to consider only the information presented in this report, it would be harshly incriminating towards parents who have the best intentions for keeping their children happy and safe. But research also shows that even the most intrusive parents are rarely the sole contributor to poor child outcomes. Even in the strongest studies implicating parental psychological control with negative child outcomes like anxiety or lowered self-esteem, the amount of change in children's behaviour may well be statistically significant but of marginal practical importance. There are always other social, genetic, and contextual variables that combine to both improve and magnify the common effects of multiple and persistent instances of controlling parenting.

Parents, professionals, and policy-makers would do well to recognize the value of autonomy-supportive parenting and any activities in the home or community that support such strategies. Parents need and want to be given freedom to construct their own *a priori* rules and the opportunities to be personally engaged with the enforcement of these rules and consequences within their home environment. Efforts aimed at reducing the contact between parents and their children (e.g., universal daycare) may only serve to increase the stress and concern parents already feel about being a "good enough parent,"³⁶ the result of which may serve to increase the external and internal parenting pressure.

A more reasonable contribution of public funding would be to ensure all parents have access to accurate information on the importance of parent-child attachment, social and academic competence, and self-determination. In line with this recommendation, Richard Lerner³⁷ and others have begun to focus on the tenets of positive youth development – elements such as competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring – and social contexts and relationships that come alongside parents to contribute to the development of these characteristics in all children. Emphasis on programs that embrace creating sustained relationships between adults and young people, teaching knowledge and skills to navigate the world, and – this can be the most difficult – allowing kids to use those skills in valued community and family activities can all be instrumental in developing healthy outcomes for all children. Helping parents come to understand that they have support and resources in other parents, their neighborhoods, schools, and places of worship is far more powerful than pathologizing parents. Only when parents feel that they have both ownership and shared responsibility in raising healthy children will they understand that psychological control is within their control.

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Endnotes

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