

The secure attachment of children

The importance of positive parenting practices and behaviors

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Positive parenting is focused on the understanding that children come into the world primed with the tools and capacities to follow a path of optimal growth and development.

This outlook is drawn from positive psychology, which is the study of how people flourish. This movement in the field of psychology arose to counteract the heavily present disease/illness model of human functioning and to focus on what goes right.

It is based on the view that all individuals want to have lives that are meaningful and fulfilling by exploring, enhancing, and using our individual strengths and to be able to enjoy love, play, and work. Keyes and Haidt [4] identify four hallmark behaviors that express what is needed for people to flourish:

- Being resilient — the ability to meet the challenges of life and use setbacks and adversity as learning and growing experiences by relying on oneself and having a positive attitude.
- Able to engage and relate to others.
- Finding fulfillment through being productive and creative.
- Looking past ourselves to help others flourish, as well.

The Civil Society Statement on Parenting recently promoted by nine international organizations mentions in its preamble “the scientific evidence that confirms the importance of positive parenting practices and behaviors to health, education, child wellbeing and overall wellbeing outcomes for children, including adolescents” [1].

These follows the mention of the two last UN General Assembly resolutions on the ‘Follow-up to the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family and beyond’ [2] and the annual Report of the UN Secretary-General on the ‘Implementation of the objectives of the International Year of the Family and its follow-up processes’ [3].

All this background calls for an explanation of what makes parenting a positive action, according to the most recent doctrines.

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Parenting Styles

Parenting styles are made up of parents' attitudes about childrearing and parenting and they represent how parents interact with their child. Diana Baumrind is credited with the work of establishing parenting styles from her research in the 1960s. The research has continued on vigorously and is now one of the most extensive and robust in psychology. One of the reasons is that children's outcomes in so many areas — from emotional, to social, to cognitive — have been found so often to be related to the style of parenting they experience.

The first thing to understand about parenting styles is that there are dimensions that make up the various styles. Falling into categories related to being high or low on the dimensions results in four parenting styles.

- One dimension is parental responsiveness. This has to do with the degree parents pay attention to their child in a way that is warm, sensitive, supportive, and deserving of respect. It is also about how much parents acknowledge the child is unique.
- A second dimension of parenting styles is parental demandingness. This is about the demands or claims parents make for their child to become a functional and vital part of the family. It revolves around the extent to which parents have appropriate expectations for a child's maturity of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. It is closely tied to how parents supervise and discipline. A feature of this dimension is psychological control. This refers to how much parents use guilt, taking away love, and shaming the child.

Most parents have a main or dominant style. However, they can be anywhere on a continuum, and they might also move across styles. Parents tend to use the style they experienced when they were growing up. If the style is not a healthy one, they will need to work harder to change their thoughts and behavior.

The style positive parenting is most aligned with is the authoritative. There are three other styles that are less supportive of positive parenting. These are authoritarian, permissive, and uninvolved.

Authoritative parenting style is high on responsiveness and demandingness, while low on psychological control. Parents who practice this style are very warm when their child approaches. They treat their children with respect when children ask questions and when they talk together. They are able to read children's signals well, both non-verbal and verbal. They also are accepting of individual differences in children, such as their particular interests or their temperament, which is how a child approaches and interacts with the world.

Authoritative parents encourage and support their children to show autonomy or independence in how they think and act. However, they have fair and clear expectations and limits about how children should behave and they base these on the level of their child's maturity. They believe in the child taking responsibility for managing their thoughts and behaviors, but they guide and teach their children how to do so by using reasoning and consequence-based discipline, rather than punishment. They are willing to still nurture and forgive when children do make mistakes, or engage in disappointing behavior. This makes for close, healthy relationships.

Authoritarian parenting style, on the other hand, is essentially the opposite. These parents are low on responsiveness and high on demandingness, with high psychological control. They do not respond warmly and discourage dialogue. They believe children should follow parents' strict orders and not think for themselves.

When children do not behave or try to be autonomous, authoritarian parents tend to punish harshly, both verbally and physically. This typically happens frequently, because such parents expect children to be able to do things earlier and better than any child can. These relationships are not close and not healthy.

Many people confuse positive parenting with permissive parenting, but as the following description highlights, this is not the case. Permissive parenting style is high on responsiveness and low on demandingness. These parents do respond warmly and much communication is present. These parents, however, are overly devoted to reading and responding to their child's signals in a way that makes it more about indulging the child's whims, which get met, no matter what.

Children are expected to regulate themselves without parental guidance or any standards of conduct being provided for them. These parents don't ask for personal responsibility and rarely discipline effectively; usually they just give in or bribe. These relationships are close, but not healthy.

The fourth style is the uninvolved parenting style which is low on responsiveness and low on demandingness. Such parents are disconnected and very hands-off, although they take care of their children's basic needs (food, clothing, shelter, health).

They don't respond much one way or the other to their children when they reach out, they rarely talk much with them, and they don't set limits or attend to whether the child is learning to self-regulate. Some parents use this style because they are overwhelmed and so shut down, while others think children, in general, are capable of raising

themselves. These relationships are not close, and not healthy.

Attachment Theory

Establishing a close parent-child relationship with secure attachment is a hallmark of positive parenting. Attachment theory has a very long and well-researched basis. It is most notably from the work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, who established the theory beginning in the 1950s. Attachment is particularly important in the area of social and emotional outcomes for children. Fundamentally, the purpose of attachment is so a child feels safe, secure, and protected.

Three main types of attachment relationships have been identified. One of the most important determinants of the quality of the attachment relationship is how the parent responds when the child has a need, such as feeling insecure, or upset, or afraid.

It's useful to know the need for attachment is so strong in infants and young children that it's not whether they are attached, but how healthy that attachment is. Also, children can have any of the types of attachments discussed below with any number of main caregivers. So they could have one for mother, a different with father, and another with a nanny or grandparent.

Secure attachment is most likely to result when parents respond to the child's needs in a way that is sensitive and loving; for instance, they pick the child up when they're crying — especially in infancy — speak soothingly, listen to the child. Children then know they can express such feelings and will get comfort.

Their strategy for using their parent to manage their distress is to find and stay close. When a young child has a secure attachment, they can use their parent (or primary caregiver) as a base from which to explore, but yet feel they can get reassurance and comfort if needed.

When there is avoidant attachment, children do just that — they avoid. This is a type of insecure attachment. They will avoid both the parent and avoid showing they are in distress. This happens when the parent regularly ignores or is insensitive by expressing annoyance or belittling the child when they send signals or approach for comfort.

Another type of insecure attachment is called ambivalent/resistant attachment. This develops when the response the child gets is inconsistent or unpredictable. It can also happen when the parent acts as if his/her needs are greater than the child's or they make a big deal of the child's distress and behave as though they're overwhelmed. The child typically exaggerates their needs in the hope that

Tips on practicing positive parenting *

Positive discipline emphasizes mutual respect and utilizes positive instructions. It focuses on learning (for the future) instead of punishing (of the past). Here are 8 tips on practicing it.

1. Focus on the reasons behind the action

There is always a reason why children misbehave even though the reason may seem silly to the parents. It is reasonable to the child and that's why they behave that way.

2. Kind and firm discipline

Be kind to model how to be kind and respectful to others. When a parent is kind and respectful despite being upset, the child learns to deal with difficulties with composure and respect.

3. Time out yourself

It is inevitable that sometimes parents are just exhausted. If something doesn't go your child's way, do you want him to blow up, or do you want him to have the ability to control his own emotion and remain respectful?

4. Be non-punitive, be creative

Punitive punishment produces Four Rs that do not help a child learn – Resentment, Rebellion, Revenge and Retreat. A positive, non-punitive response is much better at settling an overstimulated child and engaging them in learning.

5. Be clear, be consistent and follow through

Decide and explain the consequences of violating limits clearly before being enforced. In addition, parents need to be consistent and follow through on them.

6. Understand brain development and age-appropriate behavior

Children under the age of three cannot reason because the part of their brain responsible for understanding consequences and making sound judgment has not yet developed. So for children in this age group, redirection instead of reasoning or giving consequences should be used.

7. Make it a learning opportunity

When children are old enough to reason (older than three), every misbehaving episode can be turned into an invaluable life lesson.

8. Be patient and don't despair

It is not about getting fast results. It is about teaching behavior that parents want their children to emulate over time.

* Based on ParentingForBrain.com, 'What Is Positive Parenting?', available at <https://bit.ly/2s8OM1W>

the parent will pay attention. Insecurely attached children have a difficult time exploring appropriately without a secure base.

What about 'Attachment Parenting?'

There has been a recent rise in a childrearing approach called attachment parenting. This revolves around physical touch, responsiveness to crying and other distress-related emotions, co-sleeping, extended breastfeeding, and authoritative parenting style. Some of these practices are part of attachment theory and mainstream positive parenting, and others are not.

The two that are most unique to attachment parenting are co-sleeping and extended breastfeeding. While these are personal choices, it is important to know that close sleeping, such as in the same room, is safer than co-sleeping in the same bed, as there is a large risk an adult will roll onto a child and smother them, particularly for infants. Breastfeeding is recommended for as much of the first year as possible, but extended breastfeeding is seen in cultures and in times when food is extremely scarce, which is not the case in the U.S. for most families.

Child Guidance

The work of Rudolf Dreikurs is frequently cited as a major influence on positive parenting. His work is an extension of Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology approach, which takes into account the environment of the person in understanding them. Dreikurs' advice on parents guiding the child has a number of components. Among these are:

- There should be mutual respect between a parent and child based on the basic human right of equality. Parents should show encouragement for their child's efforts, as this indicates they believe in the child and accept them as they are. At the same time, parents should not set standards the child cannot reach, as this will discourage them.

- Rather than rewards and punishment, parents should use natural consequences that stem from the child's actions, as opposed to the parent using their authority to get the child to do or not do something. When disciplining, more acting and less talking, which can lead to arguments, is recommended. Related is for the parent to withdraw by ignoring or leaving the room to remove an audience for the child's attempts at a power struggle. However, this is not the same as withdrawing from the child, just from the conflict. Please note these ideas are not for when a child is in immediate danger, or too young to be left alone.
- Children need to be taught important skills and habits, but this should be done when the child is calm, and also not when there are others around who aren't in the immediate family so the child is not too self-conscious. Parents must let children do for themselves when and what they can, and to accept a child's perhaps still-inadequate efforts, if it still gets the job done. They must resist the urge to make it just a bit better, or to validate their importance as parents.

Behaviorism

Many people shudder when they hear behaviorism connected to child rearing. They conjure up images of a controlled, scared, or emotionless child. Even those who write in the popular positive parenting world rarely use this term directly.

None-the-less, the truth is all of us, as humans, pretty much from the beginning of life, make decisions about what we think and how we act, based on the feedback we get from our environment, both physically as well in relationships. It is perfectly normal! B.F. Skinner developed the behavioral theory of operant conditioning, based on the idea that to understand behavior, one must look at both what happened before and the consequences following the behavior.

[1] Cf. <http://www.familyperspective.org/jfpo/jfpo-cssp-en.php>.

[2] "Initiatives to promote involved and positive parenting [...] have been found to be beneficial in advancing social integration and solidarity between generations, as well as in promoting and protecting the human rights of all family members." [A/RES/72/145 and A/C.3/73/L.19/Rev.1].

[3] It significantly referred to positive parenting and discipline as relevant for UNICEF programmes and some national strategies, as those developed in Malta and Portugal, as well as its study in the Conference held in Doha after the presentation of the Statement [A/74/61-E/2019/4].

[4] Corey L. M. Keyes and Jonathan Haidt, 'Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived', 2003.