

Strong Bonds Fact Sheet: Understanding the Reasons : Parenting Styles

Approaches to parenting vary. How you parent – your parenting style – is influenced by your own parents, your personality, what you learn from people around you, the stresses you face in your life, and your child's personality and behaviour. The following are types of parenting styles¹

Parenting Styles

Authoritarian Parenting

An authoritarian parent has all the power. Decisions are made for the child, without discussion or explanation. Authoritarian parenting is cold and firm.

Indulgent Parenting

Indulgent parents allow children to have a lot of power. Boundaries are not set or enforced. Indulgent parenting is warm and soft.

Indifferent Parenting

An indifferent parent may not show much interest in the child's needs. Life is centred on the parent. Indifferent parenting may also swing between indulgent and authoritarian styles, so there is a lack of consistent parenting. Children don't know how to behave or what to expect.

Authoritative Parenting

In authoritative parenting, parents set clear boundaries and children are allowed some power within those boundaries. Authoritative parenting is warm and firm. Authoritative parenting has been shown to have the best outcomes for young people.

Abusive Parenting

Abusive parents hurt their children. Abusive parenting includes emotional, physical or sexual abuse and neglect. Abusive parenting causes lasting damage and must be stopped.

Different Styles

Parents in a family often have different parenting styles. One may be strict and the other more lenient. One may be more affectionate and the other more cold. This is not a bad thing. Both sides usually have some good parts. They can balance each other out.

However, it is important for parents to work together, even when their styles are different. They must agree on the rules, and support each other in enforcing them.

Even when parents have trouble getting along with each other, they should try to talk to each other and come to an agreement about parenting. It is important not to undermine the other parent, or keep secrets with the child.

Separated parents

Parents who have separated still need to work together to parent their children appropriately.

As far as possible, the rules in each home need to be consistent. Parents need to talk to each other about parenting issues, find agreement and support each other in enforcing boundaries.

Exposing children to constant conflict, or undermining or criticising the other parent, is damaging to children. If you need to talk to someone about the difficulties or frustrations that you have with your ex-partner, find a supportive friend or arrange to see a counsellor. It is not appropriate to debrief with your child about such things.

Authoritative parenting works best

As stated above, authoritative parenting is both firm and warm. People who adopt this style of parenting set clear and appropriate boundaries with children and give their children plenty of affection. Research has shown this is the style that works best for young people.

Authoritative parenting boosts a young person's self-esteem. It develops resilience. It helps young people learn to look after themselves, and to have healthy relationships.

For an authoritative parenting style you should:

- show warmth and affection and give praise
- have clear and fair boundaries and limits
- clearly explain the consequences of children breaking the limits or boundaries
- be consistent with limits and follow-through with consequences
- use and expect co-operation rather than obedience.

Research shows teenagers benefit from being monitored. They do better when their parents keep an eye on them, checking where they are going and having arrangements about where they are and when they must come home. This tends to be easier when they are in early adolescence and gets harder as they get older. There comes a point when they decide for themselves what they are going to do and where they are going to go.

It is normal – healthy, in fact – for teenagers to keep some secrets from their parents. But it is best to have as open a relationship as possible, so they feel comfortable coming to you for advice when they need to.

Can I change?

If your parenting style has been too strict or too passive, inconsistent or abusive you should try to change.

It is challenging to change the way you behave with your children. You have habits and attitudes that are hard to break. Your children are used to the way that things have been. They are likely to resist change. But it can be done and it is worth the effort to build a better relationship.

Rethink rules

Think about the boundaries you have set for your child. Are they appropriate? Have they changed as your child matures? Are they too different from the community around you?

If you have been very strict, rethink which things you will be firm about. If you have been too passive, set some good boundaries now and discuss them clearly with your child in a calm but firm manner.

Boundaries

If you have had a passive approach with your children it is hard to change when they are teenagers. They will resist your efforts to establish new boundaries. Setting some good rules, like a regular family mealtime, is worth the effort. Research with young people shows they feel more cared for when their parents show interest in them, create routines and rules for them, and make an effort to help them grow up safely.

Think about the relationship you would like when your child is an adult. You can start to create that relationship now.

What is abusive parenting?

Child abuse is emotional, physical or sexual abuse of a child, or severe neglect of the child's needs. It is very damaging.

Sexual abuse

Sexual contact between adults (people over 18) and children (people under 16) is both wrong and illegal.

Sexual contact between parents and their children is never OK, at any age.

It is also abusive for any adult in a position of power over a young person to be involved in any sexual activity with them – that includes step-parents, teachers, foster-parents and carers.

Physical abuse

Physical abuse is when children are physically hurt. It can include hitting the child with your hand or an object or with enough force to cause bruising. It may be a conscious disciplinary strategy, or losing control.

Emotional abuse

Emotional abuse is mainly verbal. Constant criticism, yelling and swearing at a child is abusive. No parent is calm and reasonable all the time. Most parents will do these things sometimes. If you are a good parent at other times, most children will cope. It is abusive when it is extreme or happens often.

Neglect

Children are hurt by neglect. If their needs for food and shelter, medical treatment and education, contact with people and love are not met, their development is affected.

Some parents find it too hard to provide the care their children need. Sometimes they do not understand what those needs are. Sometimes they are having so much trouble dealing with their own problems they cannot manage their parenting jobs.

If you are struggling to meet your child's needs, remember that the most important need is love. Show love and affection; smile, talk and listen. No matter how bad other things are, these things help children to cope. But it is also important to remember children have only one childhood. If you cannot care for them properly, get help.

Acting on child abuse

Physical abuse, sexual abuse and neglect are unlawful. A parent or other adult who physically or sexually abuses a child or neglects their child can be charged with a criminal offence.

When a child is abused or neglected, the government may step in to protect the child.

In Victoria, Child Protection intervene when a parent abuses a child or does not provide safety and basic care, or when someone else abuses the child and the child's parent is unable or unwilling to protect them. They may involve the Children's Court.

For more information, contact the Department of Human Services in your region.

I want to stop hurting my child

If you believe you have been abusing or neglecting your child, you can get help to change. Start by telling someone that you need help. The government is making changes to the Child Protection system. They would rather families seek help, than have the government involved.



Tips from this Help Sheet

- Approaches to parenting vary, but authoritative parenting has the best outcomes for young people
- It is important for parents to work together and have a consistent approach to parenting, even if they have different styles
- It is challenging to change your parenting style, but it may benefit your young person a great deal
- Abusive parenting is never okay and needs to be stopped



Related Help Sheets

- What went wrong? Why?
- Adolescent Development
- Family Dynamics
- Understanding Drug Use
- Understanding Mental Illness
- Understanding Complex Problems
- Need a Helping Hand?





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