

Research Brief: Gender Differences in Parenting

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Parenting styles

Social science researchers study the dimensions and outcomes of parenting styles and behavior to understand how the best and worst practices impact children. Understanding and organizing parenting behaviors provides useful frameworks to help improve outcomes for children and families around the world.

One of the most widespread social science constructs of parenting styles in the last 50 years describes four basic styles of parenting. These are referred to as authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglecting/rejecting, which are based on the two dimensions of demandingness and responsiveness (Baumrind, 2005; Baumrind, 1996; Britannica, n.d.). Responsiveness is characterized by parental warmth in emotional expression with their children, supporting their children's individuality and autonomy, reasoned communication, and general attunement to their children's emotional state and cues. Demandingness is characterized by parents monitoring their children's behavior, setting limits and rules that are backed up by appropriate discipline, maturity demands (behavioral control), and generally enforcing expectations for their children. Using these two dimensions, authoritative parenting can be described as high responsiveness and high demandingness, authoritarian as low responsiveness and high demandingness, permissive as high responsiveness and low demandingness, and neglectful/rejecting as low responsiveness and low demandingness.

The research on these four parenting styles explores parental behaviors associated with each style and the potential outcomes for children based on their parents' parenting style.

Parenting methods across cultures can typically be described as one of these four styles (Britannica, n.d.; Yaffe, 2020), and authoritative parenting is considered to have the best outcomes for children (Britannica, n.d.; Sanvictores & Mendez, 2022). The positive outcomes associated with better parenting styles include high academic and school performance, good emotional regulation that supports social skills and emotional health, independence, confidence, and autonomy that support goal achievement, and high self-esteem. Neglectful parenting tends to have adverse impacts for children, such as delinquency, drug use, school challenges, and relationship challenges. Authoritarian and permissive parenting styles result in more moderate outcomes for children, with a mix of positive and negative outcomes depending on which style is used.

Authoritative parenting seems to be the best for children and is described as being high in both responsiveness and demandingness (Britannica, n.d.; Sanvictores & Mendez, 2022). The relationship between parent and child is close and nurturing, with open communication in both directions (Britannica, n.d.; Sanvictores & Mendez, 2022). There are reciprocal expressions of love and warmth, and communication between parent and child is person-based rather than position-based centering their roles in the family (Baumrind, 1996; see also Baumrind, 1966, 2005). The parent monitors the child's behavior and directly communicates consistent expectations, which are enforced by appropriate rewards or disapproval. Authoritative parents typically require behavioral compliance from their children while allowing and acknowledging dissenting opinions, including discussing the reasoning and motivation for the desired behavior.

Discussion of gender differences

Authoritative parenting is the most common and most desirable style, yet it is not practiced equally by mothers and fathers (Yaffe, 2020). More mothers than fathers use an authoritative style, while more fathers use an authoritarian style, according to a systematic review of research on gender and parenting styles from 15 countries around the world (Yaffe, 2020). This review found that mothers in the studies were more accepting, responsive, supportive, behaviorally controlling, demanding, and autonomy-granting, traits which are aligned with being highly responsive and highly demanding. Fathers were found to be more restrictive, coercive, harsher, and more punitive while showing less concern, which aligned with being highly demanding but low in responsiveness. In the review Yaffe discussed how these traits align with common social gender-role concepts, specifically along the dimension of responsiveness. Mothers tend to be more emotionally attuned to their children which supports their family role of nurturer, while fathers tend to be less emotionally responsive and serve as a protector.

Couples often share the same parenting style, and having two authoritative parents is associated with the most positive outcomes for children (Simons & Conger, 2007), but research shows that even just one parent in the couple using an authoritative style leads to better outcomes than when neither parent uses authoritative parenting (McKinney & Renk, 2008; Simons & Conger, 2007). However, there is also evidence that a mother and father using different parenting styles can lead to increased marital conflict and child behavior problems (Tavassolie et al., 2016). Discussing applications of their findings, Tavassolie et al. describe the possible benefits of increased parental awareness of their parenting styles. When parenting

styles conflict, understanding the source of the disagreement could support parents in collaborating to find mutually acceptable parenting choices.

There are certain parent behaviors that suggest gender-dependent outcomes. Challenging behavior is an emerging topic that might reveal gender differences in parenting, and that the same behavior displayed by mothers and fathers could have different effects on their children (Majdandžić et al., 2013). These behaviors are done more commonly by fathers, in order to stimulate, surprise, and destabilize the child as well encourage risk-taking behaviors (Majdandžić et al., 2013). Majdandžić et al. describe parent-child relationships with challenging behaviors as activation relationships, while relationships without them are called attachment relationships. Their study results indicate that when fathers performed challenging behaviors, their children's anxiety decreased six months later, but that when mothers performed the same kinds of challenging behaviors their children's anxiety increased. Van Lissa et al. (2019) also discussed attachment and activation relationships in the context of adolescent children, and their results supported the idea that mothers and fathers play different roles in their children's development. Children who perceived high levels of support from their mother had better emotional regulation, supporting the theorized benefits of the maternal attachment relationship. Children who perceived less behavioral control from their father had better emotional regulation as well, suggesting that fathers encouraging freedom and autonomy is a healthy challenge that supports children's emotional development according to the activation relationship theory.

Research on parenting styles and behavior has typically focused on mothers and omitted fathers, but studies that include mothers and fathers can provide both nuance and

clarity. As the data increase so does the understanding of how mothers and fathers are similar and different. As theories about the roles of mothers and fathers are developed, social expectations and gender roles can be viewed with a new perspective. Perhaps most importantly, increased knowledge contributes to practical strategies for parents to support their families and children in achieving the best possible outcomes.

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