

Authoritative  
parenting is the best  
form of parenting



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Over time there has been considerable scientific interest in the study of parenting as a key component to healthy adolescent development. A wealth of information is available, supporting that the type of parenting adolescents experience is undoubtedly one of the most potent influences on their psychological and behavioural well-being (Fletcher et al., 1999). In reviewing the literature, one is struck by the consistency with which authoritative parenting has been associated with a wide range of positive adolescent outcomes. However, a critical appraisal of the relevant research evidence reveals some important drawbacks that need to be addressed when the benefits of authoritativeness are taken into account.

Before examining in detail the studies that argue for the beneficial effects of authoritative parenting in adolescence, it would be sensible to provide some conceptual definitions. According to Darling and Steinberg (1993), the term “parenting style” is used to denote “the constellation of attitudes towards the child that are communicated to the child and create an emotional climate in which the parent’s behaviors are expressed” (p. 493). Baumrind (1967, 1971, 1978) has made a seminal contribution to the field of parent-child interactions by categorizing parenting styles into three qualitatively different patterns: the authoritative, authoritarian and permissive form of parenting. This threefold classification was based on two dimensions of parental behaviour: responsiveness and demandingness. Subsequently, Maccoby and Martin (1983) transformed this typology by including a fourth style of parenting, the neglectful (or indifferent). Due to the word limit, this essay does not intend to present details of each parenting style but it will mainly focus on authoritative parenting.

The effective balance between high levels of demandingness and responsiveness (Glasgow et al., 1997) is the distinctive characteristic of authoritative parenting. Parents adopting this style appear to be warm and involved, consistent in setting firm limits while permitting autonomous behaviour and decision-making (“ psychological autonomy granting”, see Steinberg, 1990). Moreover, authoritative parenting involves recognition of the rights of both parents and children (Dornbusch et al., 1987) through a combination of reasoned control, support and concern. The high maturity demands that authoritative parenting entails are fostered through bidirectional communication (e. g. verbal give and take), reasoned behavioural guidelines and support of independence (Spera, 2005). In contrast, authoritarian parents are emotionally distant and unresponsive in the parenting role while permissive parents are more responsive than demanding. Finally, cold and distant relationships characterize indifferent parenting (Fletcher et al., 1999).

Over several decades, the concept of parenting style typology has served as a framework for a large body of research on family socialization practices during childhood. Nevertheless, a plethora of studies investigating family interaction patterns and areas of adolescent functioning played a key role in bringing the phenomenon to the forefront of theoretical and research attention. This body of research indicates that the beneficial influence of authoritative parenting does not diminish during adolescence (Glasgow et al., 1997). To illustrate, authoritative parenting has been associated with better psychological adjustment (e. g. less psychological distress, fewer problem behaviours, better peer relations) (Brown, Mounts, Lamborn &

Steinberg, 1993), better academic performance (Dornbusch et al., 1987; Weiss & Schwarz, 1996; Winte & Yaffe, 2000), increased competence and higher self-esteem, autonomy, and self-reliance (Baumrind, 1989; Buri, Louiselle, Misukanis & Mueller, 1988) in adolescence. A question that needs to be addressed is why this strong link between authoritative parenting and positive adolescents' outcomes exist. First of all, the high levels of emotional security and parental involvement provide adolescents with a sense of comfort and independence. Hence, parental influence is easily accepted, enabling more effective and efficient socialization. Secondly, adolescents function as responsible individuals due to the combination of parental support with high expectations which facilitates the development of their self-regulatory skills. Last but not least, the bidirectional communication which characterizes authoritative families fosters the development of skills in interpersonal relations and produces better adjusted adolescents (Spera, 2005; Steinberg, 2001).

A vast amount of research has provided evidence supporting the proposal that authoritative parenting is demonstrably the best form of parenting in adolescence. Baumrind (1967) was the first to report this relationship. Preschool children reared by authoritative parents were followed in a longitudinal study to investigate whether the positive outcomes of authoritative parenting remain stable across time. Baumrind found that those children were more mature, independent, prosocial, active and achievement-oriented than children of non-authoritative parents. When the sample was examined again during adolescence, Baumrind (1989) revealed that the beneficial effects of authoritative parenting were consistent with her

earlier findings. Similarly, a study conducted by Glasgow and her colleagues (1997) revealed a positive link between authoritative parenting style, adolescents' attributions and educational outcomes. In fact, authoritatively reared adolescents appeared to be more socially and personally responsible, indicating lower levels of dysfunctional attitudes, than adolescents from non-authoritative families.

By the same token, Weiss and Schwarz (1996) examined Baumrind's conceptual framework about parenting styles through a multi-informant design. Reports by 178 college students, their mothers, fathers and one sibling were used to investigate the hypothesis of the study. Their findings corroborated and extended those of previous research as they showed that authoritative parenting remains the best form of parenting even in an older, late-adolescent, college-age sample. In a similar vein, Gray and Steinberg (1999) "unpacked" authoritative parenting, into its constituent components – warmth, control, and psychological autonomy granting – in an effort to examine their independent contribution to healthy adolescent functioning. Their findings indicated that all three aspects of authoritative parenting exert a powerful influence on adolescents' psychosocial development and academic competence. Specifically, parental control was found to be important as a deterrent against behavioural problems (e. g. drug use, delinquency) while parental involvement offered a general protection against anxiety, depression and other forms of internalised distress (Steinberg, 2001).

Consistent with the above is also a sizeable body of work indicating a positive relationship between authoritative parenting style and students' <https://assignbuster.com/authoritative-parenting-is-the-best-form-of-parenting/>

academic achievement. Relevant evidence is provided by Dornbusch et al., (1987) who used data from a large and diverse sample of adolescents (N= 7836) in order to test Baumrind's typology in the context of school performance. The results revealed that families high in authoritative parenting had adolescents who attained higher grades in school compared with those from authoritarian or permissive families. Additional research on school outcomes by Steinberg and his colleagues (1989) showed that adolescents exposed to authoritative parenting develop more positive academic self-concept, stronger work orientation, and lower levels of school misconduct. Consequently, they are more likely to do better in school than their peers who experience other styles of parenting.

Evidence in favour of the proposal is also provided by a number of studies that indicate the detrimental effects of authoritarian and permissive parenting styles on adolescents' well-being. Lamborn et al., (1991) found that adolescents exposed to authoritarian parenting are more obedient and conforming, but their self-confidence regarding their perceptions about their social and academic competence as well as their self-sufficiency is significantly low. Quite the opposite results are presented by adolescents who experience permissive parenting. Although they demonstrate a strong sense of self-competence, they report higher levels of substance abuse (Adalbjarnardottir & Hafsteinsson, 2001) school difficulties and poor levels of emotion regulation skills (Steinberg, 1990). Overall, the aforementioned studies give weight to the assumption that the combination of high levels of responsiveness and demandingness that authoritative parenting entails, constitutes the best form of parenting in adolescence.

Generally, based on the conclusions made by Steinberg et al., (1992), this body of research indicates that the link between authoritativeness and adolescents' well-being is: (1) causal (Steinberg et al., 1989); (2) extended from younger to older adolescents (Weiss & Schwarz, 1996); and (3) widely applicable across diverse ethnic, socioeconomic, and family structure groups (Dornbusch et al., 1987).

Although there has been great progress over the years regarding the work on authoritativeness and its beneficial effects on adolescents' well-being, a general review of the literature reveals many aspects that are inherently questionable. A number of studies at the other end of the spectrum highlight some important methodological inconsistencies that challenge the value of the proposal that authoritative parenting represents the best form of parenting in adolescence.

A general criticism is related to the fact that the majority of studies proposing the beneficial effects of authoritative parenting have been conducted on samples of white, middle-class adolescents, growing up in two-parent households (Steinberg, 1990). The superiority of authoritative parenting is related to cultural specificity, thus the results cannot be generalised. According to Pellerin (2005), children from authoritative homes may reveal better outcomes than others due to the fact that the authoritative climate at home prepares them to function well in authoritative contexts. In contrast, no optimum youth outcomes should be expected in other non-authoritative environments.

To illustrate, research has shown that the relationship between authoritative parenting and adolescents' outcomes is not consistent across families from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Specifically, Leung, Lau, and Lam (1998) examined the influence of parenting styles on children's academic achievement in four countries – United States, Hong Kong, China and Australia. The results showed that academic achievement in the sample of Hong Kong adolescents was positively related to authoritarianism, whereas authoritative parenting was unrelated to the grades of this sample but positively related to the grades of European American and Australian adolescents. Chao (1994, 2001) reached similar conclusions, providing evidence against the generalisability of authoritativeness. She observed that, Asian populations interpret the meaning of authoritarian parenting differently. To be more specific, while authoritarian parents are defined as caring and concerned by Asians, European Americans characterize the same style as controlling and dictatorial. Further research in Middle East and Asian societies suggested that authoritarian parenting may carry some protective benefits for poor ethnic minority families who are more likely to live in dangerous community contexts (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999). For example, Dwairy, Achoui, Ahouserie, and Farah (2006) revealed that authoritarian parenting was enhancing adolescents' development in Arah societies rather than harming their well-being as it did in Western societies.

Relevant to the above claims are studies indicating that adolescents reared in permissive families perform equally or better in several youth outcomes. Wolfradt, Hempel, and Miles (2003) concluded that German adolescents, who



perceived their parents as permissive “ seemed to show a distinctive better psychosocial adjustment by scoring lowest on depersonalization and anxiety and showing high levels of active coping” (p. 529). Similarly, Garcia and Gracia (2009) challenged the idea that authoritative parenting style is always associated with optimum youth outcomes across all cultural and ethnic contexts by providing evidence that in Spain, the most advantageous style of parenting is the indulgent (permissive) one. However, it has to be remembered that the evidence presented so far does not provide the opportunity to explore issues of causality. Hence, any interpretation deriving from the above can be misleading.

Beside the concern of cultural specificity, the studies in favour of authoritativeness failed to acknowledge that the goals toward which parents socialize their children may vary even across the same ecologies (Baumrind, 1971). As Darling and Steinberg (1993) note, it is of high importance, before reaching the conclusion that the benefits of authoritative parenting transcend the boundaries of cultural context, to know more about the goals toward which parents socialize their children and the practices they use to achieve this purpose.

It has also been asserted that research on the benefits of authoritative parenting has ignored issues related to inter-parental consistency (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Traditionally, research has examined the effects of mothers' parenting styles assuming that fathers adopt either a similar or an irrelevant style to the child's competence (Fletcher et al., 1999). The supporters of this view claim that parenting style may differ between mothers and fathers, thus

conclusions based only on the style adopted by one of the parents may not be valid.

Moreover, certain criticisms have been applied in connection with the use of typology in describing parenting style (Darling and Steinberg, 1993). It can be assumed that parenting style may not include only the dimensions proposed by Baumrind. Hence, there is always a risk that other behaviours of equal importance which are not part of authoritative parenting may lead to the positive outcomes in adolescents (Lewis, 1981). In addition, as Weiss and Schwarz (1996) propose, the ability to distinguish which component of authoritative parenting contributes to the predominant effects is restricted by the use of typology. Apparently, the consensus when investigating parental effect is to look at the combination rather than a single type of parenting.

Yet, many of the previously described studies have been criticized for their single-informant design. In fact, there is a possible risk for the association between authoritative parenting and adolescents' psychological adjustment to be the result of socially desirable responses and not the outcome of the association between the constructs (Weiss & Schwarz, 1996). In other words, since many of the data have been derived from adolescents' reports, there is always the likelihood for particular patterns of behaviour to be based on the way that adolescents characterize their parents. Therefore, many of the studies supporting the proposal may have built their results on adolescents' subjective experience. In order to reach valid conclusions, it is important to know whether parents' actual behaviour towards their children is associated in similar ways with the outcomes assessed (Steinberg et al., 1991). This can <https://assignbuster.com/authoritative-parenting-is-the-best-form-of-parenting/>

be achieved through a multi-informant design (e. g. Weiss & Schwarz, 1996) combined with observation methods.

Finally, there has been considerable debate regarding the direction of the relationship between authoritative parenting and positive adolescents' functioning. Is the relationship reciprocal or straightforward? It is worthwhile noting that most of the studies supporting the proposal are correlational, thus any interpretation must be treated with caution as a reciprocal causation can be derived from the findings. Perhaps, it is adolescents' achievements that provoke authoritative parenting. In addition, there is always the possibility that the link between parental authoritativeness and healthy adolescent outcomes exist simply due to a confounding third variable (Steinberg et al., 1992). A relevant explanation is provided by O' Connor (2002) who suggests that genetic factors may moderate the influence of parent-child relationships. To be more specific, parental influence may be overestimated if researchers neglect the presumed environmental effect that genetic factors carry (O' Connor, 2002). For instance, positive child attributes may lead the parents to invest in their children. Therefore, bi-directionality and endogeneity need to be considered when parental influence is taken into account.

Obviously, there are many reasons to suspect that authoritative parenting is the best form of parenting in adolescence. However, despite the long and robust tradition in this field some controversial issues still remain vague. " As research on families and adolescents proceeds the researchers must not lose sight of the changing social context in which families live and the implications of this change for the study of family relations" (Steinberg, <https://assignbuster.com/authoritative-parenting-is-the-best-form-of-parenting/>

1990, p. 276). In brief, the issue merits further investigation; certainly, more longitudinal studies are needed in order to unscramble the causal pattern and be able to support with confidence that children exposed to authoritative parenting experience the most beneficial influence.

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