



## REFOCUSING ON PARENTING

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### **Introduction**

Each day, more than three quarters of a million adults around the world experience the joy and heartache, and, the challenge and reward of becoming new parents. Despite the fact that most people become parents and everyone who ever lived has had parents, parenting remains a somewhat mystifying subject about which almost every one has opinion but about which few people agree.

It is the principal and continuing task of parents in each generation to prepare children of the next generation for the physical, economic and psychological situations in which those children must

survive and thrive. Childhood is the phase of the life cycle when parent provided experiences are believed to exert their most significant and salient influences. While the amount of interaction between parent and child is greatest, childhood is also the time when human beings are particularly susceptible and responsive to external experiences. Indeed, the opportunity for enhanced parental influence and prolonged learning is thought to be the evolutionary reason for the extended duration of human childhood.

Yet, parenting is under "friendly fire" today on account of strong secular and historical trends

operating in modern society. Industrialisation, urbanisation, poverty, increasing population growth/density and dual parental employment constitute centrifugal forces on parenting and the family.

This article refocuses on parenthood, addressing questions about the positives of parenthood, purview of parenthood and parenting styles.

### **Positive of Parenthood for Parents**

It is important to stress that parenting has its own intrinsic pleasures, privileges and profits. Parenting is not all giving. In various surveys, parents have reported that when they had their first child, they not only fell "in love" with their baby, but were personally happier than ever before. Parents can find interest and can derive considerable and continuing pleasure in their relationship and activities with their children.

Evolutionary theory asserts that adults are motivated by strong self-interest to be good parents. According to this, all individuals are compelled to see their childbearing and childrearing succeed on the argument that this is the way people continue their unique genetic characteristics. Becoming or being a parent also means having new and vital responsibilities to self as well as to others. Parenthood can enhance one's psychological development, self-confidence and sense of well being. Parenting children augments self esteem and a sense of fulfillment.

In essence, parents receive a great deal "in kind" for their hard work and commitment. They are often recipients of unconditional love, skills gained, an enhanced sense of self and even immortality.

### **Parents**

In the minds of many, mother is unique, the role of mother universal and motherhood unequivocally principal in the development of young children. However, with urbanisation, the days when most women "stayed home" with children will soon

be a thing of the past. Whether working outside the home or not, mother will continue to bear the largest part of day to day responsibilities of childrearing. The urbanisation has witnessed fathers spending more time with their children in care giving. Mothers and fathers tend to interact with and care for their children in complementary ways they divide and share the labours of caregiving and engage children by taking responsibility for different type of interactions.

The origin of maternal and parental behavior is extremely complex. Some aspects of parenting appear initially to arise out of biological process associated with pregnancy and parturition. Pregnancy in human being causes the release of certain hormones thought to be involved in the development and expression of protective, nurturant and responsive feelings toward offspring. The structural characteristics of the very young like facial features, excite feeling of affection and solicitude in mature members of different species.

Parenting calls for enduring personality and associated characteristics including intelligence, traits and attitudes, motivation to become involved with children and childcare knowledge and skills. Some characteristics that favour good parenting include general well-being awareness, predictability, responsiveness and emotional availability.

Negative characteristics of personality, like self-centeredness and depression, whether transient or permanent, typically affect parenting adversely. Mothers with elevated depression are more likely to ignore, protest, or verbally attack children in problem solving situations. Even sub-clinical depression is negatively related to mother's communication of nurturance and trust.

Intimate support from husbands enhances maternal competence, family dynamics and child outcomes. Women who have supportive relationships with husbands are more attentive and sensitively respond to their children. By contrast,



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quarrelling parents are likely to convey confusing messages to their children. They would not only have less time for their children but also become less involved in their lives. They are observed to engage in more hostile relationships with their children.

### **Responsibilities Of Parents**

From the start, parenthood is a 168 hour - a-week job. Human infants are totally dependent on parents for survival. Childhood is the time when we first make sense of and understand objects in the world, forge our first social bonds and learn for the first time how to express and read basic human emotions. In childhood, individual personalities and social styles also first develop; it is parents who escort children through all these dramatic firsts. Not surprisingly, these developmental dynamics are closely tracked by parents; parents shape them and all these in turn shape parenting.

The contents of caregiving can be divided into following four categories: -

(a) **Nurturant Caregiving.** Nurturant caregiving meets the biological, physical and health requirements of children. Parents are responsible for promoting children's wellness and preventing their illness. Virtually in all higher species, parents nurture their young providing sustenance, routine care, protection, supervision, grooming, comfort and the like. Nurturance is a pre-requisite to children's survival and well-being.

(b) **Material Caregiving.** Material caregiving includes the ways in which parents provision, organize and arrange the child's physical world, including home and local environments. Adults are responsible for the number and variety of inanimate objects (toys, books, and tools) available to the child, the level of ambient stimulation, the limits on physical freedom, and the overall safety and physical dimensions of children's experiences.

The amount of time children spend interacting with their inanimate surroundings rivals or exceeds the time children spend in direct social interaction with parents or others.

(c) **Social Caregiving.** Social caregiving includes variety of visual, verbal, affective and physical behaviors. Rocking, kissing, tactile comforting, smiling, vocalising and playing illustrate parent-child interpersonal interactions. Through positive feedback, openness and negotiation, listening and emotional closeness, parents can make their children feel valued, accepted and approved of. Social, caregiving includes helping children to regulate their own affections and emotions. It influences communicative styles and interpersonal repertoires which children develop to form meaningful and sustained relationships with others.

(d) **Didactic Caregiving** Didactic caregiving consists of the variety of strategies parents use to stimulate children to engage and understand the environment and to enter the world of learning. Didactics means introducing, mediating, and interpreting the external world. Teaching, describing and demonstrating, as well as provoking or providing opportunities to observe, to imitate and to learn forms part of this.

While elements of this taxonomy are self evident, in practice, child interactions are dynamic, intricate and multidimensional and caregivers regularly engage in combination of these.

### **Styles Of Parenting**

Three contrasting parenting styles have been identified; authoritarian, permissive and authoritative. These three parenting styles differ particularly on two parenting dimension; the amount of nurturance in childrearing interaction and the amount of parental control over the child activities and behavior.



**(a) Authoritarian Parenting.**

The authoritarian parents tend to be low in nurturance and high in parental control compared with other parents. They set absolute standards of behavior for their children that are not to be questioned or negotiated. They favour forceful discipline and demand prompt obedience. Authoritarian parents also are less likely than others to use more gentle methods of persuasion such as affection, praise and rewards with their children. Consequently authoritarian parents are prone to model more aggressive modes of conflict resolutions and are lax in modeling affectionate, nurturant behaviors in their interaction with their children.

**(b) Permissive Patents.** Permissive parent tend to be moderate to high in nurturance but low in parental control. These parents place relatively few demands on their children and are likely to be inconsistent disciplinarians. They accept the child's impulses, desires and action and are less likely than other parents to monitor their children's behavior. Although their children tend to be friendly, sociable youngsters compared with others their age, they lack knowledge of appropriate behavior for ordinary social situations and take too little responsibility for their own misbehavior.

**(c) Authoritative Parent.** In contrast to both authoritarian and permissive parents, authoritative parents tend to be high in nurturance and moderate in parental control when it comes to dealing with child behavior. It is combination of nurturance and parental control that is most facilitative in the development of social competence during early childhood and beyond.

Nurturing behavior includes affectionate and friendly interaction with the child, consideration for

the child's feelings, desires and needs, interest in the child's daily activities, respect for the child's points of view, expression of parental pride in the child's accomplishment and support and encouragement during times of stress in the child's life. A high level of nurturance in child rearing virtually assures more positive adult-child interaction than negative ones in the day-to-day operations of family life. This in turn predisposes the child to return love to the parent and to enjoy spending time with the parent thus increasing the possibilities of significant parental influence throughout childhood. Parental nurturance also motivates the child to please the parent by striving to live up to parental expectations. The children of nurturing parents are more likely to incorporate parental values, such as considerateness and fairness in interpersonal relation into their own lifestyles. One would also expect these children to resist peer group values that are clearly different from family values. If there is a downside to high level of nurturance in childrearing, it is the risk that nurturant parents might be more lax than other parents in challenging their children to measure up to developmentally appropriate standards for behavior. However, this risk could be reduced by the authoritative parents inclination to combine moderate levels of parental control with nurturance.

The authoritative parents set behavior standards for their children. To facilitate compliance, and as a courtesy to the child, authoritative parents offer reason and explanation for the demand placed on their children. These practices increase the child's understanding of rules and regulations, eventually making it possible for the child to monitor his or her behavior in the absence of the parents.

Parents who use authoritative child rearing practices often use positive re-inforcers such as praise, approval and rewards to increase the child's compliance with behavioral standards. A parent's positive response to good behavior may be the most powerful tool the parent has for increasing child



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compliance and decreasing the need for disciplinary action.

When misbehavior does occur and discipline is deemed necessary, authoritative parents show a preference for rational-inductive discipline in which both sides of an issue are stated and a just solution is sought. These parents also prefer consequence-oriented discipline, in which, children are expected to make up for their wrong doing. Also, authoritative parents do not force harsh physical punishment or put down such actions as ridicule or negative social comparisons which affect the child's sense of personal worth.

## Conclusion

In parenting, as in other endeavors, nothing works all the time. It is safe to say however, that authoritative parenting works better than most of the parenting styles in facilitating the development of social competence in children at home and in the peer group. High level of nurturance combined with moderate levels of control help adults become responsible child rearing agents for their children and help children become mature competent members of society. With a little bit of luck, the children of authoritative parents should enjoy more than their share of success in the peer group.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*The officer was commissined on 22 Jan 91 and is a Specialist in Paediatrics. He has served in INHS Aswani, INHS Sanjivini and Military Hospital (Jammu). Presently he is posted in INS Jeevanti.*

*A young Midshipman had nearly completed his first overseas deployment when he was given an opportunity to display his ability at getting the ship under way. With a stream of crisp commands, he had the decks buzzing with men. The ship steamed out of the channel and soon the port was far behind.*

*The Snottie's efficiency had been remarkable. In fact, the deck was abuzz with talk that he had set a new record for getting a destroyer under way. The Snottie glowed at his accomplishment and was not all surprised when another seaman approached him with a message from the Captain.*

*He was, however, a bit surprised to find that it was a radio message, and he was even more surprised when he read, "My personal congratulations upon completing your underway preparation exercise according to the book and with amazing speed. In your haste, however, you have overlooked one of the unwritten rules. Make sure the Captain is onboard before getting under way!"*

*Contributed by Lt KS Bali*

