

# Authoritarian parenting: What happens to the kids?



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The authoritarian parenting style is about being [strict and stern](#). It insists on unquestioning obedience, and enforces good behavior through threats, shaming, and other punishments.

As defined by psychologists, it's also a style associated with less parental warmth and responsiveness (Baumrind 1991).

That doesn't bode well for a child's health outcomes, especially if she's growing up in an otherwise stressful environment. As I note in [this article](#), studies suggest that responsiveness and warmth can protect kids from the effects of toxic stress.

But what about other things -- like behavior problems? Social Skills? Emotional well-being? Academic achievement?

If authoritarian parents are demanding, doesn't that at least suggest they'd produce kids who are better-behaved and more successful in the classroom?

Surprisingly, the evidence indicates otherwise. Here is an overview of the research.

## Authoritarianism and the alternatives

Researchers recognize at least [three alternatives to authoritarian parenting](#):

• [Permissive parents](#) are emotionally warm, but reluctant to enforce rules or standards of conduct.

• **Uninvolved parents** are like permissive parents, but they lack warmth

• [Authoritative parents](#), like authoritarian parents, set limits and enforce standards. But unlike authoritarian parents, authoritative parents are very responsive or nurturing.

In addition, authoritative parents encourage their kids to ask questions, and they explain the rationale behind the rules. Authoritative parents are also less likely to control kids through the induction of shame, guilt, or the withdrawal of love.

## **How does authoritarianism measure up?**

### **Behavior problems**

#### **Mounting evidence that heavy-handed tactics make kids worse**

When kids misbehave, it might seem tempting to enforce good behavior through threats, harsh punishments, and other forms of psychological control. But research suggests these tactics *don't* result in long-term behavioral improvements.

On the contrary, they seem to make things worse.

For instance, let's consider what psychologists call "externalizing behavior problems" -- disruptive, aggressive, defiant, or anti-social conduct. If authoritarian disciplinary tactics work, we should expect them to lead to fewer such behavior problems as children get older.

But that isn't what we observe when we track children's development. In a recent meta-analysis of more than 1400 published studies, Martin Piquart found that harsh control and psychological control were actually the biggest predictors of worsening behavior problems over time (Piquart 2017).

Kids subjected to these authoritarian tactics at one time point tended to develop more externalizing behavior problems at later time points.

What about other types of misbehavior? Like adolescent alcohol use? Once again, the most current evidence suggests that kids with authoritarian parents are more, not less likely to use and abuse alcohol (Glozah 2014; Calafat et al 2014).

### **Social skills and resourcefulness**

#### **Kids from authoritarian families are less resourceful, less socially-adept, and more likely to become involved in bullying.**

This generalization appears to apply across a variety of cultures. Kids from authoritarian families may find it more difficult to fend for themselves and make friends. And they are at higher risk for involvement in bullying -- both as perpetrators and as victims.

Examples?

#### **The United States**

Studies of American adolescents have reported that teens with authoritarian parents were the least likely to feel socially accepted by their peers. They were also rated as less self-reliant (Lamborn et al 1991; Steinberg et al 1992; Steinberg et al 1994).

In addition, a recent study of U.S. college students found that students raised by authoritarian parents were more likely to engage in acts of bullying (Luk et al 2016).

#### **China**

One study of 2nd graders in Beijing found that kids from authoritarian families were rated as less socially competent by their teachers. They were also more aggressive and less likely to be accepted by their peers (Chen et al 1997). Other Chinese research has linked the punitive aspects of authoritarianism with poorer social functioning (Zhou et al 2004).

#### **Cyprus**

When researchers questioned 231 young adolescents about their cultural values and experiences with peers, they found that kids from authoritarian homes were more likely to have experienced bullying -- both as victims and perpetrators (Georgiou et al 2013).

## **Turkey**

In a study of Turkish high school students, kids from authoritarian families were rated as less resourceful than kids from authoritarian or permissive parents (Turler and Tzer 2008).

## **South America and Spain**

Researchers in Latin cultures report that authoritarian parents are more likely to have kids with low social competence (Martinez et al 2007; Garcia and Gracia 2009). In addition, a Spanish study found links between authoritarian parenting and bullying. High school students with authoritarian parents were more likely to be involved in bullying, particularly if their parents attempted to control them through the use of punitive discipline (Gómez-Ortiz et al 2016).

## **The Netherlands**

In Dutch studies, kids with authoritarian parents were rated as less helpful and less popular by their teachers and classmates. They were also rated as less mature in their reasoning about moral issues (Dekovic and Janssens 1992; Janssens and Dekovic 1997).

## **Emotional problems**

Does authoritarian parenting put kids at greater risk of anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression?

Maybe yes.

For example, in a behavioral genetics study of Chinese twins, researchers found that kids with authoritarian fathers were more likely to suffer from a psychiatric disorder -- even after accounting for the influence of genes (Yin et al 2016).

Other research in China suggests that authoritarian parenting puts children at higher risk for depression if they have trouble with self-control (Muhtadie et al 2013). And kids with harsh parents tend to have more trouble regulating their emotions (Chang 2003; Wang et al 2006).

Links between authoritarianism and emotional problems have also been found in the United States. Behavioral genetics research suggests that authoritarian parenting contributes to the risk of major depression later in life (Long et al 2015).

In addition, U.S. studies indicate that adolescents and adults are more likely to suffer depressive symptoms if they characterize their parents as having used authoritarian practices in the past (King et al 2016; Rothrauff et al 2009). Children are more likely to develop symptoms if their mothers embrace authoritarian child-rearing tactics (Calzada et al 2015).

And research in other societies paints a similar picture:

- In Caribbean countries, kids raised by authoritarian parents are more likely to suffer from depression than kids raised by authoritative parents (Lipps et al 2012).
- Studies of Spanish and Brazilian adolescents have reported that teens from authoritarian homes had lower self-esteem than did teens from authoritative or permissive families (Martinez and Garcia 2007; Martinez and Garcia 2008).
- German researchers found that teens with authoritarian parents were more likely to suffer from trait anxiety. They were also more likely to experience depersonalization--the feeling of watching oneself act without being in control of one's actions (Wolfradt et al 2003).

But the authoritarian parenting style isn't always linked with emotional problems. Some studies of American adolescents have failed to find emotional differences between kids from authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive homes (Lamborn et al 1991; Steinberg et al 2006).

And research on adolescents in the Middle East has also failed to find a link between authoritarian caregiving and psychological problems like depression (Dwairy 2004; Dwairy and Menshar 2006).

Why the inconsistencies?

I suspect the effects of authoritarianism depend on how harsh, cold, or punitive the parent is.

For instance, some research suggests that corporal punishment is linked with higher rates of depression and anxiety among children.

It also seems likely that culture plays a role. If kids perceive authoritarianism as normal and mainstream, they may be less distressed by it (Dwairy 2004).

## **What about school?**

### **Experimental research suggests that authoritarian approaches interfere with learning.**

In a fascinating study of kindergarteners, Melissa Kamins and Carol Dweck have shown that a common tactic of authoritarian caregiving--shaming a child for poor performance--[can make kids perform more poorly on problem-solving tasks](#)(Kamins and Dweck 1999).

Moreover, experiments suggest that people learn better from positive feedback than from negative feedback, and this may be especially true for kids (Schmittmann et al 2006; van Duijvenvoorde et al 2008).

### **Other studies report correlations between authoritarianism and lower school achievement.**

For example, a study of adolescents in the San Francisco Bay Area found that the authoritarian parenting style was linked with lower school grades for all ethnic groups (Dornbusch et al 1987). These findings are supported by other, similar studies (Steinberg et al 1989; Steinberg et al 1992).

## **And morality?**

Authoritarian parents might see themselves as champions of morality. But, as noted above, studies suggest that kids with authoritarian parents are actually *less* advanced when it comes to self-regulation and moral reasoning (Dekovic and Janssens 1992; Janssens and Dekovic 1997; Karreman et al 2006; Piotrowski et al 2013).

Moreover, kids from authoritarian families may be more likely to "tune out" their parents as they get older.

For instance, when researchers tracked American middle and high school students over 18 months, they found that kids who identified their parents as more authoritarian were more likely to reject their parents as legitimate authority figures. They were also more likely to engage in delinquency over time (Trinker et al 2012).

And in a study of American undergraduates, researchers asked students who they consulted when they had to make moral decisions. Undergraduates with authoritative parents were the most likely to say they would talk with their parents.

Students with *authoritarian* parents--like students from permissive families--were more likely to reference their peers (Bednar et al 2003).

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