

## **Parenting Dimensions**

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*Parenting* is the process of supporting the development of a child from infancy through adulthood. This support encompasses not only the child's physical development, but his or her social, emotional, and financial development as well. Although children are most often raised by their biological parents, parenting refers to a process that is separate from its biological definition. Thus, siblings, grandparents, and legal guardians may also parent. For example, in the Kipsigis community of Kenya, after a child reaches the age of two it is common practice for older siblings to take on the role of parent while the mother is away working or running errands. In contrast, western societies such as the United States often reserve this role for a designated adult who may or may not be related to the child.

Researchers who study parenting use the term *parenting dimensions* to refer to the core features and qualities which capture the essence of the parenting process. These elements are important because they provide the foundation upon which the study of parenting is built. Much research on parenting dimensions occurred between the 1930's-1960's, at which time many different models of parenting dimensions were proposed. From these models two overarching constructs emerged: *warmth* and *autonomy support*. After the 1960's, a third dimension, *structure*, was added. These three constructs were initially measured in tandem with their opposing constructs, *rejection*, *coercion*, and *chaos*. Thus, a parent high in *warmth* would score low on *rejection* and vice versa. However, researchers later did away with this bipolar structure

so that all dimensions could be measured independently of each other. This resulted in a six-dimension parenting model which includes *warmth*, *rejection*, *autonomy support*, *coercion*, *structure*, and *chaos*.

*Warmth* refers to expressions of love, affection, appreciation, care, and enjoyment. Parents demonstrate warmth to their children when they are emotionally available, positively involved in the child's activities, supportive and genuinely caring. Warmth is especially important when a child is in need of comfort. For example, when a child falls off her bicycle and scrapes her knee, a parent shows warmth by responding to the situation and providing affection, such as a comforting hug. The opposite construct of warmth is *rejection*. Rejecting parents interact with their children in negative, hostile, disapproving, critical, overreactive, irritable, and explosive ways. They may also respond to their children by acting cold and unfriendly. Rather than comforting the child who fell off her bicycle, the rejecting parent may instead criticize and blame the child for what happened.

Parents who are high in *autonomy support* allow their children more choice in decision-making. Such parents encourage self-expression in their children and value their opinions and preferences. When a child is working on his homework, the autonomy supportive parent is less directive and encourages the child to find the solution on his own. In contrast, *coercion* (also referred to as psychological control) is exemplified by strict control over the child. Coercive parents are autocratic, inflexible, intrusive, restrictive, and power asserting. They demand obedience of their children and discourage freedom of choice and self-expression. Coercive parents may also use punitive disciplinary techniques in order to assert their authority and maintain obedience in their children.

The last two constructs in the six-dimension model of parenting are *structure* and

*chaos*. *Structure* is defined by the level of consistency, predictability, and organization in the child's environment. It also refers to the clarity of the parents' expectations for the child's behavior. Parents high in structure provide clear and consistent rules for how their children should behave. For example, before a child is allowed to go outside and play she may be required to complete her homework. A parent high in structure will adhere firmly to this rule and not allow the child to play outside until she has accomplished this task. In this way, the parent is providing clear expectations for the child's behavior and demonstrating consistency. The opposite construct of structure is *chaos*. Chaotic parenting is characterized by inconsistent discipline, unpredictability, and permissiveness. A parent high in chaos may insist that the child finish her homework before playing outside on one day and not enforce this rule on another day. Because clear and consistent rules for behavior are not provided, children are unsure about the behaviors that are expected of them.

#### Further Readings

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