

# What Are the Different Parenting Styles?

By Barbara Brody

Some parents expect their kids to do exactly what they say, no questions asked. Others micromanage every aspect of their child's life in an effort to keep them safe and set them up for success. And yet others embrace a laid-back approach, allowing their offspring to make their own choices on just about everything.

If more than one of these approaches resonates with you yet none seems like a perfect fit, that's OK. Although psychologists and parenting experts frequently attempt to sort parents into neat categories, "I think very few of us fit into rigid buckets, and people can swing between the various styles," says Jephtha Tausig, PhD, a New York-based clinical psychologist and clinical supervisor at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Medical Center. You might find yourself shifting based on your child's age, your child's temperament, or even the time of day.

"When you wake up and are full of mental energy, you might practice authoritative parenting, meaning there are clear rules and consequences, but when rules are broken we can sit down and talk about it," says Jenny Yip, PhD, clinical assistant professor of psychiatrist at the USC Keck School of Medicine and founder of the Little Thinkers Center in Los Angeles. "However, as the day dwindles and your energy dwindles, you might find yourself feeling overwhelmed and tell your kids, 'Do whatever you want!'"

"That's permissive parenting. Or you might be so upset because a child broke a rule for the tenth time that you act like an authoritarian parent and take all their toys away. At some point, you might just want to have a glass of wine and hide in the closet, which would mean acting like an uninvolved parent."

Psychologists tend to focus on the four key parenting styles:

- Authoritarian
- Authoritative
- Permissive
- Uninvolved/neglectful

These categories stem from work by developmental psychologist Diana Baumrind, PhD, in the 1960s, but they're still used by most psychologists today. In recent years, however,

parenting experts have coined a number of unofficial (and commonly debated) styles, including helicopter, free-range, and attachment parenting. Here's what you should know about the pros and cons of these varying methods.

## **Authoritarian Parenting**

If you've ever told your kids to do something "because I'm the dad [or mom]," that's authoritarian. It's the most traditional style because parents are clearly in charge and children are expected to fall in line no matter what.

On the plus side, kids whose parents take an authoritarian approach know exactly where the boundaries are and what the consequences of violating them will be. It also makes good sense in select circumstances.

"Certain things, like wearing a seatbelt in a car or a helmet when you get on a bike, might not be negotiable," Tausig says. The downside, however, is that "this kind of model only views respect one way. "Children have to respect parents but parents don't necessarily have to respect children."

Authoritarian parenting also lacks flexibility, because the overarching rule is, "It's my way or the highway," Yip says. While kids might mind in the short-term, the parent-child relationship tends to lack warmth. Those raised with such strict rules might be more apt to rebel when they become teenagers. Also, kids who see their parents as bullies might take note and start bullying their peers, Yip says.

## **Permissive Parenting**

Permissive parenting is the polar opposite of authoritarian. "Permissive parents want to be their child's best friend," Yip says.

On the plus side, that makes them very nurturing. But being too easy also has downsides. "The problem is there are no limits," she says. "If you're always allowing a child to do whatever they want, they will never understand that in the real world there are consequences to their actions."

Permissive parenting can also force children to make too many choices before they're ready. You probably don't want your child to have two hot fudge sundaes for dinner every night, Tausig says, but a parent who's permissive across the board might very well let that happen.

## **Authoritative Parenting**

Most psychologists consider authoritative parenting to be the sweet spot between authoritarian and permissive parenting. Research shows it strikes the best balance. "It's usually what ends up being most comfortable for both children and parents because it tends to reduce conflict," Tausig says. "Kids feel safer in terms of knowing where the

boundaries are and that they can trust and rely on them, and parents feel safer in asserting the boundaries.” Yet warmth and flexibility are also part of the equation.

Authoritative parents – unlike their authoritarian counterparts – enforce rules, but not without discussing them and the reasons behind them. Kids are welcome to provide input and ask questions, though they don’t get the final say. “Sometimes a rule might not make sense,” Yip says. “Rather than telling them, ‘just do as I say,’ you’re able to have a dialogue, respond, and be flexible.”

## **Uninvolved/Neglectful Parenting**

This type is similar to permissive, minus the nurturing. “Uninvolved parents are completely hands-off. Their mantra is ‘You do what you want; I really don’t care,’” Yip says. While even the most doting parent might drift into this category when they’re really worn out, no expert would suggest taking this route often time.

People who are raised by uninvolved parents are more prone to anxiety and depression, Yip says. “Imagine if you had an absent parent who neglected all your needs and didn’t provide for you; you might feel like you’re not important.”

## **Helicopter Parenting**

Helicopter parenting isn’t an official parenting style, but it’s one that’s gotten a lot of attention in recent years. As with most approaches (aside from neglectful), it stems from a good place: Helicopter parents want to protect their kids, keep them happy, and set them up for success so badly that they become overinvolved in their lives.

The problem, Yip says, is that these folks often wind up micromanaging their child’s life – completing science fair projects for them or calling friends’ parents to mediate a fight. As a result, their kids don’t learn how to handle their own problems or withstand any kind of disappointment.

“The problem with overinvolved parenting is that it doesn’t prepare children for the real world and doesn’t equip them with resiliency,” says Yip. It’s telling, she says, that more than a quarter of young adults who enroll in college for the first time don’t return to campus for their sophomore year.

## **Free-Range Parenting**

This might be viewed as a type of permissive parenting, but it can include plenty of rules and guidance. There are different ideas about free-range parenting, says Lenore Skenazy, who trademarked the phrase in her book *Free-Range Kids: How to Raise Safe, Self-Reliant Children (Without Going Nuts with Worry)*.

She defines free-range parenting as trusting kids to do more by themselves, including walking to school without parents in tow, preparing simple meals, and figuring out how to pass the time when they get bored. “A scrape, a spat, an afternoon with ‘nothing to do’ – we not only think they can handle these things; we believe they grow more resilient once they discover their own resourcefulness,” she says on her website.

Yip says taking a more hands-off approach, when a child is ready, makes a lot of sense. “We don’t let kids out of our sight anymore; that tells them they can’t handle it.” If parents misinterpret this philosophy or apply it to a child who isn’t ready for more independence, however, it could veer into neglectful territory.

## Attachment Parenting

Attachment parenting, a term coined by pediatrician William Sears, MD, and Martha Sears, RN, refers to being both physically and emotionally in tune with your child from the moment of birth. Key tenets include breastfeeding, babywearing, and co-sleeping (in the same bed or room). While the main goal is to create a secure bond between parent and baby, many attachment parenting fans say it can also shape how you raise older children. For example, they might oppose enforcing strict bedtimes or forcing kids to eat vegetables.

Attachment parenting is all about prioritizing love and a nurturing environment, which is mostly a good thing, Tausig says. But there’s a catch. Strictly following this philosophy often puts too much pressure on parents and mothers in particular. They may feel they have no choice but to breastfeed on demand or co-sleep, even if it takes a toll on them.

On the other hand, it’s easy to take the notion of attachment parenting too far, Yip says. This could include letting a child choose when to stop breastfeeding, even if that child is 4 or 5 years old. “At that point, you have to question whether you’re really doing what’s best for the child, because you might be hindering their social-emotional development,” she says.

## Is One Style the Best?

Whatever approach (or combination of approaches) you tend to rely on, chances are you’re doing OK as long as you keep your child’s best interests in mind, Tausig says. “None of us, including myself and my colleagues, has a lock on how to be a perfect parent.”

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### SOURCES ▼

#### SOURCES:

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Jenny Yip, PhD, clinical assistant professor of psychiatry, USC Keck School of Medicine; founder, Little Thinkers Center, Los Angeles.

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