

Rethinking “Harmonious Parenting” Using a Three-factor Discipline Model

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Diana Baumrind’s typology of parenting is based on a two-factor model of “control” and “warmth”. Her recommended discipline style, labeled “authoritative parenting”, was constructed by taking high scores on these two factors. A problem with authoritative parenting is that it does not allow for flexible and differentiated responses to discipline situations. It is argued that a simpler, and more adequate, approach would be to switch to a model of discipline with a third factor, labeled “tolerance”. Parents of the most socially competent children are adept at knowing when they have a problem and when they do not. An example of the latter would be when a child expresses negative affect while complying fully with a request. Baumrind’s notion of authoritative parenting was a useful “dialectic”, demonstrating that control and warmth are independent and equally necessary behaviors, but it did not go far enough. Baumrind’s category of harmonious parenting (high warmth, moderate control, high tolerance), which she sees as an anomaly, should be substituted for authoritative parenting as the preferred discipline pattern.

Introduction

Diana Baumrind’s (1967) widely-cited research relies on a two-factor model of discipline to generate a typology, in which three ideal parenting types—“authoritative”, “authoritarian” and “permissive”—were generated by combining the extreme poles of a two-factor discipline model. The two bi-polar dimensions on the model were termed “control” and “warmth”. The three aforementioned ideal parenting types were constructed as follows: authoritative parents were high on both warmth and control, authoritarian parents were high on control but low on warmth, while permissive parents were low on control but high on warmth. A later-identified fourth ideal type of “rejecting–neglecting” parents was constructed by identifying parents who were low on both control and warmth.

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6 S. Greenspan

29 Baumrind thus used a quasi-Hegelian dialectic, whereby competent parenting was
30 seen as a combination of discipline traits that were viewed as incompatible in earlier
31 formulations. For example, because psychoanalysts tended to see adult neurosis as
32 caused by excessive parental control, the approach proposed by so-called “vulgar”
33 (i.e. overly simplistic) Freudians was for parents to be permissive. Conversely, because
34 behaviorists tended to see child behavior problems as caused by inadequate parental
35 control, their recommendation was to be authoritarian. Baumrind’s solution was to
36 combine the best of permissive parenting (i.e. high warmth) and the best of
37 authoritarian parenting (i.e. high control). This produced the synthesis of
38 authoritative parenting, by combining high control with high warmth. She argued
39 that this pattern would be preferable to the other two ideal types, in that it would give
40 young children the direction favored by behaviorists and the acceptance favored by
41 psychoanalysts. Baumrind also has argued that psychoanalysts put too much
42 emphasis on independence and separation as a criterion for mental health (especially
43 in adolescence) and put too little emphasis on interdependence. The strong, but
44 loving, direction provided by authoritative parents is necessary, in Baumrind’s view, if
45 children are to grow up to become adults who have this balanced orientation.

46 Support for this hypothesis was provided in a study by Baumrind and Black
47 (1967), in which they found that parents using authoritative discipline had
48 preschool-aged children who were significantly more socially competent than the
49 children of parents using either authoritarian or permissive discipline. These findings
50 were generally replicated in a later study involving adolescents, in which Baumrind
51 (1991) found that youths whose parents use an authoritative discipline style were
52 most likely to be socially competent and least likely to use drugs.

53 A criticism of Baumrind’s findings made by Lewis (1981) was that it contradicted a
54 large body of attribution theory and research. She argued that high parental control
55 may bring about external behavioral compliance but is likely to retard the
56 internalization of adult values. Lewis (1981) re-examined Baumrind’s data and
57 found that one could eliminate the items measuring “firm enforcement of rules and
58 standards” without substantially altering the findings. In her reply, Baumrind (1983)
59 agreed with Lewis up to a point, but still argued that strong parental control is
60 necessary for the full development of child social competence.

61 Criticism of Baumrind’s emphasis on strong parental control continues to the
62 present time, as in the recent book by Wendy S. Grolnick (2003) entitled *The
63 Psychology of Parental Control: How Well-Meant Parenting Backfires*. Grolnick focuses
64 mainly on academic outcomes, and argues that Baumrind placed too little emphasis
65 on the context, and specific child needs, when parental control is exercised. As did
66 Lewis, Grolnick took Baumrind to task for ignoring the importance of child
67 independence, and she argued that authoritative parenting can undermine motiva-
68 tion and self-determination, particularly with older children. Grolnick also argued
69 that parental context (skill) is as important as parental technique, and that Baumrind
70 missed the whole issue of the manner in which parenting techniques are
71 implemented. Grolnick also cites the work of Steinberg and colleagues (Steinberg,
72 Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992) as supporting the idea that a critical aspect of

73 parenting context is respect for the autonomy and self-determination needs of the
74 child.

75 An interesting anomaly in Baumrind's studies is the existence of a subset of parents
76 who are similar to the authoritative parents in many respects but who are only
77 moderately high on the control dimension. These parents are more willing to tolerate
78 a certain degree of behavioral defiance, and seem to attach a higher value on avoiding
79 parent-child conflict. In her early childhood sample, Baumrind (1971) termed these
80 "harmonious" parents, while in her adolescent sample (Baumrind, 1991) she termed
81 them "democratic" parents. The harmonious parents came to Baumrind's attention
82 when her assistants refused to rate them on some control items, on the grounds that
83 they appeared to maintain considerable control over their children without ever
84 appearing to do so.

85 Preschool children with harmonious parents, and adolescents with (very similar)
86 democratic parents, appear to be as socially competent as children of the less tolerant
87 authoritative parents. However, Baumrind argued (on the basis of only two cases)
88 that preschool boys with harmonious parents seemed somewhat too timid. She also
89 argued (data was only sketchily described) that youths with democratic parents were
90 more likely to use drugs than youths with authoritative parents. Baumrind also has
91 suggested in some of her writings that harmonious parents are able to use control
92 methods so sparingly because they have done such a good job, through earlier use of
93 authoritative methods, of producing children who do not misbehave and who are
94 highly responsive to even the most subtle communications of parental disapproval.

95 A problem with Baumrind's typology of parenting is that it lacks an important
96 dimension, which she herself sometimes refers to as "non-intrusiveness". Baumrind
97 seems to recognize the importance of non-intrusiveness, because among the virtues
98 that she attributes to authoritative parents is a sensitivity to the feelings and needs of
99 children. In fact, one can argue that Baumrind's warmth factor is somewhat
100 contaminated, in that it contains a combination of "love" items with "non-
101 intrusiveness" items.

102 To my mind, the major problem with Baumrind's model of parenting is that it
103 lacks any overt recognition that competent parents, even ones who are relatively high
104 on control, need to make judgments all the time about when to intervene and when
105 to not intervene. This criticism, which is similar to those made by Lewis (1981) and
106 Grolnick (2003), cannot be dismissed simply on the basis of Baumrind's data. A
107 limitation of the underlying theory that drove Baumrind's research is that it has no
108 place in it for what might be termed parental detachment or restraint. Given her lack
109 of interest in this dimension of parenting, it is not surprising that Baumrind
110 constructed measures that failed to tap this domain directly. Because of Baumrind's
111 strong theoretical commitment to the two-factor dialectic, she had to force
112 detachment/non-intrusiveness into a two-factor model in which it does not readily
113 fit. A more parsimonious, and theoretically superior, solution would be to switch to a
114 three-factor model of discipline. Such a model, in fact, is justified not only
115 theoretically, but empirically as well.

A More Adequate Theory of Parenting

Baumrind's work, and that of many subsequent parenting researchers, is based on the idea (one might almost say myth) that the empirical literature provides strong support for a two-factor discipline solution. Even those who attack Baumrind's position tend to accept this assertion. This can be seen in the fact that Grolnick (2003), while highly critical of Baumrind's control emphasis, accepts her conclusion that Becker (1964) found parental discipline to be best described by the two-factor model of high–low control and high–low warmth. In fact, Becker (1964) also identified a third factor, which he labeled “anxious involvement versus calm detachment” but that I prefer to call “tolerance”.

In my own early work on parental discipline (which I am only now revisiting after a long detour into other research areas, which explains the age of some of the publications cited), I took as my starting point the self-help literature on discipline aimed at parents and other caregivers. In an integrative paper (Greenspan, 1985), I identified three major discipline meta-models found in the popular parent education literature. The first, termed the “Affective model”, might be considered Rogerian or neo-Freudian, and a good exemplar is found in the writings of Haim Ginott (1965). The second discipline model, termed the “Behavioral model”, can be considered Skinnerian, and a good exemplar is found in the writings of Gerald Patterson (Patterson & Gullion, 1968). The third approach, termed the “Cognitive model”, can be considered Adlerian, and a good exemplar is found in the writings of Rudolf Dreikurs (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964). My position, which I elaborated in that paper, is that each of the three discipline models offers caregivers a set of different but overlapping principles for achieving competence in each of Becker's three discipline factors.

For the factor of Warmth, the Affective model's principle is “comment on acts rather than the person”, the Behavioral model's principle is “do more praising than punishing” and the Cognitive model's principle is “allow democratic forms of participation”. For the factor of Tolerance, the Affective model's principle is “allow expressions of feelings”, the Behavioral model's principle is “do more ignoring than punishing” and the Cognitive model's principle is “encourage lifestyle autonomy”. For the factor of Control, the Affective model's principle is “let a child know when his/her behavior is unacceptable”, the Behavioral model's principle is “be contingent in punishing only behaviors that you want to see less of” while the Cognitive model's principle is “arrange to have a child experience the natural or logical consequences of misbehavior”.

Within the three-factor model, authoritative parenting is problematic, while harmonious parenting is not. Authoritative parenting is a problem because a parent who sets a limit every time an opportunity presents itself would score too low on tolerance. This would be objectionable to adherents to the Affective model because it would prevent the child an outlet for feelings, it would be objectionable to adherents to the Behavioral model because it would cause discipline to lose its differential reinforcing value (and by giving attention to mild bad behavior, it would encourage

156 acting out), and it would be objectionable to adherents to the Cognitive model
157 because it would deny the child the opportunity to develop an autonomous
158 internalized understanding of principles of reciprocal pro-social behavior.

159 Harmonious parenting, on the other hand, fits easily within the three-factor
160 model. That is because the moderate degree of control exhibited by these parents is
161 based, as Baumrind herself noted, on a tendency to distinguish between those child
162 misbehaviors that are to be controlled and those that are to be ignored. The
163 harmonious pattern can, therefore, be defined as characteristic of parents who are
164 warm, who set limits when they feel it is called for, and who overlook some
165 (presumably mild) child behaviors in the interests of facilitating child autonomy and
166 of maintaining family harmony.

167 In the Behavioral model, the principle for tolerance is typically stated as “ignore
168 child behaviors which one does not like but can live with” (as opposed to the
169 Behavioral principle for control, which goes something like “do not ignore behaviors
170 which one does not like and cannot live with”). In the Affective model, the kinds of
171 antecedent child behaviors that fit in the former category (i.e. do not like but can live
172 with) often involve some symbolic expression of emotion. Even when the emotional
173 expression is accompanied by some unacceptable behavior, the trick—according to
174 adherents of the Affective parenting model—is to set a limit on the behavior while at
175 the same time affording an outlet for the underlying emotion. An example would be
176 when a child punches his brother: a caregiver is encouraged to say something like
177 “Brothers are not for hitting. We don’t allow punching in this house. If you want
178 to let your brother know how you feel, tell him in words or go and punch that Bobo doll
179 over there and make believe it is your brother”.

180 In an empirical study (Greenspan, 1978a), I tested the hypothesis that mothers of
181 high social competence preschoolers would be more likely than mothers of low social
182 competence preschoolers to base their limit-setting efforts on actual problem
183 behaviors. I specifically predicted that they would be more likely to allow expressions
184 of affect. To study this, I constructed a parental interview measure using brief stories
185 in which a child (whom the parent was to think of as her own) was portrayed as
186 either complying or not complying with a parental order to stop some activity and
187 then as either expressing an annoyed feeling or not expressing any feeling. The
188 subjects were asked to role-play how they would deal with the behaviors portrayed in
189 the vignettes.

190 I found that the mothers of the high social competence preschoolers were more
191 likely to engage in limit-setting behavior only when they had an actual problem (i.e.
192 when the child did not comply), while parents of low social competence preschoolers
193 tended to see non-compliance where it did not exist. As example, one story involved a
194 child who is bouncing a ball in the house. You ask him to stop. He bounces the ball
195 one more time and then he stops. The mothers of the high social competence
196 children were likely to say something along the lines of “thank you for stopping” (in
197 other words, they ignored the one-more-bounce as an expression of affect, and
198 focused on the subsequent stopping). The mothers of the low social competence
199 children, on the other hand, tended to say something along the lines of “I told you to

200 stop. How many times do I have to tell you?" (in other words, they focused on the
201 extra bounce, and treated it as an act of non-compliance, ignoring the fact that the
202 child then complied). The same finding held when the defiance was expressed
203 verbally (e.g. "I don't want to stop") as opposed to non-verbally (the extra bounce).

204 The one exception to this tendency of the "good" moms to treat affect as a non-
205 problem was when the child's verbal expression of affect took on a nasty and personal
206 tone (e.g. "you're a mean mommy and I hate you"). Most parents tend to treat "I hate
207 you" as a problem, even when accompanied by compliance. Thus, there are times
208 when a symbolic behavior crosses the threshold over into an overt behavior (as when
209 a child utters an obscenity), and for most parents "I hate you" seems to be too
210 upsetting to ignore. Another interesting finding is that a few mothers of the low social
211 competence children seemed to develop an attitude towards the portrayed child (as
212 reflected in asides such as "this kid is a real stinker"), resulting from an accumulation
213 of portrayed misbehaviors. These parents would sometimes set a limit even when
214 there was compliance and no affective expression. In other words, these parents
215 started to engage in a power struggle with the portrayed child, and were so overly
216 sensitized by the child's past history of defiance that they tended to see misbehavior
217 everywhere.

218 In a paper presented at a conference exploring implications of Piagetian theory for
219 the helping professions (Greenspan, 1978b), I reformulated the study as a kind of
220 Piagetian social conservation experiment. Affect was used to create an illusion of
221 non-compliance in a manner comparable with how changing the shape of a ball of
222 clay creates an illusion of altered quantity in a standard conservation experiment. A
223 major task of discipline, in this view, is to "conserve" the reality of compliance (and
224 of related realities such as a child's worth) in a situation in which, because of certain
225 affective distortions, it is easy to lose sight of these realities.

226 Conclusion

227 Baumrind's work has been enormously valuable and has stimulated a great deal of
228 important empirical research on parenting. It has made researchers and clinicians
229 aware that good parenting involves more than just being warm and loving; parents
230 also need to set firm limits if their children are to develop into socially competent
231 individuals. As a theory of parenting, however, Baumrind's typology, and the
232 resulting ideal type of authoritative parenting, is inadequate. The typology is
233 inadequate because it is based on only two of the three empirically derived factors of
234 discipline, and has no place in it for a major emphasis (tolerance) in the theories of
235 clinically oriented parent educators. The resulting ideal type of authoritative
236 parenting is inadequate because it creates the mistaken impression that good parents
237 set limits all of the time. It does not address the idea, which is so obvious as to almost
238 not need confirmation, that good parents know when it is appropriate, and when it is
239 not appropriate, to set limits.

240 Caregiver discipline may be considered a form of adult adaptive behavior, and
241 good parenting may be considered an aspect of adult social competence, with the

242 micro discipline situation (child misbehavior) serving as a problem that must be
243 solved. Baumrind's typology portrays parenting as something analogous to fixed
244 personality traits (or the fixed child social competence traits used as the outcome
245 variables in her research). But this misses the dynamic aspect of any social
246 interaction, including a discipline interaction between a caregiver and a child. Using
247 Martin Ford's (1992) action model of motivated behavior, I developed a devel-
248 opmental-contextualist formulation of adaptive behavior as the interface of a
249 challenging micro situation plus cognitive processes plus affective factors plus
250 physical (e.g. state) processes (Greenspan, 1999).

251 The same dynamic formulation can be applied to discipline, with the micro
252 situation being a child behavior that one wants to either elicit or stop, the cognitive
253 process being the parent's judgment about what is going on (e.g. whether there is a
254 problem or not), the affective process being whatever emotional buttons the child or
255 situation manage to push, and the physical process being such things as whether the
256 parent is feeling generally stressed or exhausted. Good parenting involves the ability
257 to make effective decisions under the pressure of sometimes difficult and confusing
258 situations. The technique of authoritative parenting is too static and rigid to allow
259 effective and flexible management of such complexity.

260 Harmonious parenting is preferable to authoritative parenting as a basis for a
261 normative theory for advising parents on how they should address the discipline
262 function. That is because it captures the three major domains of discipline, and not
263 just the two from which Baumrind constructed the notion of authoritative discipline.
264 Leaving tolerance and autonomy-promotion out of the mix of techniques that
265 parents use is to run the risk, as Grolnick (2003) points out, that parental control can
266 become parental oppressiveness. Parent-child interaction is a complex dance, and
267 only when a caregiver can step back and not just forward can he/she hope to perform
268 that dance skillfully.

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12 S. Greenspan

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