

1971

A Study of Personality Differences in Children Related to Strict or Permissive Parental Discipline

Patricia L. Greene
Ouachita Baptist University

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A STUDY OF PERSONALITY DIFFERENCES
IN CHILDREN RELATED TO
STRICT OR PERMISSIVE PARENTAL DISCIPLINE

A Research Paper

Presented to

Dr. Weldon Vogt

Ouachita Baptist University

In Complete Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Course
Special Studies - H491

by

Patricia L. Greene

December 1971

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to determine how the children of dominating parents differ from those of submissive parents in behavior, personality, and in their mental life and attitudes. In addition a discussion will be made of the adjustment between father and mother as married partners and of the childhood background of the parents.

The study to be reported is based upon actual cases comparing families in which there is strict and rigid control of children with families in which control of the children is lax.

The collected information of this research paper follows no one single finding of any one test. Rather, the study includes a **conglomeration** of psychological testings and findings.

I. PROBLEM

The proper procedure for the socialization of children is a difficult problem. The question has often been asked if the child should be allowed to do as he pleases with his parents quietly hoping he will make the correct decisions, or should the parents make the child do as he is told.

Statement of the problem. It was the purpose of this study (1) to present the behavior of permissive and dominant parents; (2) to report the personality differences in children from both home settings; and (3) to present concluding factors based upon cases studied.

Importance of the study. In controversies over parental discipline of children, few of the arguments advanced for more permissiveness or for more strict adult control have yet been empirically tested. Psychologists, psychoanalysts, teachers, parents, grandparents have often spoken with strong conviction on one or the other side of these issues, but the evidence has usually come from personal experience, clinical cases, plausible theories, or unconscious bias.

In this study an attempt was made to definite, concrete findings beyond the shortcomings stated above. These findings resulted from objective psychological findings.

EVIDENCE OF DOMINANT AND SUBMISSIVE PARENTS

Definition of the Terms. By dominating parents is meant those who exercise a great deal of control over the child by being very strict and authoritative with him, who punish the child or threaten punishment, who are hard on the child and hold him to standards which are not suited to his age and development, who criticize a child, who unnecessarily frighten the child, who plan extensively for him, or, in some cases, who care for the child's needs to an unusual degree and give him unnecessary toys or advantages or special privileges.

By submissive parents is meant those who permit the child a great deal of freedom, allow themselves to be dominated by the child and accede to the child's demands and wishes, who indulge the child and cannot refuse his request or, on the other hand who desert him or neglect the child, who do not give him proper training and leave him too much to his own resources.

Attitude of the Parent. Parental authority takes its complexion largely from the attitude placed upon the question of the ultimate dependence or independence of the child. If the child is to be dependent upon the parent, the aim is to regulate their interests, their choices, their friends, so that the parents keep the little circle firmly moored within the large, then the negative virtues of docility, compliance, passive obedience, and the only ones which will be emphasized. If on the other hand it is accepted from the beginning that the independence of a self-governing personality is the goal of the parent's endeavors in child-training, the efforts will be directed from the beginning towards a gradual realization of that independence.

The conception of authority held by persons responsible for the control of others is often revealed by the cast of questions on this issue. Two contrasting forms of question are: How can I get people to do what I want? and How can I direct and train people so that they will come to accept full responsibility for their behavior? The parent who thinks in terms of the persisting dependence of his children is likely to employ the first form which expresses his search for methods of enforcing authority. If, however, one accepts as a goal the ultimate independence of the child, the second is the preferred form which implies the need of emancipation.¹

Characteristics of the Home Environment. Baldwin has studied the relationships between democracy and control in the home, and children's behavior in nursery school. The democratic home atmosphere is characterized by general permissiveness, avoidance of arbitrary decisions, and a high level of verbal contact between parents and child. "Controlled" homes emphasize clear-cut restrictions on behavior, and consequently, friction over disciplinary procedures is low.

The subjects in this study were 67 4-year-old nursery school pupils whose homes had been visited and evaluated. Nursery school teachers and observers rated the children's behavior in school.²

¹William E. Blatz and Helen Bott, The Management of Young Children (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1930), p. 17.

²Paul Henry Mussen, John J. Conger and Jerome Kagan, Child Development and Personality (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1963), pp. 295-296.

Characteristics of the Non-permissive Parent. These descriptive titles are qualities of behavior of the strict parent during early childhood.

1. High restrictions on play in the house and with furniture.
2. High demands for good table manners.
3. High restriction on making noise.
4. High demands for being neat and orderly.
5. Severe toilet training.
6. High standards for strict obedience.
7. Strong emphasis on doing well in school.
8. Strict and rejective response to dependency.
9. High use of physical punishment.
10. Severe punishment for aggression toward parents.
11. Low permissiveness for aggression toward parents.
12. Low permissiveness for aggression among siblings.
13. Low permissiveness for aggression to other children.
14. Low permissiveness for nudity or immodesty.
15. Low permissiveness for masturbation.
16. Low permissiveness for sex play with other children.³

³Robert R. Sears, Eleanor E. Maccoby, and Harry Levin, Patterns of Child Rearing (Illinois: Row, Peterson and Company, 1957), p. 472.

BEHAVIOR OF CHILDREN FROM DOMINANT AND SUBMISSIVE HOMES

The Relation between Behavior and Parental Discipline. In an early investigation, Ayer and Bernreuter found some interesting relationships between child behavior (as measured by the Merrill-Palmer Personality Rating Scale) and parental practices of child discipline (as reflected by the parents' verbal remarks and attitudes in interviews). They found that physical punishment tends to orient the child away from reality, and to make him more dependent upon adult affection and attention. When children are permitted to profit from their own mistakes with a minimum of adult interference and punishment, they tend to have more attractive personalities, i.e., are more sociable, less dependent on adults, better able to face reality. Extreme parental punitiveness appears to bind the child to the parent in an abnormally dependent and emotional way. Although some parents may prefer this kind of parent-child relationship, clinical evidence indicates that their children will have greater difficulty in adjusting to school and community life.⁴

Parental patterns and the Behavior of the Children. An approach to the patterns of parent behavior and attitudes in relation to their children's behavior is that done by Radke. Her subjects, mothers and fathers of 43 preschool children, completed questionnaires and were interviewed concerning disciplinary practices and ways in which they carried on authority functions of the family. The items in the questionnaire were grouped into scales which made it possible for the investigation to

⁴George G. Thompson, Child Psychology (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1952), pp. 520-521.

make judgments concerning (1) philosophy of authority, from autocratic to democratic; (2) parental restriction, from strict and firm to lax and easy-going; (3) severity of punishment, from severe to mild; and (4) parent-child rapport, from good to poor.

What are some of the characteristics of the children who come from homes characterized as autocratic, democratic, restrictive, or severely disciplined? A summary answer to this question may be obtained from information Radke had collected about the children and the home.

Children from relatively autocratic homes compared with children from more democratic homes were found to rate as more unpopular with other children, as more given to fighting and quarreling, as more inconsiderate, as more emotionally unstable, as more daring and uninhibited, and as more insensitive to praise or blame. Radke suggests in explaining these results that they come about from shift of setting which such a child experiences. A child coming from an autocratic home to the presumably less autocratic atmosphere of the school finds himself in the midst of contemporaries whose powers are not as strong as those of his parents. As a consequence, he assumes the behavior of his parents toward the other children, acting without sensitivity or consideration for others. Unpopularity and not getting along well with schoolmates are logical outcomes. In general, the patterns from the restrictive homes and those where severe discipline is used give the same picture as that from autocratic homes.

Children from more democratic homes were found to show an opposite constellation of behavior characteristics to those of the autocratically controlled children. Thus, they are more popular, nonquarrelsome, considerate, compliant, emotionally stable, sensitive to the opinions of others and nonleaders (though followers).

A factor analysis of the ratings on the Sears, Maccoby, Levin child-rearing scales performed by Milton isolated five major factors: (1) permissiveness-strictness; (2) general family adjustment; (3) warmth of mother-child relationship; (4) responsible child-training orientation; and (5) aggressiveness and punitiveness. In discussing the effects of child rearing on the children Sears and his colleagues chose to emphasize the mother's warmth and the effects of punishment and of permissiveness.

The other end of the warmth continuum, maternal coldness, associated in their research with the development of feeding problems and persistent bed-wetting, contributed to high aggression and was an important background condition for emotional upset during severe toilet training and for the slowing of conscience development. The second factor, punishment, and the third, permissiveness, were related primarily to the first factor of permissiveness-strictness and secondarily to the fifth factor, aggression and punitiveness. Since relation to the last factor may not be immediately apparent, it should be mentioned that the scales defining it were for use of high physical and severe punishment and low permissiveness for aggression toward parents as well as high demands and permissiveness for aggression toward other children.

Punishment was important - mothers punishing severely for toilet accidents or punishing dependency severely tended to have bedwetting children in the first instance and dependent children in the second.⁵

⁵Robert Watson, Psychology of the Child (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 1965), pp. 353-354.

Effect of Home Atmosphere on Children's Behavior. On the basis of a careful review of the research literature on parent-child relationships, Radke summarized the kinds of child behavior most commonly associated with different types of homes. Excerpts from her summary are presented in Table 1. An inspection of this table shows the positive fruits of child acceptance, consistent discipline, well-adjusted parents, and parent-child companionship. The undesirable outcomes of child rejection, "babying," domination, poorly adjusted parents, and inconsistent discipline are also demonstrated. Although some of the investigations on which these concomitant relationships were based have serious scientific flaws, the general picture is probably a valid one.

A harmonious home in which consistent, democratic child-care procedures predominate would appear to be a desirable goal toward which all parents should strive -- in terms of their own happiness as well as that of their children. Well-adjusted parents have a high probability of rearing well-adjusted children. Nevertheless, the further education of well-adjusted parents may enable them to carry on a more effective program of social guidance by showing them ways and means of doing those things toward which they are already naturally inclined. The child-rearing practices of poorly adjusted parents are likely to be defective at the base, and it is doubtful that any amount of educational "tinkering" at the superficial fringe will do much to alter them. Human behavior at the adult level is extremely resistant to change. Very often, the best that can be done is to help children live with "difficult" parents.⁶

⁶Thompson, op. cit., pp. 523-524.

Type of Home	Type of Child Behavior Associated With It
Rejective	Submissive, aggressive, adjustment difficulties, feelings of insecurity, nervous, sadistic, shy, stubborn, noncompliant.
Overprotective, "babying"	Submissive, infantile, jealous, nervous, aggressive, feelings of insecurity.
Dominating parent	Dependable, shy, submissive, polite, self-conscious, tense, quarrelsome, disinterested, uncooperative, bold.
Inharmonious	Aggressive, neurotic, jealous, delinquent.
Defective discipline	Poor adjustment, aggressive, rebellious, jealous, neurotic, delinquent.
Harmonious, well-adjusted, calm, happy, compatible	Good adjustment , cooperative, independent, superior adjustment, submissive.
Logical, scientific approach	Self-reliant, cooperative, responsible.
Child accepted	Socially acceptable, faces future confidently.
Parents play with child	Security feelings, self-reliant.
Consistent, strict discipline	Good adjustment.

TABLE 1. The effects of various home atmospheres on children's behavior.

PERSONALITY DIFFERENCES

In a study done by Goodwin Watson, forty-four children brought up in good, loving, but strictly disciplined homes are compared with 34 children from the same community and also brought up in good, loving homes but with an extraordinary degree of permissiveness. For the purpose here, only results of the study will be reported and not detailed facts and figures.

Plan of Personality Study. Children who are strictly brought up will be compared with children who are treated much more permissively, on each of nine dimensions of personality as follows:

Overt Behavior

1. Independence - dependence.
2. Socialization - ego-centrism.
3. Persistence - easy discouragement.
4. Self-control - disintegration.
5. Energy - passivity.
6. Creativity - stereotyping.

Inner Feelings

7. Friendliness - hostility.
8. Security - anxiety.
9. Happiness - sadness.

In each instance the null hypothesis - that there is no significant difference between the two groups - was statistically tested. Here the hypothesis and the test result will be given.

a. Independence - Dependence: Hypothesis 1. Is there no difference between children from strict and those from permissive homes in the personality dimension of independence - dependence?

There was found to be a marked tendency for greater freedom in the home to show itself in greater independence in the child's behavior outside the home.

b. Socialization - Ego-centrism: Hypothesis 2. Is there no difference between children from strict and those from permissive homes in the personality dimension of socialization - ego-centrism?

Differences . . . show markedly better cooperation by children from permissive homes. Differences are statistically significant being large enough to have a probability of chance occurrence, less than .01. The highest level of mature cooperation is found among 32 per cent of the children from permissive homes but only 9 per cent of the children strictly disciplined. The null hypothesis must be rejected and so also must the "spoiled child" or "little monster" tradition. Exceptionally permissive discipline seems on the whole to be associated with better socialization and more effective cooperation with others. At the same time, it should be remembered that children from each type of home can be found at every step of the socialization scale.

c. Persistence - Easy-discouragement: Hypothesis 3. Is there no difference between children from strict and those from permissive homes in the personality dimension of persistence versus being easily discouraged?

The hypothesis that home discipline is unrelated to persistence-discouragement should probably be rejected. The observed differences certainly do not sustain the popular fear that children who are allowed their own way much of the time at home will collapse when faced by difficult tasks. Apparently - with due allowance, again, for the fact that

some children from each type of home can be found at every level -- there is some tendency for permissive discipline to foster the type of personality which makes a reasonable effort, continues effective intellectual attack upon problems, but is unlikely to persist indefinitely against odds.

d. Self-Control--Emotional Disintegration: Hypothesis 4: Is there no difference between children from strict and those from permissive homes in the personality dimension of self-control versus emotional disintegration?

The data did not support the view that children given firm control at home are better able to withstand frustration; neither do they support those who argue that strict parental control interferes with the development of the child's self-control.

e. Energy-Passivity: Hypothesis 5. Is there no difference between children from strict and those from permissive homes in the dimensions of energetic versus passive personality?

Neither data from the psychological tests nor those from the classroom would support the view that strict home discipline typically represses impulses to such an extent as to make children inactive. In the test situation no difference is apparent, at school the well-disciplined children appear, on the whole, more active along approved lines.

f. Creavity - Conformity: Hypothesis 6. Is there no difference between children from strict and those from permissive homes in the personality dimension of creativity versus conformity?

The differences shown in these results are the most impressive of any in the comparisons, and compel rejection of the null hypothesis.

High creativity characterizes 11 (33 per cent) of the children brought up with unusual freedom, but only 2 (5 per cent) of those from strict homes. The more firmly disciplined children are most apt to be found near the middle of the range in this variable.

g. Friendliness - Hostility: Hypothesis 7. Is there no difference between children from strict and those from permissive homes along the dimension of friendly versus hostile feelings toward others?

The null hypothesis should be rejected. More hostility is evident in those children who have been strictly disciplined; more positive feelings toward others are expressed by children whose parents have been permissive; these differences are consistent through the distribution and are statistically significant.

h. Security - Anxiety: Hypothesis 8. Is there no difference between children from strict and those from permissive homes in the personality dimension security - anxiety?

The two groups are not clearly distinguished. The null hypothesis is acceptable. Half a dozen children from each type of discipline show marked evidence of anxiety - another half-dozen from each category behave in an easy, secure manner. What makes for anxiety in a child must be something other than unusually strict or unusually lax parental control.

i. Happiness - Sadness: Hypothesis 9. Is there no difference between children from strict and those from permissive homes in the personality dimension of happiness versus sadness?

Results conform to the null hypothesis. Although the data show a slightly larger proportion of permissive discipline subjects in both the "happy" and the "unhappy" categories, the differences are unreliable.

On three of the nine, no statistically significant difference is found: these are the dimensions of self-control, inner security, and happiness. Factors making for anxiety, emotional disorganization, and unhappiness are found about equally often under either type of home discipline. No difference in activity and energy level was observed during the psychological testing, but teacher ratings indicate higher activity level of an approved sort, at school for the children accustomed to strict discipline.

On the four remaining variable significant differences in each instance are in favor of the children from permissive homes. Greater freedom for the child is clearly associated with: (a) more initiative and independence; (b) better socialization and cooperation; (c) less inner hostility and more friendly feelings toward others; and (d) a higher level of spontaneity, originality, and creativity.⁷

⁷Morris L. Haimowitz and Natalie R. Haimowitz, Human Development (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1960), pp. 33-43.

MARITAL RELATIONSHIP OF DOMINANT AND SUBMISSIVE PARENTS

In a study done by Percival M. Symonds, data was obtained from 24 investigators concerning maladjustment between husband and wife, both dominating and submissive. ⁸ The differences, though not large, suggest that dominance and submission toward children on the part of parents is not related so much to marital harmony as to the individual personalities of the parents.

The dominating parents were checked more frequently for conflict over household management, failure to share experiences, failure to be frank and sincere, and for temper displays, irritability, and fretting. But these are differences that could have occurred easily by chance. In some cases the husband controlled the family finances strictly and there were conflicts over household management. The evidence seems to be that conflicts of authority or ascendance are involved here rather than any deeper underlying unhappiness in the marriage relationship.

A closer inspection of individual cases revealed that in many instances one parent (usually the wife) held a dominant position in the family and lorded it over not only the child but her spouse, while the other parent (usually the husband) assumed the weak, yielding role.

While there are cases where both parents are strict with the children, in most of the cases one parent tends to be in the ascendance in the family and the other parent plays a more passive role. The ascendant parent usually seems neurotic with a compulsive tendency to order the people and things about her. One gets the impression that not

⁸Percival M. Symonds, The Psychology of Parent-Child Relationships (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1939), p. 132.

only is some need in the ascendant parent satisfied in this way, but that the passive parent also derives satisfaction at playing a submissive role and in having his wife play the part of a dominant mother over him.

The submissive parents were checked more frequently than the dominant parents with as much as a difference of 3 or 4 for such items as home neglected, meals hastily prepared, husband fails to help at home, carelessness, friends of one disliked by other, wife frigid, wife believes in equality with men, difference in education and religion. These differences could have occurred by chance and have suggestive value only.

A study of the separate cases leaves one with the impression that, in general, both parents are childish, and fail to accept responsibility. The fault seems to lie more often with the mother. In some cases it would seem to be a matter of inadequate personality. In other cases it appears that the parents in some way are using each other to satisfy some need__spite, overdependence, demand for attention__and the child suffers accordingly from weakness of the parents and neglect. There are some cases where there is quarreling between the parents, or there is infidelity, but in others the parents are emotionally dependent on each other. In some cases the parents seem narcissistic and in others are carried away by the distractions of modern life.⁹

Linking Parent Characteristics to Child-Rearing Variables. Several studies have used the authoritarian-egalitarian dimension in seeking a

⁹Ibid., pp. 132-134.

connection between parent characteristics and child-rearing attitudes and practices. Levinson and Huffman made a methodological contribution in developing a test of Traditional Family Ideology in which the respondents indicate three degrees of agreement and disagreement with a series of items about parent-child relationships, husband-wife relationships, male and female roles, and general aims of the family. The TFI scale was found to be highly related to the Ethnocentrism (E) and Authoritarianism (F) scales. It also differentiated between persons with different religious preferences and practices. Hart carried the analysis further with a population of mothers of preschool children. These mothers responded to the TFI scale and the F scale and also reported what they would do in response to 38 different child-behavior situations. The findings indicate a relationship between the mothers' reports of how they would behave toward their children and the authoritarian-egalitarian values measured by the tests. The investigator relates this study to those that show similarities between the authoritarianism of mothers and that of children, but notes that further data are needed to complete the causal chain.¹⁰

¹⁰Paul H. Mussen, Child Development (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1960), p. 969.

CHILDHOOD BACKGROUND OF PARENTS

It appears in a rather hazy and dim way, that a person adopts an attitude as a parent similar to the attitude held toward him by the parent of the same sex. A woman seems to carry over a dominant or submissive attitude in marriage corresponding to her mother's attitude toward her; likewise a man carries over the dominant or submissive attitude which his father displayed.

If this is true as a general trend, it is an interesting contrast with the personalities shown as children. Earlier in the study it was shown that children of dominant parents are relatively submissive, passive, and uncertain of themselves, yet when they become parents they tend to dominate their children as their parents did before them. The children of indulgent parents, on the other hand, are rebellious, independent, stubborn, aggressive, and authority rejecting yet when they become parents they neglect or indulge their children as their parents did before them. ¹¹

¹¹ Symonds, op. cit., pp. 137-138.

COMMENT

From the information collected and studied, one general conclusion can be drawn from the findings reported. This conclusion is that there is an underlying general trait of permissiveness-strictness. This results in behavioral and personality differences in the children raised in these conditions.

Clear-cut differences can be determined between the dominant child and the child who is indulged. But both groups have good characteristics as well as unfavorable.

The purpose here was not to prove one method as opposed to the second, but simply to report an objective view of the child-parent relations from these two settings.

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