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As a child leaves infancy and approaches toddlerhood, one of the tasks parents face is introducing the child to the peer group. To be sure, parents are interested in their child's earliest interactions with peers, but in time, parents become more seriously invested in

their children's ability to get along with playmates. Getting along has different meanings for different parents, but in general, parents want their child to enjoy the company of other children, be liked by them, be well-behaved in their presence (for example, share and cooperate with them), and resist the influence of companions who are overly boisterous, aggressive or defiant of adult authority.

How do parents help their child become a socially competent, well-liked playmate who is not too easily influenced by ill-behaved peers? What do we know from research literature in this area? Inasmuch as peer relations is only one of many social relationships that a child must master, it is not surprising that research on parenting styles gives some helpful insights into development of social skills in the peer group. A number of investigators, such as Diana Baumrind, Martin Hoffman, and Martha Putallaz, have made significant contributions to this topic.

The research of Diana Baumrind is particularly noteworthy. Baumrind has published a series of studies on the relation between parental child rearing styles and social competence in children of preschool and school age. Data on nursery school children were obtained from observations in a school setting and in laboratory test situations when the children were approximately four to five years of age. Data on the children's parents were obtained through home observations and interviews of both mothers and fathers. Three contrasting parenting styles were identified by Baumrind: authoritarian, permissive, and authoritative, each of which has implications for the child's social competence with peers and adults. The three parenting styles differ particularly on two parenting dimensions: the amount of nurturance in child-rearing interactions and the amount of parental control over the child's activities and behavior.

Authoritarian parents tend to be low in nurturance and high in parental control compared with other parents. They set absolute standards of behavior for their children that are not to be questioned or negotiated. They favor forceful discipline and demand prompt obedience. Authoritarian parents also are less likely than others to use more gentle methods of persuasion, such as affection, praise and rewards, with their children. Consequently, authoritarian parents are prone to model the more aggressive modes of conflict resolution and are lax in modeling affectionate, nurturant behaviors in their interactions with their children.

In sharp contrast, permissive parents tend to be moderate-to-high in nurturance, but low in parental control. These parents place relatively few demands on their children and are likely to be inconsistent disciplinarians. They are accepting of the child's impulses, desires, and actions and are less likely than other parents to monitor their children's behavior. Although their children tend to be friendly, sociable youngsters, compared with others their age they lack a knowledge of appropriate behaviors for ordinary social situations and take too little responsibility for their own misbehavior.

Authoritative parents, in contrast to both authoritarian and permissive parents, tend to

be high in nurturance and moderate in parental control when it comes to dealing with child behavior. It is this combination of parenting strategies that Baumrind and others find the most facilitative in the development of social competence during early childhood and beyond. The following discussion describes specific behaviors used by authoritative parents and the role these behaviors play in fostering social development.

THE CASE FOR HIGH NURTURANCE

Nurturing behaviors of parents that predict social competence include affectionate and friendly interaction with the child; consideration for the child's feelings, desires and needs; interest in the child's daily activities; respect for the child's points of view; expression of parental pride in the child's accomplishments; and support and encouragement during times of stress in the child's life.

The advantages of high levels of nurturance in fostering social development have been confirmed again and again in studies of children. These advantages begin in infancy, when maternal nurturance facilitates a secure attachment which, in turn, predicts social competence, and continue throughout childhood. High levels of nurturance in child rearing virtually assure more positive adult-child interactions than negative ones in the day-to-day operations of family life. This, in turn, predisposes the child to return love to the parent and to enjoy spending time with the parent, thus increasing the possibilities of significant parental influence throughout childhood. Parental nurturance also motivates the child to please the parent by striving to live up to parental expectations and helps to keep the child from hurting or disappointing the loved parent. Because children more readily identify with nurturant than nonnurturant models, the children of nurturing parents are more likely to incorporate parental values, such as considerateness and fairness in interpersonal relations, into their own lifestyle. One would also expect these children to resist peer group values that are clearly different from family values.

If there is a downside to high levels of nurturance in child rearing, it is the risk that nurturant parents might be more lax than other parents in challenging their children to measure up to developmentally appropriate standards for behavior. This risk would appear to be reduced, however, by the authoritative parents' inclination to combine moderate levels of parental control with nurturance.

THE CASE OF MODERATE CONTROL

Nurturant parents who maintain at least a moderate level of control over their child do not give up their right to set behavioral standards for the child and to convey the importance of compliance with those standards. To facilitate compliance, and as a courtesy to the child, authoritative parents offer reasons and explanations for the demands placed on their children. Evidence suggests that such a practice increases the child's understanding of rules and regulations, eventually making it possible for the child

to monitor his or her behavior in the absence of the parent.
Parents who use authoritative child rearing practices often use positive reinforcers, such as praise, approval, and rewards, to increase the child's compliance with behavioral standards. The success of positive social reinforcement in producing desirable behavior is legendary. A parent's positive response to good behavior may be the most powerful tool the parent has for increasing child compliance and decreasing the need for disciplinary action.

When misbehavior does occur and discipline is deemed necessary, authoritative parents show a preference for "rational-inductive discipline," in which both sides of an issue are stated and a just solution is sought. These parents also prefer "consequence-oriented discipline" in which children are expected to make up for their wrongdoing. Martin Hoffman points out that this disciplinary strategy has the advantage of focusing the child's attention on the plight of the victim rather than on the child's plight at the hands of an angry parent.

Finally, authoritative parents try to avoid the more extreme forms of punishment in rearing their children. They do not favor harsh physical punishment or put-downs, such as ridicule or negative social comparison, which attack the child's sense of personal worth. Although the harsher forms of punishment can be effective in the short run, they often generate resentment and hostility that carry over to the school and peer group, reducing the child's effectiveness in these settings.

SUMMARY

In parenting, as in other endeavors, nothing works all of the time. It is safe to say, however, that authoritative parenting works better than most other parenting styles in facilitating the development of social competence in children at home and in the peer group. High levels of nurturance combined with moderate levels of control help adults be responsible child rearing agents for their children and help children become mature, competent members of society. With a little bit of luck, the children of authoritative parents should enjoy more than their share of success in the peer group.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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