



# Formative Parenting

*Cultivating Character in Children*

*A Ministry of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Immaculata, Pennsylvania*

## **Parent Guide to Fostering Self-Discipline, Part 2** **PARENT AUTHORITY STYLE**

Dear Parent,

Self-discipline, the ability to fulfill appropriate expectations whether supervised or un-noticed, is developed in an atmosphere that fosters ownership, responsibility, and cooperation. Self-discipline develops when we allow children to be accountable for whatever they can handle, to make decisions and to experience the consequences, either positive or negative (dangerous situations, excepted). Since discipline is a learning process that is influenced by the discipline style that parents exercise, this newsletter reviews information related to parenting styles and perceptions that affect the formation of self-discipline within children. Psychologists know more today about how to provide a healthy atmosphere for child development than they did thirty years ago. Years of research have provided manageable guidelines for parents and the main ideas of parenting authority styles are presented here. The ideas are further developed in [The Parent's Handbook](#) authored by Don Dinkmeyer and Gary McKay as well as in additional STEP publications (Systematic Training for Effective Parenting) specifically written for parents of pre-school children or teenagers.

Family history and society influence the expectations that parents place upon themselves. Often, in an effort to be a "good" parent, some folks believe that they must do everything for their child: become servants, time-keepers, personal secretaries, reminding, controlling, over-indulging; over-protecting, domineering, or pitying. Though well intentioned, such behaviors keep children dependent and rob them of self-confidence, self-control, self-respect, self-reliance and the ability to determine personal boundaries and accountability. Though intended to be loving, this kind of parenting blocks the development of self-discipline. In contrast, effective parents are those who:

- respect children
- accept children as they are
- allow children to be responsible for their own problems
- give choices within limits
- permit children to experience the consequences of their decisions
- involve children in decisions that affect them
- explore alternative solutions
- encourage independence
- expect contribution
- promote equality and mutual respect
- set realistic standards
- refuse to be a "doormat"
- know when to say no

In a home determined by "responsible" parenting children feel self-confident, become resourceful, contribute and cooperate; they respect themselves and others, trust others and are tolerant of others; they view a mistake as a learning opportunity; and they have good social relationships.

Parents want the best for their children and they set out to influence childhood behavior by one of three parenting styles. STEP literature (Systematic Training for Effective Parenting) identifies the styles as GIVING ORDERS, GIVING IN, or GIVING CHOICES. The terms indicate that parents usually respond to discipline formation by giving orders (autocratic) to their child, giving in (permissive), or giving choices (democratic/authoritative). The leadership style represents the parent's basic attitude regarding control. The autocratic parent believes that he must be in control if his children are to develop properly. The permissive parent does not believe that she has or ought to have control. The democratic parent believes in controlling the situation, not the child. It is not unusual for a parent to use a mix of styles depending on circumstances. What tends to be your primary parenting style? The descriptions that follow are textbook-like, meaning that each describe a parent in the extreme. Consider each style on a continuum of one through ten and assess how much of the style represents your pattern of leadership.

### **GIVING ORDERS:**

#### **The Autocratic, Authoritarian, Controlling Style of Parenting**

Autocratic parents expect their child to obey because they are the parent who is older, smarter, and

deserving of respect. They believe that they know what is good and they force their ideas on their child through criticism, blame, demands, threats, nagging, lecturing, or manipulation via rewards and punishments. They take responsibility for all problems, make all decisions and give

advice. Authoritarian parents set many rules that are to be followed exactly. When dis-obeyed they punish, withdraw privileges, or resort to physical abuse. In these ways autocratic parents disrespect their child.

Children respond to controlling parents in various ways. They may evidence fear, anger, resentment, rebellion, discouragement, or over-conformist behaviors. The child may comply while the parent is present to enforce the rule but he will probably not internalize the value. And, in the absence of the authority figure, he may act in retaliatory ways or take a stand on issues that his parent cannot control, i.e., choice of friends, effort in schoolwork, drugs.

#### **GIVING IN:**

##### **The Permissive (Laissez Faire) Style of Parenting**

Permissive parents usually view themselves as powerless and overwhelmed. Generally they are afraid to take a stand on things they believe in. They offer no opinions and make requests that can be easily ignored. By not setting boundaries or expectations and, instead, ignoring their own rights, permissive parents disrespect themselves. They take the role of servant and assume the problems of their child. They plead, beg, and explain as their method of influencing the behaviors of their child. Children are free to follow their own whims and make demands. When mis-behavior surfaces, permissive parents will attempt to reason with their child.

Children of permissive parents grow up without guidelines. Their parents give in to whatever the child wants. But children without limits develop insecurity, inconsistency, or behaviors that become socially unacceptable or annoying to others. Children who have a pattern of doing as they please do not learn to care about

the feelings and rights of others and, therefore, have difficulty learning how to behave in society.

#### **GIVING CHOICES:**

##### **The Democratic (Authoritative) Style of Parenting**

Democratic parenting is based on equality and respect. While abilities, responsibilities and experiences differ, all members of the family are viewed as equally worthwhile. Being equal does not mean being the same. Parents are not the same as their children but they are equal in terms of human worth and dignity. Mutual respect for the rights of all is fostered and all children are involved in decision making whenever it is appropriate. Consequently, children are more likely to cooperate. Children learn to explore alternative solutions and they are permitted to experience the consequences of their decisions. Democratic parents give choices that fit their child's age and development. Giving choices within set limits develops responsibility.

Children of democratic households demonstrate the following characteristics: mutual respect, trust, concern, and caring; empathy for others; willingness to listen to others; the ability to focus on strengths rather than weaknesses; a commitment to cooperation and participation in conflict resolution; honest sharing of feelings rather than hiding them and bearing resentment; appreciation of common goals with freedom to pursue personal goals; and willingness to accept themselves and others as imperfect and in the process of growth. Behavior problems are minimal in a democratic family because true discipline is fostered; discipline that is defined as listening, understanding, integrating, owning, and responding in a life-giving way.

Respect, clear expectations, and permitting a child to experience the logical consequences of her choices are keys to discipline formation. When a child feels respected she tends to be cooperative and respectful. By taking into consideration the opinions and feelings of your child before acting, you convey respect for her. Conversely, if you talk at your child or to your child rather than with your child you imply that he is inferior. If you punish, yell, remind, coax, or do for him what he can do for himself you treat him as inferior, incapable, or inadequate, even though that is not your intention. He perceives that as disrespect and negative behavior or withdrawing, protective behavior results.

We are all products of our personal history and none of us is perfect. The best of us make mistakes at times and the worst of us do great things sometimes. We are programmed to think in terms of results when a more life-giving attitude is to think in terms of effort. We cannot always control results but we do have authority over our efforts. Focus on effort and results follow. Now that you've had an opportunity to reflect on parenting styles, you can identify your own. If it is life-giving, continue your parent practices. If you are dis-satisfied it is time to consider change. There is no magic wand and, in truth, you can only change yourself. Changing behavior requires the commitment to identify what parenting principles you need to practice and put them into action on a consistent basis. Faith in yourself and faith in God's help will fortify your courage. Pray, reflect, seek additional guidance through reading or counselling, set goals, and put into consistent action a plan.

May the information shared in this newsletter affirm your parenting style and serve as a guide to determine the authority style that best supports the formation of self-discipline within your child.

Dr. Patricia McCormack, IHM, a former Catholic schoolteacher and catechist, is a formation education consultant, an author of several books as well as the PARENT PARTNERSHIP HANDBOOK feature of *Today's Catholic Teacher*, and director of *IHM Formative Support for Parents and Teachers*, Arlington, VA. She speaks and writes frequently on topics of child formation. Reach her at [DrPatMcCormack@aol.com](mailto:DrPatMcCormack@aol.com).

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