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## Authoritarian Parenting in Relation to a Child's Health-Related Quality of Life

### **Introduction**

Albert Bandura, a renowned psychologist, determined that children learn through the observation of adult behavior. In the bobo doll experiment, conducted by Bandura, children were divided into three groups. Each group was exposed to a video of an adult performing actions against a bobo doll: a control group (no activity), experimental group one (aggressive behavior), and experimental group two (nonaggressive behavior). Then, the children were all put into rooms with the same bobo doll. The results of the experiment were as follows, when compared to the control group's reaction to the bobo doll –no response towards the doll–, both experimental groups one and two showed actions of imitation and mirroring the actions performed in the video they watched. Group one acted aggressively toward the doll while group two acted calmly and peacefully toward the doll (Nolen 4). This experiment yielded valuable insight into the moldability of children based on their environmental factors.

The key contributor to a child's environment is their guardian's parenting style – permissive, authoritative, authoritarian, or neglectful. Though, the authoritarian style has been attributed to the most adverse reactions in children. Anna Llorca, a Ph.D. graduate with

connections to the EVAIN (Evaluation and Intervention in Adolescence) research group, said that the authoritarian parenting style is when parents have lofty expectations for their children but give little/no responsiveness to them (6). This lack of care and attention is associated with so-called “unpopular” adaptations in children: aggression and impulsivity. As a result, the authoritarian parenting style decreases children’s –health-related– quality of life from psychological and emotional perspectives.

Nevertheless, some skeptics question the true influence of parenting style on a child’s compensational abilities. While Homo sapiens are complex individuals capable of adapting to survive in undesirable situations, this does not mean they are resistant to poor treatment effects. Regardless, many parents see the authoritarian parenting style as a method of tough love that will prepare the child for future adversity. However, this apparent preparation is associated with these “unpopular” adaptations. These adaptations are the brain’s way of counteracting adversity experienced, but often they just serve as a Band-Aid that only provides short time relief. Thereby, hindering the child’s well-being. While Rahill et al., a Licensed Clinical Social Worker for the College of Behavior and Community Sciences, recognizes it is important to teach about “endurance through suffering,” (585) she also acknowledges that when performed persistently and incorrectly, it is harmful to the child.

### **Psychological Imbalances from the Authoritarian Parenting Style**

To begin, a child’s psychological life quality is directly affected by the authoritarian parenting style. It affects the child from their conception to inevitable death. From the conception perspective, a child is a culmination of two sets of genes and two sets of traits. What they inherit

plays a role in their first responses to any set of stimuli. Even more, while responses found in adulthood are caused indirectly, scientific studies have shown a causal relationship between the treatment a child receives and their capability to successfully create neural connections (which are necessary to have a high quality of life).

Scientifically, two sensitive periods allow for significant alterations to a child's brain functions and health: early childhood (one to two years old) and the beginning of puberty (around twelve years old). Brenda Patoine, the founder of a medical communications program with training in neuroscience, studied pre-pubescent brain models of children with authoritarian parents. Patoine found that these children had "increased reactivity in the amygdala... leading to heightened responses to stress" (6). This study was then corroborated by Hilary Mead—a clinical psychologist specializing in the youth segment. Mead found a causal relationship between the authoritarian parenting style and "higher cortisol (a stress hormone) levels" (78). An overreactive amygdala, (which is responsible for emotional regulation) coupled with high-stress levels leads to many internal and external struggles. This illustrates the heightened vulnerability children face; they have yet to develop the ability to rationalize any treatment, thereby hindering their capability to know between right and wrong. Granted, some have argued that other "external and environmental factors—culture, socioeconomic status, and education—are larger components toward a child's reactions and perceptions," than family relationships (Cherry 8). While these factors place a child at higher risk for developing a mental and/or behavioral disorder, there must be a trigger to cause a reaction (which is usually caused by parent-child relationships).

Both a heightened reactivity to stress and a higher stress level contribute to adverse responses found in adulthood. These sensitive periods that take place during one's adolescence affect their neural plasticity –the nervous system's capability to “change its activity in response to intrinsic or extrinsic stimuli” in the brain– (Hendry 7) and the child's phenotypic plasticity – the alteration of “physical and/or behavioral characteristics in an organism's life” (Bender 5). Though the brain has preprogrammed responses –from plasticity– to situations (otherwise known as a fight-or-flight response), authoritarian parenting lowers the brain's capability to successfully perform these operations. Regardless, some critics, including researchers at the University of Arizona, argue that this change is not necessarily a hindrance to the child's performance rates, but rather a motivator –encouraging “heightened resilience to stressful conditions” and fostering the ability to “compromise” in unfavorable situations (13). But certain stress disorders counteract this argument. Specifically, that of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): the result of periodical exposure to stressful situations and reactions. PTSD is the brain's way of adapting to deal with adversity, but it often causes memory lapses and other problems to coexist (Rahill et al. 3). Brandon Keim, an independent journalist with publications in many popular magazines, found similarities between soldiers who have seen combat and anguished children (7). This apparent relationship corroborates the argument regarding parenting style and a child's diminished quality of life.

Overall, these alterations decrease children's life quality as it affects their ability to coexist in society respectably. Children are creatures of habit who instinctually adapt to survive; however, these adaptations also hurt nerve connections and synapses. Often many of these synapses do not even form due to said adversity in childhood. Undoubtedly, both set children up

for failure in future life situations involving any degree of stress and unease. If they go into flight mode in an uncalled-for situation of stress the damage may be irreversible.

### **Emotional Difficulties Correlation/Causation to the Authoritarian Parenting Style**

A person's emotional stability (their ability to coexist in society) is also lowered by the authoritarian parenting style. Children on the receiving end of this parenting style tend to struggle with emotional unavailability, inability to open up, and problems with complete transparency. Valeria Sabater, a psychologist specializing in well-being and emotional traits, found that these skills –which children of authoritarian parenting lack– play a role in a child's ability to establish and maintain romantic relationships and friendships (3). Even though children trying to acquire this personal relationship are theoretically in control regardless of their upbringing, a study conducted by Harvard University's Child Development Center established that “children develop in an environment built off relationships that begin in the home” (6). One's apparent perception of relationships is shaped by what they see and hear during their upbringing. This means their idea of what a relationship is, is an expansion of what they once observed. Imagine you grew up in a household where cleanliness was the top priority. Before you were able to do anything, the house must be spotless. Over time this tendency of cleanliness becomes ingrained into your brain, to the point you do it instinctually –without being told to do so. This is like the “adaptations” children of authoritarian parents develop. Further, in an adult's brain, the neurons that control reactions to adversity experienced in childhood can be triggered by events that take place in romantic and platonic relationships, like PTSD responses.

On the romantic side, children of authoritarian parents struggle to have healthy relationships. Often, these children develop an anxious-avoidant attachment style (Sabater 10). An anxious-avoidant attachment style is a fear of intimacy and commitment. This leads to a relationship where the child of the authoritarian guardian seeks constant reassurance and hides behind self-conscious thoughts coupled with emotional coldness. They instinctively react this way due to heightened insecurities created during attempts to survive maltreatment from the authoritarian parenting style. Regardless, these actions that are destructive to the child's well-being are the body's way of physically responding to stress with means to survive –otherwise referred to as adaptations. This was confirmed by many studies of urban evolution, specifically with the peppered moth study. In the peppered moth study, moths in places with air pollution and places without air pollution were compared. Eric Bender, an avid writer in the biomedical research and climate resilience field, determined that the moths in polluted areas were black-bodied when compared to the moths in nonpolluted areas (6). This difference highlights the importance of the environment in how one adapts. Much like in the peppered moth experiment, a child experiences similar adaptations to their environment. However, in a child's case, these adaptations often put a wall between them experiencing a happy, healthy, and secure relationship with a significant other.

Furthermore, offspring of authoritarian parents tend to be attracted to certain malicious behaviors –usually those that were once performed by their parents– which hinders their ability to find and secure healthy relationships. A healthy relationship is a mutualistic agreement where both people benefit from a relationship with an equal push and pull in safety and happiness. Sadly, children with authoritarian guardians, gravitate towards relationships with physically/

mentally abusive people (Sarwar 14). This parenting style gives the child material to imitate and utilize to perceive relationships while they are still developing and learning. Therefore, it can be determined that there is a correlation between experiences (as well as adaptations to said experiences) and a child's capability to have a high quality of life.

From the platonic perspective, children with authoritarian parents struggle to relate to someone else and understand what they are going through. Friendships are established on the principles of knowing each other well and trusting one another with everything (Cherry 5). Socially, these children face a "negative emotional climate" that discourages "empathy in adolescents" (Llorca et al. 23). This discouragement of empathetic behaviors (by emotional and facial expressions) is linked to a non-affectionate upbringing in authoritarian parenting. This results in the inability to establish connections that go beyond the surface level. Therefore, these ideals fail to allow the child to flourish.

Nevertheless, skeptics have argued that the authoritarian parenting style's effect on the child is minimal. They corroborate their argument by saying that every child is different, and that each will have different reactions to similar situations. While it is true that everyone has unique reactions to stimuli, brain studies of children of authoritarian guardians compared to children experiencing other parenting styles have shown increased aggressive behavior and other undesirable traits in these children (Llorca et al. 12). Accordingly, this struggle to create and maintain romantic and platonic friendships is detrimental to the child's quality of life and subsequent reactions to stressful stimuli.

## **Conclusion**

Today, it is becoming less stigmatized to struggle with mental and physical health problems openly. Despite this, people are still uneducated on the correspondence between a child's environment and the curation of such health problems. Undoubtedly educating is key, but we must first recognize unavoidable human error –done intentionally and unintentionally. From there, we must work to manage it and make it have smaller-scale effects (Bender 7). While human error is inevitable, we can combat it through outreach methods. For instance, biologically, we tend to mimic what we are shown early in life, however, if we are taught to react in a way that illustrates “not being afraid of the uncertainty,” (Rahill et al. 583) but rather to face it, our mindset and reactions can healthily and positively change.

All in all, the authoritarian parenting style plays a leading role in a child's life quality. Even more, there is a lot of plasticity in the brain that enables it to adjust to a new situation and overcome some of the problems of imperative development in the first place. While the plasticity cannot erase what the authoritarian parenting method did to the child, it could rearrange neurons to find positive coping mechanisms/adaptations that could help the child overcome the maltreatment (Waller and Hyde 17). Although these positive adaptations would be beneficial for the child, many negative responses happen concurrently. To make this process as safe and acceptable as possible for a child, more research must be done on the logistics behind it. Currently, it would be impossible to implement this on a worldwide scale, but future social and scientific advancements in people and technology could change this.



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