

The Reign of the Iron Fist: Long-Term Harmful Outcomes of Authoritarian Parenting

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ABSTRACT

Amid heated debate concerning parenting styles and their outcomes in society, the following questions arise: To what extent does an authoritarian parenting style harm children's future behavior, especially regarding self-discipline and social functioning? What steps should society take to mitigate this harm? Authoritarian parenting is known to cause poor self-discipline, reinforce a cycle of depression, and compromise social functioning, all of which persist well into adulthood. These results suggest that authoritarian parenting is counterproductive (given that some parents mean well when they use this parenting style) and has lasting effects that should be addressed, possibly by public advocacy, change of parenting style, and support methods.

Introduction

Parenting has been a challenge present as long as the human race has existed. Throughout history, there has been no shortage of punitive parenting with the motivation of raising a child fit to support their household. As child-rearing has evolved, however, these motivations have become less common and have been replaced with the common goal of raising a family for fulfillment. With this change came the distinction of parenting styles. In the 1960s, Diana Baumrind distinguished three common parenting styles—authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive. These parenting styles, along with a fourth—neglectful or uninvolved—added in the 1980s, serve as the basis for the modern discussion of parenting [1]. Although the most severe form of parental punishment may appear to be a thing of the past, do some vestiges of this reign remain within authoritarian parenting today? Indeed, these remnants are seen through several of the following examples.

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Defining and Comparing Parenting Styles

Based on and expanded upon Baumrind's theory, the four aforementioned parenting styles span a spectrum ranging from total parental control to complete freedom. On one extreme, authoritarian parenting describes a style where "the parent establishes strict rules that the child obeys," with little explanation or room for negotiation. In other words, parents have high expectations but little nurturing and mistakes typically lead to punishment [2]. On the other hand, authoritative parenting leans away from the extremes of the scale, with the implementation of not only clear but also well-explained rules and disciplinary methods are employed instead of mere punishment for mistakes [2]. Under authoritarian parenting, children may perceive rules as arbitrary, lacking clear reasons. Under authoritative parenting, however, children may acquire the capacity to exercise independent judgment in alignment with the implemented rules. Compared to the previous styles, permissive parents are nurturing and rarely impose rules upon or discipline their children. Finally, at the opposite end of the spectrum, uninvolved parents fulfill their children's needs but do not nurture or communicate with them, thus imposing no rules [2]. Note that this style was introduced after Baumrind's study was finished, thus hindering the relevance of uninvolved parents. Overall, the aforementioned evidence substantiates the notion that authoritative parenting is the most well-rounded of the styles. Conversely, authoritarian parenting suggests that harsh and unnecessary discipline is directly harmful to mental health, while permissive parenting may lead to bad habits due to a total lack of discipline. Finally, uninvolved parenting is likely the least ideal parenting style due to its lack of the essential aspects of parenting.

Self-Discipline and Bad Habits

Background

A key characteristic of authoritarian parenting is harsh discipline. With any signs of misbehavior, an authoritarian parent is on the child's tail, often bringing with them punitive methods [3]. But aside from the immediate emotional harm, what are the long-term damages of this discipline? Intuitively, it makes sense that this harsh discipline weakens decision-making: if all decisions are made by the parent, a child may not grow up with the skills necessary to make their own. For further context, one meta-analysis

of several studies by Martin Pinquart “found that harsh discipline and psychological control were actually the biggest predictors of a [child’s] behavior worsening over time,” leading to the premature conclusion that “kids subjected to authoritarian tactics... tended to develop more externalizing behavior problems” in the future [3]. While this cannot be reduced to pure causation, this finding introduces the prospect that authoritarian parenting may contribute to long-term behavioral issues, particularly in self-discipline and the development of bad habits, as these examples will discuss.

Alcohol Use

A significant scenario demanding self-discipline to prevent poor outcomes is in alcohol use, a widespread and potentially destructive problem. Adolescence “is the key period for the initiation of alcohol consumption”, meaning parenting styles may have amplified effects on alcohol consumption [4]. Most importantly, the study by Alati et al. reinforces the assertion that “excessive discipline may actually increase adolescent alcohol intake,” citing the following findings: “Among those in the high drinking trajectory, harsh discipline was not effective in reducing adolescent drinking levels, while among those in the lower drinking trajectory harsh discipline contributed to higher levels of drinking” [4]. This evidence suggests that authoritarian parenting harms children’s future self-discipline because authoritarian parenting can continue or worsen bad habits (chiefly, alcohol usage). Additionally, this evidence supports the idea that authoritarian parenting could be counterproductive since it may lead to outcomes opposite of the parent’s wishes. It is crucial to bear in mind that alcohol, with its potential to induce effects like antisocial behavior, can significantly impair lives [4]. Consequently, authoritarian parenting may have detrimental implications that extend well into adulthood.

Dietary and Dental Habits

In a similar vein, this same theory can be applied to the consumption of other unhealthy yet satisfying substances—namely, junk food. One universally known effect of junk food is dental caries. Dental caries describes tooth decay that occurs when acids demineralize the enamel, and can be caused by high sugar consumption and poor dental hygiene [5]. Thus, caries are mitigated with good habits, such as moderation of foods high in sugar (e.g. common junk foods) and optimal dental hygiene. From this evidence,

a theory can be formed that if a certain parenting style is known to result in children with more caries, it may be that the parenting style has failed to address the bad habits that cause caries. Accordingly, this theory is supported by research linking authoritarian parenting and the incidence of caries. Namely, a study exploring this link found that “[a]uthoritarian parenting accounted for 10 children (91 percent) with caries and one child (nine percent) without caries”, which led to the conclusion that there is “an association between authoritarian parenting and increased caries” [6]. Although limitations arising from the study’s sample size should be taken into account, one could reasonably infer from these findings that authoritarian parenting is also associated with unhealthy habits contributing to dental caries. This reflects a counterproductive relationship between authoritarian parenting and poor self-discipline. It is also worth noting that caries tend to be chronic [5], suggesting that these self-discipline problems stemming from authoritarian parenting persist far into the future, similar to the impact of alcohol.

Mental Health and Social Functioning

Background

According to a study done by Eugene Paykel, social functioning describes “an individual’s ability to function within their usual environment” and is “considered a key feature of quality of life” [7]. Therefore, a lack of social functioning can suggest a lower quality of life. Additionally, studies have found that depression significantly lowers social functioning [7], thereby lowering one’s quality of life. This statement holds pivotal significance in the argument against authoritarian parenting, given that research has revealed children with authoritarian parents report depressive symptoms more frequently than those with authoritative parents [8].

Long-Term Problems

The challenge of lowered social functioning stemming from authoritarian parenting is potentially detrimental to a child’s future, given mental health issues such as depression is described as a “chronic or episodic condition requiring long-term therapy” [7]. Immediately, a clear inference can be made from this evidence indicating that authoritarian parenting has enduring negative effects on a person’s mental health long-term given the

established link between authoritarian parenting and depression. This is underscored by the revelation that impaired social functioning persists even after depression symptoms are resolved [7]. However, long-term effects are likely not limited to this; if authoritarian parenting leads to depression, it might lead to decreased social functioning as well. In theory, decreased social functioning would further worsen one's mental health as social functioning dictates a person's ability to live their life as they wish to. Certain measures of social functioning include "occupation, household role, marital functioning, parental role, family/kinship role, social role, leisure/general interest, and self-care" [7]. Within impaired social functioning, these measures will receive lower scores, signifying an individual's challenge fulfilling those roles. Since they will not be able to carry out several societal roles, their depression may worsen, as "poor social support networks, poor marital relationships, and poor economic status" are risk factors for progression of depression [7].

The risk factors for depression appear to align with the roles contributing to social functioning, suggesting the possibility that depression not only impairs social functioning but also that diminished social functioning exacerbates depression in what seems to be a positive feedback loop. Authoritarian parenting, therefore, triggers this positive feedback loop when it leads to depression. The enduring nature of this feedback loop is underscored by previous evidence indicating neither depression or impaired social functioning are easily eradicated.

Solution

Background

To fully grasp the extent of harm caused by authoritarian parenting and discern a viable solution, the reasons for its use must be established; after all, with its previously established counterproductivity and enduring consequences, why should this parenting style be employed at all? Chiefly, the reason authoritarian parenting continues to persist is due to cultural beliefs. For instance, research has shown that the overall styles of Chinese and Arabic parenting lean authoritarian [9], and another source was able to make the broad statement that "[w]ithin the United States, parenting styles have been shown to differ substantially by cultural groups as measured by their race/ethnicity" [10]. A more specific explanation for parents

use of authoritarian methods is their misguided belief they are benefitting their child. For instance, a widely-read parenting magazine suggests that parents may “feel that a strict approach is the best way to gain compliance” and “raise capable, well-rounded, high-achieving members of society.” Notably, this source also highlights the influence of parental personality traits in making this choice [11]. It is important to acknowledge that altering cultural beliefs and personality traits poses significant challenges. Many individuals will be resistant to accepting advice on such a sensitive topic as parenting. Consequently, some solutions remain theoretical. It should also be noted that a solution is only needed when authoritarian parenting is used to an extreme extent; for example, if a parent uses authoritarian discipline one time, it should not be assumed to be harmful as long as the parent maintains reasonable methods at other times.

Having identified the reasons for the adoption of authoritarian parenting, the question arises: why should it be addressed? The previous sections of this paper have established the several harms of this parenting style, all of which are psychological or social. In a contemporary world where many pursue fulfillment in life, it is imperative that children receive the necessary care to attain happiness. The adverse effects of authoritarian parenting in childhood may persist throughout an individual’s lifetime, jeopardizing their ability to achieve this goal by detrimentally affecting self-discipline and social functioning. If one goal of authoritarian parenting is to create “capable, well-rounded, high-achieving members of society” and outcomes are consistently negative, the endeavors of most authoritarian parents prove counterproductive. These harms are only emphasized by the longevity of the problems authoritarian parenting causes. If they are not addressed now, they will continue long into an individual’s life and be passed on to future generations.

Solution 1: Public Advocacy

Despite the aforementioned cultural limitations, a solution can be derived from one key reason for authoritarian parenting as mentioned before: misconception. As explained in the previous section, some authoritarian parents may believe that they are raising their children to be successful members of society, when in reality they may be doing the opposite. A tried and true method to address misconceptions is to advocate for the solution. As articulated by the Child Friendly Cities initiative, “child rights

must be known and understood” before efforts for child rights can be put into practice [12]. Some ways to spread awareness are public advertisements, news articles, and word of mouth. Although a single poster or article will not revolutionize parenting entirely, widespread dissemination of such materials may reach enough viewers, including “local government authorities, members of civil society organizations, academics, media and business professionals, parents/caregivers and children”, fostering a collective understanding of the concepts and encourage participation in the advocacy movement against authoritarian parenting [12].

Solution 2: Parenting Style Changes

Another approach to advocate against authoritarian parenting is to directly address parents who use this style and speak to them personally in hopes of changing their methods. Instead of advocating to a collective, this approach could also be utilized for first-time parents to instill beneficial ideas before detrimental notions take hold. In practice, this could be implemented through individualized advice provided to parents by friends, family, or even professionals. This solution refers back to the crucial distinction between authoritarian and authoritative parenting particularly how and why rules are enforced. First, the “how” must be addressed: as established, one harm of authoritarian parenting stems from the harsh punishments and threats for any mistakes made by children [3]. Thus, to mitigate this particular harm, authoritarian parents should reflect before punishing their children. Decisions regarding punishment should not be impulsive; rather, parents should think more thoroughly and refrain from implementing disproportionately harsh consequences for minor mistakes, safeguarding the immediate emotional well-being of their children. Additionally, physical punishment should be avoided at all costs as its harms have already been well-established. Research has revealed its link to mental health issues in children [3]. Concerning the “why” of punishment, authoritarian parents typically refrain from providing explanations for the enforcement of specific rules in contrast to authoritative parents [2]. If authoritarian parents made a minor adjustment to their current approach and began explaining the reasons behind rule enforcement, it could be advantageous to both their own thinking and their children’s. Specifically, parents may realize that certain rules are unnecessary and children may learn the true implications of their mistakes leading to improved decision-making skills and the reduced

likelihood those mistakes would be repeated in the future. These changes effectively tackle the self-discipline challenges associated with authoritarian parenting, as discussed earlier. Although implementing these changes would likely pose initial challenges, providing easily accessible professional counseling and therapy to any parents in need can support the adoption of these ideas. Alternatively, family and friends of parents could also offer advice to parents they know.

Alternative Solution: Support

The previous solutions aim to solve the problem from the parental side, but there may be solutions that children can initiate themselves as well—after all, as the Child-Friendly Cities initiative states, “children themselves must understand their own rights and how to assert these” [12]. While it is likely beneficial to address the problem from the root, the subsequent solutions are likely to work when the previously mentioned do not, as children can enact them themselves. Specifically, if a child is under the care of a staunchly authoritarian parent, they could derive benefits from establishing a robust support system consisting of friends and trusted adults [13]. While these figures may not be able to reshape parenting, they can offer essential emotional support to the child, potentially preventing the onset of depression that is associated with authoritarian parenting, and protecting the child from a recurring cycle of depression and impaired social functioning. This solution may be the most feasible to enact as others require extensive work.

Conclusion

This paper only touches the surface of the extensive effects of authoritarian parenting and further research is needed to confirm that the harms of authoritarian parenting are indeed as direct as they seem. Additionally, the subjects of parenting can be viewed through various perspectives and lenses, indicating that it may not be a one-size-fits-all style suitable for everyone. Nevertheless, even if its possible benefits remain unexplored, authoritarian parenting has consistently demonstrated its tendency to yield negative outcomes in a child’s behavior. This research found that the harmful effects of authoritarian parenting are lasting; they are not limited to childhood harm, but persist for a lifetime. It is important that the cycle of authoritarian parenting is broken sooner rather than later, preventing detrimental ideas from permanently affecting a child. By eliminating harmful ideas from the

root with advocacy and societal change, more children will grow up well-adjusted and finally break the reign of the iron fist that is authoritarian parenting.

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