

Finding a positive parental balance

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U of A researcher Christina Rinaldi. Credit: Richard Siemens

(Phys.org) -- Wondering why your toddler is acting up? University of Alberta researcher Christina Rinaldi says it may be time to take a look at your parental style—and your partner's.

Rinaldi's study, which appears in [Early Childhood Research Quarterly](#), looked at how [parents'](#) child-rearing styles were related to their young children's behaviour. She says that although much of the research to date on parenting has looked only at the mother's role, the research she conducted with co-author Nina Howe of Concordia University (Montreal) showed a correlation between the father's parental style and the child's behaviour, either positive or negative. Their findings suggest parental styles that are either too strict or too lenient are likely to be associated with negative types of behaviour in children, whereas a more even-handed approach is more likely to result in positive conduct.

Terrible twos—or too-extreme parents?

Participants in the study were asked to identify their parental style and that of their partner, and to identify and measure their children's behaviour. The results indicated that when the mothers were more permissive in their parental style or the fathers more authoritarian, the toddlers tended to demonstrate negatively focused habits such as temper tantrums, arguing with adults or not sharing toys. On the other hand, for parents who reported that the father displayed a firm but fair and friendly style, children tended to display a more positive demeanour.

“Being more authoritative is a positive style. You have structure, but you also have limits for kids so they know what to expect. It's very clear in its communication, but at the same time has expectations and doesn't let everything go,” said Rinaldi. “Toddlers are starting to test their environment. It's hard for them to communicate exactly what they want. And so it really tests the limits of what parents can do and their own abilities.”

Shifting styles and dissimilar siblings

Rinaldi says it is important to remember that parental styles are fluid, and that factors such as mood and fatigue—on the part of both parent and child—can play a role in shifting a parent's approach. The key, she says, lies with the parent being able to determine boundaries and limits to put on a child, based on the child and environment factors. Within the family dynamic, she says that parents may adopt different approaches among siblings as well, especially if one child is more even-tempered than another. It's less of the Smothers Brothers' “mom always liked you best” situation and more like having to navigate the perilous waters of each child's needs.

“People look back on their own childhood and they say, ‘Well, our parents didn't treat us the same,’ but why would they treat you exactly the

same? You are different human beings,” said Rinaldi. “Some children require a little bit more attention than others. And some parents are baffled as to why one strategy works with one and not with the others, so it is a demand on the parent to figure it out.”

Positive parental propositions

Rinaldi says there are many ways to be an effective parent, but what her research underscores is that parents who share the authoritative traits—by providing structure in a loving, caring, very clear way to their young children—are the ones to emulate. She says kids need structure and routines to help them, especially in their early years. Toddlers enjoy knowing what to expect and what is expected of them, including having duties like helping to set the table or tasks such as brushing their teeth before bed. Having reasonable expectations that are age-appropriate is another consideration, she says, noting that it might be unfair to expect young children not to be moody when they are hungry or up past their bedtime. But when it comes time to be the firm, loving parent, it comes down to saying what you mean and meaning what you say.

“Follow through consistently,” she said. “But do that in a warm and caring way, without necessarily being overly domineering and doing it in a coercive and manipulative way, because that actually does come through.”

Provided by University of Alberta

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