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Authority-based parenting maintains its influence even when the authority figure is not present; power-based parenting must be present in order to have an influence.

Two characteristics that most set authority-based parenting apart from power-based parenting is whether fear or reasoning is used to exert influence. While the power-based parent relies heavily on fear in order to bring about changes in behaviors and attitudes, reasoning is the earmark of parents who rely on their authority-rather than on their power-to bring about change and compliance.

Authority-based parenting

Authority-based parenting teaches a clear understanding of the differences between what is right and what is wrong. Getting caught and suffering the consequences for wrong and inappropriate behavior-while important-is just one consideration in the scheme of things for the authority-based parent, and it is usually viewed as just a deterrent for immediate misbehaviors, and it is considered a relatively small change agent for the bigger and long term picture. For authority-based parents, it is the communication and reasoning which accompany the consequences that actually set the stage for life long differences in their kids.

Reason rather than fear is more associated with authority-based parenting than is fear. Certainly, fear and reason can be found in both power and authority based parenting. But for the most part, authority-based parents tend to rely more on the reasoning factor than on the fear factor, while power-based parents rely more heavily on fear, than on reason. It would stand to reason, then, that one outcome of power-based parenting would most likely be kids who are more motivated by their fears than by good sound reasoning about what is right and what is wrong; fears of getting caught, fears of what the consequences to themselves might be if they were to be found out. Likewise, it could

be safely assumed that the reasoning factor in authority-based parenting would be more likely to lead to a consideration of what is right and what is wrong, regardless of whom, if anyone is around.

Authority-based parents understand the inevitability of disobedience and are then able to use it as a vehicle for teaching the difference between what is right and what is wrong. While appropriate consequences are used, they also employ a healthy dose of reason. Rather than being threatened or discouraged by challenges to their authority, they take advantage of them to teach and mold their kids. In short, while appropriate consequences are certainly used, along with them comes a good deal of talking, instructing, and listening as well.

When kids disobey, the common response of an authority-based parent is not to attack verbally or physically, not to use put-downs or to ridicule, and not to rely on unreasonably harsh consequences. Instead, they rely more on time spent talking (and listening) about why what the child did was unacceptable and what is expected next time. While our role as authority figure in their lives requires that we administer appropriate consequences, they are an augment to the learning that takes place through the time consuming efforts of guiding, directing, and communicating.

Power-based parenting

Power-based parenting sends to their kids the message that misbehavior-whatever form it might take-is wrong only if they get caught and suffer enough as a result of having been detected. So the fear of pain and detection is what encourages obedience and compliance. The intent of the power-based parent is to bring about behavior and attitude changes by making the consequences grim and painful enough that their kids would not dare commit the unacceptable again. Seldom is reasoning and productive instruction a part of the power-based parent's response to unacceptable behaviors from their kids.

"What they don't know won't hurt them", "its only wrong if I get caught and have to pay the consequence", are familiar reactions in kids who have been raised in a power-based parenting family.

Since fear is a primary ingredient used in power-based parenting, kids who have been raised in a power-based home tend to develop "non-detection" techniques such as lying, manipulating, and sneaking. When fear is the primary motivating factor, then kids learn to "wear" their parents' values and expectations only as long as they are present to hold them accountable with the fear of detection. When the power figure is not present, then the motivation of fear is gone, and they can do as they please. As kids from power-based parenting grow up and away, they will likely continue the charade with society, friends, authority, and with their spouse as well.

Power-based parents rely on verbal abuse, threats, guilt, put-downs, and unreasonable consequences. Usually, there is very little instruction or reasoning. Little is learned regarding right and wrong so the outcome gives rise only to the notion that, "I'd better not get caught next time", and the need to do what is right plays into the decision making process very little, if any. Power-based parents usually assume that if the punishment is severe enough, then talking, listening and instructing with reason, will be unnecessary. In short, the goal is, "to teach them a lesson they will never forget". Unfortunately the only lesson that is learned is, "I'd better not get caught next time".

What's a parent to do?

It is inevitable that we parents will play a role in shaping the morals and values that our kids eventually take on as their own. While we are by no means the only source of influence, their sense of right and wrong will initially evolve and emerge in large part as a result of their relationship and interaction with us. What they consistently hear from our lips and how they see we live our lives will both provide the early framework for how their moral character develops and evolves.

So there is simply no such thing as a neutral influence when it comes to our role in this area of their lives. And how we influence them will be determined by many factors. One way or another though, we will play a significant part in influencing their moral character.

As a result of using our authority rather than our power, it will be more likely that our kids will develop an internal value system that will guide their decisions and behaviors when we are not around. What will be more likely to guide their actions will be what they have learned about right and wrong, rather than what they think they can get away with.

The question we must all ask ourselves is: do we use fear, or do we rely instead on reasoning, in our efforts to shape and influence our kids? Certainly, the temptation is always there to rely on the fear factor rather than the reasoning factor since it is so much quicker and often may seem to bring about the immediate desired change. Reasoning takes far more time—a commodity that is scarce for all of us. But take the extra time we must if we want to maintain and strengthen our influence when we are no longer in the picture, either because they have grown up and away, or because we just happen to be in the next room or in some other way, they are out of the scope of our detection.

In the long run, though, the time and effort spent teaching, and shaping our kids through the process of reasoning will reap grand benefits not only for our kids, but for us and our society as well.

The prevalence of this, "they will never know the difference" thinking suggests that for too many, what most influences their behaviors are "external watchdogs", rather than a healthy internal belief system of what is right and what is wrong. It further suggests the notion that the primary motivation is what one can get away with, rather than an internal conviction-the influence of one's conscience development.

Discussion questions

When you were growing up were your parents an authority figure and influence, or were they more of a power figure in your life?

Are you affected in your life today as a result of their having been either an authority in your life that used reason, or a power over you that used fear?

What is your relationship like with them today?

Is your relationship with them today affected by whether they used power-based parenting or authority-based parenting when you were growing up?

Would you characterize the approach you use with your kids today as a power-based or authority-based parenting model?

How does your parenting style seem to be working and what affect does it have on your kids?