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Authority-Based Parenting establishes guidelines that are fluid and flexible while Power-Based Parenting establishes guidelines that are rigid and inflexible.

Authority-based parenting

Authority-based parenting regularly considers adjusting the all important guidelines they have established for their kids. While all of us adjust to some degree along the way, there are some important differences that set authority-based parents apart from power-based parents.

It is important not to confuse flexibility with inconsistency that seems to change with the wind and for no apparent reason. Since consistency is one of the ingredients that foster safety, predictability and an understanding of cause-effect, it is an important characteristic found in successful parenting. The key is to be willing and able to be flexible and at the same time, consistent.

So in terms used here, flexibility that is an earmark of authority-based parenting refers to fairness and the willingness to reevaluate decisions and circumstances based on new information that comes to light.

In PARENTING WITH AN ATTITUDE (question # 20), I emphasize the importance of establishing for our kids appropriate guidelines within which they are able then to freely function. I suggested, too, that these guidelines are important for three reasons: 1) safety-for their physical and emotional protection and well being; 2) to provide them with as much predictability in their lives as possible, and, 3) to help give them a sense of cause-effect-an understanding of the relationship between actions and consequences.

The example I gave to describe the importance of guidelines for our kids was a freeway, with all of those lines, bumps and signs that require certain behaviors from us as we drive. We have all at one time or another been driving down a well-marked freeway, perhaps late at night when suddenly all of the lines and those little bumps in the middle of the road disappear. It doesn't take us long to realize that the road we're traveling has been repaved and that those little men in orange have not yet returned from their coffee break to remark the road for our protection. Temporarily, we do not have the guides on our road to show us what is expected from us and what we can expect from others. Soon, a bit further down the road, the bumps and lines reappear and again, we feel safe. At last, we know what is expected of us and what we can expect from others. Again we feel safe because we have a certain degree of predictability that we can use to make decisions.

It is one task to establish these guidelines within which our kids can feel safe and experience some degree of predictability. It is yet another task (as if we were looking for something else to do!) to consistently consider and evaluate adjusting those guidelines. Of course, the easiest thing to do would be to establish those guidelines the day our kids are born, never again to be considered until at last, on their eighteenth birthday, we remove them all!

What adds to the difficulty of our task as parents is the responsibility of constantly reevaluating the guidelines we have established, adjusting and readjusting them based on the ever-changing factors and circumstances that must be considered. Circumstances like their age, our perception of their maturity, attitudes, how well or poorly they handled our last expanding of their freedom, all play an important role in our determining the wisdom of either expanding or contracting their scope of freedom-the guidelines we set within which they may then freely function.

Power-based parenting

Rigidity is part of the anatomy of power-based parenting, and relates to either contracting guidelines for no good reason, or refusing to expand the parameters, even though there is new and relevant data. Out of nowhere, the guidelines are either tightened or broadened-and for no particular reason-and then just as quickly and unexpectedly, they are reversed. This kind of surprise and lack of reason can do nothing but leave our kids confused and feeling insecure. And most often, the only explanation kids get from their power-based parents is a curt, "because I said so", or, "because I'm your parent".

When power-based parenting relies on rigid but inconsistent guideline, there are two common and probable outcomes that may develop in the personality of our kids. They may eventually get to such a point of frustration that they break through our inconsistent and rigid guidelines we've set, and begin doing things "my way" without thinking through the all-important "cause-effect". In this case, no longer is what we expect of them considered by them, and we lose much or even all of our influence.

Since these kids have not learned how to make safe mistakes within the relative safety of appropriate guidelines and parameters, their rebellion leads to more mistakes that they are not equipped to handle. In such a situation, the inevitable outcome is frustration, self-defeating rebellion, and poor self-esteem. Unfortunately, we see signs of this all over and throughout our society today in delinquency and other forms of destructive rebellion. Basically they are saying, "I don't care what the guidelines for my behavior are, from now on I'm doing things my way, and for myself".

The other common outcome is less obvious and perhaps less destructive to the rest of us, but it is nonetheless unfortunate. Some kids react in just the opposite way as those described above, and become spineless adults who seek out someone else to be in control of them. Sadly and ironically, both of these resulting personality characteristics too often come together in marriages and other relationships where one person, needing to control and dominate,

seeks out another who has given up, has become spineless, and is now looking for someone to continue the pattern of dominance and control. Needless to say, such a match makes for a miserable relationship that more often than not ends in pain and sadness.

What's a parent to do?

While authority-based parents recognize the importance of guidelines, they see too, the necessity within those guidelines to give their kids the room to maneuver, to take risks, to work through trial and error decision-making, to succeed, and to fail. They see the necessity of all of these experiences for the purposes of learning and maturing. And rather than using their guidelines and parameters as heavy restraints that leave little freedom, they view their guidelines as a safety net designed to protect.

If it our goal to raise great kids, then we must give them the freedom that may at times allow them to fail and to make mistakes. We must have the faith that when they do blow it, that they will be equipped to learn from their failings. Our challenge, of course, is to set their guidelines in such a way that they are still as safe as possible in their efforts at trial and error.

Discussion questions

When you were growing up did your parents encourage you to be independent within guidelines that provided some safety, or was being independent discouraged?

How did their attitude regarding independence/dependence affect you as you were growing up? How are you affected today?

Is your attitude regarding independence/dependence with your kids today similar to the attitude your parents had with you?

How do you see your kids doing with regard to practicing independence within the guidelines you have set for them?

If inappropriate dependence on you is a problem with your kids, what are some changes you could make?

Do you have some fears you must face in allowing your kids to be more independent?