

Parenting Styles

What are Parenting Styles?

Parenting styles, as defined by Dr. John Gottman, describe the way parents react and respond to their child's emotions. Your parenting style is related to how you feel about emotions. ("Feelings about feelings" are often referred to as meta-feelings.) For example, do think emotions are powerful? Messy? Distracting? Important? The way you, as a parent, feel about these questions plays an important role in shaping your parenting style.

Why Parenting Styles Matter

Parenting styles matter because the way a parent interacts with their child sets the stage for the child's future social and emotional development.

- ★ One of the primary ways to help your child is to help him learn to manage his emotions. However, for many parents, this is not an easy task. It requires self-awareness about your own management of emotions, an awareness of emotions in others (specifically your child,) and a method for responding.

The Four Parenting Styles

There are four parenting styles. Most parents have a dominant style but use a combination of all four. As you read the descriptions below, consider which style best describes you, as well as how you were parented.

DISMISSING "I know you miss mommy, but let's do something fun like make cookies."

- ★ Dismissing parents can be very loving and compassionate. They just don't believe it is important to spend time dealing with their child's negative emotions, and tend to ignore the feelings or attempt to distract the child from them.



- ★ Such parents are not insensitive to their children's emotions. They see them happening and want to be helpful and protective, but they are not sure what to do. Because dismissing parents ignore emotions, they miss the opportunity to connect and to create a closer relationship with their children when their children need them most.

Children with Dismissing Parents tend to...

- ★ Learn that negative emotions (especially sadness and anger) can't be trusted.
- ★ Learn that it is only good to feel happy, even though they have other feelings.
- ★ Learn that it is better to avoid or "get over" certain emotions rather than to feel them and understand them. They may also learn to hide their emotions.
- ★ Struggle learning how to self-soothe from escalated emotions like sadness or anger, which can make school and friendship hard later.
- ★ Learn that some feelings won't be noticed until they escalate into stronger feelings.

DISAPPROVING "There is nothing to be afraid of in your room...just go to bed and go to sleep."

- ★ Disapproving parents typically don't value emotions and often feel that negative emotions should not be allowed to happen. As a result, children learn that some feelings are "good" and others are "bad" because their parents treat the feeling like a behavior by asking or telling the child to feel differently.

INFORMATION FOR PARENTS: Parenting Styles

- ★ When children of disapproving parents feel the “bad” emotions, like sadness, anger, or fear, they often think something is wrong with them or that they are a “bad” person, even though their feelings are normal.
- ★ What these parents are missing, in part, is the realization that emotions are a natural part of our daily experiences and are not simply a mode of thinking that can be switched on or off at will.

Children with Disapproving Parents tend to ...

- ★ Learn that certain feelings should be switched off like a light.
- ★ Have difficulty learning to regulate emotions, which typically has negative long-term effects.
- ★ Learn that some feelings won't be noticed by displaying subtle cues (such as nonverbal displays of frustration) until they escalate into stronger feelings and behaviors (such as hitting).
- ★ Be less likely to talk to their parents about how they feel because they worry that they might be punished for those feelings.

LAISSEZ-FAIRE “I’m sorry your brother took your toy away from you.”

- ★ Laissez-faire parents are compassionate, and they recognize and respond to their children's emotions. They practice unconditional love, but they also fear that setting limits on a child's behavior might send the wrong message and show that love is only connected to good behavior.

Children with Laissez-Faire Parents tend to ...

- ★ Learn that feelings are valued, and they can talk about their feelings with others. This is a very important part of learning what emotions are.
- ★ Learn that it is ok to act out or misbehave when they have strong feelings, and that almost “anything goes” when it comes to their behavior.
- ★ Struggle learning skills for how to calm down when they feel excited, angry, or sad.
- ★ Have difficulty learning ways to act appropriately around others, and can have trouble keeping friends or concentrating in school.

EMOTION COACHING “Come sit with me and we’ll talk about how you’re feeling right now.”

- ★ Emotion Coaching parents value sharing emotional times with their children.
- ★ To Emotion Coach, parents need to use empathy. Specifically, these parents try to put themselves into their child's shoes. They show an understanding of their children's emotions and guide them in their behavior. Emotion Coaching creates a foundation for strong, healthy, trusting relationships.

- ★ Emotion Coaching takes practice. Every emotional event is different and Emotion Coaching needs to be flexible. None of us can do it all the time, but the more we can take the time to help children work through their emotions, the better.

Children with Emotion Coaching Parents tend to ...

- ★ Learn that feelings are important and can be trusted.
- ★ Learn how to name certain feelings and begin to understand why they feel the way they do.
- ★ Learn that they are not alone with their feelings, and that they can bring their wide range of emotions to their parents with confidence they will be loved and comforted.
- ★ Learn that all feelings they experience are OK, but not all of their behaviors are OK.
- ★ Learn how to solve the problems life brings.
- ★ Learn to calm themselves down when they have strong emotions so they can concentrate better at school.
- ★ Learn about their own feelings and the feelings of others, which helps them form strong friendships.

What Parents Can Do

THE BIG PICTURE:

- ★ Realize that most parents use a combination of all four parenting styles, and that even the “best” Emotion Coaches only use that style about 30% of the time – and that is enough to make a big difference in the parent-child relationship.
- ★ Remember that feelings are normal and children can't control how they feel.
- ★ Teach limits on behavior. Children like to know their boundaries and it's important that you teach them what is acceptable and unacceptable.

IN EVERYDAY MOMENTS:

- ★ Avoid ignoring or disciplining a child for their emotions. When emotions arise, make an effort to teach your child how to manage them. Doing so will establish a stronger relationship between the two of you.
- ★ Recognize emotions – this is the first step to helping children learn about them.
- ★ Remember that every child expresses emotions in her own way.
- ★ Let your child feel and understand his emotions.
- ★ Help children figure out what to do when they experience strong emotions.