

Key to a Well-Adjusted Child: Tailored Parenting?

Family Matters

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<Parenting advice is often black or white: Be firm and unwavering. Be loving and supportive. But new research shows that a one-size-fits-all approach may not be the best way to handle things. Rather than consistency, a parent's flexibility may be key to a well-adjusted kid, according to [research](#) published online this month in the *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*.

Nimble parents who tailor their parenting approaches to each child's individual personality have kids who are half as likely to have symptoms of depression or anxiety, compared with parents who don't take children's temperaments into consideration, the study found.

When it comes to granting kids autonomy, for example, parents should let their child's disposition be their guide. Even though society encourages gradually giving kids increasing amounts of independence, for some kids, too much free rein can backfire. "It flies in the face of a lot of parenting advice," says Liliana Lengua, a psychology professor at the University of Washington (UW) and the study's principal investigator.

For three years, researchers tracked 214 families whose children were in the third to fifth grades, with an average age of 9, when the study began. Monthly, they visited the families and instructed parents and children to have two conversations: the first a neutral chat about their day and the second a dicier discussion about a challenging topic — chores, for example, or homework.

Researchers assessed the interactions based on factors including the warmth and engagement of the parent, negative affect — being harsh or critical toward the child — and to what extent a parent granted a child autonomy or took the lead in the conversation. They also asked parents and children to describe the children's temperament.

Each year, researchers gauged children's symptoms of depression and anxiety. When all the information was combined, they found that certain temperaments combined with specific parenting approaches made kids more — or less — likely to develop anxiety and depression.

Most significantly, children who displayed more effortful control — the ability to self-regulate, focus and stay on task — had greater symptoms of anxiety and depression if their mothers were control freaks and called the shots. “It’s sort of like a vote of no-confidence for these kids when their parents think they can’t do things on their own,” says Lengua.

On the other hand, those children with less effortful control displayed less anxiety when their mothers provided guidance and structure; they doubled their anxiety symptoms if their mothers were mostly hands-off. “It’s a parent’s goal to get children to navigate the challenges of life on their own, but it seems that children low in effortful control need much more structure and guidance in getting there,” says Lengua. That might mean defining a situation more clearly, offering more instruction and possible solutions and rewarding them for cooperation and success.

Not surprisingly, children with low levels of fear whose parents related to them gently had the lowest levels of depression. And low-fear kids whose parents interacted harshly with them had the highest levels of depression. But fearful kids with parents who tended to be more critical also had low levels of depression. What gives?

“I don’t want to give the advice that being harsh and critical with your child is a good thing,” says Lengua. “But with fearful children, you have to balance validating emotions with not being overly solicitous. Sometimes you just have to do what sounds like coming down hard on them.”

Tiger Mom might call that tough love.