

Childhood Influences: Family

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Our parents have a huge impact on our self-esteem. Much of our behavior is modelled on the people we see around us. If our parents have low self-esteem, then we may learn that it is normal to talk and think negatively about ourselves.

In your early years, countless hours are spent with friends and family. It is human nature to model our behavior after those around us. If our parents talk negatively about themselves, we may learn to do the same, thinking it is the normal thing to do. Self-esteem begins to form during infancy, because in our first two years we begin to learn who we can trust as our caregivers.



The banner features the Explorable logo (a flask with a flame) and the text "EXPLORABLE Quiz Time!". Below the logo are three quiz cards: "Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2" (with a pair of red roller skates), "Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2" (with a fan of colored pencils), and "Quiz: Flags in Europe" (with a Ferris wheel). A "See all quizzes =>" link is located at the bottom right.

Parenting Style

Parenting style can have a big impact on our self-esteem. In 1983, Maccoby and Martin ("Socialization in the context of the family: Parent-child interaction") built on the earlier work of Baumrind to come up with four main styles of parenting: authoritarian, authoritative, permissive and neglectful.

Authoritarian Parenting Style

In the authoritarian style, parents rule the children with an iron fist. They do not allow their children much freedom, and the child is punished if they do not obey instructions. The parents do not offer explanation for their actions, other than that they are parents and their instructions should be followed. Children of authoritarian parents tend to be conformist and self-blaming, trends which continue into adulthood.

Authoritative Parenting Style

Authoritative parents, meanwhile, tend to be more responsive to their children. They take the approach that their child is fallible, so it is more practical to help them find solutions to problems rather than chastising them. Boundaries and consequences of rules being broken are made clear to the children.

Authoritative parents let their children have greater autonomy than authoritarian parents, and this leads to them being more self-reliant in the long run. By encouraging offspring to take responsibility for their actions, authoritative parenting can lead to self-awareness and accountability.

Permissive Parenting Style

The permissive approach is characterized by parents who, compared to the other two styles, appear to have a far more relaxed approach to parenting. They don't tend to set out many expectations and rules. Instead, the roles of the child and parent differ from the authoritative and authoritarian styles, with the parent acting as less of a disciplinarian.

This approach can have diverse outcomes. Sometimes the children lack self-control and are used to getting their own way, while other times they become adept independent thinkers who are secure in themselves.

Neglectful Parenting Style

The rejecting, neglectful parents are somehow absent during their children's upbringing, either mentally or physically. It may be that they work extreme hours, or are too absorbed in their own lives. As a result, the children grow up without boundaries or support. This can have a lasting impact on self-esteem and a person's relationships.

Clearly, the way that we are raised has a huge impact on our self-esteem. The book "Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother", by Amy Chua, sparked a lot of debate over how we raise children, and how parenting styles vary across cultures. Think about how you were raised, and what the norms are in your culture. Are there any key phrases that your parents repeatedly used? What do you think their motivation is for saying these things? Perhaps your parents are repeating patterns of how they were raised.

Call to Action : Write a Letter

A powerful exercise is to write down any negative or demanding things that family members have said to you over the years. Can you identify which of these things you say to yourself? What might you say instead? Why do you think your parents said the things they did?

Next, write a letter to your parents. Mention all the things that they did or said that you feel affected your self-esteem. Write without censoring yourself. When you are finished, tear up the letter. This exercise works on two levels.

First, it asks you to really explore your childhood and think carefully about the influences of your family. Second, it is also cathartic, as writing things down helps you think more objectively about them. Tearing up the letter is symbolic of letting go.

Key Points:

- Our family life shapes our self-esteem in several ways
- Parenting styles can be broadly categorized as authoritarian, authoritative, permissive and neglecting
- Parenting style influences our core beliefs and self-esteem

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