**Parenting Dimensions**

Pamela C. Sheffler, M.A.

Cecilia S. Cheung, Ph.D.

University of California, Riverside

*Parenting* is the process of supporting the development of a child from infancy through

adulthood. This support encompasses not only the child’s physical development, but his or her

social, emotional, and financial development as well. Although children are most often raised by

their biological parents, parenting refers to a process that is separate from its biological

definition. Thus, siblings, grandparents, and legal guardians may also parent. For example, in

the Kipsigis community of Kenya, after a child reaches the age of two it is common practice for

older siblings to take on the role of parent while the mother is away working or running

errands. In contrast, western societies such as the United States often reserve this role for a

designated adult who may or may not be related to the child.

Researchers who study parenting use the term *parenting dimensions* to refer to the core

features and qualities which capture the essence of the parenting process. These elements are

important because they provide the foundation upon which the study of parenting is built. Much

research on parenting dimensions occurred between the 1930’s-1960’s, at which time many

different models of parenting dimensions were proposed. From these models two overarching

constructs emerged: *warmth* and *autonomy support*. After the 1960’s, a third dimension,

*structure*, was added. These three constructs were initially measured in tandem with their

opposing constructs, *rejection, coercion, and chaos*. Thus, a parent high in *warmth* would score

low on *rejection* and vice versa. However, researchers later did away with this bipolar structure

so that all dimensions could be measured independently of each other. This resulted in a six-dimension parenting model which includes *warmth, rejection, autonomy support, coercion,*

*structure,* and *chaos*.

*Warmth* refers to expressions of love, affection, appreciation, care, and enjoyment. Parents demonstrate warmth to their children when they are emotionally available,

positively involved in the child’s activities, supportive and genuinely caring. Warmth is

especially important when a child is in need of comfort. For example, when a child falls off her

bicycle and scrapes her knee, a parent shows warmth by responding to the situation and

providing affection, such as a comforting hug. The opposite construct of warmth is *rejection*.

Rejecting parents interact with their children in negative, hostile, disapproving, critical, overreactive, irritable, and explosive ways. They may also respond to their children by acting cold and unfriendly. Rather than comforting the child who fell off her bicycle, the rejecting parent may instead criticize and blame the child for what happened.

Parents who are high in *autonomy support* allow their children more choice in decision-making. Such parents encourage self-expression in their children and value their opinions and

preferences. When a child is working on his homework, the autonomy supportive parent is less

directive and encourages the child to find the solution on his own. In contrast, *coercion* (also

referred to as psychological control) is exemplified by strict control over the child. Coercive

parents are autocratic, inflexible, intrusive, restrictive, and power asserting. They demand

obedience of their children and discourage freedom of choice and self-expression. Coercive

parents may also use punitive disciplinary techniques in order to assert their authority and

maintain obedience in their children.

The last two constructs in the six-dimension model of parenting are *structure* and

*chaos*. *Structure* is defined by the level of consistency, predictability, and organization in the

child’s environment. It also refers to the clarity of the parents’ expectations for the child’s

behavior. Parents high in structure provide clear and consistent rules for how their children

should behave. For example, before a child is allowed to go outside and play she may be

required to complete her homework. A parent high in structure will adhere firmly to this rule and

not allow the child to play outside until she has accomplished this task. In this way, the parent is

providing clear expectations for the child’s behavior and demonstrating consistency. The

opposite construct of structure is *chaos*. Chaotic parenting is characterized by inconsistent

discipline, unpredictability, and permissiveness. A parent high in chaos may insist that the child

finish her homework before playing outside on one day and not enforce this rule on another

day. Because clear and consistent rules for behavior are not provided, children are unsure about

the behaviors that are expected of them.

Further Readings

Pinquart, M. (2017). Associations of parenting dimensions and styles with externalizing problems of children and adolescents: An updated meta-analysis. *Developmental Psychology*, *53*(5), 873–932. https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000295

Skinner, E., Johnson, S., & Snyder, T. (2005). Six dimensions of parenting: A motivational

model. *Parenting: Science and Practice, 5*(2), 175-235. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327922par0502\_3

Smetana, J. G. (2017). Current research on parenting styles, dimensions, and beliefs. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *15,* 19-25. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.02.012