

# Parenting Styles: Attitudes & Rearing Behaviors

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## Introduction to Parental Rearing Behaviors and Attitudes

The study of attitudes toward parental rearing behaviors represents a critical intersection within developmental psychology, social psychology, and family studies. These attitudes refer not merely to the observable actions parents take--such as discipline, affection, or supervision--but rather to the subjective evaluations, beliefs, and emotional responses that children, adolescents, or even adult offspring hold regarding the efficacy, fairness, and appropriateness of those actions. Understanding these attitudes is paramount because they serve as powerful mediators between objective parenting practices and the resulting developmental outcomes experienced by the child. An adolescent, for instance, might perceive a high level of parental supervision (the behavior) not as protective care, but as an unwarranted invasion of privacy, leading to a **negative attitude** that fuels conflict and psychological distress. This field acknowledges that the child is not a passive recipient of parenting but an active interpreter whose cognitive processing of parental inputs shapes their internal models of relationships and authority. Therefore, research must move beyond simple frequency counts of behaviors and delve into the qualitative meaning-making processes inherent in the parent-child dynamic, focusing specifically on how these behaviors are internalized and judged. The resulting attitudes--whether positive (e.g., viewing parental guidance as supportive) or negative (e.g., viewing strictness as rejection)--significantly influence self-esteem, peer relationships, and emotional regulation across the lifespan.

A fundamental distinction must be drawn between the actual parental behavior as observed by a third party and the child's perception and subsequent attitude formation. While observational studies may categorize a parent as exhibiting high warmth, the child's individual temperament, past experiences, and current emotional state may filter this warmth, leading to a perceived inconsistency or even skepticism if the warmth is perceived as conditional or manipulative. Attitudes, in this context, are complex psychological constructs typically involving three interconnected components:

The **cognitive component**, which encompasses beliefs and thoughts about the behavior (e.g., "My parents are too controlling").

The **affective component**, which includes the feelings and emotions evoked by the behavior (e.g., "I feel frustrated when they check my phone").

The **behavioral component**, which reflects the readiness or intention to act in response to the perceived behavior (e.g., "I will resist their rules or attempt to hide information").

These tripartite attitudes are often deeply entrenched by late childhood and adolescence, reflecting years of cumulative interactional history. Furthermore, the attitudes held by the child often reflect their expectations of parental roles derived from cultural norms, peer comparisons, and media portrayals, creating a complex evaluative matrix against which their own parents are constantly measured. The stability and intensity of these attitudes are key determinants of overall family

functioning and the trajectory of the child's emotional development.

## Defining Parental Rearing Behavior Dimensions

Psychological literature has consistently identified several core dimensions of parental rearing behaviors that serve as the primary targets for attitudinal formation. The most established model typically revolves around two orthogonal axes: **Parental Warmth/Acceptance** and **Parental Control/Demandingness**. Attitudes toward warmth focus on the perceived level of affection, emotional support, responsiveness, and acceptance demonstrated by the parent. A positive attitude in this dimension is associated with perceptions of secure attachment and availability, fostering trust and open communication, and is highly predictive of the child's capacity for intimacy in future relationships. Conversely, perceived lack of warmth or emotional neglect often generates negative attitudes characterized by feelings of devaluation or insecurity. It is critical to note that the quality of this warmth--whether genuine, consistent, or conditional--is crucial, as children quickly develop nuanced attitudes differentiating authentic support from superficial or manipulative gestures, thus setting durable relational blueprints.

The second major axis, **Control or Demandingness**, generates attitudes related to structure, discipline, monitoring, and rule enforcement. This dimension is highly nuanced because attitudes toward control are often bimodal: excessive control (authoritarianism) tends to elicit strongly negative attitudes characterized by resentment, passive aggression, and challenges to autonomy, leading the child to view the parent as an obstacle to independence. However, insufficient control (permissiveness) can also elicit negative attitudes related to perceived parental disinterest or lack of guidance, leading to insecurity and a feeling of being unsupported in navigating the world's challenges. Optimal outcomes are generally associated with attitudes toward authoritative control, where high demands are paired with high responsiveness, fostering an attitude that rules are fair, necessary, and designed for the child's welfare rather than solely for the parent's convenience or power assertion. The child's developmental stage also profoundly influences these attitudes; what is accepted as necessary monitoring in early childhood may be fiercely resisted as unwarranted intrusion during adolescence, demonstrating the dynamic nature of attitudinal evaluation over time.

Beyond these core dimensions, attitudes are also formed regarding specific, often detrimental, behavioral domains such as **psychological control**, which refers to intrusive, manipulative, or guilt-inducing attempts by the parent to control the child's thoughts, feelings, and identity development. Attitudes toward psychological control are almost universally negative and highly detrimental, generating feelings of anxiety, suppressed autonomy, and difficulties in identity formation. Other crucial domains include attitudes toward parental communication styles (e.g., openness versus secrecy), conflict resolution techniques (e.g., negotiation versus coercion), and the perceived fairness of resource allocation among siblings. Each of these specific behaviors contributes incrementally to the overall attitudinal landscape the child develops regarding their

primary caregivers, creating a complex profile of beliefs and emotional responses that color all subsequent relational interactions.

## Theoretical Frameworks for Attitudinal Formation

Several influential theoretical models attempt to explain how attitudes toward parental rearing behaviors are formed, maintained, and modified. **Attachment Theory**, pioneered by Bowlby and refined by Ainsworth, provides a foundational framework, positing that the child's evaluation of parental responsiveness shapes their **Internal Working Models (IWMs)**--cognitive and affective schemas about the self (worthiness) and others (availability). Attitudes are essentially the expressed manifestation of these IWMs. A child whose parent consistently meets their needs develops a positive attitude that their parent is reliable and caring, leading to an IWM of secure attachment. Conversely, inconsistent or rejecting parenting leads to negative attitudes (e.g., anxiety or avoidance) and corresponding insecure IWMs, which dictate expectations for future relationship interactions and self-perception, often persisting long after the child leaves the parental home.

**Social Learning Theory** and **Cognitive Theory** emphasize the processes of observation, modeling, and cognitive appraisal in attitude formation. Children observe their parents' behaviors, and their attitudes are shaped not only by the direct impact of those behaviors but also by observing the consequences of those behaviors on others (e.g., siblings or the non-involved parent). Cognitive appraisal is particularly important: the same behavior (e.g., grounding) can elicit different attitudes depending on the child's interpretation of the parent's motive. If the child attributes the grounding to a desire for their safety, the attitude may be one of grudging acceptance; however, if attributed to parental anger, moodiness, or power assertion, the attitude will be strongly negative and oppositional. Furthermore, cognitive consistency theories suggest that once a strong attitude is formed--for example, 'my mother is fundamentally unfair'--the child will selectively attend to and interpret future behaviors in a manner that confirms this existing negative attitude, making attitude modification a significant therapeutic challenge.

**Attribution Theory** is highly relevant in understanding attitudinal shifts, as children continually attempt to attribute causes to their parents' actions. When a parent acts negatively, the child might attribute the behavior to external, unstable factors (e.g., "Dad is stressed because of work"), leading to a less severe, temporary negative attitude. However, if the child attributes the behavior to internal, stable factors (e.g., "My mother is fundamentally cruel or rejecting"), the resulting negative attitude is profound, generalized, and highly resistant to change, often leading to deep-seated feelings of mistrust. Parental communication that clearly explains the reasons and intentions behind rearing behaviors--often referred to as **inductive discipline**--is crucial for fostering positive attributions and, consequently, more favorable attitudes toward disciplinary actions, even when those actions are restrictive or unpleasant.

## The Role of Culture and Context

Attitudes toward parental rearing behaviors are not universal but are profoundly shaped by cultural norms, socioeconomic status (SES), and the broader ecological context. What is perceived as appropriate supervision or control varies dramatically across cultures. In individualistic Western cultures, strong control behaviors during adolescence are often viewed negatively, interpreted as hindering the development of autonomy and leading to negative attitudes regarding parental invasiveness. The cultural value placed on independence means control is often seen as a transgression of personal boundaries. Conversely, in many collectivistic cultures, high levels of parental control and demandingness are perceived positively, interpreted as necessary expressions of filial piety, interdependence, and deep parental commitment, leading to attitudes of respect, compliance, and obligation. Therefore, the same objective behavior can generate entirely opposite attitudes based solely on the prevailing cultural meaning system. Researchers must employ culturally sensitive measures that assess the **meaning and intent** of the behavior rather than simply its observable presence.

Socioeconomic status and neighborhood context also modulate attitudinal formation significantly. In high-risk, low-SES environments, high levels of parental monitoring and restrictiveness are often perceived by children as adaptive, protective mechanisms necessary for survival and safety, fostering attitudes of gratitude and security. The child understands the controls as necessary boundaries in a dangerous world. In contrast, in middle-class environments where safety is assumed and autonomy is highly valued, similar levels of restrictiveness might be viewed as unnecessary limitations on freedom, generating conflictual and strongly negative attitudes. Furthermore, the attitudes held by the peer group significantly influence an individual's evaluation. If a peer group universally views a specific parental rule (e.g., a strict curfew) as unfair or antiquated, an individual child is highly likely to adopt a similar negative attitude, even if they personally did not find the rule overly burdensome, demonstrating the power of social comparison and normative influence in attitudinal judgment and expression.

## Measurement and Assessment of Attitudes

Accurate assessment of attitudes toward parental rearing behaviors is challenging because it requires reliable methods to capture subjective perceptions and evaluations rather than objective actions. Measurement typically relies heavily on **self-report questionnaires**, though projective techniques and observational methods are also employed. The most common self-report instruments, such as the Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ) or various parenting style scales, ask the offspring to rate the frequency and perceived acceptability of specific parental behaviors (e.g., "How often did your mother make you feel loved?" or "How fair was your father's punishment?"). These instruments yield quantitative data on the degree of perceived acceptance, control, and psychological manipulation, which are then used to infer

underlying attitudes. A major methodological consideration is the potential for **retrospective bias** when adults report on childhood experiences; current attitudes, relationship quality, and psychological state can significantly skew the memory and interpretation of past behaviors, leading to inaccuracies in historical assessment.

To mitigate the limitations inherent in retrospective self-report, researchers sometimes utilize methodologies such as the Q-sort technique, where the child sorts cards describing various parental behaviors into categories based on relevance or favorability, providing a more nuanced, qualitative picture of their evaluative framework. Observational methods, while resource-intensive, involve coding interactions (e.g., during a structured conflict task) and then soliciting immediate, concurrent attitudinal reports from the child regarding the fairness or effectiveness of the parent's immediate response. This concurrent approach reduces retrospective bias and provides crucial insight into the formation of attitudes in real-time, focusing on the immediate emotional and cognitive appraisal of the interaction. Crucially, researchers must ensure that the measures differentiate clearly between the **perception** of the behavior (what happened) and the **attitude** toward that perception (how it was judged), recognizing that a perceived strictness might generate a positive attitude if the child views it as necessary and protective, while a low level of control might generate a negative attitude if it is interpreted as indifference.

### Impact of Attitudinal Congruence and Discrepancy

The congruence, or lack thereof, between the attitudes held by the child and the actual parental behaviors is a powerful predictor of psychological adjustment and family cohesion. When a child's attitude toward a parent's behavior is generally positive--meaning they perceive the parenting as supportive, fair, and legitimate--there is high **attitudinal congruence**, which is strongly associated with positive outcomes such as higher self-esteem, better academic performance, and lower levels of externalizing behaviors. This congruence suggests that the child has successfully internalized the parental value system or has positively appraised the parent's intentions, leading to a smooth integration of parental guidance into their own identity structure. Congruence fosters a sense of security and mutual respect within the family unit.

Conversely, significant **attitudinal discrepancy**, particularly when the child views parental behaviors (especially control or discipline) as illegitimate, unfair, or hostile, leads to profound psychological distress and relational breakdown. When the child perceives high levels of control but holds a negative attitude toward that control, the result is often covert resistance, emotional withdrawal, and internalization problems such as anxiety and depression, as the child feels incapable of altering the perceived injustice. Furthermore, discrepancy can arise when parents exhibit behaviors (e.g., emotional unavailability or inconsistent discipline) that contradict the child's fundamental need for attachment and predictability, generating feelings of betrayal or instability. The resulting negative attitude acts as a chronic stressor, undermining the child's sense of security

and leading to maladaptive coping strategies. The study of discrepancies highlights the crucial point that the objective presence of a behavior is less important than the subjective, evaluative lens through which the child processes and judges it.

## Developmental Outcomes Associated with Attitudes

Attitudes toward parental rearing behaviors are robust predictors of a wide range of developmental outcomes, influencing psychosocial functioning from early childhood through adulthood. Positive attitudes toward parental warmth and authoritative control are consistently linked to superior emotional regulation skills. Children who positively evaluate their parents' supportive behaviors learn to trust their own emotional responses and develop effective strategies for managing stress, knowing they have a reliable base of support and guidance. These positive attitudes translate into greater social competence and fewer problems in peer relationships, as they project their secure Internal Working Models onto others, fostering mutually rewarding interactions and trust.

In contrast, negative attitudes, particularly those directed toward perceived rejection, excessive psychological control, or hostility, are highly correlated with psychopathology. Adolescents who harbor intensely negative attitudes toward their parents' disciplinary tactics are significantly more likely to engage in risk behaviors, including substance abuse, delinquency, and early sexual activity, viewing their defiance as a legitimate response to perceived injustice or lack of autonomy. The link between negative attitudes toward parental control and **internalizing disorders** (anxiety, depression) is particularly strong, as the child often turns conflict inward, feeling helpless or worthless in the face of perceived unfairness. Furthermore, these early attitudes solidify into stable relational patterns, affecting the choice of romantic partners and the quality of parenting the individual later provides to their own children, potentially perpetuating intergenerational cycles of attitudinal formation and maladaptive behavioral response.

## Clinical and Educational Implications

The clinical implications derived from the study of attitudes toward parental rearing behaviors emphasize the necessity of addressing the child's perception and interpretation rather than solely focusing on changing parental behavior in isolation. Therapeutic interventions must often employ a family systems approach to facilitate the renegotiation of meaning. For example, in cases of severe parent-adolescent conflict, therapy should focus on helping the adolescent articulate their negative attitudes (e.g., "I feel you don't trust me") and helping the parent understand that their behavior (e.g., frequent monitoring) is being interpreted through a lens of suspicion rather than care. This process of **re-attribution**--changing the child's attitude regarding the parent's motive from internal malice to external concern--is often more effective than simply modifying the behavior itself, as it addresses the underlying cognitive schema.

Educational programs designed for parents also benefit greatly from incorporating attitudinal awareness. Parents are taught not only *what* behaviors to use (e.g., positive reinforcement) but also *how* to communicate the intent behind those behaviors effectively through clear, empathetic language (inductive reasoning). By explaining rules and consequences clearly and empathetically, parents can foster positive attitudes in their children, ensuring that discipline is perceived as justifiable guidance designed to teach responsibility rather than arbitrary power assertion. Furthermore, educators and counselors working with children exhibiting behavioral problems must screen for negative attitudes toward parental figures, recognizing that these attitudes may be the root cause of externalizing behaviors, serving as a form of protest against perceived unfairness or emotional neglect. Addressing the child's subjective, evaluative reality is therefore key to effective intervention and long-term psychological adjustment.

Finally, understanding attitudinal development is crucial for preventative mental health strategies. Promoting positive parent-child communication, encouraging open dialogue about rules and expectations, and teaching both parents and children skills for **perspective-taking** can inoculate the relationship against the formation of severe, generalized negative attitudes. Early identification of significant attitudinal discrepancies can prompt timely interventions, preventing the crystallization of negative Internal Working Models that might otherwise dictate maladaptive relational patterns throughout adulthood, thereby breaking the cycle of negative evaluation and response.