The best way to discipline your kids

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While there isn't an instruction manual for dealing with teens (or kids or toddlers) when they do something wrong — as they're wired to do — there is a decades-old body of research on the subject. As first described by formative developmental psychologist Diana Baumrind in the 1960s, parents assert themselves in basically two ways: through authoritarian control or authoritative control.

Authoritarian parents, as the name implies, have a dictatorial quality: “You should eat your vegetables because I say so,” “I'm the parent, you're the child,” and the like. They appeal to their role and status rather than to reason — an unbecoming trait not just in parents, but teachers, managers, or any other wielders of power. The parent has a monopoly on needs, and the child is expected to bend toward their will.

The authoritative are much more reasonable: adjusting the kids through verbal give-and-take, and helping them to think through things. According to Oberlin psychologist Nancy Darling, the authoritative parent is a “shepherd” and a “guide to the culture,” showing the child how and why people do things the way they do — they are aids in the long process of socialization, or absorbing the norms and values of the family and broader culture. “Most importantly, they try to balance the responsibility of the child to conform to the needs and demands of others with the rights of the child to be respected and have their own needs met,” Darling writes. That sounds a lot like setting boundaries, a skill that you need to learn by adulthood, unless you want to mess up your entire life.

I bumped into this insight while reading a study on the personality trait that makes kids especially receptive to good or bad parenting. The takeaway is that the more a kid is given to negative emotions, the more they flourish or flail depending on their caregivers' parenting style.

The stakes are high with control styles, as Melinda Wenner Moyer reports for Slate. The children of authoritarian parents exercise less self-control, are more likely to get in trouble with alcohol or eating disorders or depression, and are more likely to get bullied or grow obese. And yes, they eat fewer veggies, too.
What seems to be at work here is how a parent’s control style shapes the children’s “locus of control,” and whether it’s internal (the events in their lives spring from their efforts and decisions) or external (the universe or a deity is responsible for their fate). Accordingly, adults with an internal locus of control do better in school, are more goal-oriented, find active solutions to problems, cope better with stress, avoid depression, achieve more in school, and are more satisfied with their jobs. So the more kids are taught to use their capabilities, the more capable they’ll feel as adults – leading not only to achievement, but well-being.

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