

Authoritative Autocratic and Abusive Parents:

Rose is a woman in her mid thirties with three small children. She feels powerless to control them. They fight, run around, refuse to sit at the table, hit each other, and generally 'run riot' virtually all of the time they are with her. It is complete chaos.

Rose is not a bad woman but she does have a personality style that is not suited to parenting. Her personality could be defined as anxious-dependent – she is dependent on others people approval to take and sustain initiative an anxiously plagued with uncertainty and self doubt. Rose therefore has great difficulties in being a strong parent who sets clear limits and boundaries for her children. She also has difficulty in asserting herself and often seeks the approval of her children for things she does. This can be observed in the way she never makes direct demands of the children but rather makes requests by asking them if they would do something. This reverses the natural family hierarchy by giving the children the freedom to overrule her parental requests by just saying “no”.

Displaying healthy and natural authority with children is a parental responsibility that each person achieves in their own way. Few would argue against the need for such a competent authority that evokes the children's willingness to comply as well as their respect. It is indeed a fine balance.

In parenting one can refer to the three A's of autocracy, authority, and abuse to define different styles of parental control.

The autocratic parent gets their child to comply with them by the use of threats or coercion. The autocratic parent punishes readily, gives out a lot, and creates a climate of a fear more than respect for the parent. The autocratic parent has strict rules and responds harshly when rules are not complied with. The autocrat is a dictator in the house and is the absolute ruler. The autocratic parent is not always abusive in the conventional sense but seeks to rule the house with an iron fist. The weak autocratic parent is forever complaining, giving out, punishing, grounding, and harassing their children for their wrong doings. The strong autocrat gets compliance through power and fear and is not afraid to resort to severe punishments to maintain control.

The abusive parent is, in many ways, an extreme autocrat who wields control through punishment and negative consequences. The abusive parent can be an under-controlled parent or over-controlled parent. The under-controlled abusive parent is chaotic, dramatic, over-the-top, out-of-control, foul-mouthed, inconsistent, and driven by moods and irritations. This parent lashes out indiscriminately and may slap or curse at a child for the smallest of things.

The over-controlled abusive parent is more like the cold-blooded tyrant who is unafraid to verbally abuse or hit a child but does so with a detached ruthlessness. He or she lets nothing go and gains compliance by attacking the child's self-esteem with criticism and put-downs.

Finally, we have the authoritative parent who is different in that he or she gains compliance or respect through natural strength, conviction, and confidence.

When you think back to when you were at school you can easily pick out the teachers who had a natural authority that demanded respect, and got it. You can also recall autocratic teachers who, while controlling the class effectively, were disliked for their mean-spiritedness and inflexibility. Finally, there may have been an abusive teacher that you recall. Thankfully, those teachers have now left the system but were a staple in many old schools from the 50's through to the 70's – i.e. the teacher that sadistically left you feeling afraid, diminished, and bad about yourself.

Authority comes easily to some more than others. It tends to be seen in people who are more independent than dependent. Independently minded people are less needy of others peoples approval than dependent people. As a parent this means that authoritative parents does not always need their children to like them and are well able to tolerate their/her children's disapproval in order to get them to comply with essential rules. The dependent parent, on the other hand, often gets handcuffed by their need to have their children like them all the time. When this need is too strong they lose much of their independent authority. Parents like this are afraid to upset their children and invest a lot of energy in reassuring them. They may go over-the-top with unnecessary praise and understanding which, they do not realise, is not actually needed by the child. They may administer punishments or consequences only to withdraw them soon after because they feel sorry for their child.