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**Authoritative Versus
Authoritarian Parenting
by Nancy Samlin, Author**

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The media have recently highlighted a fundamental debate among parenting experts: To be a drill sergeant – or an empathic listener? To spank – or not to spank? To punish – or to teach?

Which Approach?

The strict authoritarian approach, represented by newspaper columnist John Rosemond, is at odds with that of pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton and others who urge parents to set limits on kids' behavior without being punitive. Understandably, these polarized perspectives baffle many parents, so they waffle between issuing commands and caving in to a child's demands. How do we get off this seesaw?

With more than two decades as a parent educator, I firmly believe that effective discipline means setting firm limits while, at the same time, treating children with respect and dignity. This is authoritative, not punitive, parenting. What's the difference?

Consider this situation: Two children are fighting about which TV show to watch. The authoritarian parent bellows, "That's enough! No more TV for a week! That'll teach you kids to get along." This parent dictates a solution, and the children have no opportunity to solve their own problems or learn to cooperate. Although they may feel resentful, they're afraid to express their true feelings.

The authoritative parent says in a calm, clear voice, "If you two can find a way together to share your TV time, you're welcome to watch. If not, the television goes off." This parent

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uses firm discipline (stating a consequence that will result if the squabbling continues), but also guides children respectfully toward working out

their own solution – and then follows through. If not, she is not a credible parent and her statement becomes an empty threat that her kids won't take seriously.

Parents and children have conflicting needs. Clashes are inevitable. But don't get pulled into every skirmish.

The problem with the authoritarian (“Do it because I say so!”) approach is that it uses adult muscle to force youngsters to obey. This may work in the short run. But over time, children may become more defiant and disobedient. Some may become sneaky and do the same thing again but are more careful not to get caught. A child who is constantly under

a parent's thumb will find ways to evade or avoid the rules.

Avoiding Extremes

Here are a few simple tips to help you become a more effective parent without going to either extreme – pushover or dictator.

- **Choose your battles.** Parents and children have conflicting needs. Adults need to hurry; kids want to dawdle. We want some order; they like to make messes. Clashes are inevitable. But don't get pulled into every skirmish. One of my favorite maxims is “If you're not selective, you're not effective.” Decide what's really important to you, like leaving the house on time in the morning without yelling or tantrums – yours or theirs. Talk to kids at night about how to get ready on time the next morning. (For example: Set out clothes together and make lunches that evening, or have a check list of what needs to be done to avoid “morning madness.” This way you'll all begin the day on a happier note.)
- **Talk less.** Children become “parent deaf” when we endlessly lecture, nag, command, criticize, cajole. They've heard it all before, so they tune us out. To get children to listen, the trick is to shorten the message. Brevity is authority. Don't preach about their messy rooms. Make a brief impersonal comment that describes what needs to be done: “Those dirty clothes belong in the hamper” or “Books go on the shelf.”

- **Set clear, firm limits.** For example, before your son goes to a friend's house, let him know exactly what time he must come home. If you arrive to pick him up and he begs to stay longer, you can say, “I know you're having a good time, but it's six o'clock.” If he resists, don't be ambivalent by saying, “Okay, just five more minutes.” Don't argue. Simply state, “Six o'clock was our agreement. We need to go now.”

- **Use consequences instead of punishment.** Let's say your child leaves his new roller blades outside overnight after you've reminded him to bring them inside. They're stolen. An authoritarian parent would lecture: “I warned you, but you never listen to me. You got just what you deserved! That's the last time I'll buy you anything expensive.” That won't teach him to be more careful with his things. It will only make him angry, inept, or resentful toward you. Instead, you could take an authoritative approach: “I can see you're upset that your roller blades are gone and that you'll have to do without them. Maybe you can think of a way to earn some money toward another pair.” An empathic response like this one teaches a lesson in responsibility without being punitive.

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- **Express your anger without insult.** It's only human to get upset when kids disobey or provoke us. Parents have a right to feel angry, but we don't have any right to hurt, insult, belittle, or frighten children. If you're about to explode, take an “adult time-out” to cool off. You could say, “I'll be in my room for ten minutes, and we'll discuss this when I come out.” Parents who use demeaning language or lash out physically fail to teach respect because they're being disrespectful toward the child. This doesn't help a child develop a conscience, and spanking models the very behavior that we want children to avoid.

A Two-Way Street

Respect is a two-way street: Kids learn it best if we model it. They

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won't learn to respect themselves or others if respect has not been given to them.

Another way to show respect is to listen to your child, especially when he is upset.

Listening closely – without interrupting or injecting adult answers – shows you are

really interested and care about him.

Though they don't always show it, children really do want parents to provide safe, predictable structure in their lives. We can do that by being an authoritative parent who sets limits on behavior, but also treats kids the way we all want to be treated – with love, dignity and respect.

Nancy Samalin is the author of several parenting books, including Loving Without Spoiling: And 100 Other Timeless Tips for Raising Terrific Kids. She is the founder and director of Parent Guidance Workshops, located in New York City, and has been conducting workshops for parents of toddlers through teens for over two decades. www.samalin.com.