

# Should Your Adolescent Have a Say?

BY JEFFREY C. SIEGEL & MICHAEL C. GOTTLIEB

Jim and Joan Jones have decided to divorce. They have two teenagers, Jimmy, 15, and Joanie, 13. Jim and Joan would prefer to settle their differences amicably; but Joan thinks the children would be better off with her, and Jim feels they should be with him. On one hand, they wonder if the children should decide for themselves, and on the other, whether the children's opinions should be sought at all. They decide to ask their lawyers.

**W**hen parents of teens choose to divorce, they and the court generally want to consider their teens' preferences regarding where and with whom they will live and how much time they will spend with the other parent. Furthermore, teens want to have their preference known and feel better when their opinions have been considered.

As a result of extensive research on adolescent decision-making, we now know much more about how they think and how capable they are of making such decisions. Following is a primer on what the research shows. It begins with parenting styles.

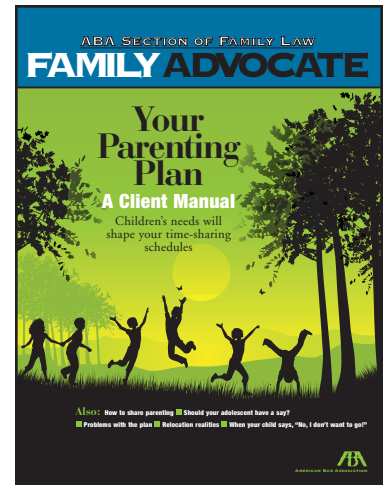
## Three kinds of parenting

The **permissive** parent attempts to behave in a nonpunitive, accepting, and affirming manner toward the child's impulses, desires, and actions; consults with the child about decisions and gives explanations for family rules; makes few demands for household responsibility and orderly behavior; allows the child to regulate his or her own activities as much as possible; avoids the exercise of control; and does not encourage the child to obey externally defined standards, which are often considered arbitrary.

Children who are raised in such environments are at risk for disrespecting authority and violating rules. Furthermore, permissive parenting contributes to an increased likelihood of adolescent experimentation with drugs and alcohol, participation in minor delinquency, and disengagement from school. In another study, anxiety and depression were higher among adolescents with parents who reported lower levels of behavioral control.

The **authoritarian** parent attempts to shape, control, and evaluate the behavior and attitudes of the child in accordance with a predetermined and rigid standard of conduct. Authoritarian parents value obedience as a virtue and favor punitive, forceful measures to curb "self-will" at points where the child's actions or beliefs conflict with what the parent thinks is right and proper. Such parents believe in keeping the child in his or her place, restricting autonomy, assigning household responsibilities to inculcate respect for work, discouraging verbal give-and-take, and believe that the child should accept the parents' word for what is right.

Children who are raised by authoritarian parents may have difficulty establishing their own independence as they have little experience in making decisions for themselves.



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The **authoritative** parent attempts to direct the child's activities, but in a rational, issue-oriented manner. Parents encourage verbal give-and-take, share with a child the reasoning behind the rule or restriction, and solicit objections when the child refuses to conform. Both autonomous self-will and disciplined conformity are valued. Such a parent enforces his or her own adult perspective, but recognizes the child's individual interests and special ways. The authoritative parent affirms the child's present qualities, but also sets standards for future conduct.

Research suggests that these children are most likely to thrive as they are allowed decision making within their capability and appropriately established parental limits.

To be more specific, teens who had either authoritative parents or only a mother who was authoritative reported greater well-being than those with no authoritative parent. Similarly, fifth graders of parents who exerted greater external control and provided less guidance had poorer academic achievement that year, and within two years, had greater difficulty with self-motivation. In contrast, when parents supported their children's autonomy, the children had higher academic achievement that year and greater internal motivation in seventh grade.

In a related study, authors found that an authoritative parenting style had a very positive impact on children's self-concept. This study suggests that parents remain an important source of guidance for their developing children, even in late adolescence. Similarly, authoritative parenting provided the most significant contribution to children's ability to cope with adversity, regardless of gender and racial differences.

These studies tell us that parents retain influence in adolescents' lives and may do so even in the face of potentially negative peer influence.

Susceptibility to peer pressure in adolescence increases to a peak around age 14, and declines thereafter across all demographic groups. Resistance to peer influences increases between ages 14 and 18 years of age. Middle adolescence is an especially significant period for the development of a capacity to stand up for what one believes and resist the pressures of one's peers to do otherwise.

### **Parental influence continues**

Social scientists had assumed that parental influence is sharply curtailed in adolescence, a time during which peers have greater influence and parents have diminishing control. What we have learned is that parents retain notable, albeit more indirect, influence over their teenager's peer relations. For example, specific authoritative parenting practices (e.g., monitoring, encouragement of achievement, joint decision making) are strongly linked with particular adolescent behaviors, such as better academic achievement, lower drug use, and greater self-reliance. In addition, teens do better and feel better about themselves when they know that their authoritative parents accept them for who they are.

In a related study, parents were more inclined to talk with their teens about their personal or emotional welfare, but they were more inclined to punish when teens misbehaved in areas regarding physical safety and in understanding the rights of others. In response, teens reported feeling that doing nothing was not appropriate for parents when issues regarding understanding the rights of others and avoiding harm arose. With regard to personal/emotional welfare, teens viewed talking as appropriate, whereas yelling and punishment were not. Teens were more likely to behave in a positive way when they viewed their parents' responses to their behavior as appropriate and reasonable. Therefore, how parents discipline their teens is less important than the degree to which their children view their responses as appropriate.

So what are the Joneses to do? If we look at only these studies, they tell us that if Jim and Joan have been authoritative parents, accepting their children as individuals,

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and disciplining them appropriately, chances are greater that their children will make better decision for themselves and benefit from being involved in decision making.

### Thinking and judgment

Adolescents and young adults (generally ages from 13 to 24) take more risks than younger or older individuals, a phenomenon that has puzzled researchers for years. What we've learned is that adolescents' inclination to engage in risky behavior does not appear to be due to irrationality, delusions of invulnerability, or ignorance. Rather, there is a gap in time between puberty, which impels adolescents toward thrill seeking, and the slow maturation of the cognitive control that regulates these impulses. It is this gap that makes adolescence a time of heightened vulnerability for risky behavior.

Recent research on adolescent brain maturation indicates that the systems responsible for logical reasoning and basic information processing (thinking) mature before those responsible for social maturity (judgment). A recent study concluded that it is not wise to make sweeping judgments about the maturity of adolescents relative to adults because the answer depends on the aspects of maturity under consideration. By age 16, adolescents' general thinking abilities are essentially indistinguishable from those of adults, but adolescents' social functioning and decision making, even at age 18, is significantly less mature than that of individuals in their mid-20s.

### Widely ranging abilities

Socially responsible decision making is significantly more common among young adults than adolescents. This finding challenges the assumption that adolescents and adults are equally competent socially, and, thus, laws and social policies should treat them equally. Instead, the picture is far more complex since adolescents' judgmental abilities range far more widely than we previously had thought. Some adolescents will exhibit more mature decision making than others. Teens who do should be able to have a greater say in custodial decisions than those who are less capable.

This information may place the Joneses in a difficult position if they do not have a clear sense of where their children are developmentally. This is understandable since adolescence is such a moving target. Therefore, Jim and Joan might consider having a child specialist or court-appointed mental health professional talk with the children and provide an initial assessment of their abilities in this regard.

In various studies, teens subjected to more parental hostility than their siblings showed more acting-out behavior, and parental conflict made matters worse. Furthermore, teens who exhibited more behavioral problems than their siblings received more hostile mothering, and, as a result, their younger siblings were also subject to more hostile mothering. Given this situation, when parents divorce, hostile mothering, for example, could easily prompt a teen to want to live with the father, even though such an impulse may not be in the adolescent's best interest.

Along similar lines, marital conflict was associated with lower self-esteem, more acting-out symptoms, and lower academic achievement in children. Children of parents who exerted more psychological control, such as being authoritarian and/or more intrusive, were more likely to be anxious or depressed. On the other hand, parental warmth was associated with children's decreased acting-out behavior and increased self-esteem over time.

If the Jones children speak with a mental health professional, one of the questions that will arise is how have they been reared. Even if it turns out that one or both of them is having some difficulty with their feelings or behavior, this may not be the

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child's fault. Teens live within the context of a family, and when they have problems, all members of the family should be evaluated to determine the cause of the problem. This assessment should be completed before deciding how much say a child can have. This step is essential since resolving certain family issues may help the adolescent make better decisions for themselves.

One study found that the frequency of parent-child conflict was tied to first-borns' difficulty in transitioning to adolescence, but second-borns experienced no such problems. These findings highlight that all siblings do not have identical problems with their parents as they move into adulthood and that parents may learn from their experiences with older children.

### **Kids benefit from having a say**

Considering teen preferences is difficult because, as noted above, adolescence is a moving target. It is a time of rapid development during which teens experiment and learn about the world as they mature. This period of development brings both opportunities to exercise choice and the consequences of those choices from which parents can often offer little protection. Therefore, understanding how teens make decisions is vital to the discussion. Never uncritically accept what a teen says. Rather, it is important to understand the complexity of the teen's situation and the bases for his or her preferences within a dynamic family situation.

Two Australian articles recently addressed the importance of children's involvement in their parent's divorce. One focused on why children should be heard within the context of mediation when using a child specialist to facilitate the process. One year later, these parents reported a general reduction in conflict and an increase in resolution of subsequent conflicts, and the children agreed. The vast majority of parents stated that their children should have a "say" in where they want to live, but when asked if such preferences should be determinative, only 22 percent of parents felt that it should be, and nearly fifty percent worried that their children might be manipulated in the process.

Seventy percent of all children felt uncomfortable with the process; they wanted to be included, but nearly all said they did not want to have the final say. Children referred to feeling better if they knew what was going on and if they had some control over the situation, rather than being at the "mercy" of their parents' actions and decisions.

The second study made three important points. First, parents who mediated and used a child specialist felt that the feedback they received about their children helped

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## **What Kind of Parent Are You?**

Billy, Susie, and John all break their curfews by 15 minutes. Billy's parents, who are very *authoritarian*, ground him for a month without exceptions, even though the senior prom is next week. Susie's permissive parents dismiss the infraction and do nothing about it. John's authoritative parents explain their concerns, ask him for an explanation, and then impose a minor punishment.

What is the result of these differing approaches? Because of the unreasonable nature of Billy's punishment, he is likely to rebel against his parents and risks getting into greater trouble in the future. A similar outcome may occur for Susie, who may assume no one cares what she does. John, on the other hand, has learned something from his experience and is likely to be more responsible next time.

— M.C.G. & J.C.S.

them to reach a consensus on children's needs and to change their behavior toward each other. Second, fathers in this group felt that bringing a child specialist into the process leveled the playing field as it removed mothers from the role of "gate keeper of the truth" about the children. Third, parents' agreements favored stability of residence and improved relationships.

How much say children should have will depend on a number of things, but social science can tell us a good deal. When parents can accurately evaluate their children's needs, they may need little or no decision-making help. But all parents cannot do this, and genuine disagreements may arise. One point that emerges from this research is that if conflict arises, the Joneses would be well-advised to consider hiring a mediator and mental health professional to work out their differences. **FA**

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