

INSIGHTS

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Which parenting style are you?

Which parenting style gives kids the best start in life? There is a controversial new parenting style that according to the author of a new book is best able to prepare kids for the future. But the evidence doesn't stack up.

There's been a lot of media and online blog focus given to parenting styles in the last few months. Much of this attention is due to the release of a controversial new book *The Battle hymn of the Tiger Mother* by American author Amy Chua earlier this year.

Yale law professor Amy Chua described how she raised her kids using a ruthless parenting style that flies in the face of current Western practice. For example, she told how she forced her 7-year-old daughter Lulu to practise a tune on the piano for hours on end — "right through dinner into the night," with no breaks for water or even the bathroom, until at last Lulu learned to play the piece.

Chua in interviews has been scathing of the current western parenting approach that allows kids to waste hours of time on Facebook and computer games, rather than spending valuable time preparing them for the future. "It's a tough world out there!" she announced on the American Today Show earlier this year.

Her stories of never accepting a mark lower than an A, of insisting on hours of math and spelling drills and daily piano practice (weekends and vacations included), of not allowing sleepovers or television or computer games have left many readers bewildered, but also defensive.

"Where's the love and the acceptance?" seems to sum up the response by many outraged readers on blogs and newspapers. At a time when many parents are labeled as 'helicopter', 'pushy' or even 'pushovers' Chua's Tiger parenting mantra has certainly hit a nerve. The implications are that the tiger mother's cubs will be better prepared to hit the world running than those who experience an indulgent, permissive parenting style. You could say it's a book whose time has come!

The fact that Chua has presented an alternate parenting view is to be applauded, although some of her methods don't sit well with most professionals and educators. Her views are also highly subjective.

What does the evidence say?

There's plenty of empirical evidence to suggest a more balanced parenting approach produces the best outcomes for kids. The recent Millennium Study mapped the parenting styles of 9,000 English households and found that children who experience authoritative (Thriving) parenting are best prepared to do well in life.

An analysis of the results is revealing. One quarter of kids with authoritative parents (Thriving parenting) were in the top 20 per cent at school. Next came permissive parenting with 18 per cent, 15 per cent for authoritarian (Tiger parenting) and 11 per cent of this cohort going to kids of disengaged parents. The authoritative approach offers a mix of discipline and warmth that is deemed necessary for kids to thrive, thus it's been dubbed the *Thriving* approach.

Here are five characteristics of the *Thriving* (authoritative) style:

1. Parents set limits and boundaries that expand as kids get older and become more capable.

2. Parents use consequences and other tools to teach kids to behave well and develop a sense of personal responsibility.

3. Children receive a great deal of encouragement (comments directed at improvement, effort and contribution rather than directed at their ability) and quality feedback about their efforts and behaviour that helps them improve.

4. Parents encourage empathy in children by recognising their emotions and giving them permission and assistance to express their feelings and help them resolve relationship problems.

5. Parents put a range of measures in place to develop a sense of generosity of spirit and give and take so kids think 'we' rather than 'what's in it for me?' This sense of community that authoritative parenting promotes is the real strength of the style.

Parenting style is not necessarily fixed. It changes over time according to children's needs, our wellbeing and even their ages. Common sense suggests parents need to be stricter with some children than with others and there will be times when parents need to release the pressure on kids, and adopt a more permissive approach for a time. However most of us default to a particular style and it would seem that most kids do better when their parents are more *thrivers* than *tigers*.

Recognise these parenting styles?

Helicopter parenting: Parents who are always hovering. Not giving kids sufficient space to solve their own problems.

Curling parenting: Named after a strange winter sport, where two people equipped with brooms sweep the obstacles off the ice for the curl (bowling ball on ice).

Lawnmower parenting: Similar to curling parenting where parents smooth the way by mowing down life's bumps.

High investment parenting: When parents live out their goals through their kids.

Submarine parenting: Neglectful style where parents disengage from most tasks.

Free range parenting: Giving kids a great deal of space and freedom.

Hippo parenting: When parents squash their kids like a hippo to prove a point!

Tiger parenting: Draconian parenting style that promotes excellence and perfection in kids.

Pussy cat parenting: The name says it all. When parents are a soft touch!

Shoulder-to-shoulder parenting: More a communication method than a style. Doing something side-by-side with kids encourages conversations.

Want to know if you're a tiger or thriver parent?

Take my FREE *Which Parenting Style Are You?* Parenting quiz at Parentingideas.com.au and discover your parenting style. There are also some practical implementation ideas to help you adopt a parenting style suitable for your kids today.

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