

Control vs. Controlling: The Difference Parents Need to Understand

A [new parenting study](#) affirms that children are more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression when they have controlling parents. Wendy S. Grolnick, who supervised the research, urges parents to understand the difference between being controlling and with being *in control*.

This isn't just a matter of semantics. Parents provide a positive experience for their children, advises Grolnick, when they put "structure" in their children's lives. This structure involves "rules, guidelines and limits" so that children have clearly outlined expectations and understanding of where their actions will lead.

This is a parent being *in control* of a situation, while accommodating their child's autonomy and agency as an individual. Within clearly defined boundaries, their child is free to move, in full knowledge of what consequences they invite when they overstep them.

A problem arises, according to Grolnick, when parents move from facilitating their child's activities within a defined zone of freedom, to a minute-by-minute delineation of what those activities are. You might call this a sort of domestic tyranny – and from personal experience I'd say it is something terrifyingly easy to edge into.

Thankfully, and perhaps unusually, the study is kind to parents who fall into the trap, acknowledging that heightened stress in their life is the main reason for overly controlling their children.

Ah, stress

Stressful situations from “divorce, having to move, and financial difficulties” are closely associated with controlling parenting, the study shows. This sounds like basic physics: “for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.” Newton’s third law might have been born out of a parent-child relationship.

Surely more parents than not have reason to beat their breasts over that one. When life feels like it’s spinning out of control it can be denied simply by focusing on one bit that we “seem” to have a firm grasp upon. Unfortunately, because of their defenselessness, children can easily become that sector – the outlet for and continuation of their parent’s own anxieties.

It’s a cruel cycle, but the study proposes solutions.

Firstly, learn good strategies for being “in control” to avoid degenerating into domestic despotism when under stress.

Secondly, better understand your child’s natural drives and work with them towards mutual goals. To use a buzz word, parent “organically.”

And then there’s fear

The observation that the source of controlling parenting is stress, is, I believe, correct. But perhaps it’s helpful to name a primal emotion at the root of stress.

In my experience as a mother, [echoed by other parents](#), I have noted that the temptation to control increases in direct relation to an increase in fear of something. It might be fear of incompetency as a parent (and of someone finding that out) or fear that children will go off the rails if left to their own devices.

Here’s another aspect of the cruel cycle. [If over-controlling parenting is embedded in fear](#), one of the oldest control

tactics is also fear. (American founding father John Adams considered it to be “the foundation of most governments.”) Does it make a difference to children whether we control by fear (threats of consequences) or by more subtle means? In other words, does the type of control, rather than the sheer fact of being controlled, influence children’s experience of anxiety? Grolnick does not say.

A further question: Is controlling parenting a worse response to stress than resorting to heavy drinking and child neglect? One would think not.

The study’s delving into a fraught topic confirms once again, that the multi-faceted problems of parenting can only be addressed with multi-faceted solutions.

Still, it is a timely reminder that, for the child’s sake, we need to look after ourselves and try to reduce stress in our lives to an absolute minimum. Which may force us to admit that we’re being overambitious with our weekly to-do lists and schedules, and that we need to [slow down](#).

That might be the most effective way to combat the proclivity to controlling parenting.

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