

insights

Refining your parenting style

by Michael Grose



Kids benefit from a mixture of two parenting approaches. On the one hand, they benefit from an approach that provides nurturance, builds strong relationships and offers strong emotional support. They also need a style that sets behavioural boundaries, challenges them to face their fears and promotes independence from an early age.

This combination of nurturance and firmness is known as an authoritative style according to the work of researcher Diane Baumrind who studied parenting styles in Western countries. A purely nurturant style is known as a permissive style, while a singularly firm style is known as authoritarian.

When discussing the authoritative approach, it's easiest to use a dog and cat metaphor. If you have a dog, you'll know it's usually friendly and wants to show love, affection and attention. The 'dog' style of parenting is relational, empathetic and warm. Cats, on the other hand, are different. They are usually self-sufficient and generally able to live quite happily without you. To develop the metaphor, a 'cat' style of parent is more able to set limits, more likely to challenge kids and encourage them to become self-sufficient. They can separate themselves from their kids, step back and not allow emotions to rule decision-making.

Warm cat, firm dog

Which of these two styles do you identify with? If you defer to one, then you may have to work a little harder on more consciously to bring the other to the table. In reality, many parents working in a partnership with each other will share the dog-cat loads, just as they sometimes play good cop, bad cop when they are less than perfect. Sole parents need to be firm cat and nurturant dog all in one package, which is challenging as we tend to default to one style over the other.

Don't mix the two approaches up

Get your cat and dog wrong and you'll be ineffective. If your first approach when a child is anxious is to be distant and unapproachable, then you're not meeting your child's emotional needs. If you meet poor behaviour with a friendly smile or an indecisive manner, then you will not be providing your child with the guidance they require. Get your response right – meet anxiety with dog-like warmth and poor behaviour with cat-like firmness – and you are giving your kids what's required in each situation.

Keep the approaches separate

A common mistake is the failure of adults to separate the two approaches. Imagine your son coming home from school very upset. You are not sure what's wrong, but you keep an eye out just the same. The next minute he hurls an insult at his younger sister, causing her to come to you for support. You remonstrate with your son, then

sympathetically ask what's troubling him. Most likely you'll get a confused response from your son, as you've mixed management – a cat-like behaviour – with counselling – a dog-like trait. It's best to keep the two approaches separate.

In this example, it would be better for you to remonstrate with your son about his behaviour and perhaps send him to his room. Then, when things have calmed down, speak to him quietly about any problems or worries that he may have. This separation will ensure that the firmness of the cat is effective and then gives some time and a different space for the more dog-like approach to work its magic.

The cat-dog framework is a practical way to ensure that your child receives the type of parenting they need to suit different situations.



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