



The Psychology of Parental Control: How Well-meant Parenting Backfires

Wendy S. Grolnick

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What is parental control? Is it positive or negative for children? What makes parents controlling with their children, even when they value supporting children's autonomy? Are there alternatives to control and how might we apply them in important domains of children's lives, such as school and sports? This book addresses these and other questions about the meaning and predictors of parental control, as well as its consequences for children's adjustment and well-being. While the topic of parental control is not new, there has been controversy about the concept, with some researchers and clinicians weighing in on the side of control and others against it. This book argues that part of the controversy stems from different uses of the term, with some investigators focusing more on parents being in control and others on controlling children. Using a definition of control as "pressure for children to think, feel, or behave in specific ways," the author explores research on parental control, arguing that there is more consensus than previously thought. Using this research base, the author provides evidence that parental control can be subtle and can lurk within many "positive" parenting approaches; parental control undermines the very behaviors we wish to inculcate in our children; providing autonomy support--the opposite of control--is a challenge, even when parents are committed to doing so.

With controversy in the literature about parental control and attention in the media on the ways in which parents step over the control line (e.g., screaming on the soccer sidelines, pressuring children in academics), this book is especially timely. It provides an empathic view of how easily parents can become trapped in controlling styles by emphasizing performance and hooking their own self-esteem on children's performance. Examples of how this can happen in academic, sporting, and peer situations with their emphasis on competition and hierarchy are provided, as well as strategies for parenting in highly involved but autonomy supportive ways.

A highly readable yet research-based treatment of the topic of parental control, this book:

- *explores the controversial topic of parental control; addresses controversy about the positive and negative effects of parental control; and disentangles various parenting concepts, such as involvement, structure, and control;
- *illustrates how control can be overt, such as in the use of corporal punishment or covert, as in the use of controlling praise;
- *provides evidence that control may produce compliance in children preventing them from initiating and taking responsibility for their own behavior;
- *explores why parents are controlling with their children, including environmental and economic stresses and strains, characteristics of children that "pull" for control, and factors in parents' own psychologies that lead them to be "hooked" on children's performance; and
- *provides examples of control in the areas of academics and sports--the hierarchical and competitive nature of these domains is seen as contributing to parents' tendencies to become controlling in these areas.

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