

Parental Authority: Its Uses, Misuses and Implications

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Perhaps the most powerful institution shaping human lives is the family. Parents within that institution have been invested with the authority and the responsibility to discipline and train their children. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes, "... it is the duty of parents to perfectly and thoroughly train their children."¹ In another passage he also states that "this...training...is obligatory and not voluntary."² This authority has been given to parents by God. Authority and its agent, power, have long been studied in child psychology. Psychologist M.L. Hoffman ascribes almost unlimited power to parents:

Probably in no other relationship does a person in our society have such complete power over another as do parents over young children.³

The subject of this paper is the appropriate use of this authority given to parents and the implications of the misuse of this authority. Non-Bahá'í sources will be quoted widely to explore the statement of 'Abdu'l-Bahá that:

Love and kindness have a far greater influence than punishment upon the improvement of human character.⁴

Bahá'í sources that specify a guiding, training, nurturing approach to parenting will be explored and the implication that the child's character will be "totally perverted"⁵ should harsh measures be employed will be examined in the light of social science theory. The need to balance nurturance with discipline will be explored in view of the Guardian's statement that "Only a relatively very highly evolved soul would always be disciplined by love alone."⁶ As well, the appropriate use of authority through the child's stages of development will be illustrated and appropriate disciplinary measures in each stage will be suggested.

An even broader implication of the appropriate use of authority in the family is its long term effect on the child's future relationships with those perceived as authority figures. In the family, the child learns the patterns for these interpersonal dynamics between himself and other institutions in his community. Should this relationship be distorted through the misuse of parental authority, relationships with teachers, police, Assembly, supervisor and even spouse will predictably be distorted. Brian Gilmartin emphasizes this point, "...the youngster's hatred and distrust of parental authority tends to generalize to a hatred and distrust of all authority."⁷ If authority is misused and the child forced to obey through abusive measures rather than through respect and love, the child can be expected to be rebellious, hostile, and even antisocial. In fact, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

[If] they will not obey their parents, ... in a certain sense means that they will not obey God.⁸

The Guardian likens the powers of the Assemblies, the elected institutions in the Bahá'í Faith, to that of the father and points out the desired effect when the individual perceives the institution or father as a helper and obeys out of respect and confidence.

It is very bad for the believers to have the feeling that their Assembly will deal too harshly with them, and the net result can only be that a feeling of fear or alienation or resentment may grow up in their hearts towards the body that they should look to as being ...their helper—one might almost say their father...whose wishes and decrees they will respect and obey unhesitatingly.⁹

Recent studies also suggest that harsh punishment of the young is rarely effective as reported in the Gilmartin report and published in the *Journal of Human Behaviour*. These children, Gilmartin states:

...tend to become highly resentful and distrustful of authority. Indeed sometimes their often blind feelings of extreme hostility for and distrust of any and all authority figures reach the point of being dangerous to both themselves and others.¹⁰

These statements in the Bahá'í writings to "rear the child gently, in the way of tenderness"¹¹ do not, however, imply that discipline is unnecessary or that a permissive approach is to be employed. The indispensability of discipline is made clear in this statement of the Guardian:

Discipline of some sort, whether physical, moral or intellectual, is indeed indispensable, and no training can be said to be complete or fruitful if it disregards this element.¹²

In light of the following evidence from the Bahá'í writings, this paper proposes a working definition of discipline. Discipline means education. Discipline is essentially programmed guidance that helps people to develop "high resolve,"¹³ "endurance," "perseverance," and internal self-control. The manner in which this discipline is employed, and the authority which parents have to use or misuse this power and its implications, is illustrated in the following tables.

Table I enumerates appropriate uses of authority and their implications for the development of the child. The Bahá'í writings are replete with words such as "praise, applaud, explain, teach, guard, and counsel." If the child must be punished, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes that "means based on reason" are to be used. The writings stress that the child is benefitted by "sugar and honey." The implications of this approach are that the child will "grow and flourish," will be "resolute," and have a will to strive and "carry to conclusion undertakings."

In Table II inappropriate uses of authority are listed with the implications that deleterious "alienation,"¹⁴ resentment, and a subdued defeatist attitude will result. These tables do not present a comprehensive list of the references available but do provide the beginnings of a model to help in identifying the Bahá'í style of parenting with respect to the appropriate use of authority.

From this outline it is again clear that harsh punitive measures are seen to distort the character of the child and that a nurturant approach will result in culturally valued child behaviour and healthy attitudes toward authority figures. This position is substantially upheld in the social science literature on motivators of child behaviour with respect to the power orientation of the parents. Of particular relevance is a series of studies conducted by psychologist Diana Baumrind on the effects of parenting styles on children's behaviour. Initially, children in a nursery school setting were observed in play situations as well as in structured laboratory settings. In the structured settings the children were given tasks that were easy, moderately difficult, and impossible to complete. The children's behaviour in both settings was subsequently assessed in two dimensions: responsible vs. socially disruptive behaviour and active vs. passive behaviour.

Baumrind then made home visits at stressful and non-stressful times of the day to look for possible differences in childrearing methods that might account for the differing levels of competence shown by the children. Observations were carried out over a three month period. Parental behaviour was measured on dimensions which included:

- Directive vs. nondirective
- Firm vs. lax enforcement policy
- Extent to which parent encourages self-assertion and independent experimentation
- Extent to which parent values individuality or conformity
- Extent to which parent uses reason and explanation when directing the child
- Level of warmth and affection demonstrated¹⁵

Each parent was also interviewed separately, and parental attitudes were discussed. Baumrind isolated three basic parenting styles and labeled them "Authoritarian," "Authoritative," and "Permissive."

The Authoritarian Parenting Style

The Authoritarian parent attempts to shape, control, and evaluate behavior and attitudes of her child in accordance with a set standard of conduct, usually an absolute standard. She values obedience as a virtue and favors punitive, forceful measures to curb self-will at points where the child's actions or beliefs conflict with what she thinks is right conduct. She believes in inculcating such instrumental values as respect for

authority, respect for work, and for the preservation of order and traditional structure. She does not encourage verbal give and take, believing that the child should accept her word for what is right.¹⁶

The Authoritative Parenting Style

The Authoritative parent attempts to direct the child's activities in a rational, issued and oriented manner. She encourages verbal give and take, and shares with the child the reasoning behind her policy. She values both expressive and instrumental attributes, both autonomous self-will and disciplined conformity. Therefore, she exerts firm control at points of parent-child divergences, but does not hem the child in with restrictions. She recognizes her own special rights as an adult, but also the child's individual interests and special ways. The authoritative parent affirms the child's present qualities, but also sets standards for future conduct. She uses reason as well as power to achieve her objectives. She does not base her decisions on group consensus on the individual child's desires, but also does not regards herself as enforceable or divinely inspired.¹⁷

The Permissive Parenting Style

The Permissive parent attempts to behave in a non-punitive, acceptant, and affirmative manner toward the child's impulses, desires, and actions. She consults with him about policy decisions and gives explanations for family rules. She makes few demands for household responsibilities and orderly behavior. She presents herself to the child as a resource for him to use as he wishes, not as an... active agent responsible for shaping and altering his on-going or future behavior. She allows the child to regulate his own abilities as much as possible, avoids the exercise of control, and does not encourage him to obey externally-defined standards. She attempts to use reason, but not overpower to accomplish her ends.¹⁸

While criticizing the inflexibility of the authoritarian approach with its iron-fisted view of power relations and the almost inevitable frustrations and hostility that it engenders in the child, Baumrind reserves her sharpest criticism for the permissive approach. The authoritative style of parenting is the one most closely aligned with the approach described in the Bahá'í writings.

The patters which emerged from Baumrind's studies clearly indicate that particular styles of parenting had particular consequences for the behaviour of preschool children. Children of authoritarian parents were socially responsible (obedient) but more distrustful, withdrawn, and self-controlled and least explorative and the least self-reliant. Conversely, children of authoritative parents were relatively more self-reliant, independent, curious, self-controlled, responsible, and content.¹⁹ These findings agree with the direction given to parents in the Bahá'í Revelation which achieves the desired balance between nurturance and discipline.

The parent-child literature of the past four decades has identified two variables as critical in the socialization of children. They are parental nurturance and parental power.

Rollins and Thomas examined the evidence from a number of studies that considered the ratio between power and nurturance and concluded that:

... a fairly consistent pattern emerges. We conclude that the most effective socialization strategy parents can use is high levels of both nurturance and inductive control attempts, while the least effective would be a low level of nurturance and either a low level of inductive or a high level of power assertive control attempts.²⁰

Inductive power is that which parents exert as they give explanations or reasons for desired behaviours. Power assertion is defined as forceful measures applied by the parent. Another variable mentioned by Rollins and Thomas as increasing child compliance was the child's perception that the parents had a legitimate right to make control attempts or were seen to have legitimate power. This was especially true for adolescents. Therefore, the authors concluded that:

... parents must desire child behavior congruence with cultural norms or the proposed model of effective socialization would produce mal-socialization.²¹ [See Table III]

Another element worthy of mention in this discussion of power assertion is the necessity of varying the manner in which power is applied over the developmental stages of the child's life. Given that God varies his laws

according to the need and capacities of mankind from age to age, in the same way the parent needs to vary his interventions from stage to stage in the child's development.

Table IV lists psychologist Eric Erikson's developmental stages. I have added age-appropriate disciplinary measures or power assertions that provide the parent with an alternative to forceful measures. The measures are drawn from Carl Roger's theory of reflective feelings, Alex Osborn's technique of mutual problem-solving and behaviour therapy for time out and contracting. This eclectic approach is adapted from Fitzhugh Dodson's book *How to Discipline with Love*.²²

Once the child has passed adolescence and developed a healthy separation from the parent, power assertions are no longer appropriate nor are they effective. 'Abdu'l-Bahá reminds us of the futility of our efforts beyond the age of puberty.

It is extremely difficult to teach the individual and refine his character once puberty has passed. By then, as experience hath shown, even if every effort be exerted to modify some tendency of his, it all avails nothing.... Therefore it is in early childhood that a firm foundation must be laid. While the branch is green and tender it can easily be made straight.²³

Another variable mentioned in the Bahá'í writings that parents should be aware of with respect to power assertion is difference in temperament. Each child has special needs that require particular consideration. The Guardian makes special mention of children who are "unruly and violent by nature."²⁴

Psychiatrists Thomas and Chess found in a twenty year study that:

Offspring even within the same families are not born with the same attributes of temperament. Some youngsters are "easy" children from birth, while others seem to display certain kinds of traits that are very difficult and troublesome for many parents to deal with.²⁵

Such children require more, not less, parental understanding. It is these children that the literature identify as most often the targets of child abuse.

While this paper has addressed almost exclusively the responsibilities of parents with respect to authority, it is also relevant to make mention of the stated responsibility of the child in the Bahá'í context inasmuch as the reciprocal parent-child relationship establishes the family as a system.

There are also certain sacred duties of children towards parents.... The (children's) prosperity in this world depends on the good pleasure of parents, and without this they will be in manifest loss.²⁶

This feature of "winning the good pleasure of the parents" is frequently absent from programs available in the community at large. No opportunity exists for children to be taught their role by others in the community in support of the parents. Sessions are available for parents through such programs as "Parent Effectiveness Training," "Systematic Training for Effective Parenting," and others. However, as yet no such group training programs for children are available.

During the United Nations Year of the Child, much attention was paid to the rights of the child and very little, if any, recognition given to the responsibility which children have to their parents. The Bahá'í community readily acknowledges that the responsibility for parenting is not the duty of just the mother and may want to support the parents in providing such training for the children in its midst. The Local Spiritual Assembly may want to include this element in its children's education program during this phase when the Universal House of Justice is calling for curriculum development.

Summary

This paper has established that: 1) The nurturant, guiding, training approach to parenting is advocated in the available Bahá'í writings; 2) Power assertion of a punitive nature has destructive implications for the character development of the child; and 3) Authority used appropriately can maximize the child's compliance in a healthy way without sacrificing his autonomy or self-assertion.

Each stage of the child's development calls for the proper use of authority and appropriate disciplinary measures. Further research in this area might consider that similar parental practices have different effects on boys and girls

...in the absence of extreme rejection or neglect, both parental affection and authority have differential effects on the development of responsibility in sons and daughters. For boys, it is the absence of sufficient warmth or discipline which more frequently impairs dependability; for girls, it is an overdose of either variable that has deleterious effects.²⁷

Finally, parents are reminded that the mandate to “perfectly and thoroughly train”²⁸ their children is likened to “waiting upon the Blessed Beauty,”²⁹ and parents are enjoined to take up the task “joyously,”³⁰ and that the task has wide implications and is a most difficult one.

In closing we are reminded of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s qualification regarding parenting:

It is, however, very difficult to succeed in it [parenting].... I hope that you will acquit yourself well in this most important of tasks...that these children, reared one and all in the holy Teachings, will develop natures like unto the sweet airs that blow across the gardens of the All-Glorious, and will waft their fragrance around the world.³¹

Table I
Appropriate Uses of Authority*

USES		IMPLICATIONS	
Praise	(p.49)	Grow and flourish	(p.49)
Applaud	(p.49)	Learn righteousness and dignity	(p.49)
Rear gently	(p.40)	Be resolute	(p.49)
Patiently train	(p.23)	Will to strive	(p.49)
Explain and teach	(p.23)	Will to endure	(p.49)
Protect them	(p.23)	Learn perseverance	(p.49)
Heartening	(p.24)	Will to advance	(p.49)
Encouraging	(p.24)	High-mindedness	(p.49)
Counsel	(p.50)	High resolve	(p.49)
Punish (means based on reason)	(p.50)	Carry undertaking to conclusion	(p.49)
Slight verbal chastisement	(p.50)	Ability to deal with future world problems	(p.42)
Accustom to hardship	(p.30)	Improve human character	(p.63)
Love and kindness preferable to punishment	(p.63)	Unity of family	(p.76)
Rights not transgressed	(p.76)		
Teach laws of God	(p.6)	Learn fear of God (God is just)	(p.72)
Promise and threat	(p.6)	Prevent things forbidden	(p.6)
Tactful and loving care	(p.6)	Loyalty and intelligence	(p.66)

* Derived from *Bahá’i Education: A Compilation*. Compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice. Thornhill: Bahá’i Community of Canada, 1977. All page numbers in this table refer to the above compilation.

Table II
Inappropriate Uses of Authority

USES	IMPLICATIONS
Too deal too harshly (p.81*)	Alienation (p.81*)
To be censured (p.239**)	Resentment (p.81*)
Striking (p.50***)	Character totally perverted (p.50***)
Vilifying (p.50***)	Fear (p.81*)
Verbal abuse (p.50***)	Subdued (p.398**)
Roles arbitrary (p.76***)	Defeated (p.398**)
To be injured (p.182**)	
To be oppressed (p.239**)	

* Bahiyyih Nakhjavani, *When We Grow Up*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1979.

** ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Bahá’u’lláh, *Bahá’i World Faith*. Wilmette: Bahá’i Publishing Trust, 1971.

*** *Bahá’i Education: A Compilation*. Compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice. Thornhill: Bahá’i Community of Canada, 1977.

Table III

Nurturance-Power Ratio

High Nurturance and High Parental Induction and Child Perception of Legitimate Power	=	Highest Compliance
High Nurturance and High Power Induction	=	High Compliance
High Nurturance and High Power Assertion	=	Lower Compliance
Low Nurturance and High Power Assertion	=	Hostility Rebellion Delinquency

Table IV

Stage*	Developmental Task*	Suggested Discipline
Infancy (0-1)	Trust vs. Distrust	Caring & Loving
Toddlerhood (1-2)	Autonomy vs. Self-Doubt	Distraction & Encouragement
First Adolescence (2-3)	Initiative vs. Guilt	Time out, Restraining
Pre-school (3-6)	Industry vs. Inferiority	Reflecting Feelings
Middle Childhood (6-11)	Identity vs. Role Confusion	Contracting
Pre-Adolescence (11-13)	Intimacy vs. Isolation	Mutual Problem Solving
Adolescence (13-16)	Generativity vs. Stagnation	Family Meetings, Consultation

*Derived from Eric Erikson, *Childhood and Society*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1950.

References

1. 'Abdu'l-Bahá quoted in *Bahá'í Education: A Compilation*, compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice. Thornhill: Bahá'í Community of Canada, 1977, p. 50.
2. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith*. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishign Trust, 1971, p. 55.
3. Boyd C. Rollins and Thomas L. Darwin, "A Theory of Parental Power and Child Compliance," *Power in Families*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1973, p. 55.
4. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í Education*, p. 63.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
7. Brian G. Gilmartin, *Journal of Human Behaviour*, February 1979, p. 24.
8. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í Education*, p. 63.

9. Bahiyyih Nakhjavani, *When We Grow Up*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1979, p. 81.
10. Gilmartin, p. 19.
11. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Bahá’í Education*, p. 6.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
13. The terms in quotation marks pertain to Table I. See Table I for references.
14. The terms in quotation marks in this paragraph pertain to Table II. See Table II for references.
15. D. Baumrind, “Child Care Practices Anteceding Three Patterns of Preschool Behavior,” *Genetic Psychology Monographs*, 1967, 75 (1) pp. 43–88.
16. D. Baumrind, “Effects of the Authoritative Parental Control on Child Behavior,” *Child Development*, 1966, 37 (4) p. 890.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 891.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 889.
19. Baumrind, “Child Care Practices Anteceding Three Patterns of Preschool Behavior,” p. 54.
20. Rollins and Thomas, *Power of Families*, p. 45.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Fitzhugh Dodson, *How to Discipline with Love (from crib to college)*. New York: The New American Library, 1977.
23. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Bahá’í Education*, p. 24.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
25. Gilmartin, p. 23.
26. Nakhjavani, *When We Grow Up*, p. 64.
27. U. Brofenbrenner, quoted in “Effects of Authoritative Parental Control on Child Behavior,” *Child Development*, p. 902.
28. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Bahá’í Education*, p. 50.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

