



LAURA MCCARTHY, PHD, LMFT

Making a Difference with Your Kids

It's September, which brings to my mind images of freshly-sharpened yellow pencils, the new-in-the-box crayons, the carefully chosen outfit for the first day of school. It is a time when parents often reflect on how we can help our children to be successful, not only in school but in life. Sometimes it seems we have little influence compared to our kids' peers, schools, and the media; other times it may feel we have the whole world on our shoulders as we try to provide our kids a healthy foundation. This month's article explores how your parenting approach can make a difference. (Those of you who are not parents may still find it interesting to think about how this applies to the children who are in your life, or to think about how you were raised.)

Diana Baumrind's research in the 1970's and 80's identified three primary parenting approaches: An "authoritarian" style high on structure and low on warmth, a "permissive" style low on structure and high on warmth, and an "authoritative" style high on both structure and warmth. Most parents generally employ one of these three styles, though their approach may vary on the situation; the balance of the authoritative approach is considered the gold standard. I find it helpful to think about warmth and structure on continuums; they are present in degrees for each of us, rather than "present" or "absent." Both structure and warmth are important aspects of parenting which influence how our kids respond to us at home, and how they relate to the world.

Does structure come easily to you? Parents who are high on structure have clear rules, are consistent with positive and negative reinforcement, and have regular routines for their children. Depending on how you were raised, structure may have very positive or very negative connotations for you, but a degree of structure is beneficial for most kids. Structure helps kids know what is expected of them and the positive and negative consequences of their actions, and gives them the ability to predict what will happen and when. This allows them to feel more secure and less anxious and they more easily learn to develop self-control. They have clearer boundaries, understand their limits, and approach the world in a less "entitled" way. If you want to increase your structure as a parent, my advice is to start small. Choose one time of day where a routine would be helpful, like getting ready for school, doing homework, or going to bed. Ask your child for input on what should come first, what comes next, etc. Write it down (have younger kids draw pictures of the steps in the routine) and post it. Or, pick one rule you want your kids to abide by and come up with a crystal-clear definition of what it means to follow the rule. Decide on an incentive and a consequence you can implement every time the rule is broken or followed. Implement consequences matter-of-factly so your child can focus completely on the rule and consequence rather than on your emotions. It is just as important to be consistent with positive reinforcement.

Does warmth come easily to you? Are you able to communicate verbally or nonverbally to your children that they are important to you, worthy of respect and being listened to, appreciated and loved? Children who feel secure in your love for them also feel more secure in venturing out into the world; they are more certain that adults and peers will like them for who they are. They also truly want to please you; they are much more likely to follow the household structure without (as many!) fights. To increase warmth in your family, create a small daily routine of connection, whether reading a book at bedtime, talking about the highlights and lowlights of each person's day during dinner, or letting your child help you with a project. One-on-one time with your child with his or her input on the activity also demonstrates respect and builds connection.

There is no perfect recipe when it comes to parenting approaches—The right "mixture" depends on who you and your child both are as individuals, and the dynamics of how your family works together. Finding the right balance of structure and warmth will help all family members to feel loved and respected.

7220 W. Jefferson Avenue
Suite 407
Lakewood, CO 80235

Phone: 720-384-4696
Fax: 303-816-9627
Email: Laura@McCarthyTherapy.com
Website: www.McCarthyTherapy.com