

# ISSUE BULLETIN

Examining Critical Issues in Faithful Catholic Education

September 4, 2018

## Should the Church Be a Permissive Parent?

By Daniel Guernsey, Ed.D.

**W**ith concerns swirling around the Vatican Synod on Young People this October, the Church's appalling failures to protect its young from predators, and the growing scourges of pornography, sexual activity, and STDs among even Catholic youth, it's the right time to reconsider how the Catholic Church should be attending to the current generation.<sup>1</sup>

We need to renew the once-familiar notion of the Church as mother to the Faithful.<sup>2</sup> The Church gives us new life through baptism and instructs, feeds, comforts, strengthens, forgives, protects, and challenges us as we seek to make our way through the world and reach our heavenly goal.

Specifically, young people need the Church to maintain an authoritative style of parenting that exhibits both deep concern for the child's wellbeing and confidence in what is right and true. This image of responsible motherhood suggests a hopeful path forward for today's Catholic schools, colleges, and youth ministry.

### Parenting Styles

---

Parents may be labeled "authoritarian," "authoritative," "indulgent," and "uninvolved"—these are the "parenting styles" often used by researchers to categorize naturally occurring patterns of parental practices and values.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Ordinary General Assembly of Synod of Bishops, "*Instrumentum Laboris* for the Synod 2018. Young People, The Faith and Vocational Discernment." Synodus Episcoporum (May 8, 2018). Available at: <http://www.synod2018.va/content/synod2018/en/fede-discernimento-vocazione/instrumentum-laboris-for-the-synod-2018--young-people--the-faith.html>

<sup>2</sup> "Catechism of the Catholic Church – God's Salvation: Law and Grace." The Holy See. Available at: [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c3a3.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c3a3.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Darling, "Parenting Style and Its Correlates. ERIC Digest." ERIC. Available at: <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED427896>

An authoritarian parenting style is highly directive, with little or no deference to child input and little warmth. It is marked by obedience, strictness, structure, order, clarity, high demands, and rule orientation. Authoritarian parenting may have low levels of communication and harsh discipline (shaming).

An authoritative parenting style is both demanding and responsive. It is marked by clear standards but with disciplinary methods that are supportive and assertive, rather than simply punitive and restrictive. Authoritative parents balance demandingness and responsiveness: they firmly enforce rules and standards expecting them to be met while encouraging independence and communication.

An indulgent (“permissive”) parenting style is marked by responsiveness, leniency, and empathy more than demands and expectations. It allows for considerable self-regulation, avoids confrontation, and is democratic and engaged. Permissive parenting is marked by tolerance and acceptance of a child’s impulses, makes few demands for mature behavior, and minimizes punishment.

An uninvolved parenting style is marked by very few demands and very little parental responsiveness, and it leans toward neglect and rejection.

It should be clear that this last “uninvolved” style is not conducive to healthy and balanced children. But what do decades of research tell us about the relative merits of the other styles, and how might that guide Holy Mother Church?

## **The ‘Cool’ Mom**

---

Studies show that authoritarian parenting’s harsh control can lead to even more undesirable behavior in the long run and possibly anxiety and low self-esteem. It may also limit a child’s opportunities and decision-making abilities.<sup>4</sup>

For Mother Church, the negative impact of employing this style is the stuff of legend and lore. Some older-generation Catholics tell stories of the “bad old days” when nuns beat kids and priests told everyone they were going to Hell each Sunday from the pulpit. Incredibly, some young people today have picked up on the tale. In surveys preparing for the youth synod, they complain that the Church seems out of touch and judgmental.

That’s not a plausible characterization of the Church today, but it could simply be what children have always said about their parents. More than 50 years after the social revolutions of the 1960s and the impact of Vatican II, there is little evidence that today’s youth experience a harsh, shaming, and unresponsive Church. Here’s a thought experiment: List three permissive-oriented

---

<sup>4</sup> Gwen Dewar, Ph.d., “Authoritarian Parenting: What Happens to the Kids?” Parenting Science. Available at: <https://www.parentingscience.com/authoritarian-parenting.html>

Catholic universities, schools, and parishes that you know well. Should be a snap! Now repeat the list for currently authoritarian-oriented universities, schools, and parishes. Not so easy.

Instead of authoritarianism, it's permissiveness and relativism that saturate all elements of the experience of young people today. The crisis facing current youth is not one of rigid Catholics trying to box them in, but of the permissiveness of liquid modernity drowning them in false tolerance and relativism and leading them to think that any truth claim is short-sighted and mean. The dictatorship of relativism has blinded and enslaved many of our young people, hindering their willingness to seek the truth and conform to it when it is discovered. This may also impede their ability to make meaningful commitments and flourish as dynamic disciples.

The solution to this challenge is not more permissiveness, even though this is a temptation: One can almost hear some youth (or even some adults trying to reach them) saying: "Gee, all of the other churches get to have divorce, contraception, pre-marital sex, homosexuality, cool services, fewer demands, less moralism. Why can't we?" We know from the sad experience of Protestant sects that this is not a recipe for ecclesial growth and commitment. But there is still the temptation to ditch adult responsibility under the guise of being more "relevant" in the lives of youth. Plus there is comfort in conforming to the age and the very human pleasure of rejoicing in our hip-ness in relation to others who are not as "with it."

This is how one mother recounts her mom's group discussions of permissive parenting and attempting to be a child's friend or "the cool mom":

I was told that if I was friends with my child, they would tell me everything. Other moms said they wanted to be a "cool" mom, and that they wanted their child's friends to think they were "cool." I asked what makes a "cool" mom, and my friends all said the same thing: not many rules (like staying up late watching TV, playing video games, computer, cell phone and texting without any rules or consequences for breaking those rules), not being "overprotective," letting their child go to the house of a friend they don't know, letting them hang out at the mall at quite young ages (because everyone else is), letting them have a Facebook account before they are 13. I could go on and on... and I realized I must be in the minority, because to me it sounded like a cool parent is a parent that lets their child run their house. Apparently a cool parent doesn't want to disappoint their child or deal with conflict and has a hard time saying no or setting limits.<sup>5</sup>

Research has revealed that permissive parenting deprives children of the direction and guidance necessary to develop appropriate morals and goals.<sup>6</sup> Rejecting discipline (i.e., control,

---

<sup>5</sup> Kidsafe Foundation, "Be Your Kid's Best Parent, Not Their Best Friend!" Modern Mom. Available at: <https://www.modernmom.com/bd0adc74-3b35-11e3-be8a-bc764e04a41e.html>

<sup>6</sup> Uwe Wolfradt, Susanne Hempel, and Jeremy N.V. Miles, "Perceived Parenting Styles, Depersonalisation, Anxiety and Coping Behaviour in Adolescents." Research Gate. Available at:

punishment) is related to poorer psychological adjustment in children. Permissive parenting has also been shown to contribute both directly and indirectly to antisocial behavior, including increased conflict orientation in adolescent males.<sup>7</sup> The chaotic and inconsistent parenting associated with permissiveness can be harmful to healthy relationships leaving children prone to weaker and ambivalent parent bonding and a feeling of insecurity when encountering an adult world.

These are not outcomes the Church can accept, especially in light of the recent scandals and a culture that presses young people into immorality and deviancy. Hands down, authoritative parenting, which is both demanding and responsive, outperforms authoritarian and permissive styles in virtually all areas. Authoritative parenting has been found to relate to higher self-esteem and life-satisfaction and to lower depression in children.<sup>8</sup> Research shows these children have better conduct in school, higher cognitive performance, and less drug use and delinquency.<sup>9</sup>

So authoritative is good; authoritarian and permissive, not so good. By embracing her role as an authoritative mother, the Church engenders the trust, closeness, and dependability that will lead to healthy bonding and lifelong development in the young.

### **Avoiding Permissiveness**

---

What does permissive parenting look like from Mother Church? It might look like trying to be a friend rather than a parent; like dropping standards; like coddling weakness and calling it strength; like being afraid to speak truth to kids who do not seem to want to hear it; like changing who you are and what you believe, because you fear kids will leave you. It might look like this passage from the document prepared for the upcoming Synod on Young People:

Young people want a “less institutional and more relational” Church, that is able to “welcome people without judging them first,” a “friendly and proximate” Church, an ecclesial community that is like “a family where you feel welcomed, listened to, cherished and integrated.” Also according to the Pre-Synodal Meeting, “we need a

---

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320931384\\_Perceived\\_parenting\\_styles\\_depersonalisation\\_anxiety\\_and\\_coping\\_behaviour\\_in\\_adolescents](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320931384_Perceived_parenting_styles_depersonalisation_anxiety_and_coping_behaviour_in_adolescents)

<sup>7</sup> Megan Schaffer, Stephanie Clark, and Elizabeth L. Jeglic, “The Role of Empathy and Parenting Style in the Development of Antisocial Behaviors.” *Sage Journals* (July 16, 2008). Available at:

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0011128708321359>

<sup>8</sup> Avidan Milevsky, Melissa Schlechter, Sarah Netter, and Danielle Keehn, “Maternal and Paternal Parenting Styles in Adolescents: Associations with Self-Esteem, Depression and Life-Satisfaction.” *Springer Link* (September 13, 2006). Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10826-006-9066-5>

<sup>9</sup> Uwe Wolfradt, Susanne Hempel, and Jeremy N.V. Miles, “Perceived Parenting Styles, Depersonalisation, Anxiety and Coping Behaviour in Adolescents.” *Research Gate*. Available at:

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320931384\\_Perceived\\_parenting\\_styles\\_depersonalisation\\_anxiety\\_and\\_coping\\_behaviour\\_in\\_adolescents](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320931384_Perceived_parenting_styles_depersonalisation_anxiety_and_coping_behaviour_in_adolescents)

Church that is welcoming and merciful, which appreciates its roots and patrimony and which loves everyone, even those who are not following the perceived standards.” (68)

They expect to be accompanied not by an unbending judge, nor by a fearful and hyperprotective parent who generates dependence, but by someone who is not afraid of his weakness and is able to make the treasure it holds within, like an earthen vessel, shine (cf. 2 Cor 4:7). Otherwise, they will ultimately turn elsewhere, especially at a time when there is no shortage of alternatives. (142)<sup>10</sup>

This is not to say that permissiveness is the intent of the document’s authors or the synod—only that it is a temptation and a possible outcome. This is a concern especially if the youth are overly idealized or approached with fear or pandering, or if their childish complaints are weaponized in an attempt to change Church doctrine.

How can we prevent such an outcome? By sticking to a research-proven, authoritative style with the youth.

What might this look like? It looks like caring more about young people than whether or not they care for you. It looks like calling them to their better selves; like presenting a challenge and making love-based demands; like speaking straight and affirming that compromise with lies is a false life; that courage, humility, and patience are absolute requirements for holiness and happiness; that life is tough and the road is hard, but the destination is worth it. That destination is clear: Christ Jesus.

Authoritative parenting from Mother Church might look like these gems spoken to the youth at various times by Saint John Paul II:

Do not be afraid. Do not be satisfied with mediocrity. Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.<sup>11</sup>

It is Jesus you seek when you dream of happiness; He is waiting for you when nothing else you find satisfies you; He is the beauty to which you are so attracted; it is He who provokes you with that thirst for fullness that will not let you settle for compromise; it is He who urges you to shed the masks of a false life; it is He who reads in your hearts your most genuine choices, the choices that others try to stifle. It is Jesus who stirs in you the desire to do something great with your lives, the will to follow an ideal, the refusal to

---

<sup>10</sup> Ordinary General Assembly of Synod of Bishops, “Instrumentum Laboris for the Synod 2018. Young People, The Faith and Vocational Discernment.” Synodus Episcoporum (May 8, 2018). Available at: <http://www.synod2018.va/content/synod2018/en/fede-discernimento-vocazione/instrumentum-laboris-for-the-synod-2018--young-people--the-faith.html>

<sup>11</sup> “5 Pieces Of Advice From JP II For World Youth Day.” Xt3 (July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2016). Available at: <http://www.xt3.com/library/view.php?id=21024>

allow yourselves to be grounded down by mediocrity, the courage to commit yourselves humbly and patiently to improving yourselves and society, making the world more human and more fraternal.<sup>12</sup>

Genuine love... is demanding. But its beauty lies precisely in the demands it makes. Only those able to make demands on themselves in the name of love can then demand love from others.<sup>13</sup>

The way Jesus shows you is not easy. Rather, it is like a path winding up a mountain. Do not lose heart! The steeper the road, the faster it rises towards ever wider horizons.<sup>14</sup>

Authoritative parenting might also look like this observation from Pope Benedict XVI:

I believe that it is dangerous for a young person simply to go from achieving goal after goal, generally being praised along the way. So it is good for a young person to experience his limit, occasionally to be dealt with critically, to suffer his way through a period of negativity, to recognize his own limits himself, not simply to win victory after victory. A human being needs to endure something in order to learn to assess himself correctly, and not least to learn to think with others. Then he will not simply judge others hastily and stay aloof, but rather accept them positively, in his labours and his weaknesses.<sup>15</sup>

## **Stay Bold and True**

---

Our young people do not need—and many do not even want—the Church to try to be cool. We need to relate to them authentically as the loving parents we are, rather than wanna-be hip friends. What they value is authenticity. They need people and organizations to believe what they say and do what they say. They celebrate and trust those who “stay true to themselves.”

Our success with youth will come if we stay bold and true to Christ. Eternity and youth are perfectly harmonized in He who is the alpha and omega. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb.13:8).<sup>16</sup> He is alive, still with us and still young. It is not He who

---

<sup>12</sup> Pope John Paul II, “15<sup>th</sup> World Youth Day, Address of the Holy Father John Paul II, Vigil of Prayer.” Holy See. Available at: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2000/jul-sep/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_20000819\\_gmg-veglia.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2000/jul-sep/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20000819_gmg-veglia.html)

<sup>13</sup> Pope John Paul II, “Apostolic Journey of His Holiness John Paul II to Cuba (January 21-26, 1998): Message of the Holy Father John Paul II to the Young People of Cuba.” Holy See. Available at: [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/pont\\_messages/1998/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_19980123\\_youth-lahavana.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/pont_messages/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19980123_youth-lahavana.html)

<sup>14</sup> Pope John Paul II, “Message of the Holy Father Pope John Paul II for the XI World Youth Day.” Holy See. Available at: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/youth/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_26111995\\_xi-world-youth-day.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/youth/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_26111995_xi-world-youth-day.html)

<sup>15</sup> “Pope Benedict XVI Quotes.” Good Reads. Available at: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/8227942-i-believe-that-it-is-dangerous-for-a-young-person>

<sup>16</sup> “Hebrews, Chapter 13.” USCCB. Available at: <http://www.usccb.org/bible/hebrews/13>

changes with each new generation of young people; it is His unchanging relevance which is ever new to each new generation. As St. John Paul II put it:

The Church of Christ is a fascinating and wonderful reality. She is ancient, being almost two thousand years old, but, at the same time, forever young, thanks to the Holy Spirit working within her. The Church is young because her message of salvation is young, that is, relevant for all times.

This is the confidence that our shepherds need to have during the Synod on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment. Jesus Christ spoke “with authority,” and that is how He revealed Himself. Young people today need to know this Christ who speaks with the authority of the Father. His Church leaders need to be confident that she possesses moral and doctrinal truth, and that truth is what young people most need to hear.

Our young people need the Church. Like a caring mother, the Church listens attentively to her young people to understand their needs. But she has the solutions! As mother to the Faithful, she teaches truth and forms young people in humility to listen to the Word and love His commandments.

With this in mind, the Synod on Young People can bear great fruit; but it will not if the Synod is dominated by a spirit of permissiveness and weak confidence in the Church’s superior wisdom. The failure to assert rightful authority is a danger to the lives and souls of young Catholics around the world.

*Dr. Dan Guernsey is the director of K-12 programs for The Cardinal Newman Society, which promotes and defends faithful Catholic education. He has 13 years’ experience as a high school principal and has served an associate professor and education department chair at the university level. He and his wife Lisa have 6 children.*