

Controlling Parents

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Experts have defined two different styles of parental control:

- Behavioral control
- Psychological control⁽¹⁾

Behavioral Control

Behaviorally controlling parents control the behavior of their children through the use of rules, regulations, and restrictions.

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Psychological Control

Psychologically controlling parents use verbal manipulation to control their child's inner thoughts, sense of self, and relationships. ⁽³⁾

Wendy Freeman and her colleagues state that psychological control has been found to be “detrimental to children’s self and social development and had been linked to adjustment problems in children and adolescents.” ⁽⁴⁾

The Eight Styles of Controlling Parents

Dan Neuharth, PhD explains that controlling parents tend to exhibit the characteristics of at least one or more of “The Eight Styles of Controlling Parents.” By understanding these eight different forms of controlling parents teens and young-adults will be able to better comprehend why their parents may have treated them a certain way. (5)

A **Perfectionistic Parent** tends to push their children to be absolutely perfect in their schoolwork, sports activities, appearance, and behaviors.

A **Depriving Parent** exhibits control by withholding their love, affection, and/or support when they feel displeased with their child. This is a form of conditional love.

A **Smothering Parent** is usually fearful of being or feeling alone. Such parents discourage their adolescents from developing independence of thought, emotion, or identity.

“**Ritualistic**” Parents raise their children with specific, militaristic in some cases, rules and regulations. They attempt to know about and supervise all (or most) aspects of their children’s lives.

“**Dependent**” Parents tend to be oversensitive and self-absorbed. They “emotionally feed off their children,” never wanting to lose or feel one-upped by their child.

A **Chaotic Parent** displays very unpredictable behaviors. Parents who characterize this form of control can be very confusing to their children because of their irregular discipline and puzzling communication.

An **Abusive Parent** could abuse their child either emotionally, physically, verbally, or sexually. When abusive parents are angry or feel threatened they tend to treat their children as threats and “defend” themselves as they see fit.

A **Childlike Parent** tends to switch roles with their child in that they depend on their children for emotional, physical, or financial security.

Why this topic is important to understand . . .

These forms of control can be detrimental to the development of an adolescent's autonomy, or independence.

It is often hard for people who are raised with unhealthy control to recognize how it negatively affects them.

Additionally, it is important to recognize the signs and symptoms of control so that you do not carry on the same practices when raising your own children. (6)



Adolescents raised with over-control tend to be very critical of themselves; this can lead to depression, and a poor self image. These adolescents are usually challenged socially which impacts peer and romantic relationships.

Often times it may take a person years to recognize the forms of control exerted upon them by other people; whether those other people were parents, friends, or a spouse.

If you have questions regarding this information here are some ways to potentially answer them and find help.

While you are still living in your parent's house you can seek the help of a guidance counselor or other adults you trust.

By speaking with a guidance counselor, or other sources of professional help, you can learn ways to cope with your parents. Also, a guidance counselor may be able to find you outside help, such as a social worker.

A psychologist can also be very helpful because you can continue to seek their help after you are done with school. It is helpful to speak with someone about your experiences to gain an outside perspective to finding a solution.

Dan Neuharth, PhD recommends three steps to healing from growing-up with unhealthy control (7):

Step One: *Emotionally leaving your parents' home* by separating from the hurtful aspects of your upbringing, parents and family role.

Step Two: *Bringing balance* to your relationship with your parents.

Step Three: *Redefining* your life.

It is hard for many minor adolescents to deal with this issue because in more cases than not they are not able to leave their parents home. However, leaving is not always the only solution. By seeking help for your emotional or psychological problems you have suffered, you can still maintain some sort of relationship with your parents. Sources of professional help include: a social worker, marriage & family therapist, and other licensed professional counselors.

Some Books, Movies, and Websites that can help you cope, understand and recover from Unhealthy Control.

Books:

If You Had Controlling Parents: How to Make Peace with Your Past and Take Your Place in the World by Dan Neuharth. Dan Neuharth is a licensed family therapist. His book gives many helpful examples and case studies of unhealthy parental control. The goal of this book is to really help people to understand their childhood. The author emphasizes that those who were raised with unhealthy control are not to blame for their past; however, only you can determine your future.

Toxic Parents: Overcoming Their Hurtful Legacy and Reclaiming Your Life by Susan Forward and Craig Buck. Written by Susan Forward, who is a widely known therapist and educator, this book is an excellent self-help guide. This book attempts to free you from the destructive cycle that unhealthy parental control can lead to.

A Child Called "It" by Dave Pelzer. This is the compelling true story of Dave Pelzer's childhood. As a child Dave Pelzer was abused by his alcohol addicted mother and neglected by his father. Dave's story embodies emotional and physical abuses that lead to him being deprived of food, poisoned, and actually stabbed. This book is very motivational because although he grew up in such turmoil, Dave was able to overcome these abuses and lead a successful life.

Films:

Mommie Dearest (1981). This movie is based on the book by the same title. The book was written by Christina Crawford and is about her life. Her mother, Joan Crawford, was a famous Hollywood actress who was very emotionally and sometimes physically abusive towards her adoptive children, daughter Christina and son Christopher.

Anywhere But Here (1999). Starring Susan Sarandon and Natalie Portman, this movie tells the story of a teenage girl and her mother. After moving to California on her mother's whim, Ann August must learn to cope with the urban areas of California, where she lives, while dealing with a mother who is very emotionally dependent on her. Ann only wishes to get through high school and go to college as far from her mother as possible.

This Boy's Life (1993). Starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Robert De Niro, this movie tells the real life story of Tobias Wolff. After leaving the east coast for a new life, Tobias and his mother move to Seattle. His mother meets and later marries a mechanic, played by Robert De Niro, who turns out to be abusive. Tobias grows up in home filled with conflict and turmoil, all while dreaming of a brighter and better future.

Websites:

Mental Health.Net, <http://www.mentalhelp.net/>, is a website dedicated “to promote mental health and wellness education and advocacy.” It is an Education World reviewed site and has won several awards and recognitions.

SelfGrowth.com, <http://www.selfgrowth.com/>, claims to be the #1 self-help website on the internet. This site seeks to help its visitors to improve their lives through positive and healthy methods.

WebMD Mental Health Center, <http://www.webmd.com/mental-health/default.htm>, seeks to help those who need guidance dealing with emotional and mental problems. It is hosted by WebMd.com which is a very reliable medical website. Searching “emotional help,” “family stress,” or “emotional abuse” on this site will bring up many helpful links and tips.

End Notes

- (1) Wendy S. Freeman, Rosemary S. L. Mills and Bobbi R. Walling, "Parenting Cognitions Associated with the Use of Psychological Control," *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, vol 16, (2006): 642.
- (2) Nucci et al, "Parental Control of the Personal Domain and Adolescent Symptoms of Psychopathology", 816.
- (3) Wendy S. Freeman, Rosemary S. L. Mills and Bobbi R. Walling, "Parenting Cognitions Associated with the Use of Psychological Control," 642.
- (4) *Ibid.*, 642-3.
- (5) Dan Neuharth, Ph.D., "Controlling Styles."
<http://www.controllingparents.com/stylesof.htm>
- (6) Dan Neuharth, Ph.D., "About the Book."
<http://www.controllingparents.com/Description.htm>
- (7) Dan Neuharth, Ph.D., "Ideas & Help."
<http://www.controllingparents.com/whatyou.htm>

Resources

Freeman, Wendy S., Rosemary S. L. Mills and Bobbi R. Walling. "Parenting Cognitions Associated with the Use of Psychological Control." *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, vol. 16 (2006): 642-659.

Neuharth, Dan, Ph.D. *Controlling Parents: Statistics*.
<http://www.controllingparents.com/Stats.htm>.

Nucci, Larry, Yuki Hasebe and Maria S. Nucci. "Parental Control of the Personal Domain and Adolescent Symptoms of Psychopathology: A Cross-National Study in the United States and Japan." *Child Development*, vol. 75, no. 3 (2004): 815-828.

Santrock, John W. *Adolescence*. ed. Mike Ryan 12th edition. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2008.