

Autonomy Versus Dependence

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It is the responsibility of a parent to raise his and her child to be a constructive, contributing member of society, where he can provide for himself, be self-sufficient, and capable of making decisions that will secure a healthy and productive life.

There is a strong cultural component that influences how one defines successful child rearing. Many cultures (*Northern European*) push autonomy and individuality as an admirable trait, and the children are raised with this understanding as what the desired result should be. Other family members and other people within their ethnic community fortify this understanding, which makes one's nonconformity from the established social norms and expectations difficult.

One problematic issue might be the extreme where autonomy does not allow for the adequate nurturance and development of the child. I have seen this as a prevalent issue in cultures facing extreme poverty when parents must abandon their children to state orphanages in order to survive, or because of substance abuse on the part of parents struggling in addiction, where the state has to remove their children, or they are so preoccupied in their drug use that the children need to learn how to survive on their own. In the most extreme cases, the children fail to develop the emotional capacity of attaching to their primary caregivers, and will henceforth struggle with all relationships.

This issue often becomes woven into the basic fabric of the child's personhood during his or her early years of development, and can be so pervasive that the child is not capable of functioning within the context of a conventional family that has a traditional hierarchy of father, mother and child.

The core values that these children learn to base their lives upon tend to focus on their inability to trust, love, or attach to their parental figures because of the caregivers' failure to nurture and develop their sense of self, in addition to their subjective value and identity as people. These situations are dehumanizing and atrocious as mother, father and their offspring all fragment and lose the most critical structure for nurturance and identity—the family.

Yet, for those intact families that lean toward this side of the continuum, there will be a noticeable style of communication that differs from the middle of the spectrum. Their paradigm will tend to contain a "*if life is not hard, you are doing something wrong*" philosophy. Accolades are infrequent because pride and praise is assumed and modesty is a valued trait. Within this context, confrontation tends to be nonverbal and the issue at hand is also assumed. Shame, disappointment and guilt are subtle tools often employed for controlling children. Each sibling might not even realize the issues of other family members because secrecy is often used under the guise of privacy, thereby reinforcing the shame. Because children are left to figure

out what the parent was trying to communicate, they often assume the worst about themselves.

Other cultures keep extended family much closer (*Southern European, Central and South American, some Asian*). Some of these cultures hold the paradigm of “*it takes a community to raise a child*” literally. Within these cultures, there are definite advantages, just as there are with those cultures that focus on autonomy. Once again, the problem lies in the extremes of dependence.

One can often see enmeshment in families where there is poor structure and boundaries between its members. This enmeshment creates an interdependency that prevents its individual members from functioning autonomously. Because of this, a dependent person also tends to have a poor self-image because he lacks a definable individual self. Thus, he tends to lack the confidence one would need to stand on his own two feet. Those who are dependent tend to have more fear, and lack the confidence to make life choices on their own, without the continual reassurances from others.

The families that lean toward this side of the continuum will also have a noticeably more extreme style of communication than the center of the spectrum. The paradigm here tends to be more about how every choice one makes impacts the familial system as a whole. Therefore, all of the family members know about each other’s problems, and discuss each other’s issues in an open forum. Instead of private, secret shame, there is public shame and embarrassment used to control behavior.

Again, most parents do the best that they can, often not realizing the faulty legacy that they are passing down to the next generation. Autonomy seems scary to the dependent person, and it is often perceived as something to be feared, because that is what is instilled. Where dependency is frightening to the one who was reared to be self-sufficient and autonomous because relational connection will create vulnerability that may be perceived as weakness. Most families fall into the middle spectrum of these extremes, but many of us still may contain traits that could be unhealthy. Try to evaluate your own family—what tools were given to you to use—and determine if there might be a healthier way of doing things.