

INSIGHTS

A flexible approach to raising kids



This year's unique challenges have brought a sharper focus on child-rearing styles. Parents who rely on one style have often struggled to meet the emotional needs of their children.

Kids who are worried, fearful or fretting about the future initially benefit from a nurturant, empathetic approach. "I get it" is what they want to hear so they feel safe and secure. They also benefit from a firmer approach where an adult communicates "You can cope with this" is something kids need to hear when they experience change, difficulty and disappointment.

This combination of nurturance and firmness is known as an authoritative approach according to Diane Baumrind, a leading researcher on parenting styles. A purely nurturant style is known as a permissive style, while a singularly firm style is known as authoritarian.

Warm cat, firm dog

It's helpful to use a cat and dog metaphor when discussing the authoritative approach. As dog-owners know these pets are highly relational and respond favorably to attention. The dog style of parenting is empathetic and has an encouraging, relationship-building focus. Cats, on the other hand, are usually self-sufficient and can live happily without you. Continuing the metaphor, the cat style of parenting is more likely to challenge kids, better able to manage poor behaviour and provide solid family leadership.

Body language counts

The dog-cat styles are expressed through our non-verbal language – our tone of voice, posture and heads. A cat speaks in a flat, clipped voice using a minimum of words. Their head is still, its body upright and confident. A cat is calm, quiet and in control. A dog, on the other hand, speaks with lots of inflection in their voice. They'll smile a great deal and lean in when they speak. It's a warmer more approachable style suited to conversations and building relationships.

Which style do you identify with?

Most people naturally have a preference for one style over the other. If you defer to one then you may have to work a little harder or more consciously to bring the other side to the fore. Many parents working in partnership with each other will share the dog-cat loads. One parent is firm in approach, while the other uses a warmer, more personal approach. Sometimes parents switch styles according to the gender or personality of their children. This is quite common as boys have a tendency to bring out the firm cat in their fathers and the warmer, protective dog-side in their mothers.

Conversely, fathers often respond to their daughters in dog-like ways and anecdotally, it seems, many mothers are more naturally cat-like with their daughters. Single parents without the luxury of sharing the parenting will generally need to be flexible and move between the two styles.

Avoid mixed messages

Get your cat and dog wrong and you risk being ineffective and failing to meet either a child's needs or the needs of a particular situation. If your first response to a child's difficulty is to be distant and unapproachable, then you are probably not meeting their immediate emotional needs. Your child or young person needs you to be approachable or dog-like when they come to you with genuine concerns. Conversely, approach a child or teen whose behaviour isn't up to standard with a dog-like approach and you'll be ignored or not taken seriously, leaving you either angry or deflated.

Flexibility is the key

It's my experience that it's possible to move seamlessly between the two modes but it takes awareness and practice. If you naturally default to cat mode, then you may have to put some conscious effort into responding with empathy and nurturance when your child or young person struggles. Alternatively, you may practise dog-like behaviours easily but have to work on your cat side to promote independence and manage your child's behaviour. In time these switches become automatic as your awareness grows enabling you to adopt new ways of parenting. Your effectiveness and satisfaction levels will increase as you move seamlessly between the cat and dog parenting styles.

Related webinar

Our school has a membership with Parenting Ideas. As part of this membership, you can attend the upcoming webinar 'Parenting like a cat and dog' at no cost.

About

In this webinar, Michael Grose uses cat and dog metaphors to introduce parents to two diverse styles of parenting. This will increase their ability and confidence to manage, nurture and build relationships with their children.

When

11 November 2020 8:00pm AEDT.

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Michael Grose

Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's an award-winning speaker and the author of 12 books for parents including *Spooned Generation*, and the bestselling *Why First Borns Rule the World and Last Borns Want to Change It*. Michael is a former teacher with 15 years experience, and has 30 years experience in parenting education. He also holds a Master of Educational Studies from Monash University specialising in parenting education.