

# Challenging yet positive parenting style benefits children's development

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When one talks about parenting, an image of the sensitive, caring mother—but not father—responding to a young child's emotional needs often comes to mind.

Research on dads has long suggested that men may interact differently with their children, sometimes pushing the child to take risks beyond their comfort zone and encouraging them to persevere when faced with frustration.

In the end, according to a new University of Michigan study, children may need both [parenting styles](#)—the challenge to take risks, explore and learn from the world around them while feeling supported in the loving care of their parents.

Joyce Lee, a U-M [doctoral candidate](#) in [social work](#) and [developmental psychology](#), and colleagues analyzed whether fathers' challenging and directive style of parenting benefited their kids' development.

The data came from the Building Strong Families project, which included a racially diverse sample of

672 low-income parents with preschoolers.

Designed to test father-child activation relationship theory, the researchers found evidence for a more challenging and directive pattern of parenting used by some fathers, but also by some mothers.

Parenting behaviors were observed during father-child and mother-child play sessions and then examined in relation to children's socioemotional development and language skills. Both dads and moms could be classified into one of three parenting profiles: supportive, intrusive and challenging/directive.

Importantly, few [low-income parents](#) were observed to be intrusive, which involves a high degree of parent-centered control and interference in children's play and a disregard for the child, said Lee, the study's lead author.

When Lee and colleagues compared families in which fathers and mothers were using similar or [different styles](#) of parenting on child outcomes, they found that children in families with challenging/directive fathers did not differ from kids with supportive dads on such outcomes as children's behavior problems, prosocial behaviors, emotional security and effortful control. Children with both supportive moms and dads had the highest scores in language skills.

When parents, either [fathers](#) or mothers, engage in challenging and directive parenting that occurs in a supportive and positive parent-child relationship, children may be more willing to take some risks and rise to the challenges placed before them, trusting they have the protection and support of their parents, the researchers said.

"By focusing exclusively on a style of parenting that has traditionally emphasized responsive, positively affectionate, child-centered mother-child interactions, we may be overlooking other ways of parenting that may also benefit children's

socioemotional development by challenging [children](#) to go the extra mile, persevere and gain self-confidence in the process," Lee said.

**More information:** Joyce Y. Lee et al. Testing the father–child activation relationship theory: A replication study with low-income unmarried parents., *Psychology of Men & Masculinities* (2020). [DOI: 10.1037/men0000301](https://doi.org/10.1037/men0000301)

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