The Effects of Parenting Style on a Child's Self-Esteem

Parents are the first exposure to the world a child has, consequently, the style of parenting a person employs has a considerable impact on the child's sense of self-worth. If a parent is overbearing a child may feel as if they don't measure up to expectations; if the parent is too detached the child may feel unworthy of love or appreciation. There are three short stories that will be examined "I Stand Here Ironing by Tillie Olson, "Two Kinds by Amy Tan, and "Everyday Use by Alice Walker. Each mother used a different parenting style, and each had very different relationships with their daughters. There are many parenting styles, this analysis will focus on the following three: the uninvolved or passive parent, the authoritarian parent, and the authoritative parent. The uninvolved parent, as the name suggests, is characterized by a lack of involvement with the child. While the authoritarian parent can be dominating and overbearing. Lastly, parents with reasonable demands and an approachable demeanor have an authoritative style.
Tillie Olson's "I Stand Here Ironing tells the story of a woman who faced many hardships as a young mother during the Great Depression. A mother whose husband had left due to the difficulties of supporting his family, leaving her, alone, to provide and care for their young daughter, Emily. She had to work during a time that it was uncommon for a woman to do so, she had to leave her little girl in the care of others, at first for the day but eventually she had to leave her with her husband's family on a more permanent basis. It is difficult for a mother to leave her child in someone else's care and this unfortunate mother had to do it multiple times; as a result, what should have been a time of bonding for the mother and daughter was robbed from them by trial and circumstance. It does not matter that there is no fault in the mother, she did what she had to, it only matters that she allowed the guilt she felt over her circumstances to claim her relationship with Emily. The lack of a connection with her daughter resulted in the daughter doing poorly in school. The young girl had no one to push her to develop her mind or foster a sense of worthiness or accomplishment that can be developed through school and learning. This mother, sadly, exemplifies an uninvolved parent, described by Dr. Shweta Singh as having "limited demands, low responsiveness, and little communication. (Singh 1522). The mother in the story reflects on the differences in personality traits between two of her daughters, Emily and Susan. Susan is depicted as outgoing and confident, while Emily is described as unsure and reserved. This is a great example of how parenting style effects the self-esteem of children. These two children had the same parent, a parent that employed different styles of parenting for each child producing vastly different personality characteristics. Judging by this example two children can grow up in the same home, with the same parents and have totally different experiences within that unit. Experiences so different that if the children were to describe them it would sound as if they were raised in different families altogether. The mother in the story acknowledges this by saying "My wisdom came too late. (Olsen 307). Her wisdom in dealing with her children was too late to benefit Emily, too late for hugs and kisses to promote a sense of acceptance; too late for encouraging better school performance, thus fostering a sense of ability and confidence. Too late for a guilt-ridden mother to forge a lasting bond with her first-born daughter.

The next style of parenting, authoritarian, is exemplified by the mother in Amy Tan's short story "Two Kinds. This is the story of a mother who either fails to see how special her daughter, Jing-mei, is or wants too desperately for everyone else to see it too. The mother in the story pushed her daughter to be special, to find a talent the world
could see. The author describes her reading articles about children considered to be exceptional for one reason or another and how she would quiz Jing-mei in the same way described in the articles only to be disappointed when Jing-mei did not perform to expectation. This practice would go on after dinner nightly. The mother went from the extreme of changing Jing-mei’s appearance to arranging for her to take piano lessons every afternoon from a deaf instructor. Jing-mei had no choice, there was no trial period to determine if her daughter enjoyed it. To the mother it did not matter, her daughter was expected to do as she was told, her happiness was irrelevant. Jing-mei complied, every day she practiced, half-heartedly and her sour notes literally fell on deaf ears. Her lack of effort and desire to play the piano was made manifest when she participated in a talent show at their church. Jing-mei’s performance was such that she could no longer hide her lack of effort or talent. This poor performance by Jing-mei prompts an argument that ends in a permanent rift in the relationship of this mother and daughter. The mother in this story declares her parenting style with the statement “Only two kinds of daughters, those who are obedient and those who follow their own mind. Only one kind of daughter can live in this house. Obedient daughter!” (Tan 315).

In the scholarly article by Dr. Shweta Singh entitled “Parenting Style in Relation to Children’s Mental Health and Self-Esteem: A review of Literature, Dr. Singh states “Children who grow up in authoritarian homes often become anxious or withdrawn or suffer from self-esteem problems. The article goes on to say that anger, aggression, and low emotional intelligence can become the hallmarks of a child raised in an authoritarian home. Sadly, what is most likely meant to bring out the best in a child can ultimately do more harm than good.

The third parenting style to be represented in this series of short stories is the authoritative style. ““Everyday Use by Alice Walker is the story of a mother and two daughters. One daughter, Maggie, lives with the mother and the other, Dee, has moved away but has come for a visit. This mother displays an authoritative style of parenting when she allows Dee to claim for herself various objects from around the house; however, she draws the line when Dee grabs the heirloom quilts that had been promised to Maggie. The mother simply will not allow one of her children to take advantage of her other child in this way. This mother has allowed Dee to grow into an individual that follows her own path, going so far as to raise funds for her schooling with the help of their church.
Meanwhile, Maggie, who had been horribly burned in a house fire, negatively affecting her self-perception, remained at home with her mother awaiting her upcoming marriage. Dee argued that Maggie would not appreciate the quilts like she would. Dee intended to hang them on the walls of her home on display as artwork. To Dee this was the only acceptable use for the quilts, to use them for their created purpose, warmth, was simply not appropriate. Mama would not let Dee take them even after Maggie said it was alright. This was right on Mama's part, Dee had previously been offered the quilts but had not thought them pretty enough, or of sufficient quality to claim at the time. Now, here she was, trying to take them from her sister who wanted them for her new life as a married woman. The mother described in the story does not have much in the way of possessions or resources but that did not stop her from doing the best she could to give each daughter what they needed or wanted. This mother did the best job of showing how to set boundaries for her children and how to enforce them.

The scholarly article authored by Mahboubeh Firouzkouhi Moghaddam, Atiye Validad, Tayebeh Rakhshani, and Marzieh Assareh entitled "Child self-esteem and Different Parenting Styles of Mothers: A Cross-Sectional Study states" "The authoritative parent is firm but not rigid, willing to make an exception when the situation warrants it. Mama shows this by allowing Dee to take some things but not other things from the home. She sets very clear limits. For this reason, this mother has the most successful parenting style to meet the needs of her children.

Different approaches to parenting are exemplified in these three short stories. Some approaches are successful, while others are harmful to the child. There must be a balance freedom and discipline. Not enough parental involvement and the child is left to figure out how to be an adult on their own and ultimately are being set up for failure. Too much of a parental presence and the child will most likely find a way to rebel against the parents wishes. Consequently, the authoritative style of parenting yields the best results due to its measured approach.