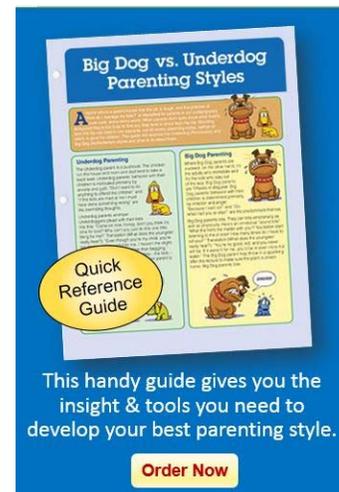


Big Dog vs. Underdog Parenting Styles

The old saying about kids not coming with a training manual is true. And the problem of "What do I do with this kid?" is intensified for parents in our contemporary rush-rush, worry-worry world. The problem is that when parents don't quite know what they're doing and they're too busy to find out, they tend to shoot from the hip. Shooting from the hip can lead to two opposite, out-of-control parenting styles, neither of which is good for children. Let's call these two styles "Underdog" parenting and "Big Dog" parenting.

Underdog parents' behavior with their children is motivated primarily by anxiety and guilt. "Don't want to do anything to offend the children" and "If the kids are mad at me I must have done something wrong" are the overriding thoughts. Big Dog parents' behavior with their children, on the other hand, is dominated primarily by irritation and anger. "Because I said so!" and "Do what I tell you or else!" are the predominant themes.



Under Dog Parents Whimper



Underdog parents whimper, while Big Dog parents bite. Underdoggers plead with their kids like this: "Come on now, honey, don't you think it's time for bed? Why can't you just do this one little thing for me?" Translation (in other words, what does the youngster really hear?): "Even though you're my child, you're too strong and powerful for me. I haven't the slightest idea how to control you other than begging." Whimpering tells the children that they—the kids—are really running the show and that their parent is basically weak and helpless.

Big Dog Parents Bite

Big Dog parents bite. They can bite emotionally as well as physically. Here's an emotional "sound bite": "What the hell's the matter with you!? You better start listening to me or else! How many times do I have to tell you!?" Translation (in other words, what does the youngster really hear?): "You're no good, kid, and you never will be. If it weren't for me, you'd be in even more hot water." The Big Dog parent may throw in a spanking after the lecture to make sure the point is driven home.



The Tragic Results

Kids from Underdog parents tend to become adults with a robust sense of entitlement. The world owes them a living and they push others around. When life doesn't treat them like it should, they blame everyone else for their misery.

Our children from the Big Dog moms and dads, though, will become adults with a deep sense of insecurity and unworthiness. They'll think everyone else is better than they are and they'll tend to withdraw. Even if they do succeed at certain things, they won't be able to give themselves credit for what they've done.

How can we interrupt this tragic cycle? Good parenting advice is already out there. 1-2-3 Magic offers a ton of good suggestions. But for many moms and dads the main thing that stands in the way of their becoming decent parents is a straightforward-though not easy-attitude adjustment. Underdog moms and dads need to understand that they have a right to be a parent, while Big Doggers need to realize that their children have a right to warmth, respect and freedom from physical or emotional abuse.