



Published in final edited form as:

*Child Dev Perspect.* 2009 December 1; 3(3): 173–175. doi:10.1111/j.1750-8606.2009.00101.x.

## Commentary on Grolnick and Pomerantz, “Issues and Challenges in Studying Parental Control: Toward a New Conceptualization”

**Rand D. Conger**

Department of Human and Community Development University of California, Davis

### Abstract

Grolnick and Pomerantz (this issue) take on the difficult challenge of rethinking how investigators might use the concept of parental control in the study of child and adolescent development. They note that previous conceptual and empirical work has employed a wide variety of definitions of parental control and argue that this broad range of approaches has created problems for the field. For example, they cite Rollins and Thomas (1979), who identified more than 15 different labels for the construct. This multiplicity of definitions, the authors suggest, has led to ambiguity in the interpretation of research findings. In particular, Grolnick and Pomerantz propose that the multiple-forms approach to defining parental control is so fraught with problems that scholars should replace it with another strategy for describing and measuring control and related constructs. They then suggest a new approach that they believe will solve the problem and also increase the theoretical value of research on these types of parenting behaviors. In this commentary, I first discuss their critique of the multiple-forms approach and then analyze their proposed solution to the conceptual difficulties they describe.

### Keywords

Parenting; Behavioral Control; Child Development

---

### Critique and Evaluation of the Multiple-Forms Approach

Grolnick and Pomerantz note that early definitions of parental control described behaviors that were considered problematic for the developing child, such as “pressure, intrusiveness, and domination.” Developmental scholars also realized, however, that some control was necessary to promote healthy development. In time, other conceptualizations led to the proposition that there are multiple forms of parental control, as exemplified by the work of Schaefer (1965), who distinguished between psychological control and the firmness of control. Over time, others have expanded on these early ideas to propose a range of parenting styles involving constructs that either integrate multiple forms of control to identify a specific type of parenting (e.g., authoritarian; Baumrind, 1971) or attempt to distinguish separate forms of control that are expected to have specific influences on particular domains of child adjustment (e.g., behavioral control; Barber, Stolz, & Olsen, 2005).

According to Grolnick and Pomerantz, however, the strengths of this multiple-forms approach to conceptualizing parental control fail to compensate for the problems it produces. Basically, they argue that although the multiple-forms strategy helps to reconcile the distinction between control that impairs the competent development of children and control that is necessary to produce a well-socialized individual, it does so in a fashion that creates too many ambiguities. They also suggest that the multiple-forms approach sometimes

defines parenting partially in terms of a specific child outcome, a procedure that does not allow sufficient theoretical separation of the two constructs. Finally, Grolnick and Pomerantz contend that the multiple-forms approach is “not tied to broader theories of development” (p. X), and thus fails to address the basic mechanisms through which parental control may influence child development. They next provide a framework to address these problems.

### **The Proposed Remedy**

To solve these difficulties, Grolnick and Pomerantz propose to define parental control as only “those kinds of parenting characterized by parents’ pressure, intrusiveness, and dominance” (p. X). This new conceptualization of parental control would represent intrusive, authoritarian, or psychological forms of control on one end of a quantitative scale, and parental behavior that encourages a child’s independence and autonomy on the other. This strategy incorporates the various facets of the multiple-forms approach into a broader construct that addresses a wide range of developmental outcomes and, thus, is not limited to just one form of adjustment or another. The authors suggest that other forms of parental behavior now considered to be part of parental control might be defined as parental structure, which includes attempts by parents to organize the environment in a fashion that promotes child competence. According to Grolnick and Pomerantz, the structure concept covers those aspects of parental control that deal with discipline, setting rules and expectations, and providing predictable consequences for children’s transgressions.

### **Does the Proposed Remedy Provide a Cure?**

In many ways, Grolnick and Pomerantz’s solution to the conceptual quandaries they describe is quite elegant and useful. Separating the control construct into two dimensions—one that primarily concerns restrictions of child autonomy and another that concerns structuring the environment to promote child competence—appears to make a lot of sense. Particularly appealing is the possibility of studying the interaction between these two parenting domains in terms of predicting child development. For example, a structured environment that provides appropriate guidance, rules, and expectations for a child while providing significant opportunity for child autonomy would seem an ideal scenario for producing a competent, well-socialized individual. Despite these virtues of this new approach, however, it seems to me that there also are significant limitations in the proposal.

To begin with, regardless of whether one uses terms like “structure” or “guidance,” these domains of parental behavior clearly represent the exercise of parental control in the parent-child relationship. The ability of the parent to create the rules, generate expectations for child conduct, and provide appropriate consequences for either compliance or disobedience ultimately involves parental pressure, intrusiveness, and dominance. The underlying theme in providing guidance or structure is that, in the final analysis, the parent is in charge. It is true that some parents do a better job than others of bringing the child’s perspective into this process, but the bottom line is that the parent is in control. In that sense, the differentiation of structure and control is a false dichotomy.

Also important is the fact that a single measure of control is likely confounded with other dimensions of parenting. For example, in their measure of psychological control, Barber and colleagues (2005, p. 22) include items that reflect criticism, disapproval, and rejection (for example, “blames me for other family members’ problems”). That is, it seems that the notion of control Grolnick and Pomerantz propose may overlap to a significant degree with issues of acceptance and rejection. Thus, it may not be as conceptually distinct from other dimensions of parenting as they might hope. Empirical findings are consistent with the idea that psychological control and acceptance or supportiveness are highly interrelated. For

example, the average intercorrelation between maternal psychological control and supportiveness in the Barber et al. (2005) study was  $-0.59$ . Maternal supportiveness was also significantly related to behavioral control ( $r = 0.54$ ). I find these same types of correlations between dimensions of supportiveness and control in my own research (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000).

The point of these observations is that the clarity of conceptualization that Grolnick and Pomerantz seek may be inconsistent with the way that parenting actually operates either theoretically or in the real world. Parental control as they conceive it may rapidly morph into issues of acceptance or rejection. To deny the legitimacy of a child's perspectives and concerns, after all, is a significant form of rejection of the child as a person. Moreover, parents appear to vary quite consistently on different dimensions of parenting, such that those who are high on control in the Grolnick and Pomerantz sense are probably low on structure as they define it. In my work, we find that recognizing these linear combinations in parental behaviors often provides the most powerful means for predicting either competence or maladjustment in a theoretically meaningful fashion (e.g., Conger et al., 2002). Simply put, I am not sure that the quest to find one, overall definition of parental control will provide the most significant breakthrough in increasing the theoretical power of these types of parenting. Rather, it seems that finding the ways in which the constituent elements of these broad forms of parenting actually combine in a theoretically meaningful manner in actual studies of parents and children will provide the greatest payoff in the development of future research and theory.

## Acknowledgments

Support for this work was provided by grants from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the National Institute on Drug Abuse, and the National Institute of Mental Health (DA17902, HD047573, HD051746, and MH051361). A copy of the paper may be obtained from Rand D. Conger, Department of Human and Community Development, University of California, Davis 95616 or <rdconger@ucdavis.edu>.

## References

- Barber BK, Stolz HE, Olsen JA. Parental support, psychological control, and behavioral control: Assessing relevance across time, method, and culture. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*. 2005; 70:1–151. [PubMed: 16359423]
- Baumrind D. Current patterns of parental authority. *Developmental Psychology Monograph*. 1971; 1(4, Pt. 2)
- Conger RD, Cui M, Bryant CM, Elder GH Jr. Competence in early adult romantic relationships: A developmental perspective on family influences. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 2000; 79:224–237. [PubMed: 10948976]
- Conger RD, Ebert-Wallace L, Sun Y, Simons RL, McLoyd VC, Brody GH. Economic pressure in African American families: A replication and extension of the Family Stress Model. *Developmental Psychology*. 2002; 38:179–193. [PubMed: 11881755]
- Rollins, BC.; Thomas, DL. Parental support, power, and control techniques in the socialization of children. In: Burr, WR.; Hill, R.; Nye, FI.; Reiss, IL., editors. *Contemporary theories about the family*. Free Press; New York: 1979. p. 317-364.
- Schaefer ES. Children's reports of parental behavior: An inventory. *Child Development*. 1965; 36:413–424. [PubMed: 14300862]