

Navigating Generational Patterns: How Childhood Trauma Shapes Authoritative Parenting Practices in Indian Families

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ABSTRACT

Background: Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are defined as early childhood exposure to maltreatment and household dysfunction. Research indicates a potential intergenerational influence of parental ACEs on their children's well-being. **Objective:** This study investigated the association between parental ACE scores and the Authoritative Parenting Style, considered the most ideal style among the four parenting styles. **Methods:** Parents (N=130) seeking therapeutic help at a wellness center participated in this study. They filled out two self-report questionnaires: The Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSDQ) and the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) based on 16 binary questions. Authoritative parenting style was identified from PSDQ, and childhood trauma levels were identified based on the ACE16 questionnaire (The high trauma group had an ACE total score of ≥ 5). For statistical analysis, an independent samples t-test was conducted to understand the link between childhood trauma (high and low) and their parenting style (specifically, the desired style, authoritative parenting, and its dimensions). **Results:** Parents in the higher trauma exposure (ACE16 score ≥ 5) had significantly less Authoritative (desired) parenting style compared to parents in the low trauma exposure group (statistically significant, $p < .05$). Two of the three dimensions (Regulation and Autonomy) related to control were also lower in individuals with a history of high childhood trauma ($p < .05$). **Conclusion:** The findings indicate that parents' childhood trauma significantly impacts their "Authoritative" parenting style as a parent. Higher exposure to childhood trauma significantly lowers the more desired parenting style (Authoritative) for parents compared to those with low childhood trauma.

Keywords: Parenting Styles, Authoritarian Parenting Style, Authoritative Parenting Style, Permissive Parenting Style, Negligent Parenting Style, Adverse Childhood Experiences, Childhood Trauma

Parenting plays a crucial role in child development and fundamentally shapes children's everyday experiences, which has a major impact on their cognitive, academic, and socio-emotional development (Skinner et al., 2005). One of the most studied approaches to understanding parental influences on human development is the concept of Parenting Styles given by Diana Baumrind in 1967 (Baumrind and Black, 1967). Diana Baumrind identified four parenting styles based on warmth and control: Authoritative (high

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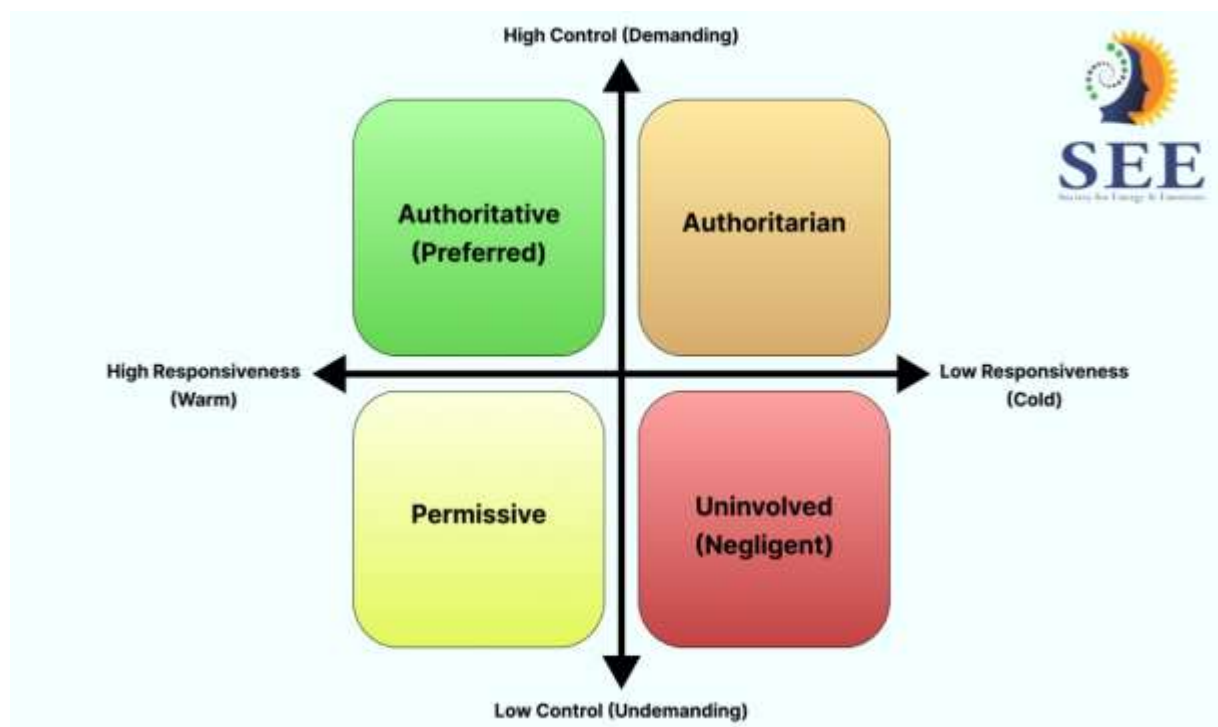
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warmth, high control), Authoritarian (low warmth, high control), Permissive (high warmth, low control), and Neglectful (low warmth, low control), as shown in Figure 1.

Authoritarian parenting involves children being expected to follow strict rules with little to no justification, and failing to obey often leads to harsh punishment. Authoritative parents expect discipline and compliance with rules while providing warmth, support, and healthy communication. Permissive parents are lenient and friendly and have very few expectations of their children. Uninvolved parenting involves fulfilling the basic needs of the child but rarely providing guidance or support, often being unaware of the child's whereabouts.



Source: Society for Energy & Emotions, Wellness Space
Figure 1 Parenting Styles

Many researchers identified the importance of researching the role of parenting styles in child development. Several studies found that parenting styles or parental behaviour have a statistically significant relationship with developmental outcomes like performance, achievement strategies, self-regulated learning, achievement goals, self-efficacy, and well-being of students (Aunola et al., 2000; Kordi and Baharudin, 2010; Turner et al., 2009)

Evidence highlights the impact of parenting style on children in four important domains of development of the children: (Ulferts, 2020)

1. Cognitive-academic development and job success (e.g. academic achievement, performance, self-regulation skills, career decision-making),
2. Emotional development and well-being (e.g. self-esteem, internalizing issues),
3. Social development and relationships (e.g. peer acceptance, externalizing behaviour),
4. Physical development and health (e.g. moderate-to-vigorous physical activity, obesity, other physical issues)

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The literature review highlighted several important findings.

- Authoritative parenting is the most beneficial style. Research links this style of parenting with several positive outcomes along all four developmental domains such as better academic achievement, higher self-esteem, less bullying (as predator or victim), and lower substance use (i.e. tobacco, alcohol, drugs). (Baumrind, 1991) It has also been found that exposure to authoritative parenting, especially mothering, was related to lower depression & higher self-esteem and life satisfaction in comparison with exposure to permissive or authoritarian parenting styles. (Milevsky et al., 2007) Authoritative parenting is associated with compliance, self-assurance, resilience, lesser chances of suicidal attempts, and better emotional intelligence in adolescents
- Authoritarian parenting, in contrast, is mostly associated with negative outcomes for children's and adolescents' academic, social, and emotional development and has been related to various negative internalising and externalising behaviours like aggression and anxiety. However, some findings prove potential positive effects on the physical development of children (e.g. lower risk for obesity)
- Though less beneficial than authoritative parenting, the overall picture of permissive parenting is unclear. Findings vary across all dimensions: Permissive parenting, for instance, is associated with lower academic achievements but higher academic self-esteem, and less suicidal thoughts but more depressive symptoms. Outcomes of meta-studies also showed conflicting results with one pointing to less delinquent behaviours and school misconduct, whereas another found more delinquent behaviours of permissively raised children. Equal inconsistency exists for the physical domain: Permissive parenting is partially related to a higher weight but at the same time to healthier lifestyle behaviours (nutrition, sleep duration, and quality, etc.
- Without a doubt, neglectful parenting has been proven to be harmful. This type of parenting is associated with negative results across all domains such as lower academic achievements, antisocial behaviour, higher internalising and externalising behaviours as well as substance abuse and obesity.

Various factors like socio-economic variables, cultural differences, personal characteristics, and psychological factors, can influence parenting styles which can differentially contribute to parenting styles, eventually impacting the child. Hence, understanding the drivers of parenting style is a pivotal area to study for improvement in parenting styles. A recent systematic review highlighted some factors from the perspective of parents and children that affect parenting styles: (Vafaenejad et al., 2019)

- a) Factors related to parents included mental status, self-efficacy, parenting stress, perfectionism, personality traits, childhood trauma, marital satisfaction, attachment styles, perceived parenting style, and substance abuse among parents. Parents who are more agreeable, conscientious, and outgoing are warmer and more nurturing, provide more structure to their children, and also support their children's autonomy. (Prinz et al., 2009). Parents' childhood experiences can also affect their parenting styles. Parents grow up observing their parents and may learn parenting practices from them. Fathers whose own parents provided consistent guidance and support, age-appropriate discipline, and warmth are more likely to provide the same to their children. (Kerr et al., 2009) On the other hand, patterns of negative discipline and ineffective parenting also appear from one generation to the next.

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- b) Factors related to children included developmental and mental disabilities, child's temperament, and anxiety.

One of the factors mentioned above that influences parenting styles is childhood trauma. Research also highlights the long-term behavioural implications of childhood trauma on adult behaviour (Trivedi et al., 2021) - which eventually influences parenting. Hence, this study seeks to understand the impact of childhood trauma (Adverse Childhood Experiences) on the Authoritative Parenting Style.

Overall, the literature review highlighted the link between parent's adverse childhood experiences before age 18 on their psychological, behavioural, interpersonal, and health issues. Therefore, it is likely that parents with exposure to high levels of trauma during childhood may exhibit challenges such as emotional unavailability, verbal or physically violent behaviour, potentially more disengaged, and less effective in their interactions with children such as attempting to discipline. In other words, parents who have experienced neglect and abuse during their childhood are likely to end up with negative parenting styles and interpersonal challenges with their children. The research also highlights the authoritative parenting style as a “desired” approach to parenting. Hence it is likely that parents with high trauma exposure may not end up following this desired parenting style.

Despite extensive research globally, there is limited work on the impact of parents' childhood trauma on their parenting styles. In India, with roughly 253 million young children (Children in India | UNICEF India, n.d.) and limited studies on childhood trauma as well as parenting styles, there is an opportunity to understand whether there is an influence of parents' childhood trauma on their desired (authoritative) parenting style. The study aims to bridge this gap in India.

MATERIALS & METHODS

Objective & Hypotheses:

This research study aims to explore if there is an influence of parents' childhood trauma exposure on their “authoritative” (ideal or desired) parenting style and subfactors based on PSDQ assessment.

The research hypotheses are as follows:

- 1) Parents with high childhood trauma exposure (ACE16 score ≥ 5), are significantly less authoritative as compared to parents with low trauma exposure (ACE16 score < 5)
- 2) Parents with high childhood trauma exposure also have significantly lower scores in the “Connection” dimension (warmth and support subfactor) of authoritative parenting style
- 3) Parents with high childhood trauma exposure also have significantly lower scores in the “Regulation” dimension (Reasoning/Induction subfactor) of authoritative parenting style
- 4) Parents with high childhood trauma exposure also have significantly lower scores in the “Autonomy Granting” dimension (Democratic Participation subfactor) of authoritative parenting style

Study Design and Sample:

The study was conducted at a wellness center in Ahmedabad, India using a cross-sectional design. Individuals (N=130) upon word-of-mouth and social media campaigns signed up after giving informed consent. After the exclusion of incomplete responses, finally, 116 individuals' data was available for analysis.

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The Inclusion Criteria in the study are males and females who are parents of children below 18 years of age. The Exclusion Criteria were males and females who were not parents or parents of children who were above 18 years. Other demographics included in the study are the occupation of the parent (salaried employee, self-employed, homemaker, freelancer), marital status of parents (single, married, widowed, or divorced), number of children, and age of the children.

Instruments:

The Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSDQ) and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) have been used for this research.

Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSDQ)

The Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (abridged version) is a 32-item self-report measure of parenting dimensions that are characteristic of each of Diana Baumrind's parenting styles. It was developed by Robinson, Mandelco, Olsen, and Hart in 1995. (Robinson et al., 1995)

The authoritative parenting style consisted of three dimensions: (1) connection–warmth/support; (2) regulation-induction/reasoning (3) autonomy granting- democratic participation. The Authoritarian parenting style also consisted of three dimensions: (1) physical coercion (2) verbal hostility, and (3) non-reasoning/punitive. The permissive parenting style consists of one dimension only: (1) indulgence. For this 32-item abridged version, Cronbach's alpha coefficient for three factors: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive were .86, .82, and .64 respectively (Sharma and Sandhu, 2006)

The subfactors of the Authoritative parenting style are explained below:

- **Authoritative Connection (Warmth & Support):** This dimension refers to the degree of warmth and emotional support provided by the parent; open communication is encouraged and there is closeness between the parent & child.
- **Authoritative Regulation (Reasoning/Induction):** This dimension focuses on discipline and setting rules and boundaries while providing support and explaining the reasons behind rules.
- **Authoritative Autonomy (Democratic Participation):** The autonomy dimension involves the encouragement of democratic participation and refers to the extent to which parents provide independence and self-direction to their children.

Although the PSDQ originally measured Authoritarian, Authoritative, and Permissive Parenting Styles only, we also measured Uninvolved Parenting Styles in this study. Limited research has been done in India using the PSDQ, which also measures uninvolved parenting styles.

Based on a research study done at Oklahoma State University, it was found that PSDQ can be reconceptualized to measure the fourth parenting style i.e. Uninvolved. (Kimble, 2014) The uninvolved style identified in this study included some hypothesized items out of which the three highest loading items are related to the use of threats and lack of follow-through. These items are congruent with the conceptualization of an uninvolved parenting style as parents who will do anything necessary (i.e., empty threats) to minimize parenting effort (Maccoby and Martin, 1983). In addition, items representing rejection (i.e., “I yell or shout when my child misbehaves” and “I punish by putting my child off somewhere alone”) and items related

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to lack of discipline and giving in to the child, both of which are also conceptually consistent with uninvolved parenting style. Moreover, there are two negatively loaded items representing a lack of regulation and reasoning that address all defining aspects of uninvolved parenting: low control, rejection, and low commitment to parenting.

The Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSDQ) applies a scoring methodology that yields continuous scores for each parenting style (authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, uninvolved) rather than assigning parents to distinct categories. This is done by calculating the mean score for each subscale within the PSDQ. Each subscale question uses a 5-point Likert-type scale (e.g., 1 = Never, 5 = Always). Higher mean scores on a subscale indicate a greater frequency of the corresponding parenting styles. This approach provides a more nuanced understanding of parenting styles, acknowledging that parents may exhibit elements of all four styles based on varying degrees of warmth and control.

Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire:

Childhood Trauma or Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) refer to potentially traumatic events or adverse experiences that occur during an individual's childhood and adolescence. The source of ACE is the family, community, and immediate environment, and it causes long-term risks for mental health with the potential to carry it over beyond the present generation. The most common adverse childhood experiences are:

Figure 1: Adverse Childhood Experiences

Adverse Childhood Experiences (3-18 years with following experience)		
Household Challenges - Domestic violence - Substance abuse - Mental illness - Divorce - Incarceration	Abuse - Physical abuse - Sexual abuse - Emotional Abuse	Neglect - Emotional neglect - Physical neglect
Others - Witnessing Community (or collective) violence - Death of a family member/ Any attachment figure - Verbal (or physical) fights between parents - Peer isolation or rejection - Socioeconomic position - Peer victimization		

Source: (Trivedi et al., 2024)

All the above experiences fall under adverse childhood experiences, and there is a lot of evidence to explain the impact of ACEs on adult mental health.

The detailed ACE binary questionnaire included a total of 16 questions; the first 10 questions were from the original ACE study (Adverse Childhood Experiences, n.d.; Felitti et al., 1998), and an additional 6 questions were based on insights from subsequent research (Trivedi et al., 2021, 2023) and the final question was added based on the practical experience in India where parents' separation is less prevalent.

The total score was obtained by adding the total number of questions where the response was “Yes”. ACE score < 5 was considered Low ACE and ACE score >=5 was considered High ACE.

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Scoring: The data was integrated into Microsoft Excel and analysed using an independent T-test (two-sample assuming unequal variances). Each data set (parents with high ACE and low ACE) was tested for normality using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and it was found that in both the groups, the data does not differ significantly from that which is normally distributed. The two groups (Parents with low childhood trauma vs Parents with high childhood trauma) average authoritative parenting style was compared using the independent T-Test (Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances) function of SPSS.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Out of the 116 who completed the self-assessment, 102 were females, which constituted 88% of the total sample population, and 14 were males, which constituted 12% of the total sample. Table 1 also highlights a further breakdown by trauma level (High vs. Low ACE score).

Table 1: Gender-wise Sample Composition of High and Low ACE Parents

		Low ACE		High ACE		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender	Females	46	45%	56	55%	102	88%
	Males	7	50%	7	50%	14	12%
Total		53	46%	63	54%	116	100%

An independent sample t-test was conducted in SPSS to compare the mean score of authoritative parenting style between parents with low ACE scores and those with high ACE scores. The descriptive statistics and t-test results are shown below in Table 2.

Table 2 – Descriptive Statistics and T-Test results of Authoritative Parenting Style based on trauma

	ACE Score	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Authoritative Parenting	Low ACE	53	4.14	0.43				
	High ACE	63	3.94	0.45	-2.39	114	0.01	0.47

The 63 participants who experienced high levels of childhood trauma (i.e. high ACE score group) (M = 3.94, SD = 0.45) compared to the 53 participants in the “low ACE” group (M = 4.14, SD = 0.43) demonstrated significantly lesser levels of authoritative parenting style, $t(114) = 2.39, p = .01$. The results confirm that adults with high exposure to childhood trauma while growing up, tend to be less authoritative in their parenting style, validating hypothesis 1.

Table 3 – Assessment of the impact of trauma on dimensions of authoritative parenting

	ACE Score	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Connection Dimension (Warmth and Support)	High	63	4.17	0.53	1.70	114	0.09	0.52
	Low	53	4.34	0.49				
Regulation Dimension (Reasoning/Induction)	High	63	3.77	0.56	2.06	114	0.04*	0.59
	Low	53	4.00	0.62				
Autonomy Granting Dimension (Democratic Participation)	High	63	3.89	0.50	2.19	114	0.03*	0.51
	Low	53	4.09	0.51				

*Indicates the p value <0.05

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Table 3 assesses three dimensions (subfactors) of authoritative parenting for the low vs high ACE exposure group. The following points highlight the results of the dimensions of authoritative parenting:

- An independent sample t-test to compare the mean scores of the authoritative parenting style's dimensions: Connection (Warmth and Support), Regulation (Reasoning/Induction), and Autonomy Granting (Democratic Participation) between parents with high ACE scores and low ACE scores was conducted. For the connection dimension, it can be seen that the mean score for parents with low ACE scores ($M=4.34$, $SD=0.49$) was slightly higher than those with high ACE scores ($M=4.17$, $SD=0.53$). However, this difference didn't prove to be statistically significant, $t(114) = 1.70$, $p=0.09$, indicating that the level of connection dimension has no impact regardless of the ACE score. Therefore, we reject hypothesis 2, indicating that the reduction in connection dimension is not statistically significant.
- The independent samples t-test analysis for regulation dimension revealed a significant difference between parents with high ACE and low ACE ($p=0.04$). Parents with low ACE scores ($M=4.00$, $SD=0.62$) had higher mean scores than those with high ACE scores ($M= 3.77$, $SD= 0.56$). Hence, it can be drawn that parents with higher exposure to childhood trauma tend to report lower authoritative regulation scores, validating hypothesis 3.
- For the autonomy dimension, the independent t-test results reflected a significant difference between high ACE and low ACE groups ($p= 0.03$) Parents with high ACE scores ($M=4.09$, $SD= 0.51$) scored lower compared to those with high ACE scores ($M=3.89$, $SD=0.50$) This means that parents with higher ACE scores tend to have lower autonomy sub scores compared to parents with low ACE, validating hypothesis 4.

This study examined the association between parental exposure to childhood trauma, measured by the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) score, and authoritative parenting style and its dimensions. The results confirm the reduction in authoritative parenting style scores for high ACE individuals. Moreover, while all the subfactors of authoritative parenting were also reduced, the statistical reduction was found only in regulation dimension (reasoning/induction) and autonomy granting dimension (democratic participation). The third dimension of connection (warmth and support) showed a statistically insignificant reduction.

This finding suggests that a parent's own experience of childhood trauma may be associated with less ideal parenting styles. Authoritative parenting, characterised by higher warmth and control is generally considered the most beneficial for child development among the four parenting styles. Therefore, these results may have important implications for understanding the intergenerational transmission of risk and for developing interventions to support parents who have experienced childhood trauma. The findings indicate that the higher the ACE score, the lower the parents' likelihood of practising an authoritative parenting style. Parents who reported experiencing higher childhood trauma engaged in parenting behaviours characterized by less warmth, fewer clear expectations, and potentially less open communication. The two subfactors that showed statistically significant reduction indicate lower warmth (due to lower reasoning) and autonomy.

Specific examples could help further understand this. One respondent (ACE score =6, with a history of childhood emotional and physical abuse, emotional neglect, and peer isolation) came for a consultation session at the wellness centre. His PSDQ scores provided the

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background before the consultation. He had a low authoritative score (3.07), with very low scores on the “connection” dimension with his children. The parent experienced very frequent emotional abuse and neglect (physical abuse was occasional) during childhood, and this may have influenced his behaviour as a parent in adulthood. After the consultation, it was clear that the parent was unconsciously behaving like his father during childhood. Moreover, this father's “verbal hostility” dimension was significantly high, which was validated during consultation. The father was sent by the mother for consultation because of verbal hostility. It is worth adding that the father also experienced frequent peer isolation during childhood.

Another parent (a woman in her 30s) with low exposure to childhood trauma (ACE score=1), showed a balanced parenting style with an authoritative score of 4.1, compared to her husband, who had a low authoritative score (3.1) and high childhood trauma (ACE score = 6). She could practice balanced parenting while her husband had anger issues that were projected onto the children and also struggled to connect with them emotionally. Based on his ACE questionnaire and personal consultation, it was observed that he experienced physical and emotional abuse as well as severe neglect, loneliness & bullying in childhood. Hence, these qualitative insights from the study also support the hypothesis.

This study’s emphasis on the Authoritative Parenting Style is particularly relevant as it is generally considered the most beneficial and ideal for child development. Authoritative parenting fosters a sense of security and trust in children (warmth) while encouraging independence and responsibility (control). This link between higher ACE scores and less Authoritative parenting styles suggests a potential pathway through which parental childhood trauma can negatively impact offspring’s well-being. This could be because of parents’ own experience during childhood that may involve several components of abuse and neglect. In other words, the parents may have not received the warmth (responsiveness) that may result in them not being able to provide warmth and responsiveness to their offspring. Similarly, the degree of control may be influenced by the parent’s own experiences with traumatic family environments.

Future Implications

The present study’s findings, highlighting an association between parents’ childhood trauma and less authoritative parenting, gives us a deeper understanding of how negative childhood experiences can continue the cycle of trauma. Based on this insight, prevention measures for parents with high ACE scores can be developed, and additional support for cultivating authoritative parenting skills can be provided.

These interventions could include:

- Educating parents about the impact of childhood trauma on their parenting styles and sharing tools and strategies for building healthy parent-child relationships.
- Teaching positive skills associated with authoritative parenting, such as assertiveness, providing warmth and support, allowing open communication, and positive discipline strategies. Also, teaching self-regulation and stress management techniques to help parents develop healthy coping mechanisms and manage their emotions.
- Addressing the underlying emotional and psychological effects of childhood trauma using 1:1 trauma-informed therapy, which can improve a parent's overall well-being and parenting capacity.

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Limitations

Although the present study supported the hypothesis that more childhood trauma resulted in lesser authoritative parenting behaviours, it is important to acknowledge the limitations. The study relied on self-reported data susceptible to personal biases, leading to inauthentic data. The sample size proved to be another limitation of this study. Future work can explore more subjects and qualitative interviews to better understand the parenting styles. Additionally, several important demographic variables, such as parents' marital status, occupation, and number of children, were collected, but due to a smaller sample size, the current study did not examine them.

Parents with more than one child had doubts while responding to the PSDQ as they claimed to have different responses for the same question depending on which child they were referring to. This showed that parenting style may vary from one child to another, and hence, separate responses for each child (in case of more than one child) should have been recorded. Moreover, the respondents were mostly mothers, with 88 % being females. Hence, the study could have been balanced and richer by ensuring that both mother and father participated, giving us more scope for research into observing differences in the parenting styles of both parents.

CONCLUSION

The study found that parents who experienced more childhood trauma (ACE Score ≥ 5) were less likely to use the authoritative parenting style, which is considered the most beneficial for child development. Moreover, two of the three subfactors of authoritative parenting style (regulation and autonomy granting dimensions) also showed statistically significant reduction. These findings suggest that a parent's own negative childhood experiences can influence their parenting approaches and potentially harm their child's well-being. The study also highlights the need for further research to understand how this happens and to develop strategies and solutions to help parents with high childhood trauma adopt more effective parenting styles.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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