

Are you an Alpha Parent?

'Alpha' is the first letter of the Greek alphabet, just like 'a' is the first letter of the English alphabet. To be an Alpha means to *go first* or to take the lead. An alpha parent is one who takes the lead and who models the behavior that they would like their child to reflect.

This fascinating bit of neuroscience will help you appreciate just how much of *you* your child reflects. Italian neurophysiologist, Giacomo Rizzolatti, and his colleagues at the University of Parma were the first to identify the **mirror neuron** in the brains of primates.

These special neurons fire in our brains when we observe another person's behavior as if we were engaging in the same behavior. This brain function is what allows us to interpret the intentions, actions, and emotions of other people.

When your child observes your behavior, their brain activity literally mirrors your brain activity, which is how they develop the same habits overtime. This is called co-regulation.

Co-regulation with an emotionally regulated adult who has functional and healthy habits is one of the biggest keys in helping a child develop their ability to regulate their own emotions and habits.

Self-Regulation and Executive Functioning

Your executive functions are a set of systems in your brain that work together to regulate your thoughts, emotions, and actions. Here's a really simplified look at three key systems.

- **Inhibitory Control:** The ability to regulate emotions, resist distractions, and manage impulses.
- **Working Memory:** The ability to hold and process ideas & images and apply relevant information to decisions and actions.
- **Cognitive Flexibility:** The ability to see or think about something in more than one way, and to shift attention from one task to another.

Working together, our executive functions allow us to navigate and respond to our environment, solve problems, and get stuff done. That's because our ability to think critically, plan ahead, organize, sustain focus and complete tasks relies on our executive functions.

Alpha parents take the lead by modeling emotional regulation, impulse-control, and problem-solving skills in front of their child. This in turn helps their kids develop their ability to self-regulate.

Three Types of Parents

To answer the question, "Am I an alpha parent?" we can define three types of parents that make up the parenting spectrum. I've defined these three distinct types as: Alpha, Controlling Alpha, and Beta. Understanding what sets these types of parents apart is the first step to developing your self-awareness as a parent.

Alpha Parent

The alpha parent is confident and outcome independent. Relaxed and at ease no matter what is happening around them, the alpha parent is a pillar of strength. The alpha parent acknowledges their child's emotions, creates a safe space for them to be vulnerable, and communicates without judgment. The alpha parent leads by example, confident in the fact that their child will inevitably follow their lead.

Children of alpha parents subconsciously co-regulate with their parent's mood and pick up on their habits. Even when the child of an alpha parent is distressed, the alpha parent's calm demeanor and confidence in their child helps their child to calm down and cope with whatever is causing them distress.

Controlling Alpha Parent

The controlling alpha parent is confident and outcome dependent. Relaxed and at ease as long as everything is going according to their agenda, the controlling alpha parent tends to have a short fuse. Their need to be in control may be well-intentioned, but they may come across as bossy or micromanaging. Controlling alpha parents try to manipulate their child into achieving a certain outcome.

Children of controlling alpha parents subconsciously co-regulate with their parent's mood and pick up on their habits. The controlling alpha parent may be

perceived by their child as aggressive and dominating. They often put their child on a pedestal or unknowingly shame their child for falling short of their unreasonable expectations.

Beta Parent

The beta parent is unconfident and outcome dependent. Anxious and lacking confidence in their ability to lead, beta parents act out of fear of failure. Their behavior may fluctuate from acting very sweet and too flexible to acting out of anger or neediness. This may come across as yelling, nagging, bribing, or pleading with their child when they do not get a desired outcome.

Children of beta parents subconsciously co-regulate with their parent's mood and pick up on their habits. Beta parents are anxious and submissive. They often say one thing and do another. They have low expectations of their child, and in turn their child has low expectations of themselves. Because of their uncertainty, beta parents (unknowingly) step back and let their child take a leadership role. In doing so, they reflect their child's emotions and behavior.

Progress, Not Perfection

The Alpha Parent Model reveals a new perspective and an emotionally compelling vision of the type of parent you can be for your child. The simplicity of this model helps you get straight to the core of why you (and your child) behave the way you do.

Because relationships and life-circumstances are too complex to fit neatly into any box, no real parent falls into any single category or type above. Instead, I encourage parents to use this model as a guide to creating your vision for what type of parent you want to be.

The key is progress, not perfection. When you have a clear and compelling vision for the type of parent you want to be, and why, you can take small steps everyday to make progress toward that vision.

To help you get there, here are 12 behaviors that alpha parents consistently practice and four that they avoid.

Alpha Parents Do:

- Stay calm in hectic or emotional situations.
- Think flexibly and go with the flow.
- Create a safe space for their child to express their feelings.
- Encourage their child to express themselves through open ended questions.
- Understand that mistakes are inevitable and good learning experiences.
- Encourage their child to come up with possible solutions and outcomes in difficult situations.
- Express confidence that their child will be able to handle any situation.
- Set reasonable expectations.
- Plan fun and rewarding activities frequently.
- Share stories of their successes and failures.
- Make sure their words match their actions.
- Remember that their child has not yet developed emotional and impulse control and that parents must model this behavior.

Alpha parents DO NOT:

- Lecture or nag their child.
- React with frustration to their child's emotions.
- Argue with their child or with a co-parent in front of their child.
- Hit, shame, or verbally abuse their child.

The Silent Movie Test

What kind of behavior do you model for your child? If your child were watching your actions without any sound (like watching a silent movie) would they see you modeling alpha behavior? This "Silent Movie" test is simple and effective way to track how well your actions align with your words and your expectations.

So many parents tell me that you are unsure of what steps to take in order to "fix" your child's behavior. That you don't know why your child acts out at the slightest request. That you don't know how to help your child feel more confident. That you feel afraid that you're doing everything wrong, or you hope everything will turn out for the best. But what so many of you are failing to recognize are your own reactions and emotions around your children.

Fear and hope are two emotions that many parents operate on. These emotions are two sides of the "*I don't know the future*" coin. If your actions rely on a flip of that coin, you will either live in constant fear that you are making the wrong decisions, or you will do nothing in hopes that your situation will improve as time passes.

I want you to understand something very important. Your actions *precede* your emotions. Here's what I mean. When you ground your actions in knowledge and your values instead of hope and fear, your emotions change to reflect your actions. That's the key to feeling confident and relaxing into your natural alpha state.

Mastering alpha parenting is an art, something that takes practice, patience and consistency over time. The Alpha Parent Model provides you with an emotionally compelling vision of the type of parent you can be for your child - one who takes the lead and models the actions that you'd like your child to reflect.

Questions, comments? Share your thoughts with me at
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