



# Better Understanding Gentle Parenting: Are the Grandparents Motivating this Approach?

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## BACKGROUND

Gentle Parenting (GP) has gained popularity in mainstream media and literature, yet little academic literature exists. We have designed 2 studies to assess GP empirically.

In 2023, the Pew Research Center found that 43% of parents stated they are trying to raise their children in a way similar to how they were raised (Minkin & Horowitz, 2023). Conversely, 44% said they are doing the opposite (raising their children in a much different way than how they, themselves, were raised). Thus, for Study 2, we predicted that half of our GP-participants would describe their own upbringing as characterized by qualities that popular media has described GP to be (high Supportive Demandingness, high Warmth, and promotion of emotion-regulation skills), whereas the other half would score low on these qualities.

As GP gains popularity, we believe that bridging the gap between popular discourse and empirical research is crucial to better understanding this parenting approach.

## METHOD

### STUDY 1 (What is Gentle Parenting?)

#### Participants

16 self-identified Gentle Parents (15 female, 1 male)

- Parent's age  $M= 35.5$  years,  $SD= 6.68$  years; 7 White Hispanics, 7 White/European not Hispanic, 1 Asian, 1 of Mixed race (i.e., Mixed Parents)

Parents focused on one of their children, in responses to the survey below

- Child's age  $M= 5.54$  years,  $SD= 3.2$  years; 8 female, 8 male

#### Materials and Procedure

- 79-item online survey to assess participant's Warmth, Demandingness (Supportive and Non-Supportive), Autonomy Granting, Promotion of Emotional Regulation Skills, and Permissiveness:
  - 7 open-ended questions about how parents create expectations, discipline, and engage with their child
  - 62<sup>†</sup> 1-to-5 Likert Scale (agree-disagree or frequency) items to assess each of the 7 above listed qualities

For both studies, summed 1-5 Likert Scale responses for each parenting quality (e.g., Sum Warmth, Sum Permissiveness)

### STUDY 2 (Gentle Parent's Own Upbringing)

#### Participants

6 self-identified Gentle Parents (3 female, 3 male)

- Parent's age  $M= 35.33$  years,  $SD= 5.75$  years; 3 White Hispanic, 1 White/of European decent and not Hispanic, and 2 of Mixed Race

#### Materials and Procedure

- 10-minute Phone Interview to identify the most influential caretaker and 4 open-ended q's
- 55-item online survey to assess the qualities of the parent's most influential caretaker
- 54 1-to-5 Likert Scale (agree-disagree or frequency) items
  - 17 items<sup>†</sup> on Warmth (e.g., *When I was a child, my parent showed patience with me*)
  - 4 items<sup>†</sup> on Demandingness: Supportive (e.g., *When I was a child, my parent set and enforced rules*)
  - 13 items<sup>†</sup> on Demandingness: Non-Supportive (e.g., *When I was a child, parent was overly strict*)
  - 8 items<sup>†</sup> on Promotion of Emotion-Regulation skills (e.g., *When I was a child, my parent helped me to identify my feelings*)
  - 7 items<sup>†</sup> on Helicopter Parenting (e.g., *When I was a child, my primary caregiver invested more time and energy into my school projects than I did*)
  - 5 items<sup>†</sup> on Permissiveness (e.g., *When I was a child, my parent ignored my misbehavior*)
- 1 open-ended question about whether their own childhood influenced their parenting approach

## RESULTS

### STUDY 1 (What is Gentle Parenting?)

	Warmth	Demandingness: Supportive	Demandingness: Non-Supportive	Autonomy Granting	Promotion of ER	Permissiveness
Ave:	4.47***	2.73	1.92***	4.17***	4.42***	2.31***
SD:	0.27	0.80	0.51	0.45	0.42	0.66

We ran a one-sample t-test to assess the likelihood average of each quality (e.g., Ave Warmth) varied from "Neutral" (i.e., the 1-5 Likert Scale's middle response of 3).

All qualities, except Demandingness Supportive, varied significantly from neutrality, \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

When asked how they respond to their child when the child has not followed rules or expectations, 92% of participants report scaffolding with their child (providing temporary support and guidance to children as they learn new skills, gradually fading the support as they become more competent (e.g., "Let me hold this box for you while you pick up the toys, or I can help you by handing them to me" when time to tidy up) and only 1 participant reported giving their child "time outs."

### STUDY 2 (Gentle Parent's Own Upbringing)

	Warmth	Demandingness: Supportive	Demandingness: Non-Supportive	Helicopter	Promotion of ER	Permissiveness
Ave:	2.92	4.21**	2.92	3.12	2.02*	1.80*
SD:	1.02	0.60	0.75	1.33	0.81	0.75

We ran a one-sample t-test to assess the likelihood average of each quality (e.g., Ave Warmth) varied from "Neutral" (i.e., the 1-5 Likert Scale's middle response of 3).

Demandingness Supportive varied from an average neutral score,  $t(5) = 4.93$ ,  $p = 0.004$ \*\*, Cohen's  $d = 2.01$ .

Promotion of ER varied from an average neutral score,  $t(5) = -2.96$ ,  $p = 0.03$ \*, Cohen's  $d = 1.21$ .

Permissiveness varied from an average neutral score,  $t(5) = -3.93$ ,  $p = 0.01$ \*, Cohen's  $d = 1.60$ .

#### How are Gentle Parents describing their mothers?



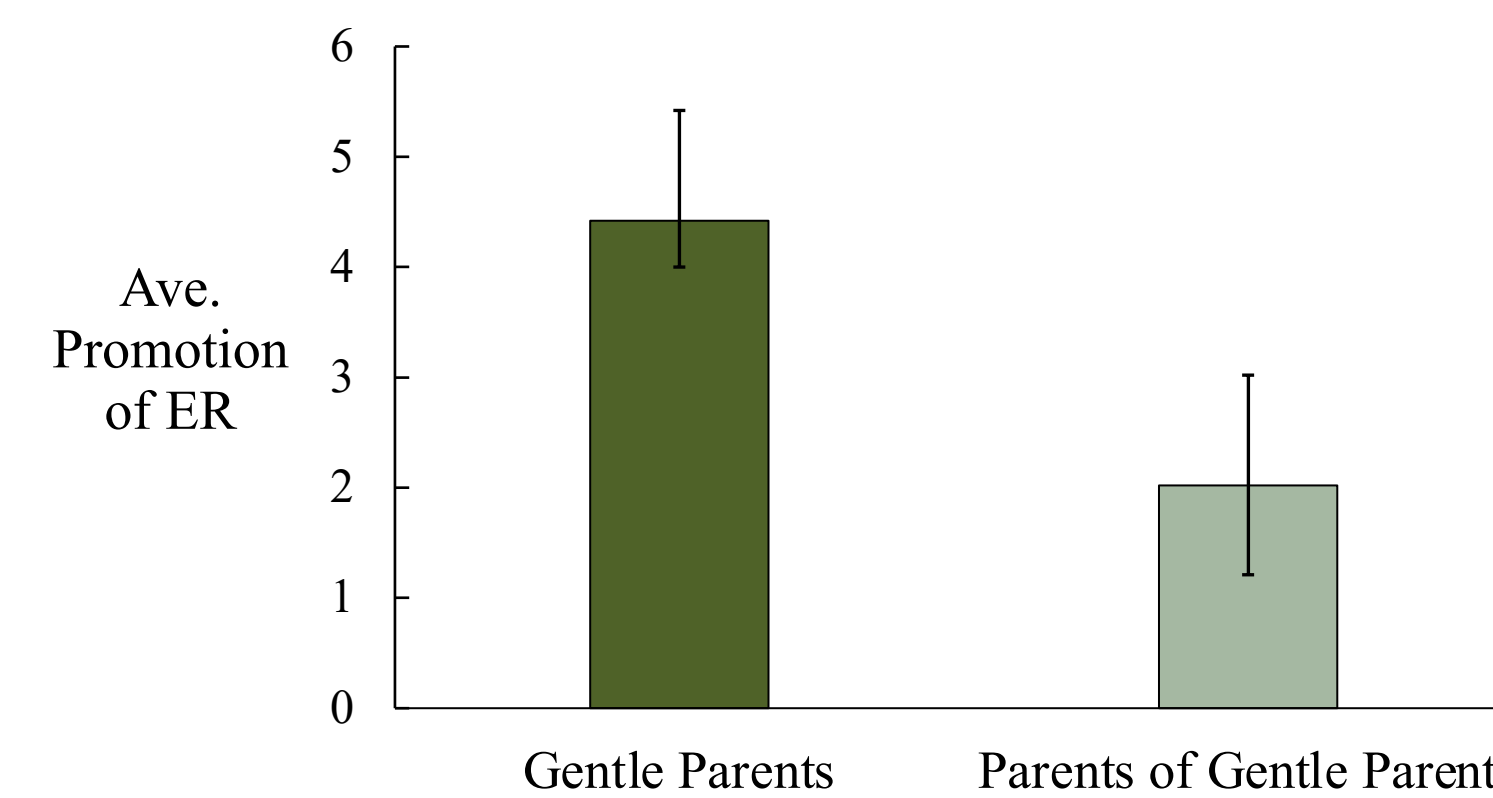
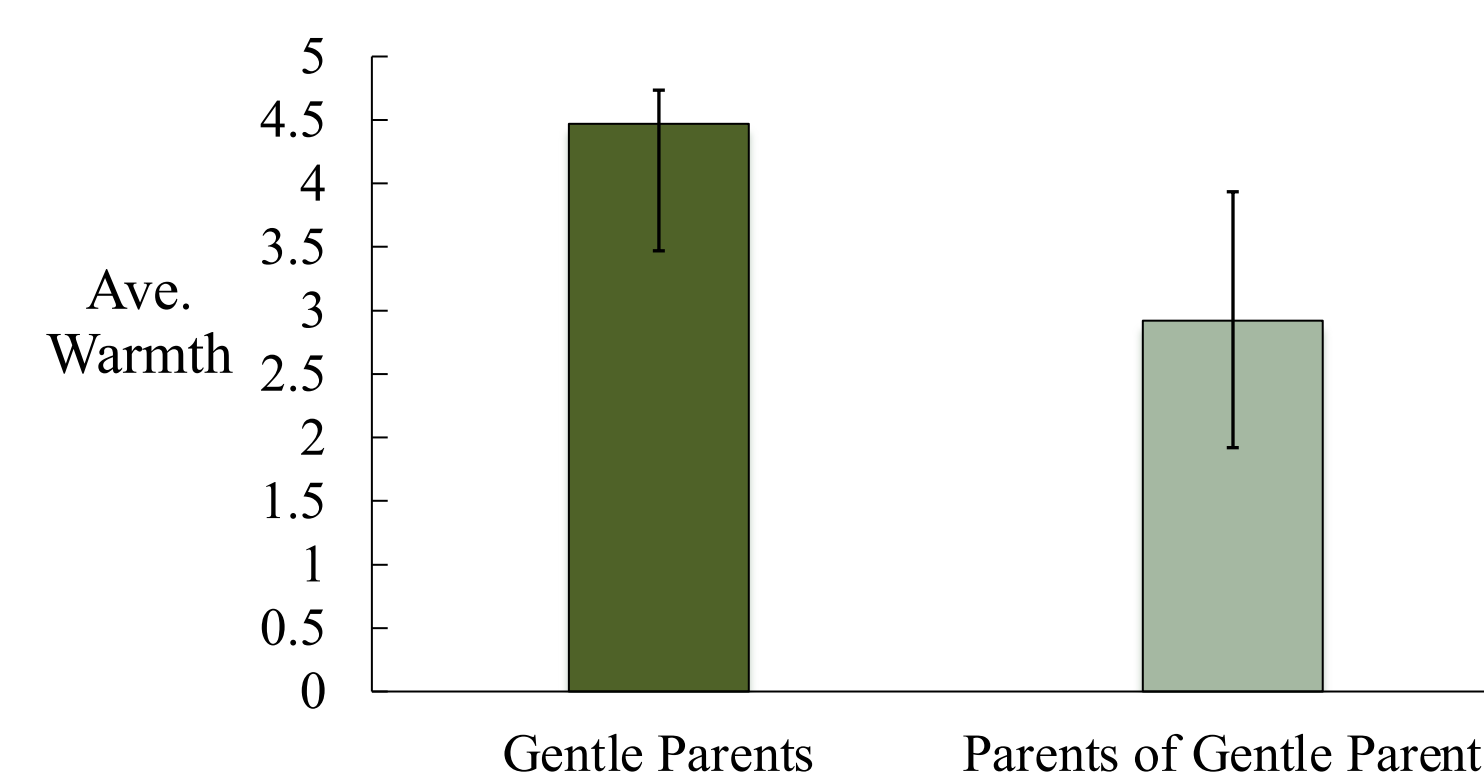
#### How do Gentle Parents describe themselves?



## COMPARISONS ACROSS STUDY 1 AND STUDY 2 SAMPLES (Gentle Parents vs. Parents of Gentle Parents)

We also ran a series of independent samples T-tests in which we compared Average scores of Warmth, Demandingness Supportive, Demandingness Non-Supportive, Promotion of ER, and Permissiveness across the 2 studies (i.e., we compared self-identified Gentle Parent's qualities to "grandparent's" qualities\*), and found the following:

- Gentle parents, on average, score higher on Warmth than do parents of Gentle Parents,  $t(19) = 5.64$ ,  $p = .007$ , Cohen's  $d = 2.72$
- Gentle parents, on average, score higher on Promotion of ER than do parents of Gentle Parents,  $t(18) = 8.84$ ,  $p = .01$ , Cohen's  $d = 4.32$



For Demandingness Supportive, Demandingness Non-Supportive, Permissiveness no significant differences ( $p > .05$ )

*\*NOTE these are separate samples. It is NOT the case that, for Study 2, these are the parents of the participants of Study 1*

## DISCUSSION

Gentle Parents have received some criticism on mainstream platforms for being permissive and/or for not maintaining rules or expectations in their household. This is inconsistent with our findings...

In both of our studies, Gentle Parents reported they *are* enforcing rules and/or expectations. Notably, they report doing so in empathic ways (helping their child to identify their emotions if their child becomes upset) and scaffolding when necessary. This is inconsistent with Permissive parenting (Maccoby & Martin, 1983), characterized by leniency in which parents often avoid setting firm boundaries or enforcing rules.

Gentle Parents scored high in Warmth, Promotion of Emotional Regulation, and Autonomy Granting, suggesting that they are empathetic with their children, supportive, and aware of their children's interests and needs, but do enforce rules.

When comparing the 2 samples, it seems Gentle Parents are different from mothers of Gentle Parents, in that they are less likely than Gentle Parents to promote ER. When prompted to describe qualities in their own parenting vs. qualities of their mothers, it seems Study 2 participants are very *unlike* their own mothers. Both samples, however, score low in Permissiveness; in this, they are consistent. In summary, we have found patterns suggesting that in some ways (Permissiveness), self-identified parents might be parenting in ways similar to their own caregivers, and in other ways (Promotion of ER), GP parents are doing things very differently.

We look forward to seeing what other patterns we identify when assessing Gentle Parent's own parents as we collect more data.

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Please contact Dr. Dolly Rojo with any questions about these studies: [drojo@msmu.edu](mailto:drojo@msmu.edu)

<sup>†</sup> We borrowed (and rephrased) survey questions from the following sources: Domenech Rodriguez et al. (2009), Robinson et al.(1995), Lovejoy et al. (1999), and Shields and Cicchetti (1997); Maccoby and Martin (1983; based on Diana Baumrind's work)