The parent line – discovering parenting styles as a foundation for parenting tools

Pete Brown

Introduction

The parent line is an exercise that I offer when asking parents and carers to think about their parenting styles. This can be at the start of a parenting group or when working with individual parents, or when working with professionals about parenting ideas. The line is a useful way to start a discussion about parenting and serves as a precursor for further discussion about parenting ideas and tools. In recent years, the parent line has served as a 'base' on which non-violent resistance (NVR) parenting-ideas sit – this base acts as a springboard into the launch of useful NVR tools and techniques.

The parent line depicts three styles of parenting originally described by Baumrind (1971). I have placed these ideas on a line to illustrate the different styles on a continuum. At an extreme end is *super-strict* (authoritarian position) and the other extreme is *anything-goes* (permissive position). Then there is the *middle-ground* (authoritative position) represented by a bubble that depicts an area that allows space for manoeuvre within the bubble. It is the middle position that parents are encouraged to consider in a variety of interventions that I shall now describe.

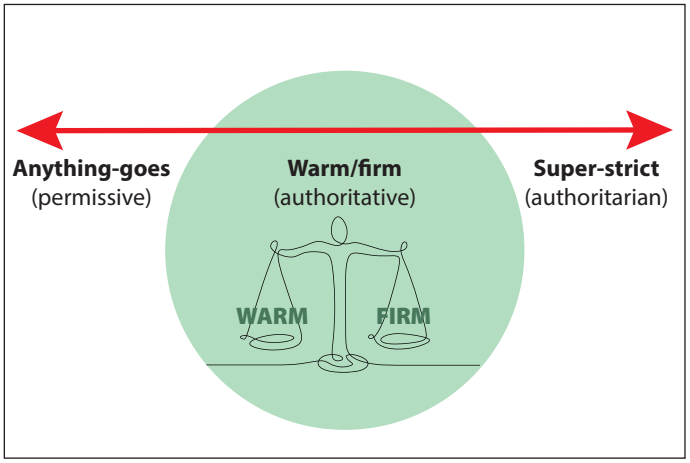

Figure 1: **The parent line**

Parenting line exercises

When facilitating face-to-face groups, *a parent-line sculpt* can be offered to explore the parenting styles. I ask participants to envisage an imaginary line and then I walk up and down the line to show the positions as shown in figure 1. Volunteers are then asked to stand up and place themselves along the line to show where they would be on an 'average' day (or part of the day). This is useful to visibly see different positions and the variety of different positions. Exercises can then be introduced to discuss *movements along the line* with the dual purpose of warming the group to the ideas and showing the variety of styles through fun, experiential exercises. I usually offer a selection from the five variations shown below.

1. The impossible position. The first position to introduce is what can be called 'perfect parent' position (figure 2). This is the exact centre of the middle ground bubble followed by a unanimous chorus of *"there is no such thing!"* This illustrates that good enough parenting is within the bubble, but not dead-centre and is a good icebreaker to show that we are never looking for perfection.

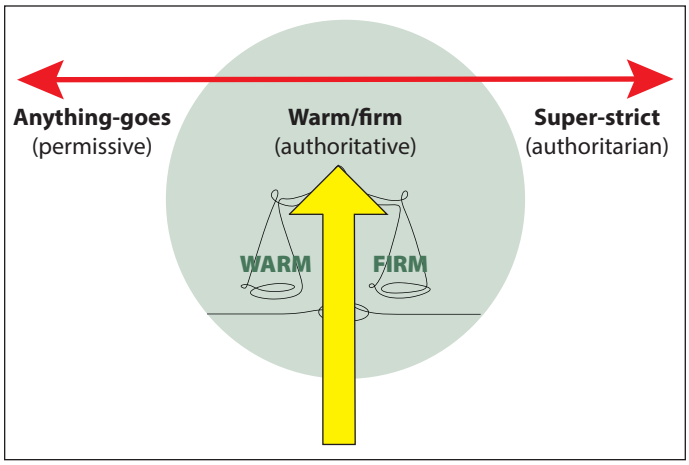

Figure 2: **The 'perfect parent' position**

2. Re-positioning linked to stress. Following the 'average' position (and after we have eliminated the 'perfect parent' position) I ask parents to change positions to a time when they feel *super-stressed* followed by *very relaxed*. It is so interesting to see sudden shifts in re-positioning. Some people move to super-strict, while many move to anything-goes. This usually brings forth the opportunity to discuss the 'seesaw' parent style – moving from one extreme to another, passing through, but not staying within, the middle bubble. This is also an opportunity to consider the influence of contextual factors such as those of culture, gender, generation and single parenthood.

3. Significant other positioning. I then ask, if co-parenting, to change positions to show where a partner / ex-partner / grandparent would be placed on the line (average, stressed, relaxed). This is always interesting! For example, if one parent is perceived to be near one end of the line, they usually place the other parent / carer at the other end, which may lead to an interesting discussion about *counterbalancing* the effects of styles

at extreme ends. This is often followed by a discussion about how increased communication may to reduce this over-compensation and allow each to step towards the middle ground.

4. Positioning related to different children. When there are siblings, parents /carers may be invited to show how positions differ according to different children. Adults often come with one child in mind, and this can open a discussion about differences between children related to factors such as neurodiversity and other differences such as children who are naturally more easy-going compared to others who may be stronger willed. This leads to consideration of children's temperaments - an area commonly discussed in the parenting field yet rarely explicitly mentioned in the therapy and mental health fields. (In a follow-up article, I will be discussing ideas considering an intersection of attachment and temperament to add to the nature-nurture debate from a both /and perspective (Brown, 2024, forthcoming).

5. Crossing the line. This variation can be useful to show when discussing styles that may move into the arena of safeguarding. I usually depict this by stepping across an imaginary line past one of the extreme ends. Participants will usually call out 'abuse' and 'neglect' (see figure 3) – it doesn't usually need to be spelt out. Another aspect can be added regarding discipline and UK legislation across the four UK countries. An example, current at the time of writing, is the question of 'reasonable physical chastisement' legal in England and Northern Ireland, whilst illegal in Scotland since 2020 and Wales since 2022 (Coram Child Law Advice, 2022). I should note that I take a clear position on the use of non-violent parenting. Nevertheless, it is useful to discuss legal positions, and the confusion that parents (and professionals) can often feel with these different positions within and between the four UK nations. There may also be confusion about acceptable parental discipline among families new to the UK from parts of the world where physical chastisement may be both common and condoned.

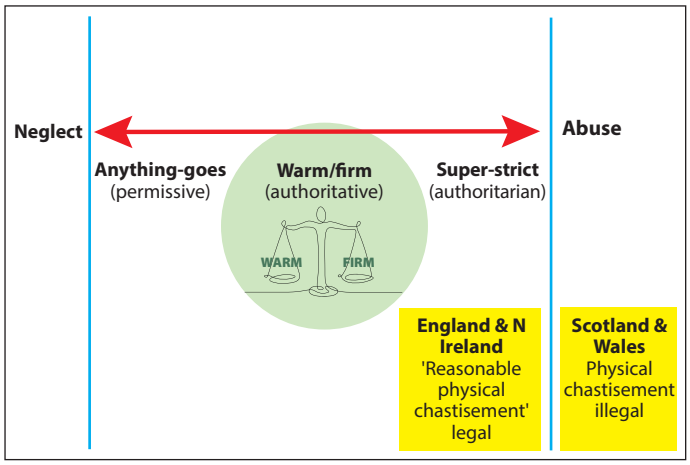

Figure 3: **Crossing the line**

The parent line as a starting point, not an end point

The parent line ideas, including the sculpt exercise, aims to begin a conversation about the middle ground of the parent line. In my view, all positive parenting programmes can benefit from the parent line exercise before introducing parenting tools. The importance lies in this common scenario: *the more a parent moves to extremes, the more a young person's attitudes and behaviour can move to extremes*. (More about this in the young person's line below).

Most parents find the middle ground ideas helpful. Common questions that arise include:

- What parenting tools help us the stay in the middle ground?
- How do we work with setbacks (when you find yourself pulled to extreme ends)?
- Why is the middle ground of parenting so difficult to stay in with some children, but not others?

The parent line and NVR

In recent years, building on the work of Omer (2021) and others, I have been organising, supervising and delivering NVR ideas to parents, carers and professionals. In these groups, all NVR ideas are introduced via the parent line, week by week, until the line is complete with the NVR toolkit.

Figure 4 shows how the NVR ideas of *escalation, parental presence, reconciliation gestures* and *acts of resistance* are shown on the line. To keep the diagram from looking too cluttered, the additional tools of *parental self-care, baskets, supporters, announcements* and *sit-ins* are not shown in the diagram. However, you can see a dynamic view of how all NVR tools are added each week by going to YouTube for a one-minute video that illustrates the process (Brown, 2023 – see references for link). Only so much can be shown with static images on the printed page!

What the parent line offers, with each tool added week-by-week, is regular repetition and reminders which have proven very useful to help embed ideas and see the NVR toolset as building on each tool, rather than a new tool replacing a previous tool. With an NVR lens, the middle bubble becomes the *higher parental presence area* – one of the central concepts of the NVR approach.

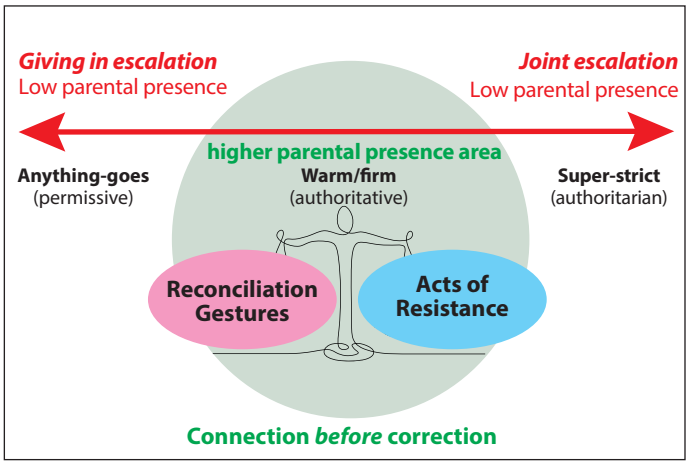

Figure 4: **NVR and the parent line**

I would now like to add two more lines that I think complement the parent line!

The child's / young person's line

The parent line is a powerful exercise in its own right. However, there is another line which can also be added to show four common positions of children and young people (adapted

from Phelan, 2003). In the middle ground are the positions of 'co-operators' and 'experimenters', while in the outer positions are 'non-co-operators' (usually more internalising issues) and 'risk-takers' (using more externalising issues). Often the child's positioning links closely to parent style positioning, but whether it does or not, a useful conversation can take place about the intersection of these lines and how parents can instigate the first change by beginning to move into the middle ground, encouraging children to also move into the middle ground leading by example (role-modelling).

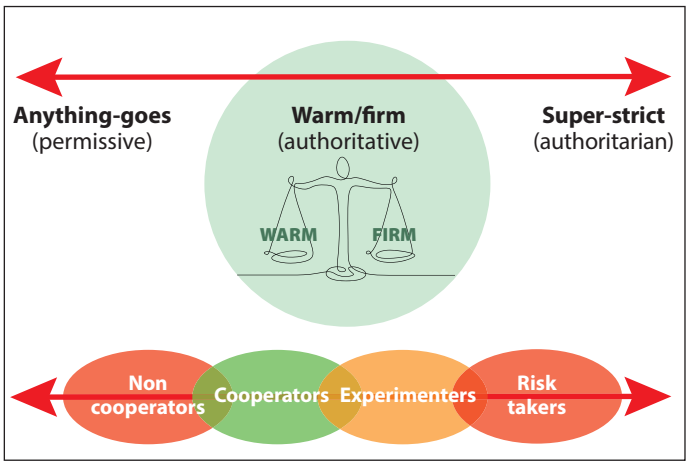

Figure 5: **The parent line and the young person's line**

Adding systemic ideas to the line

In a parent line variation, we can view change through the lens of Tom Andersen's ideas which I have called the *Goldilocks zones of change*, discussed at length in a previous article (Brown, 2019). While there are some obvious differences (too little change does not equate exactly with anything goes) the middle ground element is very useful indeed. The Goldilocks line shows the idea that small changes to styles work better than giant leaps overnight (figure 6). Using a trauma lens, we may also call the middle ground the window of tolerance.

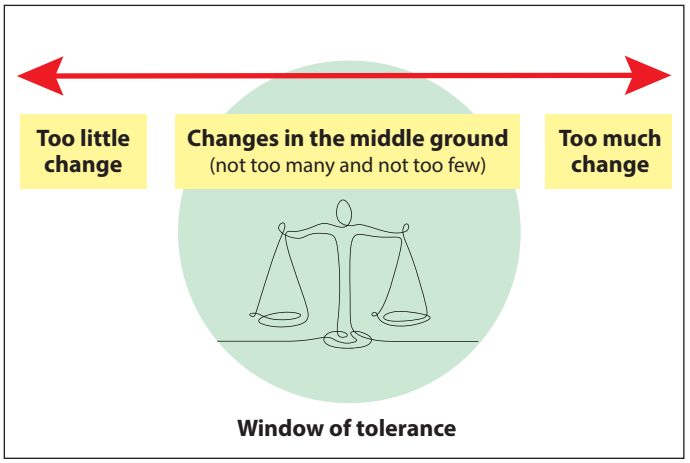

Figure 6: **The Goldilocks zone of change**

Creative adaptations of the parent line

Before ending this article, I would like to briefly discuss four creative adaptations – I think these are very useful for exploring, understanding, and working in related contexts.

1. The teacher line

A helpful adaption that I use when working in schools is *the teacher line*. The parent line exercises are replaced with variations such as *the perfect teacher; teaching at average, stressed and relaxed times and children where teachers find themselves pulled into extreme positions*. I then suggest tools, usually from the NVR toolkit and sometimes adapted to whole-class situations, as well as for situations with individual children. In my experience, schools with 'zero tolerance' behaviour policies tend to be at the authoritarian end of the line and may really benefit from a range of NVR tools and ideas, all with the aim of reducing escalation and raising teacher presence (as opposed to teacher control).

2. The facilitator line

When running NVR foundation courses, the parent line sculpt is introduced as part of the foundation syllabus. If practitioners are going to deliver NVR parenting-groups, the facilitator line can also be introduced to show 'facilitator positioning'. I may ask participants to consider their experience of my facilitation style while running the workshop – where would they place me on the line? How might they navigate the 'middle ground' if they feel pulled into more extreme positions by particular parents? I also suggest that facilitators consider more vulnerable parents in groupwork as the parent-line sculpt can be very powerful, so options are often given such as being able to contact a facilitator after the sculpt, as well as the option to not participate in the sculpt.

3. The management line

I find it can be useful to consider management styles via the line. This can reveal styles from more collaborative (centre left) to more authoritative (centre-right) as well as considering more extreme styles, usually at the authoritarian end (often characterised, in my experience, by high staff dissatisfaction and turnover).

4. The police line

I think it is interesting to think about police responses to families in crisis and when the police might modify what might be seen as a default authoritarian position. For example, a caller on the radio programme *Women's Hour* reported that when her daughter hit her father in a temper, the police were called in desperation to come and help calm the situation. When they arrived, it was stated they could 'arrest her' as a deterrent rather than talk with her. Clearly this escalatory authoritarian response to a family crisis was not helpful (BBC Radio 4, 2023). There is also an interesting example of the transformation of old-school police authority, going against the grain, with a discussion of an NVR approach from Israeli police towards Israeli-Arab citizens (Gilad, 2019).

Conclusion

I hope you will find the parent line and associated ideas helpful in parenting work. Various exercises and ideas have been introduced to help parents, carers and others consider parenting styles (and related styles) and how these may be adjusted to promote more cooperative relationships. Finally, parent line ideas have been incorporated into the NVR toolkit to help situate and embed the weekly tools and changes of the NVR process.

Postscript: A short note re NVR

I am aware that different NVR models are emerging, although, in my view, all stay true (albeit with different emphases), to the original ideas of Omer (2004, 2021). I have called the NVR model noted here *'narrative approaches to NVR'* (Brown, 2021). This model was developed within Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust between 2015-2022 and emphasises the importance of taking great care in the use of words with a series of pre-planned non-escalatory comments, as well as actions. It builds on an original NVR groupwork model first pioneered in 2005 and described by Heismann and Day (2010).

References

Baumrind, D. (1971) Current patterns of parental authority. D*evelopmental Psychology Monograph*, 4(1, Pt.2): 1-103.

Brown, P. (2019) Working therapeutically in the Goldilocks zone. *Context*, 161: 23-26.

Brown, P. (2021) *Narrative Influences in NVR* – a webinar by Pete Brown (June 2021). AFT webinar series. Available at: https://www.aft.org.uk/page/memberdigitalresources

Brown, P. (2023) *NVR Tools and Parent Line*. YouTube video. Available at: https://petebrown.org.uk/nvr-factsheets

Brown, P. (in press 2024) Towards a theory of the intersection of attachment and temperament (working title). To be published in *Context* 196, December 2024.

Coram Child Law Advice (2022) *The Law on Smacking Children* [online]. Available at: https://childlawadvice.org.uk/information-pages/the-law-on-smacking-children/ [Accessed 03/23].

Omer, H. (2004) *Non-Violent Resistance* (first edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Omer, H. (2021) Non-Violent Resistance (second edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Phelan, T. (2003) 123 Magic (third edition). Parent Magic Inc.

BBC Radio 4 (2023) Trust in the Police? Have you say and call Nuala McGovern at *Woman's Hour* (Transmitted 22/03/23, accessed 03/23).

Gilad, Z. (2019) Building trust and cooperation between Israel police and Israeli-Arab citizens. In: E. Heismann, J. Jude & E. Day (eds.) *Non-violent Resistance Innovations in Practice*. Brighton: Pavilion Publishing.

Heismann, E. & Day, E. (2010) *Non-violent Resistance Programme Training Pack*. Brighton: Pavilion Publishing.

Pete Brown is a systemic family therapist. He has a small private practice and also delivers NVR foundation training programmes as well as working as a part-time tutor on the Kings family therapy course in South London.

Website: www.petebrown.org.uk

Email: pete-brown12@hotmail.co.uk