

Psychological Control of the Child

The manipulative psychological control of the child by a parent is a scientifically established family relationship pattern in dysfunctional family systems. In his book regarding parental psychological control of children, *Intrusive Parenting: How Psychological Control Affects Children and Adolescents*,¹ published by the American Psychological Association, Brian Barber and his colleague, Elizabeth Harmon, identify over 30 empirically validated scientific studies that have established the construct of parental psychological control of children. In Chapter 2 of *Intrusive Parenting: How Psychological Control Affects Children and Adolescents*, Barber and Harmon define the construct of parental psychological control of the child:

“Psychological control refers to parental behaviors that are intrusive and manipulative of children’s thoughts, feelings, and attachment to parents. These behaviors appear to be associated with disturbances in the psychoemotional boundaries between the child and parent, and hence with the development of an independent sense of self and identity.” (Barber & Harmon, 2002, p. 15)²

According to Stone, Bueler, and Barber:

“The central elements of psychological control are intrusion into the child’s psychological world and self-definition and parental attempts to manipulate the child’s thoughts and feelings through invoking guilt, shame, and anxiety. Psychological control is distinguished from behavioral control in that the parent attempts to control, through the use of criticism, dominance, and anxiety or guilt induction, the youth’s thoughts and feelings rather than the youth’s behavior.” (Stone, Buehler, & Barber, 2002, p. 57)³

Soenens and Vansteenkiste (2010) describe the various methods used to achieve parental psychological control of the child:

“Psychological control can be expressed through a variety of parental tactics, including (a) guilt-induction, which refers to the use of guilt inducing strategies to pressure children to comply with a parental request; (b) contingent love or love

¹ Barber, B. K. (Ed.) (2002). *Intrusive parenting: How psychological control affects children and adolescents*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

² Barber, B. K. and Harmon, E. L. (2002). *Violating the self: Parenting psychological control of children and adolescents*. In B. K. Barber (Ed.), *Intrusive parenting* (pp. 15-52). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

³ Stone, G., Buehler, C., & Barber, B. K.. (2002) *Interparental conflict, parental psychological control, and youth problem behaviors*. In B. K. Barber (Ed.), *Intrusive parenting: How psychological control affects children and adolescents*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

withdrawal, where parents make their attention, interest, care, and love contingent upon the children's attainment of parental standards; (c) instilling anxiety, which refers to the induction of anxiety to make children comply with parental requests; and (d) invalidation of the child's perspective, which pertains to parental constraining of the child's spontaneous expression of thoughts and feelings." (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010, p. 75)⁴

Research by Stone, Buehler, and Barber establishes the link between parental psychological control of children and marital conflict:

"This study was conducted using two different samples of youth. The first sample consisted of youth living in Knox County, Tennessee. The second sample consisted of youth living in Ogden, Utah." (Stone, Buehler, & Barber, 2002, p. 62)

"The analyses reveal that variability in psychological control used by parents is not random but it is linked to interparental conflict, particularly covert conflict. Higher levels of covert conflict in the marital relationship heighten the likelihood that parents would use psychological control with their children." (Stone, Buehler, & Barber, 2002, p. 86)

Stone, Buehler, and Barber offer an explanation for their finding that intrusive parental psychological control of children is related to high inter-spousal conflict:

"The concept of triangles "describes the way any three people relate to each other and involve others in emotional issues between them" (Bowen, 1989, p. 306). In the anxiety-filled environment of conflict, a third person is triangulated, either temporarily or permanently, to ease the anxious feelings of the conflicting partners. By default, that third person is exposed to an anxiety-provoking and disturbing atmosphere. For example, a child might become the scapegoat or focus of attention, thereby transferring the tension from the marital dyad to the parent-child dyad. Unresolved tension in the marital relationship might spill over to the parent-child relationship through parents' use of psychological control as a way of securing and maintaining a strong emotional alliance and level of support from the child. As a consequence, the triangulated youth might feel pressured or obliged to listen to or agree with one parents' complaints against the other. The resulting enmeshment and cross-generational coalition would exemplify parents' use of psychological control to coerce and maintain a parent-youth emotional alliance against the other parent (Haley, 1976; Minuchin, 1974)." (Stone, Buehler, & Barber, 2002, p. 86-87)

⁴ Soenens, B., & Vansteenkiste, M. (2010). A theoretical upgrade of the concept of parental psychological control: Proposing new insights on the basis of self-determination theory. *Developmental Review*, 30, 74-99.