

Matthew Fahrenbacher

A Tribe Apart Case Study

In the process of evaluating students' achievement and progress in school, many educational observers have analyzed schools in a vacuum. But what goes on inside the school walls are not the only factors affecting how students perform and behave. According to Steinberg, because culture seems to play a significant factor in academic achievement, "at least some of the roots of our achievement problem must reside outside our schools" (101). As illustrated by Brendon Lamont's and Ann Smith, the parenting styles of parents influence the relationship between parent and adolescent and the development of the adolescent. Specifically, Brendon's permissive parents and Ann's authoritarian parents have helped undermine their ability to achieve in school and be motivated to succeed in life.

The first glimpse of Brendon's parents is shown in "A Tribe Apart" during a dispute over his world studies class. The specific problem was supposedly with the teacher or the subject, Brendon doesn't seem to be sure himself, but instead of encouraging their son to plod through the difficult time or try to work out an agreement between Brendon and his teacher, Brendon's parents try to help Brendon get a new teacher (79). This is an early indication that his parents were more interested in making sure their son was happy and indulging his wishes than establishing high expectations for him and pushing him towards resolving the conflict instead of dodging it. With this initial description, Steinberg would say that Brendon's parents have a permissive parenting style. This diagnosis is confirmed in the instances where his parents find his illegal drugs. When his mom found his drugs, she only made token, hollow threats that he was in "big trouble." Instead of informing Brendon's father, the mother says nothing to avoid a conflict, another trademark of permissive parenting. Almost the same thing happened with his dad, who when finding his drugs told Brendon to take care of the issue without any consequences

or follow up to check for compliance. Brendon could get away with whatever he wanted.

This parenting style has several implications for how Brendon thinks and behaves. First of all, and most obvious of all, it has implications for his relationship with his parents. Because his parents are permissive, Brendon can expect to get away with more than he might under more authoritarian parenting, allowing him to push the boundaries of any rules imposed on him. This could logically allow him to take more risks and be more devious, and this is shown to be the case in his large drug trafficking network and late-night graffiti runs. This intern causes more conflict and stress within the family, as boundaries that are created to maintain family cohesion are always being tested. And because Brendon's parents are permissive, this stress is allowed to compound instead of being dealt with. The result is an unresolved tension between his parents and himself, damaging Brendon's relationship with his parents and the rest of his family.

Secondly, he does not internalize a system of respect for and adherence to adult norms, and has very little self control. From the start of his freshman year, he had quite a bit of disruptive behavior, and he only became more deviant in the years after. Brendon never obtains an intrinsic respect for playing by the rules that his sister does; although he respects his sisters accomplishments and ability to be "Ms. Perfect," he blames his rambunctiousness on his lineage, and hence on something beyond his control. Essentially, he has an external locus of control, so whatever happens to him is not his fault. According to Steinberg, Brendon could have come to this state of being because his parents did not demonstrate control, and so Brendon never internalized that control into self-control. Many times he tries to reach out for help, especially with his youth group, but instead of finding comfort in the group, he ultimately blames God for letting him down. His drug dealing, his bad grades, his family strife, and all his problems are external to him. With this type of mentality, how can Brendon ever resolve an important situation? His life has become out of his control, and whatever may be will be.

In a different way than Brendon, Ann has very little control over her life because of her

parents. Ann would be the first to admit that her parents are very controlling and one-dimensional in their decisions. For example, her parents were completely against Ann seeing her African-American boy friend, Ron, without any reasoning or discussion. As she described it, "People under house arrest get more freedom than I do" (196). In the power hierarchy, Ann is most definitely at the bottom. Her stepfather doesn't respect her precisely because she is still an adolescent, implying that anything that she feels and thinks is irrelevant. This is all evidence of an extreme form of authoritarian parenting. But unlike most authoritarian parents, there is no evidence that these parents have anything but their own self interest in mind and not the best interests of Ann. Without any respect to the emotional and psychological state of Ann, they order her around like their personal slave, ordering her to do chore after chore without any perspective of her life at school and what toll that may have on her. They only speak negative about her future, and refuse to help her with basic things, like FedExing a scholarship. Unlike Brendon who could get away with whatever he wanted, Ann was severely limited without clearing with her belligerent slave masters.

For Ann's relationship with her parents, there is nothing but tension and disrespect formed by this parenting style. They have arguments constantly that, according to Ann, out due soap opera, but for free. To avoid these confrontations, Ann goes behind her parents back to get things done, such as helping her friend get an abortion. So her parents control has actually caused her to rebel, although in subtle ways. On the other hand, she cannot bring herself to confront her parents over issues that concern her. On her prom night, she could have told her parents that she was going to the prom with her disapproved boy friend and left without their consent, but instead she decided to avoid the confrontation and stayed home instead. Essentially, Ann seems to have become "whipped;" she can secretly go against her parents wishes, such as in the abortion decision, but in public she folds like a house of cards. Of great concern will be her ability to deal with authoritarian individuals other than her parents. Will she be able to stand up

to them and argue her side, or will she become “fed up and put up?” Unfortunately, it seems that the later is more likely than the former, and Ann maybe hampered by this the rest of her life.

Additionally, this parenting style has created a great void in her sense of self-love. Just as Brendon did not internalize self-control because his parents did not show control, Ann has not been shown love, and therefore has not internalized self-esteem. But to help fill this void, Ann has shown love and put herself into the children she baby sits. In fact, that job is way for her to get recognition for doing a good job, something she doesn't get from her parents. Also, and in contrast to Brendon's parents, Ann's parents seem to be attempting a twisted intrinsic locus of control - everything is her fault, but there's nothing she can do about it either. Attacks on her ability to make money or get into a good college (“If you're going to work at Kmart you ought to start filling out that Kmart application”) feed into the tension between her sense of self and her parents total control (313). Ultimately, Ann's parents are attacking her emotional stability and attempting to undermine her ability to do anything well.

In the final comparison of an educational observer, what matters most is how Ann and Brendon perform in the classroom. In both cases, the results are less than optimal. For Brendon, his lack of respect for rules or intrinsic value for going to classes or intrinsic control over his life leads him away from school and towards illegal activities. Instead of just being a disruption, he completely cuts out of classes, or comes in deliberately high and out of it. Because his parents were very permissive, they never gave him consequences for deviating from their expectations, and so he continued to move away from school and pushing boundaries on his life to the limit. Ann, on the other hand, seems like she should be succeeding to her friends, but she doesn't get very good grades. The reason is precisely because of her parents. She was afraid of trying hard and “succeeding” only to find out that it was not good enough for her parents and being let down again. Essentially, her parents gave her motivation to not try to succeed. In short, if you don't try, you can't lose.

In light of the cases of Brendon and Ann, it seems clear that what happens in the school is not all that effects how a student will perform in school. Although there can be other factors, one important variable to consider is the parenting style of parents. Although Brendon and Ann have parents with very different parenting styles, both have some similar and other reflected problems related to their relationship with their parents and their development as an adolescent that could be attributed to those parenting styles. Because of Brendon and Ann's parents' styles, they're academic achievement and motivation have both been negatively effected.