

Valerie Joncas  
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Prof. Cathy McCarron  
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### **Atticus Finch: A Timeless Parenting Model in a Work of Fiction**

The Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee revolves around racial inequality and injustice. The gross inequality that existed for blacks in the South in the 1930's is illustrated when a black laborer is found guilty of raping a white girl despite his innocence. However, the well-loved novel discloses more than just the racial conflict. Looking beyond the obvious social issues, the novel offers an admirable and timeless father figure: Atticus Finch. Besides the fact that he displays an ethical and respectful personality who is fighting for justice, he also is a great Dad. Besides the fact that this character displays an ethical and respectful personality while fighting for justice, he also is a great Dad. Throughout the novel, he impresses the readers with his noteworthy parenting style. He seems to understand how to build a respectful, caring relationship with his children and yet execute his authority. Therefore, this work of fiction can be consulted to gain valuable parenting skills.

In the novel, Atticus raises two children, Jem and Scout, as a single parent. At the beginning, Jem is ten years old and Scout six. Scout, whose actual name is Jean Louise, struggles with the necessity of going to school while Jem enters the teenage phase and develops a desire for independence. Jem and Scout spend a lot of time with their best friend Dill who usually spends the summer in Maycomb visiting his aunt. Calpurnia, the Finches' stern but loving black nanny, provides a maternal role for the children. However, she does not try to be a second parent.

The novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* provides the type of helpful parenting advice one would find in a contemporary parenting guide. In fact, reading a piece of fiction to improve one's

parenting skills offers a nice change of pace. Parenting guides are often filled with theories, studies, and jargon, whereas in the novel, Atticus sets an example for parents simply by his actions. Compared to a theoretical parenting guide, a work of fiction can be a more interesting and more entertaining way to learn about effective parenting. Moreover, since advice for parents are embedded in the characters' actions, the reader might be able to relate to the parenting tips more easily. Therefore, a work of fiction lends itself to an alternative to parenting guides.

According to the parenting styles introduced by developmental psychologist Diana Baumrind, Atticus belongs to the category of "authoritative parents." Authoritative parenting is based on finding an adequate balance between responsiveness and demands. Authoritative parents respect the children's interests and express affection for them. They encourage the development of the children's own identity. Also, communication is indispensable in the parent-child relationship. The parents set reasonable boundaries upon informing the children about their reasons. Besides authoritative parenting, Baumrind also introduces "permissive" and "authoritarian" parenting. The permissive one includes affection but hardly any demands. In contrast, obedience and restriction define authoritarian parenting. The parents tend to overly restrict the children's autonomy (Grobman).

A research study on "Patterns of Competence and Adjustment among Adolescents from Authoritative, Authoritarian, Indulgent, and Neglectful Families" demonstrates the positive impact of authoritative parenting on children: "Results indicate that adolescents who characterize their parents as authoritative score highest on measures of psychosocial competence and lowest on measures of psychological and behavioral dysfunction" (Lamborn et al. 1). Therefore, authoritative parenting performs most effectively of all parenting styles. This conclusion can also be observed in the beneficial impact of Atticus' parenting style on his children.

Atticus teaches the readers a lesson in finding an effective balance between affection and discipline. In the self-help guide *Unconditional Parenting*, Alfie Kohn emphasizes, “Children need to be loved as they are, and for who they are... Unconditional love, in short, is what children require in order to flourish” (11). Throughout the novel, Atticus conveys his love for his children in words and gestures. For instance, Jem and Scout put all their efforts into building a snowman from snow that barely covers the ground. He unsheathes his love and pride for Jem when he praises him by saying, “I didn’t know how you were going to do it,...but from now on I’ll never worry about what’ll become of you, son, you’ll always have an idea” (Lee 76). Another time, Atticus and Scout talk about his legal case. At the end of the conversation, he tells her to crawl into his lap: “He put his arms around me and rocked me gently” (Lee 87). Both scenes account for Atticus’ genuine love for his children.

At the same time, Atticus sets strict limits since Jem and Scout tend to challenge certain situations. The fact that Jem and Scout mostly obey Atticus can be ascribed to his love-based discipline. When the children lurk around the Radley place, he tells them clearly, “...I’ll tell you right now: stop it. I’m too old to go chasing you off the Radley property...” (Lee 278). Atticus communicates his rules and reasons with respect rather than with anger. Kohn explains, “On balance, the kids who do what they’re told are likely to be those whose parents *don’t* rely on power and instead have developed a warm and secure relationship with them” (51). As a matter of fact, Atticus never uses physical force with his children when disciplining them.

Besides relying on love-based discipline, Atticus ensures that the limits are reasonable and fair. Consequently, the children respect him as a parent and the limits they are given. For example, even though he has to remind Scout to stop fighting several times, she eventually realizes that she would do him a great favor if she overcame her bad habit: “Somehow, if I

fought Cecil I would let Atticus down. Atticus so rarely asked Jem and me to do something for him, I could take being called a coward for him” (Lee 88). As a result of discipline based on love, Atticus is able to change Scout’s inappropriate habits.

Another key factor of Atticus’ parenting is the fact that he holds a lot of respect for his children. He is always willing to listen to their point of view. In fact, Atticus seems to treat his children like adults. Kohn elucidates, “The way many kids are treated suggests a lack of respect for their needs and preferences – in fact, a lack of respect for children, period” (49). Atticus, however, cares about his children’s desires, interests, and reasons. When Scout refuses to go back to school, Atticus inquires about her motives and comes up with a satisfactory solution for both of them: “If you’ll concede the necessity of going to school, we’ll go on reading every night as we always have. Is it a bargain?” (Lee 35). He lets his children be a part of the problem-solving process, which gives them a feeling of usefulness. As a result, Atticus and his children share a respectful and trustful relationship.

Atticus also succeeds in having honest and open conversations with his children. The famous guide *Dr. Spock on Parenting* advises parents “to be genuinely interested in their children’s questions, to give them satisfying answers, to make their children feel that there are no taboos regarding curiosity and learning and dreaming” (Spock 239). For instance, Jem and Scout confront their father with many uncomfortable questions when the townspeople from Maycomb badmouth the accused rapist, Tom Robinson. At one point, Scout wanted to know what would happen to Robinson if he lost his appeal. Atticus answered honestly, “He’ll go to the chair...” (Lee 250). Atticus never tries to hide the truth by saying “you wouldn’t understand” or “you’re too young to talk about that sort of thing.” In fact, Atticus himself thinks it is important to answer a child’s question because he explains to his brother Jack, “When a child asks you something,

answer him, for goodness' sake. But don't make a production of it. Children are children, but they can spot an evasion quicker than adults, and evasion simply muddles 'em" (Lee 99).

The effectiveness of Atticus' parenting style is observable in the behavior of his children. Throughout the novel, Jem's and Scout's personalities indicate care, respect, independence, honesty, and social competence. For example, as Jem gets dressed in the middle of the night to follow Atticus to the county jail, he explains to Scout that he is "[s]cared about Atticus. Somebody might hurt him" (Lee 167). Therefore, they have developed great love for their father. The fact that they spend all their free time playing outside with friends reflects their social competence and independence. Also, after Jem cut off every flower of the camellia bush in Mrs. Dubose's yard, he confesses his misdeed to Atticus. Jem's behavior reveals responsibility and honesty. Many of these valuable characteristics are introduced to Jem and Scout by Atticus.

Compared to other families in the novel, Atticus' parenting style seems ahead of his time. Dill's parents appear neither affectionate nor demanding. Dill feels neglected by his parents. In fact, he even runs away from home in order to stay with Jem and Scout. He reveals to Scout, "The thing is, what I'm tryin' to say is – they *do* get on a lot better without me, I can't help them any. They ain't mean. They buy me everything I want, but it's now-you've-got-it-go-play-with-it" (Lee 162). Dill does not feel appreciated by his parents. Consequently, their negligence impairs Dill's self-esteem. In fact, Dill tends to hide the truth about himself and his family by coming up with picture-perfect stories. His neglectful parents make him feel unworthy. Jem and Scout, in contrast, never even consider running away from home because Atticus provides them love.

Furthermore, the Ewell family, the poorest family in Maycomb County, presents a negative type of parenting. A father raises eight children in a shack on the outskirts of town. The

father's drunkenness and the probable domestic violence cause a very unstable situation. Even though the novel does not state clearly how the father treats his children, it seems quite likely that he may abuse his children. During the cross-examination, Atticus asks Mayella, the oldest child in the family, if she has any friends. She "frown[s] as if puzzled" and answers, "You makin' fun o' me agin, Mr. Finch?" (Lee 208). Therefore, the children of the Ewell family come across as insecure and socially incompetent characters.

In fact, Atticus' parenting style distinguishes itself from the norm of the nineteen thirties. The textbook *The Family Experience* by Mark Hutter describes how in the thirties many families struggled with the consequences of the Great Depression. The economic stress caused a significant increase in domestic violence (16). Even though the novel does not present this trend explicitly, all of the families except the Finches disclose some major problems in their way of parenting. As a matter of fact, the parenting style of the Ewell family is seriously affected by their poverty. Harper Lee seems to make a point by setting Atticus as a parent apart from anyone else; by portraying an impressive, timeless role model for parents, she might allude to the necessity of improving the parenting skills in our society.

Many self-help guides and parenting websites suggest that the most common parenting mistakes include not trying to fix problems, not being consistent, not having rules or setting limits, not setting a good example, not specifying the bad behavior, not putting an end to bad behavior, not having realistic expectations, or being unapproachable or uninvolved (Battaglia). Interestingly, Atticus' parenting style does not depict any of these problems. Even though the novel takes place in the thirties, Atticus teaches us parenting skills which would still be beneficial today.

Therefore, Atticus presents an admirable, instructive parenting style. Reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* can impart valuable advice in raising a child with affection, as well as appropriate discipline. Atticus sets reasonable limits which give Jem and Scout enough space to explore their identity. Nonetheless, the children are willing to obey his rules because he communicates his reasons to them. His love-based discipline maintains a mutual respect. Most importantly, he expresses his affection and pride to his children independent of their achievements. Jem and Scout imitate his good example as a loving, respectful, honest person; Jem points out proudly, “Atticus is a gentleman, just like me!” (Lee 113).

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