

# **Relationships Between Childhood Overindulgence and Parenting Attributes: Implications for Family Life Educators**

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**Paper presented at the National Council on Family Relations**

**Annual Meeting, November 2002**

If books mirror our culture, then we live in a culture of overindulgence. Book titles such as “Simple Indulgence: Easy, Everyday Things to Do for Me” (Eastman, 1999) and “Endangered Pleasures: In Defense of Self-Indulgence & Simple Luxuries” (Holland, 1995) reflect these widely held cultural beliefs. At the same time this societal overindulgence is encouraged, parenting books like “Too much of a Good Thing: Raising Children of Character in an Indulgent Age” (Kindlon, 2001), and “Spoiling Childhood: How Well-Meaning Parents are Giving Children Too Much - But Not What They Need” (Ehrensaft, 1997) warn parents about the effects of overindulging children. Central to these two conflicting messages is the question: “Is overindulgence a bad thing, or not?”

It is probably natural for all parents to want the best for children. To give their children everything they can so that they have a good start in life; but giving children “too much” is quite a different thing from giving them “enough.” Coles (1977) recognized this in an early study on the effects of “affluence” on children. The author states, “ ‘Privileged’ children keep struggling with their perceptions of what life is like in America for others, for the less fortunate. [T]he ‘privileged’ seem, in fact, frightened and guilty and confused and conflicted – in their own ways, victims” (p. xiv). Hausner (1990), a family therapist with extensive experience counseling

affluent families, also observed this victimization: “Just as poverty has a profound influence, so too does affluence. It creates distinct opportunities as well as problems...spoiled children with obnoxious behavior and superior attitudes, unmotivated adolescents who care only for their stereos and clothes, reckless teenagers living delinquent and self-destructive lives” (p.9). What then is overindulgence?

### **Defining Overindulgence**

Overindulgent parents inundate their children with family resources such as material wealth, time, attention, experiences, or lack of responsibility at developmentally inappropriate times (Bredehoft, Mennicke, Potter, and Clarke, 1998). Overindulged children grow up in an unrealistic world and as a result they fail to learn skills such as perseverance, coping with failure in effective ways, and getting along with others. Parents overindulge to meet their own needs, not the needs of their children (Bredehoft et al., 1998). For example, they may have grown up in a very poor family and as a result shower their children with excessive material wealth because they do not want their children to have the same experience. Is overindulging children synonymous with spoiling children?

### **Differences Between Spoiling and Overindulgence**

The concepts of “overindulgence” and “spoiling” are commonly confused. Spoiling is only one aspect of overindulgence. Swain (1985) and McIntosh (1989) state that the process of “spoiling children” emanates from the child’s needs resulting in excessive, self-centered, obnoxious, and ill-tempered child behavior. Whereas the process of “overindulgence” stems from the parent’s needs (Bredehoft et al., 1998). Overindulgent parents do not provide appropriate structure for their children. In addition, they give their children excessive family resources at developmentally inappropriate times, which prevents them from learning their developmental tasks (Clarke and Dawson, 1998).

## **Research on Overindulgence**

Whereas only a few studies on spoiling exist (Brook, Watemberg, & Geva, 2000; Garner, 1996; Ispa, 1995; McIntosh, 1989; Nelms, 1983; Robinson, 1978; Solomon, Martin & Cottingham, 1993; Swain, 1985; Wilson, Witzke & Volin, 1981) even fewer studies on overindulgence are represented in the literature. The existing literature on overindulgence can be categorized into two categories: (1) attitudes and concerns about overindulgence and (2) the relationship between childhood overindulgence and adulthood temperament. And, in the majority of these studies, overindulgence is not the study's primary focus.

### **Attitudes and Concerns About Overindulgence**

Three studies have investigated attitudes and overindulgence (Pietropinto, 1985; Young, 1986; and Cleveland, 1984). Pietropinto (1985) surveyed 400 psychiatrists asking them to identify how unhappy marriages effected children. Results indicate "emotional neglect" or "overindulgence of children" by incompatible parents to be among the major concerns of the psychiatrists surveyed. Young (1986) assessed the attitudes of 77 first-time mothers whose infants were one, six, and twelve months of age using the Mother-Child Relationship Evaluation Scales. Results found a significant positive correlation between participants' attitudes on the acceptance, overindulgence, and overprotection scales and their perceptions of their own mothers' attitudes toward mothering. Cleveland (1984) investigated overprotection, overindulgence, anxiety, and social competence in elementary children.

### **The Relationship Between Childhood Overindulgence and Adulthood Temperament**

Bredehoft et al. (1998) conducted a study designed to explore how childhood overindulgence influences adulthood temperament, it will be presented here in greater detail because it is devoted solely to investigating overindulgence.

In this first study (Bredehoft et al., 1998) 730 adults completed a author developed questionnaire on overindulgence with 124 participants identifying themselves as adult children of

overindulgence (ACO's). The ACO subsample was predominantly female (87.7% female; 12.3% male) and ranged in age from 19 to 80 years of age (Mean = 42.2 years).

The findings from this study paint a less than happy picture for adults who were overindulged as children. A high percentage of ACO's came from violent homes and homes in which parents were addicted to alcohol, drugs, work, or food. ACO's reported the following life problems which they associated with their overindulgence: not knowing what is enough, overeating and gaining weight, money management problems, parenting and childrearing conflicts, conflicts with interpersonal boundaries, difficulty in decision-making, poor self-esteem, poor health, and being involved in excessive activities. As a result of being overindulged ACO's reported mostly negative feelings: confused, embarrassed, guilty, and ignored.

ACO's acknowledged that both of their parents were responsible for the overindulgence followed next by mother. Compared to non-ACO's, ACO's were significantly more likely to overindulge their own children and engage in higher levels of self-indulgence which they believed resulted in gaining weight, feeling guilty, experiencing lower self-esteem, poor health and loneliness.

Surprisingly ACO's did not limit their overindulgence to simply being given too many things; instead they identified 17 areas of overindulgence (e.g., clothes, toys, lack of rules, no chores, being over-loved, being entertained), which logically can be classified into three categories: material overindulgence (too many things), structural overindulgence (lack of rules and soft structure), and relational overindulgence (over-nurture).

### **Proposed Research Study: NCFR Conference**

A web-based follow-up study was designed to further explore the relationship between childhood overindulgence, adulthood temperament and parental locus of control. Of the 391 participants 348 identified themselves as parents from 39 states and 12 countries outside the United States. The parent subsample was predominantly female (89.7% female; 10.3% male) and ranged in age from 26 to 95 years of age (Mode = 46-55 age bracket). In addition to a 14-item

author developed likert-style inventory on overindulgence, participants completed a series of psychological inventories: Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales (FACES), Olson (1986); Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), Rosenberg (1979); Dysfunctional Attitude Scale (DAS), Weissman (1979 & 1980); and the Parental Locus of Control Scale (PLOC), Campis, Lyman, & Prentice-Dunn (1986).

The results from this study suggest that overindulgence is a complex construct. This study empirically verified three types of parental overindulgence: material overindulgence (too many things), structural overindulgence (lack of rules and soft structure), and relational overindulgence (over-nurture). A statistically significant correlation was found between childhood overindulgence and three of the scales used in this study: the Dysfunctional Attitude Scale, Parental Locus Of Control and FACES (family adaptability). Significance between childhood overindulgence and family cohesion and self-esteem were not found.

This suggests that overindulgence is related to dysfunctional attitudes, external parental locus of control, and family adaptability. In turn, dysfunctional attitudes are closely associated with a variety of negative attributes ranging from the need for approval, being self-critical, perfectionism, poor social adjustment and depression. Parents who were overindulged as children subsequently believed in fate, that their child controlled their life, thought that they were less effective parents, had little control over their child's behavior and have a more chaotic family system. In sum, the results suggest that the effects of overindulgence carry over from childhood into adult life.

Researchers will apply the findings from this study to parenting, parenting practices, family life education and family life education practices.

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