

When 33-year-old Amber was a child, her mother tried to protect her from the world. She didn't allow Amber much independence, even picking out her clothes every day until Amber was 14. Although her mother's actions stemmed from love and a desire to protect Amber, they ended up having dire consequences.

Overindulgent Parents, Under-Functioning Kids

"Because of (my mother's) lack of trust in me as a person, I had an extremely difficult time integrating into adulthood," Amber says. "My social skills were that of a small child. My money management skills were nil. My knowledge of the world was zero."

Amber eventually became a drug addict who was unable to hold a job.

The most frightening part? Her story isn't an exaggeration. Indeed, it happens more than you might think.

The trend towards overindulged children, and their resulting problems, has skyrocketed, not just here in the United States, but all over world. This year alone, several prominent newspaper headlines spotlighted these kids: the three-year-old in London who purchased a £9,000 car on eBay; the 8,000 parents and relatives who accompanied 3,000 students to register at a university in China; the 16 million American kids ages 10 to 18 with a cell phone.

Despite the headlines, overindulgence is not a trait in which only the wealthy participate. Teacher Rae Brill sees it all of the time in her Illinois school- like when 4th, 5th or 6th graders who don't

have their math homework because their mothers didn't place it in their backpacks. Her school even had one mother of a first grader walk her child into the classroom each day, unpack the child's backpack for her, tell her the answers to the morning daily oral language sentence, take her backpack to the locker and then leave.

"What is she teaching her child? Someone will give you the answers?" Ms. Brill asks. "The school I teach is 70 percent low income, so it doesn't have anything to do with wealth."

Given the pervasiveness of over-indulgent parents, some might find it hard to spot. Just what is over-indulgence? And how does a parent know whether they are committing it?

Dr. Connie Dawson, an attachment-oriented therapist to adoptive families and co-author of the book *How Much is Enough*, says the test for over-indulgence actually is quite simple.

"When parents give children too much stuff that costs money, do things for children that they can do for themselves, do not expect children to do chores, do not have good rules and let children run the

family," Dr. Dawson says, "(those) parents are overindulging."

Hazards of Parenting Indulgently

While over-indulging children may seem harmless – or even, in some areas of society, good parenting – it can be hazardous to kids, warns Dr. Jim Fogarty, a clinical psychologist and author of the book *Overindulged Children*.

Children of overindulgent parents turn out to be angry, resentful and indifferent, Dr. Fogarty says. As young children, they do not show any signs of problems. But when they become teens, Dr. Fogarty says, problems ignite: the children grow distant from their parents, demonstrating love only when their parents give them what they want (and becoming angry and resentful when their parents don't). As adults, Dr. Fogarty says, people who were overindulged as children have few boundaries: spending, gambling, drinking or doing other things to excess.

"Overindulgent parents love their children," Dr. Fogarty adds, "but overindulged children do not love their parents."

Scientific research confirms Dr. Fog-

arty's assessment: a 1991 study by Dr. Susie Lamborn of the University of Wisconsin at Madison, in collaboration with professors of psychology from several other universities, found that teenagers with indulgent parents engaged in substance abuse and school misconduct, and were less involved in school.

Dr. Dan Kindlon, a professor of child psychology at Harvard University, presents similar results from his own large-scale study in his book *Too Much of a Good Thing*. Indeed, Dr. Kindlon compares the problems of overindulgent children with the seven deadly sins:

- Self centeredness – Pride
- Anger – Wrath
- Driven – Envy
- Not motivated – Sloth
- Eating problems – Gluttony
- Self-control problems – Lust
- Spoiled – Greed

His research finds that an overwhelming majority of teens from overindulgent families use drugs (58.9 percent) and display permissive sexual attitudes (21.3 percent), self-centeredness (32.6 percent), anger (24.3 percent boys and 31.7 percent girls) and disordered eating (23.5 percent girls).

“When these teens grow up, they do not have the psychological tools to prosper or the emotional maturity to deal with problems of everyday life,” Dr. Kindlon says.

No parents intend to harm their children, but when they over-function for them, they inadvertently rob the children of the opportunity to learn life skills – they prevent the child from learning the lessons that the child should be learning at each stage of growing up, echoes Dr. Dawson. For instance, if a parent does things for a child that the child is capable of doing for himself, the child doesn't have the opportunity to develop problem solving, responsibility, being a contributing member of a group and money management.

“When a parent over-functions, the child typically responds by under-functioning or acting out,” says Dr. Dawson.

Dr. Diane Ehrensaft, a clinical psychologist and author of the book *Spoiling Childhood*, says she has seen all kinds of over-indulgence in her practice, including parents who max-out credit cards to give their children everything but leave no money to purchase basic items for themselves.

“Based on my clinical work, I speculate that children who are over-indulged end up as adolescents until their 20s [and] do not become adults until they are well into their 30s,” Dr. Ehrensaft says. “These overindulged people find it difficult to de-center off themselves and care for another person in intimate relationships. They enter into the work role with an inflated sense of self, assuming they will be immediately promoted to managerial positions. They are shattered when they realize they are just a new worker who is not special.”

Understanding the Psyche of Parents who Coddle

All kinds of parents overindulge, says Dr. Fogarty. It cuts across all sociological and economic lines.

“It is a myth that the rich overindulge more than others,” he says. “When rich people do overindulge we hear about it because they do extreme things.”

While middle class parents may not spend \$150,000 on a debutante party, they do amass credit card debt in an effort to give their children whatever it is they want.

Dr. Fogarty points out that, in 2005, just one credit card company reported an average of 3,000 charges per minute every day between Thanksgiving and Christmas. While not all of these charges were by parents, Dr. Fogarty believes that many likely were.

For people without the means to financially indulge their children, Dr. Fogarty says too much permission is the indulgence of choice: low income parents often allow their children to do things they are not ready to do.

Still, middle- and upper-class parents do have to be more careful about guarding against overindulgence, says Dr. Rebecca Huston, co-chair of the Parenting Committee at the Texas Pediatric Society and a Clinical Associate Professor in the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio.

“Though overindulging is not always related to money, wealthier parents have to be careful against creating Paris Hiltons,” she says.

Dr. Huston specifically singles-out the trend of “helicopter parents”: usually middle- and upper-class parents who constantly hover around their children and try to fix everything from school

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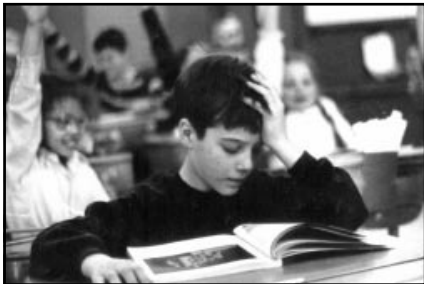
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OVERINDULGENT PARENTS

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problems to roommate troubles – even after the kids become adults.

“These parents find letting go painful and are over-involved in their child’s life right from the beginning,” Dr. Huston says.

Anne Pleshette Murphy, Good Morning America’s parenting correspondent and author of the book *The 7 Stages of Motherhood*, says she empathizes with the struggles of today’s parents. Because there are so many ways to raise children today, she says, parents don’t feel there is a “right” way to do things.

“Parents overindulge because of guilt—they feel guilty about choices they are making,” Ms. Pleshette Murphy says. “They worry that every time they say ‘no’ to their children, they hurt them”.

She adds that many parents indulge their children to make themselves look good.

“Our children are not billboards; they are not our walking advertisements,” she stresses. Ms. Pleshette Murphy recalls the time a mother called to announce that her daughter was accepted to Yale – except the mother’s words were “We got into Yale”.

Dr. Ehrensaft says that parents often assume the more children have, the more successful they will be—a notion that is patently wrong. As well, she says parents tend to “over-function” for their children at home to make-up for any stresses the child experiences in the outside world.

Worst all of all, though, Dr. Ehrensaft says many parents overindulge because they are afraid of losing their child’s love.

“I know children who threaten they will run away if their parents do not provide them with what they want,” she says.

Dr. Sam Hackworth, CEO of AskACHildPsychologist.com agrees.

“Parents often do things for their children,” he says, “because they want them to need them.”

Giving Parenting the Best Shot

Dr. Huston presents a thought-provoking irony: In America, she says, we say we strive for independence. Why then, she asks, do we hover around our children?

“Parents will have to step back and let their children make their own decisions,” she says.

But how can parents do that? How can they avoid overindulgent behavior and nurture healthy children? More to the point: how can they raise children of character in an indulgent age?

Dr. Kindlon, the Harvard University child psychologist, says it’s a matter of T.L.C.: time, limits and caring.

“It’s a three-legged stool that children need to support them,” agrees Ms. Pleshette Murphy. “They need limits to make them feel safe. They need responsibilities. Children need opportunities to fail and fall on their face. The indulgence issue comes from an unwillingness to let our children stumble. The most difficult thing as a parent is to decide when you need to protect them and when you need to let them go.”

What can help parents make this decision? Mary Jane Burson, a certified family life educator and a lecturer at the University of Texas at Austin, says parent need to keep their eyes on the big picture: the future.

“Parents should not lose sight of the lessons children need to learn in the longer run,” Ms. Burson says. “Parents should ask themselves about the kind of adults they are creating.”

This, says Dr. Ehrensaft, means using two words that are notably absent from many parents’ vocabularies: ‘No’ and ‘stop’.

“Using [these words] will strengthen parents’ bonds with their child,” she says. Further, “parents should expect children to be nice to them, to help around the house. Children need to learn to give as much as to receive”.

Dr. Fogarty concurs about the need for chores and work, citing a study that revealed children who did regular chores beginning at age four did those chores for the rest of their lives.

“Children without chores and responsibilities create Lord of the Flies syndrome,” Dr. Fogarty says. “That is happening to overindulged children – I am convinced that overindulgence is the leading cause of an increase in conduct disorders in our suburbs. Chores and work teach children to invest in family and community. Over-indulged children are only interested in getting others to pamper them”.

Amber somberly agrees, noting her own experience as proof.

“In my opinion, parents who coddle their kids, in whatever strange ways they do it, are trying to keep their kids from growing up and are in denial about the fact that it will happen eventually whether they like it or not,” she says. “They are hindering the natural emotional and mental growth processes of their kids. They are demeaning them as human beings and as their children”.

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