

## The Unwanted and Unintended Long-Term Results of Overindulging Children: Three Types of Overindulgence and Corrective Strategies for Parents and Institutions

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Overindulgence is much more than *spoiling*, a term used to describe unwanted and annoying behavior. Overindulgence describes a pattern of behaviors among authority figures that frequently results in behaviors characterized by dependence, irresponsibility, and disrespect/defiance (and occasionally all three) among those who are being reared or mentored.

No parent or institutional authority intends to harm children by overindulging them. However, three studies involving adults who were overindulged as children have revealed the negative impact of overindulgence (Bredehoft, Clarke, & Dawson, 2001; Bredehoft, Dawson, & Morgart, 2002; Bredehoft, Mennicke, Potter, & Clarke, 1998). The researchers have suggested the presence of a subtle and persistent societal drift in mores toward rewarding authority figures who appear caring while ignoring how well the developmental needs of children are being met.

The series of three studies was conceived in an attempt to understand the long-term impact of childhood overindulgence. The first of the studies in the Overindulgence Research Project (Bredehoft, et al., 1998) was designed to identify the operational beliefs of adults who were overindulged as children from adults who were not overindulged during their rearing.

A layman's working definition of overindulgence was derived from focus groups prior to the first study, as follows:

Overindulging children is giving them too much of what looks good, and for too long. It is giving them things or experiences that are not appropriate for their age or their interests and talents. It is the process of giving things to children to meet the adult's needs, not the child's.

Overindulgence is giving a disproportionate amount of resources to one or more children in a way that appears to be meeting the children's needs but does not, so children

experience scarcity in the midst of plenty.

Overindulgence is doing or having so much of something that it does active harm, or at least prevents a person from developing and deprives that person of achieving his or her full potential.

Overindulgence is a form of child neglect. It hinders children from performing their needed developmental tasks, and from learning necessary life lessons. (Clarke, Dawson, & Bredehoft, 2004, p. xvii)

The second study (Bredehoft et al., 2001) involved 74 college student subjects and correlated scores on the overindulgence scale, developed from the first study, with measures of dysfunctional attitudes (Wiseman & Beck, 1978), self-esteem, perceptions of family of origin cohesion and adaptability, self-efficacy, and self-righteousness. A list of the top eight beliefs associated with overindulgence serves as an example of the results:

- It is difficult to be happy unless one looks good, is intelligent, rich, and creative.
- My happiness depends on most people I know liking me.
- If I fail partly, it is as bad as being a total failure.
- I can't be happy if I miss out on many of the good things in life.
- Being alone leads to unhappiness.
- If someone disagrees with me, it probably indicates that the person doesn't like me.
- My happiness depends more on other people than it depends on me.
- If I fail at my work, I consider myself a failure as a person.

The third of the studies in the Overindulgence Project (Bredehoft, Dawson, & Morgart, 2002) involved 391 parents. Correlations between the overindulgence

scale and the Parental Locus of Control Scale are of high interest to anyone who works with parents (Bredehoft, Dawson, & Clarke, 2002). The 10 beliefs from the Parental Locus of Control (Campis, Lyman, & Prentice-Dunn, 1986) that correlated most strongly with responses on the overindulgence scale are

- What happens in my life is mostly determined by my child.
- My life is largely controlled by my child.
- My child usually gets his or her way, so why try.
- I let my child get away with things.
- It's often easier to let my child have his or her own way than to put up with the tantrum.
- Neither my child nor I is responsible for his/her behavior.
- I have often found that when it comes to my children, what is bound to happen will happen.
- My child has a lot to say about the number of friends I have.
- In order to make my plans work, I make sure they are congruent with the desires of my child.
- When something goes wrong between my child and me, there's little I can do to correct it.

### **The Means of Overindulgence**

Most observers suspect there is more to overindulgence than simply giving children whatever they demand. Three areas of overindulgence emerged in the data from the studies in the Overindulgence Project:

1. material overindulgence, that is, having too much and not knowing what is enough;
2. relational overindulgence, that is, having others do things for the child the child is developmentally able to do for him- or herself; and
3. structural overindulgence, that is, not insisting on chores, not having rules or not consistently enforcing rules, giving children too much freedom, allowing children to take the lead or dominate the family, and not expecting children to learn life and responsibility skills.

### **The Problems Associated With**

## **Overindulging Children**

The difficulties resulting from having been overindulged as children were identified by subjects in the initial study (Bredehoft et al., 1998). The most common problems experienced both in their youth and as adults, were

- trouble learning how to delay gratification;
- trouble giving up status as the constant center of attention;
- trouble becoming competent in everyday skills, self-care skills, and the skills of relating with others;
- trouble taking personal responsibility;
- trouble developing a sense of personal identity;
- trouble knowing what is enough; and
- trouble knowing what is normal for other people.

### **Recommendations for Clinicians and Educators**

The results from the study suggested that there are two major populations for remediation focus. The first consists of adults who were overindulged as children and generally seek counseling because of repeated failures in career and personal relationships, and/or because they are experiencing a generalized low level of life satisfaction. The second consists of parents who seek help because of concern about a child's behaviors or demeanor.

Both client populations benefit from mentorship by the counselor. The three types of overindulgence (material, relational, and structural) can be addressed as indicated by information gathered in the client intake.

### **Material Overindulgence**

Research subjects (Bredehoft et al., 1998) identified the major ways in which they were overindulged with material goods and activities that cost money:

- they were allowed all the clothes and toys they wanted;
- they were given lots of privileges;
- their parents made sure they were entertained; and
- they overscheduled their time with activities, lessons, and sports.

Helping the client(s) to identify family values

comes first. What does the family believe about priorities regarding things or activities that cost money? Do the parents understand their role in supporting the developmental tasks a child is addressing at each stage of his or her life? Do the parenting figures agree and are they supportive of one another? Can the parents confidently make and implement decisions in the best interests of the child? Can the parents confidently identify and interfere with what is not in the child's best interest? Can the parents put those interests ahead of their own to advance the development of the child?

The Test of Four (Clarke et al., 2004) is an invaluable tool in deciding whether or not overindulgence is the issue. These four questions can be applied to any situation to test for the presence of overindulgence:

1. Does the situation hinder the child from learning the tasks that support his or her development and learning at this age?
2. Does the situation give a disproportionate amount of family resources to one or more of the children? (Resources can include money, space, time, energy, attention, and psychic input.)
3. Does this situation exist to benefit the adult more than the child?
4. Does the child's behavior potentially harm others, society, or the planet in some way?

If any one of these four clues is clearly present, there is an overindulgence problem. Deciding on what is enough and learning how to say "no" and make it stick are two primary skills that help clients recover from the negative effects of material overindulgence.

### **Relational Overindulgence**

The overfunctioning of the adult and the corresponding underfunctioning of the child characterize relational overindulgence. Helping clients to replace overfunctioning begins with understanding the underlying concepts of reciprocity and responsibility, that is, with helping the clients gain clarity about who is responsible for what. Giving and taking in relationships should be balanced.

Once again, an understanding of what one can expect of children at various ages is crucial. Because the parents' job is to support and encourage the optimal physical, intellectual, social, emotional, and spiritual development of children, the basis for judging whether or not a child is overreaching or underperforming is a knowledge of development, per se.

A cornerstone of relational overindulgence is what

has been popularly known as codependence, doing for others (with an expectation of a reward) what they are capable of doing for themselves. Recovery involves helping adults identify and meet their needs in straightforward ways, rather than through rescuing children.

The answers to seven questions can help clients determine whether the effect of an action is likely to be helpful or rescuing:

1. Am I providing a safe setting in which this child can learn this skill?
2. Am I willing to let or help the child do this even though his or her distress may cause me some discomfort?
3. Did the child ask me for help? Or did the child accept my offer of help?
4. Did the child work at least as hard at finding a solution as I did?
5. Did the child say "Thank you" or express appreciation in another way?
6. Did I give help willingly, without resentment?
7. Was there a cutoff date on the aid? (A time when the child would accept full responsibility)?

### **Structural Overindulgence**

Structural overindulgence encompasses the ways in which parents offer security and safety to children. Setting boundaries with rules enforced by both positive and negative consequences constitutes the primary means of structuring. The adults who were overindulged as children identified five areas of "soft" structuring in their families:

1. they were not expected to do chores;
2. they were not expected to learn the same skills as other children;
3. they said their parents either didn't have rules or didn't make them follow the rules;
4. they were given too much freedom; and
5. they were allowed to take the lead or dominate the family.

For parents, authoritative leadership forms the basis for implementing secure structures. Diana Baumrind (1983) identified the essential qualities of authoritative parenting as high on support and high on structure.

A recent study conducted by a University of Minnesota researcher (Rossman, 2002), found that being involved in household tasks at an early age had

significant positive outcomes for the children when they became adults in terms of where they were along the educational path and career path, and of how they evaluated family relationships. Rossman found that having started to participate in household tasks at ages of 3 and 4 was a predictor of success in young adulthood. Being expected to do chores gives children a way to contribute to the family's functioning as well as provide the opportunity for children to learn life skills.

The other major factor in helping clients recover from being overindulgent or having been overindulged is the development of boundary-setting skills and the use of rules and positive and negative consequences to enforce and reenforce rules.

### Summary

By identifying in which areas overindulgence is occurring, counselors can consult with parents and educators and suggest alternatives directed at one (or more) overindulgence areas. Adults do not intend to hurt those in their charge, yet adult subjects said they experienced emotional pain as a result of having been overindulged. They also said they couldn't talk about their pain because of a general lack of empathy for someone "who had so much" or "who had is so easy".

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