

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

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between childhood overindulgence and parenting attributes (family cohesion, family adaptability, self-esteem, dysfunctional attitudes, and parental locus of control). Of the 391 participants 348 identified themselves as parents from 39 states and 12 countries. The parent subsample was predominantly female (89.7% female; 10.3% male) ranging in age from 26 to 95 years. Results indicate that childhood overindulgence is significantly related to dysfunctional thinking and lack of parental locus of control. Overindulgence is a complex construct involving three specific dimensions: material overindulgence (too much), structural overindulgence (soft structure), and relational overindulgence (over-nurture). Implications for parents, parent educators and family life educators will be made.

Method and Data Collection

Subjects

We used a web-based system collecting data from 391 participants (11.0% male; 89% female from 39 states and 12 additional countries). Participants were recruited in five ways:

1. participants attending workshops;
2. trained parent facilitators;
3. parents attending parenting classes;
4. a list serve for certified family life educators, and
5. word of mouth.

Psychological Scales (measures)

In addition to a standard consent form and demographic information, each subject filled out the following psychological scales:

1. FACES (Olson, Portner & Lavee, 1986);
2. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1979);
3. The Dysfunctional Attitude Scale (Weissman, 1979 & 1980);
4. The Parental Locus of Control Scale (Campis, Lyman, & Prentice-Dunn, 1986).
5. And fourteen author-developed likert-style questions on overindulgence.

Results

Question 1: *Is there a relationship between childhood overindulgence, family adaptability, family cohesion, self-esteem and dysfunctional attitudes in adulthood?* Yes and No.

- Family Adaptability, $r = .129^*$ yes
- Family Cohesion, $r = -.095$ no
- Self-esteem, $r = -.101^*$ yes
- Dysfunctional Attitude Scale, $r = .227^{***}$ yes

Note: $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$; these are weighted overindulgence sum scores correlated with scale sum scores

Top 8 Dysfunctional Attitudes Associated with Overindulgence

1. It is difficult to be happy unless one is looking good intelligent, rich and creative.***
2. I cannot be happy unless most people I know admire me.**
3. If I fail partly, it is as bad as being a complete failure.**
4. I cannot be happy if I miss out on many of the good things in life.*
5. Being alone leads to unhappiness.*
6. If someone disagrees with me, it probably indicates that he does not like me.*
7. My happiness depends more on other people than it does on me.*
8. If I fail at my work, I am a failure as a person.*

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Question 2: *Is there a relationship between childhood overindulgence and adulthood parental locus of control?* Yes.

- PLOC Sum Score, $r = .244$ ***

Sub Scales

- Parental Efficacy, $r = .206$ ***
- Child Control of Parent's Life, $r = .295$ ***
- Parent Control of Child's Behavior, $r = .144$ **
- Parent Belief in Fate, $r = .200$ ***
- Parental Responsibility, $r = .008$

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; these are weighted overindulgence sum scores correlated with PLOC scores

Top 10 Parental Locus of Control Beliefs Associated with Overindulgence

1. I feel like what happens in my life is mostly determined by my child.***
2. My life is chiefly controlled by my child.***
3. My child usually gets his or her own way, so why try.**
4. I allow my child to get away with things.**
5. It is often easier to let my child have his/her own way than to put up with the tantrum.**
6. Neither my child nor myself is responsible for his/her behavior.*
7. I have often found that when it comes to my children, what is going to happen will happen.*
8. My child influences the number of friends I have.*
9. In order to have my plans work, I make sure they fit in with the desires of my child.*
10. When something goes wrong between me and my child, there is little I can do to correct it.*

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Question 3: *Are there three types of overindulgence (1) Material Overindulgence (Too Much), (2) Structural Overindulgence (Lack of Rules, Soft Structure), and (3) Relational Overindulgence (Over-nurture)? Yes.*

- First, we found statistically significant correlations between the responses to “Do you think you were overindulged as a child?” and all thirteen Indicators of Overindulgence (Range: $r=.151^{**}$ to $.544^{***}$) (See Table 1).
- Second, we factor analyzed the Indicators of Overindulgence items to see if there were indeed three types of overindulgence, and if so, which items measured each type. The factor analysis verified our hypothesis by loading the Indicators of Overindulgence onto three factors - Factor 1: Material Overindulgence, Factor 2: Structural Overindulgence, and Factor 3 Relational Overindulgence (See Table 2).

Implications for Family Life Educators

Chores

Parent educators can use these research results plus the findings of Marty Rossman's longitudinal study to emphasize to parents the importance of children's doing chores.

Chores have three important functions. Doing chores involves learning many life skills. Doing chores lets children know they are contributing members of the family. Even though at first teaching chores takes extra time, in the long run chores done by children lightens the parental load.

Secrets

To avoid ridicule or teasing, many adults who were overindulged as children do not talk about it. They are often embarrassed by lack of skills that everyone else seems to have.

Parent educators can point out that children are not to blame for having been overindulged and can, with empathy, help adults gain skills they need, no matter how trivial those skills might seem to others.

Aimless Distraction?

Many parents are aware that their children may have too many toys, and parent educators can give suggestions for reducing the number of toys, particularly the toys that stifle imagination and creativity.

Many parents are not aware that over-scheduling can involve as much overindulgence as too many toys. Children need unstructured time to create their own play scenarios and learn how to structure their own time.

The Positive Side of Discomfort

Overindulgence comes from a good heart and often from a wish to keep children happy. Children do need to learn how to be happy. They also need to learn how to handle frustration. Parent educators can help parents realize that experiencing unpleasant consequences, following rules they may not want to follow, and not getting what they

want all of the time are very important experiences that help children grow up healthy and pleasant to be with.

Boundary Issues

Given the culture of overindulgence that presently surrounds American families; the studies can help family life educators help families to find their boundaries in the areas of material, relational and structural overindulgence.

Parent educators need to know that overindulgence occurs in three ways; material overindulgence (too much), structural overindulgence (soft structure) and relational overindulgence (over-nurture) so that they can refute the common mythology that overindulgence is only about “too much” and the same thing as spoiling.

Therapy and Referral

Because there is a link between overindulgence and dysfunctional thinking, and individuals who have high frequencies of dysfunctional thinking experience a greater frequency of depression; parent educators should have a ready-to-go list of counseling and therapy referrals.

When parents who were overindulged as children, sign up for a parenting classes, the family life educator should be aware that these parents will typically not know what is enough, overeat, have difficulties with money management, have increasing parenting and childrearing conflicts, have conflicts with interpersonal boundaries, difficulty in decision-making, poor self-esteem, poor health, and are often involved in excessive activities, and be prepared to respond appropriately.

It will be even more important for parent educators who are working with parents who were overindulged as children to be mindful of Bill Doherty's levels of involvement and follow them; otherwise the parent educator may slip out of the educator role and into the therapist role.

In Summary

Information on parents who were overindulged as children will help parent educators understand the challenges that this parent subset might experience.

The studies' results underscore the importance of parent leadership in families.

The studies' results give family life educators the underpinning for framing overindulgence as harmful to children (and parents!).

Table 1 Correlations Among Indicators of Overindulgence

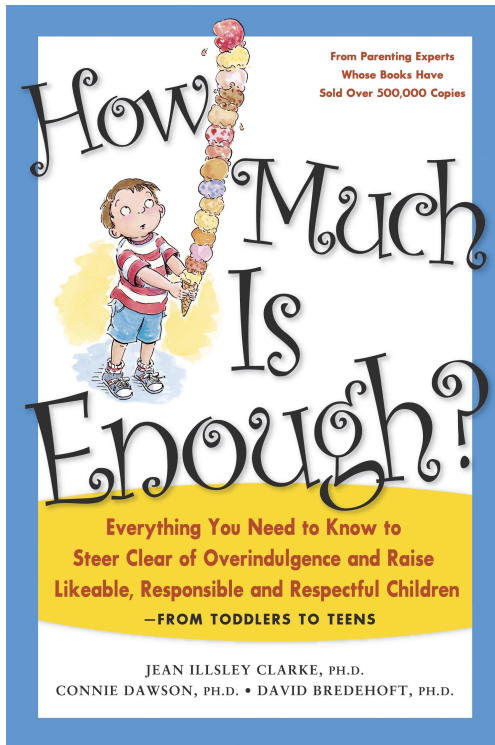
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Overindulged	-													
2. Did things for me	.430***	-												
3. Chores	.322***	.381***	-											
4. Clothes	.443***	.264***	.201***	-										
5. Privileges	.443***	.270***	.253***	.572***	-									
6. Toys	.544***	.298***	.211***	.513***	.448***	-								
7. Freedom	.370***	.210***	.254***	.250***	.496***	.253***	-							
8. Dominate Family	.469***	.261***	.299***	.281***	.363***	.254***	.367***	-						
9. Skills	.151**	.117*	.291***	.047	-.004	.080	.243***	.122*	-					
10. Parents over-loving	.488***	.374***	.137*	.181**	.162**	.250***	.206***	.275***	.088	-				
11. Rules	.254***	.148**	.487***	.139**	.306***	.149**	.506***	.300***	.360***	.082	-			
12. Enforce Rules	.259***	.174**	.422***	.121*	.279***	.164**	.505***	.313***	.333***	.096	.857***	-		
13. Activities	.273***	.169**	.015	.260***	.227***	.362***	.058	.084	-.071	.130*	-.146**	-.135*	-	
14. Entertained me	.469***	.222***	.088	.387***	.315***	.405***	.166**	.179**	.084	.333***	.045	.028	.465***	-

$n = 348$, Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 2 Factor Loadings for Indicators of Overindulgence

Factor	Indicator of Overindulgence	Factor Loading
Factor 1 Material Overindulgence (Too Many Things)	Clothes	.746
	Toys	.718
	Privileges	.767
	Parents entertained me	.638
	Parents scheduled me for activities, lessons, sports and camps	.593
Factor 2 Structural Overindulgence (Soft Structure)	Parents had rules	.901
	Parents enforced their rules	.874
	Chores	.588
	Too much freedom	.637
	Allowed me to take the lead or dominate the family	.389
	Skills	.499
Factor 3 Relational Overindulgence (Over-Nurture)	Over-loving and gave me too much attention	.745
	Did things for me	.707

Note: $n = 390$.



No parent gets up in the morning and says, "I'll overindulge my children today in order to muck up their adult lives!" But giving children too much of anything interferes with a child's opportunity to learn important life lessons, and the outcome is painful.

Adults who were overindulged as children participated in three research studies. They told the authors about the pain of not knowing what is enough, and the debilitating shame of being ridiculed because they were missing life skills.

How Much Is Enough? is a no-shame, no-blame book that encourages parents to provide an occasional indulgence without succumbing to overindulgence. The authors clearly respect parents and recognize the complexities of parenting in a consumer oriented, media dominated culture.

How Much Is Enough? helps parents recognize when they are overindulging and what they can do instead. The Test of Four gives readers a clear way to identify overindulgence. The many stories, all true, show what overindulgence looks like at different ages

and what to do instead. Every chapter invites readers to claim their good intentions and then to make sure that the impact of their behavior carries out their good intent.

Parents, educators and mental health workers everywhere can use *How Much Is Enough?* to help them identify and avoid overindulging. And children, even those who complain bitterly, will benefit and will be thankful as adults.

Early Praise for *How Much Is Enough?*

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How Much Is Enough? Everything You Need to Know to Steer Clear of Overindulgence and Raise Likeable, Responsible, and Respectful Children FROM TODDLERS TO TEENS is a timely book for all Americans to read and reflect on. In many ways we are the most overindulgent culture in the world, and this book provides a well-researched, groundbreaking approach to understanding the impact of overindulgence on our children, on our communities, and on our planet. The authors have provided a no-guilt/no-blame strategy for raising our children in a more balanced and loving way. Highly recommended!" Rick Ingrasci M.D., M.P.H. Director of Community Development BigMindMedia

"*How Much Is Enough?* is a long-awaited resource for anyone working in the field of mental health. In gentle language, it provides vital insight and information about the critical causes and effects that result from a range of parenting approaches." Pandora Lee Busfield, LICSW

"Parental overindulgence is finally receiving the attention it deserves-*How Much Is Enough?* should be required reading for every parent." Thomas Golden, Ph.D.

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