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CONTENTS

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Focus on:

- 11 Confirmation—A Developmental Understanding
- 25 What Teachers Can do When Overindulged Children Come to School.
- 37 On the Necessity of Integrating Affective Education Into the Regular Curriculum
- 43 Professors and the Profession; Twelve Turkish Mothers: A Reflection for the First Day of Class

What Teachers Can Do When Overindulged Children Come to School

by David J. Bredehoft and Chelsae K. Armao

Parents want the best for their children, but sometimes they give too much, they overindulge. What then is overindulgence? How does overindulgence affect children? As a teacher, what does overindulgence mean for you and your classroom? How should you respond to overindulged students? If overindulgence has a negative impact on children and can affect the classroom, teachers need the ability to make effective and positive changes to prevent it. The authors have three goals in mind for this article: first, we will define overindulgence; second, we will describe the research on how overindulgence affects children; and third we will offer suggestions on how teachers and schools can respond to overindulgence. Let's start by considering the following cases of overindulgence.

Case #1: The Failing Student

It is Friday afternoon and after a long difficult week teaching fifth grade you are exhausted and ready to go home for the weekend. As you are about to leave for home, you get a phone call from an angry parent. He feels you are unfair in the way you are grading his daughter and wants you to change her grade. He threatens to take the matter to the administration if you do not comply. What should you do?

Case #2: The Over-involved Parent

You start each school day by checking email. Recently, a mother of one of your second graders has been emailing and demanding that you report her son's assignments and progress daily. If you do not respond to her immediately, she gets upset. Everyday she wants to know in great detail how her son is doing in your class. What should you do?

Case #3: The Over-the-Top Prom

You are at a faculty meeting before the up-coming high school prom. One of your colleagues raises the concern that

prom has ballooned into a lavish extravaganza of limos, tuxedos, dresses, dinners and parties costing in some cases as much as \$3,000 per student. She wonders aloud, "Should we do something to restrain students' parents from spending more every year?"

Addressing the needs of students is part of the educator's job, but fulfilling all the wishes of children could be encouraging overindulgence. The Overindulgence Project (Clarke, Dawson & Bredehoft, 2007) studied childhood overindulgence and subsequent problems in adulthood (for more information concerning the Overindulgence Project see <http://www.overindulgence.info/AboutOurResearch.htm>). Overindulgence is more than being permissive with children and giving them too much, it also includes not having rules or enforcing rules (Bredehoft, Mennicke, Potter & Clarke, 1998; Clarke, Dawson & Bredehoft, 2004).

Overindulgence Defined

Bredehoft et al. (1998) define overindulgence as giving children too much, too soon and too long. It involves giving experiences that are not appropriate for their age, interests or talents, and meets the adult's needs rather than the child's. Overindulgence can also include using a disproportionate amount of family resources, or doing something or having so much that it actually does harm to the child.

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Overindulgence is also much more than spoiling. This definition of overindulgence identifies three types of overindulgence.

The three types of overindulgence include giving too much, over-nurturing, and too little structure (Bredehoft & Leach, 2006; Clarke, Dawson & Bredehoft, 2004). Having too much can come not only in the form of material possessions, but can be seen when parents schedule children for too many activities. Toys, clothes, privileges, entertainment, sports, and camps all fall under the category of giving too much. Over-nurture can involve over-loving (smothering), giving too much attention, or doing things for children that they should do for themselves. Having no chores, no rules, not enforcing the rules, and not expecting children to learn skills are all examples of soft structure. These three types of overindulgence can interact to affect child development.

Are children more overindulged today? Statistics on the amount of money children spend annually raise the question of whether children are more overindulged today than in the past. For example, children 18 and under spend \$150 billion dollars each year; Americans under age 25 are spending five times more money than their parents did at that age; U.S. teens spend on average \$80.00 per shopping trip to the mall (Ewold, 2003); and experts figure the annual tween-age (5-12 yr. olds) buying power at about \$85 billion (Strauss, 2004).

Parents Who Overindulge Their Children

Parents who overindulge their children have certain recognizable characteristics (Walcheski, Bredehoft & Leach, 2007). One noticeable characteristic is that they feel disempowered when it comes to parenting. This can come from a lack of parenting skills or not having adequate knowledge about parenting. Parents who overindulge their children are not satisfied with parenting, nor do they value it. Further, Walcheski et al. (2007) found that the more parents overindulge their children the more likely they are to use authoritarian or permissive parenting styles (Baumrind, 1978) or both. Authoritarian and permissive parents raise children who have poorer social skills, lower self-esteem, do more poorly in school, and are more likely to be involved in problem behavior (Coopersmith, 1967; Baumrind, 1996; Buri, Louiselle, Misukanis & Mueller, 1988). When parents overindulge, their children grow up without important skills they need in adulthood (Bredehoft et al., 1998; Bredehoft & Clarke, 2006; Bredehoft & Leach, 2006).

It is important to understand that overindulgence comes from a good heart. Parents always want the best for their children, but sometimes they overdo it. As Ada Alden says, "If you water a plant too much, it dies. Even if you are watering it too much out of love, it still dies" (Clarke et al., 2004, p. 37). While the intentions may be good, the risks are serious.

Risks of Overindulgence

All three types of overindulgence were found to have negative influences affecting children into adulthood. Bredehoft et al. (1998), Bredehoft & Clarke (2006), Bredehoft & Leach (2006) found that children who are overindulged grow up to be at risk for:

- not knowing the difference between needs and wants;

- needing constant stimulation and entertainment from others;
- being deficient in life skills which interferes with performing daily tasks;
- not taking responsibility for their own actions;
- not learning important social skills which lead to interpersonal boundary issues and decision making problems;
- lower self-efficacy (a sense of feeling incapable of dealing effectively with life problems); and
- overeating, overspending, and dysfunctional thinking (increased depressive thoughts).

Paradoxically, overindulged children can develop an overblown sense of self-importance which can lead to problems at school, on the job, and/or in relationships.

The Connection between Overindulgence, Parenting, and Adult Relationships

Overindulged children face a number of disadvantages when they become parents. Bredehoft (2006) found that the more children are overindulged the more likely they are to become parents who:

- feel ineffective;
- believe they are not in control of their own life or their child's behavior; and
- think they are not responsible for their child's actions, and that raising good children is due to fate, luck, or chance.

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When overindulged children grow up they are more likely to select a partner who overindulges them and vice versa. Then, both usually overindulge their children. Often there is dissatisfaction in these relationships stemming from money management problems, the belief that the partner controls the relationship, or ineffective parenting skills. Solving these issues is difficult, because adults who were overindulged as children tend to possess poor conflict resolution skills (Bredehoft et al., 1998; Bredehoft & Clarke, 2006; Walcheski et al., 2007).

How do I know if it is overindulgence?

How can teachers tell if a particular behavior on the part of an adult qualifies as overindulging a child or not? Clarke, Dawson & Bredehoft (2004) identify four crucial questions called the Test of Four: a very powerful tool used to determine if something is overindulgence. A “yes” answer to any of the Test of Four questions indicates that it probably is overindulgence. A “yes” to all four screams, “Look out! This is a risky situation. There clearly is an overindulgence problem.”

The Test of Four

1. Development? Does it interfere with the child’s/student’s development?
2. Resources? Does it use a disproportionate amount of resources (e.g., money, time, energy, focus etc.) to meet the wants, not the needs of one or more of the students/children?
3. Whose needs? Are you doing it to benefit you the teacher or his/her parent more than the student/child?
4. Possible harm? Does it potentially harm others, society, or the planet in some way?

Applying the Test of Four

Consider the angry father in case # 1 who is pressuring the teacher to change his daughter’s grade—is this overindulgence?

1. Will changing her grade get in the way of this student learning a developmental task? *Yes. If after you have reviewed her grades and have determined that no calculation errors were made, changing her grade would prevent her from learning a number of important developmental tasks (e.g., completing work, turning it in on time, doing high quality work, mastering necessary knowledge etc.).*
2. Will changing the grade use a disproportionate amount of resources (e.g., money, time, energy, focus etc.) to meet the wants, not the needs of this student and/or parent? *Yes. In this case not money, but the resources of extra time, energy, and concern will be expended by both teacher and parent.*
3. Whose needs are being met? Will changing the grade benefit the teacher, the parent, or the student? *In this*

case, changing the grade clearly meets the needs of the parent, not the developmental needs of the child. For example, it would meet the father's needs if his rescue was trying to spare her "feelings of failure and embarrassment" like he once felt in a similar situation. Further, if the teacher caved in and changed her grade it would be meeting the teacher's need to keep parents happy and not deal with conflict.

4. Does changing her grade cause harm to her, to others, to society, or to the planet in some way? *Yes. It is harmful to the student, because she is not learning both the curricular content and the developmental lessons she needs to learn and, if this type of overindulgence continues on a larger scale it may even harm the society because children will grow up and not have the knowledge and skills to function in a complex demanding adult world.*

Overindulgence and the Classroom Teacher

With more children being overindulged by parents and knowing that overindulgence poses risks to children, teachers and schools have an added responsibility for curbing overindulgence. There are changes that can be made, strategies teachers can use, and ways to respond to students who are overindulged.

How Teachers Can Respond to Students in the Classroom

Classrooms should have rules, both posted and verbally told to students. Having rules in the classroom is a way to avoid discrepancy. Making rules clear and understandable to students ensures that everyone is on the same page. Effective classroom rules support and encourage learning.

It is a teacher's job to set and enforce reasonable developmentally appropriate rules. At each developmental stage, it is a child's job to test the rules. Kids are going to push, and it is the teacher who decides where "no" is and to keep it there. Overindulged children not only test the rules, they push far beyond the limits. They believe the rules do not apply to them. The rules only apply to others because they believe *they are privileged*.

When creating rules, teachers should decide which rules are negotiable and which rules are nonnegotiable. Clear guidelines

and rules provide for greater consistency and predictability. With both negotiable and nonnegotiable rules students understand what is expected of them and learn to handle the consequence of breaking a rule, or falling short of a standard. Further, they will learn appropriate compliance, personal responsibility, and thinking skills. Consequences should be reasonable and implemented in a timely fashion, which will ultimately help to enforce classroom rules.

Enforcing rules teaches students important life skills and good character traits. This includes teaching respect for people and things within the classroom (e.g., fellow students, toys, books, posters, desks, or other classroom objects). Teaching students to respect others and property encourages children to take responsibility for their own actions. For example, if a student breaks something, it should be the student's responsibility to figure out how to replace it (e.g., paying for it out of their allowance). Teachers may also consider having children do chores within the classroom. Having students complete a responsibility chart encourages pride for the classroom and fosters a sense of being a contributing member of the community. Once classroom rules and expectations are clear, and respect is high among students, children can be gradually given more age appropriate freedom.

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It can be challenging not to intervene every time a disagreement arises in the classroom. One way to promote both independence and satisfaction in relationships is to encourage students to solve their own problems. Allowing students to come up with solutions helps to develop good decision making and conflict resolution skills, both of which will be useful later in life. However, being over-involved in conflicts prohibits this from happening. It can become a form of overindulgence. Helping students distinguish between needs and wants is another skill vital to development. By learning to differentiate, they will also come to understand why they cannot have what they want all the time.

How the School System Can Respond to Students

Being a teacher often means being in an unpopular authority position. Teaching is not a popularity contest and understanding and being clear about this helps prevent overindulgence. Remember there are three ways to overindulge a child (too much, soft-structure, and over-nurture), and that all three can be done simultaneously. Focus on one way in which students are being overindulged. It will be easier if only one thing is changed at a time. Identify which type of overindulgence is occurring and address it, then later address other areas of concern.

Next, involve parents in the process. There are three main things parents may not realize are important for students to experience. First, many parents try to rescue their children from everything. They need to realize that it is alright for children to experience some unpleasant consequences, and that these are necessary for learning. For example, the angry father in case #1 who berates the teacher and threatens to go to the administration if his daughter's grade is not changed does not want her to experience the unpleasant consequence of poor study habits. This is an important lesson for the daughter to learn. Second, parents need to realize there will be rules that need to be followed even though their child may not want to follow them. Finally, it is important that children learn that they will not get what they want all of the time. Teachers can help parents realize that these experiences help children grow up to be healthy and responsible adults.

One additional area should be considered when making systemic changes: an on-going dialog. Within the school, teachers should encourage on-going discussions with school administrators about what changes and policies need to be established. This helps both teachers and school administrators prevent overindulgence before it happens. For example, the upset mother in case #2 who e-mails her son's teacher daily—demanding to know his assignments and progress immediately—is being unrealistic particularly when most teachers have 25-30 students per class. Teachers would be overwhelmed if all parents demanded the same responsiveness. As a school, a policy should be developed on the use of e-mail with parents. Further, involving concerned parents and students in the development and review of this policy would be helpful.

Tips for avoiding overindulgence

- Practice and use the Test of Four.
- Decide which rules are negotiable and which are nonnegotiable. Enforce rules using reasonable consequences.
- Set limits and discuss them with your students.
- Have age appropriate rules adjusting the rule to each new level of child development. Then gradually give students freedom appropriate for their age.
- Show appreciation to your students for how well they follow rules.
- Let students make decisions appropriate for their age.
- Encourage your students to solve their own problems.
- As children demonstrate greater responsibility, increase their level of freedom.
- Teach the difference between wants and needs.
- Learn to say “no.”
- Practice saying, “You have had enough for now.”
- Teach respect for people and things.
- Become a good role model for your students. “Talk the talk and walk the walk.”

The task of effectively responding to overindulgence is possible through an ongoing discussion between concerned teachers, administrators, and parents. The tools of knowing what overindulgence is, as well as how to respond allows school, teachers, and family to raise competent and well-adjusted children who will eventually become capable and successful adults. **LEJ**

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