

Developmental Neglect – An ACE Risk Factor

by Jean Illsley Clarke, MA, CFLE, David Bredehoft, Ph.D., CFLE and Connie Dawson, Ph.D.

When we, the Overindulgence Research Study authors, started the research on adults who were overindulged as children, we thought it would be about too much stuff. We were wrong. It is much broader than that. Ten studies later, to our surprise, it turns out that we were identifying behaviors that lead to developmental neglect.

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study identifies traumatic events and conditions that limit and distort a child's ability to thrive. The Overindulgence Research Studies identified parenting practices that, while not necessarily traumatic at the time, can have lasting negative effects on development and health, if occurring regularly. Think consistent "problematic practices" instead of "traumatic events"

Resources continued from page 16

Publications

I am safe and secure: promoting resilience in young children. A short NAEYC article on the importance of resilience. Includes hyperlinks to resources with general information about resilience and organizations supporting children undergoing stress. <http://www.naeyc.org/content/i-am-safe-and-secure-promoting-resilience-young-children>

Brendtro, L.K., Brokenleg, M., & Van Bockern, S. (1990). **Reclaiming Youth at Risk: Our Hope for the Future.** Springer.

Steel, W., & Malchiodi, C.A. (2012). **Trauma-Informed Practices with Children and Adolescents.** NY: Routledge. A sourcebook of practical approaches to working with children and adolescents that synthesizes research from leading trauma specialists and translates it into easy to implement techniques.

Van Der Kolk, B., M.D. (2015). **The Body Keeps the Score. Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma.** Penguin Books. ✨

What is developmental neglect?

Developmental neglect is failing to provide the environment in which children can accomplish the developmental tasks associated with each developmental stage in ways that interfere with their ability to thrive. The overindulgence research points to evidence that chronic parental overindulgence is a source of developmental neglect.

What does the research tell us about what overindulgence looks like and what outcomes are associated with it?

If emotional neglect is about not feeling loved, developmental neglect is about not being competent and responsible as well as not feeling loved. Here are some typical quotes from adults who were overindulged as children.

About competence:

- I do not seem capable of dealing with most problems that come up in my life.
- I have money management problems.
- I don't feel competent as a parent/I have little control over my child.
- I don't know what is enough of anything, food, clothing, money, sex, liquor, entertainment, you name it.
- I don't feel effective.

Dysfunctional attitudes and thinking:

- I confuse wants and needs.
- I am not enough. I will never be enough.
- If they don't like what I did, it is their fault.
- I have difficulties finding meaning in times of hardships.

On parenting:

- Neither my child nor myself is responsible for his/her behavior.

Adults who were regularly overindulged as children agreed with the statements that they feel they are entitled to more of everything, and that they deserve more than others. Their life goals are wealth, fame and image, and they are not interested in personal growth, helping others, or building meaningful relationships.

In addition, they told us

- Love is conditional on accepting the indulgence.
- "I feel fat and still empty."



Jean Illsley Clarke

What is overindulgence?

This definition grew out of the findings of the Overindulgence Research Studies. According to Clarke, Dawson and Bredehoft in their 2014 book *How Much is Too Much? Raising Likeable, Responsible, Respectful Children in the Age of Overindulgence*:

Overindulging children is giving them too much of what looks good, too soon 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 family 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's elevator definition is "overindulging is giving children so much of anything that it keeps them from learning their developmental tasks, and has a negative effect on their adult lives."

Developmental Neglect continued on page 18

SPECIAL FEATURE

Developmental Neglect continued from page 17

How does overindulgence happen?

Overindulgence is frequently thought of as too many toys or as spoiling but it is much more. Adults who were chronically overindulged tell us: "I had too much freedom and too much independence too early," and "they gave me everything I wanted when what I really wanted was them." Study III identified the three ways overindulgence occurs.

1. Material overindulgence. Too many things, or lessons, or too much entertainment, or overscheduling. It leads to lack of appreciation and an overblown sense of entitlement.
2. Relational overindulgence. Overnurture, doing things for children they should be doing for themselves. It leads to a position of learned helplessness, incompetence and a continued belief that they are the center of the universe.
3. Structural overindulgence. Soft structure - No rules or chores, too much freedom leading to poor boundaries, lack of work skills, and learned irresponsibility.

Who does the overindulging?

Anyone can. According to the studies:

- Overindulgence occurs in all types of family systems in the Circumplex Model.
- Permissive and authoritarian parents overindulge more than authoritative parents.

- Fathers do more overindulging than mothers, but mothers run a close second. Grandparents, not so much.
- Overindulgence occurs at all income levels but in different ways.
- Parents who were overindulged as children are more apt to overindulge than those who were not.

Why would good hearted parents fall into developmental neglect?

That's the problem. Usually overindulgence looks so good, so loving, and so supportive, we do not realize it could be doing harm.

We want children to be happy, to have it all, and to have fun. It comes from a good heart. Also, our world is awash in pressures to give more and do more. Actually, we authors consider it the "New Normal."

It is difficult for today's parents to resist these pressures especially since we live in an instant gratification world where children are bombarded by marketers as early as age one. Parents can be afraid their children will not like them if they enforce rules and chores. Some parents are not comfortable seeing their child upset or sad they give in.

Sometimes overindulgence is related to a parent's low self-esteem. Sometimes parents are so stressed about life, they overindulge just to get through the day. Parents may

not even know they are overindulging. Life seems easier if we just go with the flow.

How is overindulgence relevant to ACEs?

Practitioners working to reduce the ACEs in families where there are known traumatic risk factors should also become knowledgeable about overindulgence because it is a form of neglect and research tells us it can happen in any family. It has become ubiquitous, and can be accepted as normal rather than being seen as potentially problematic. It can slide past our awareness as a risk factor.

What can CFLEs do to counter developmental neglect?

Since overindulgence is a form of developmental neglect you can:

- Inform yourself about overindulgence.
- Continue to teach about child development and the jobs of the child and the adult.
- Talk, teach, and blog about overindulgence and its hazardous risks.
- Tell parents about the free online course "Parenting in the Age of Overindulgence" developed by the University of Minnesota Extension found at: <http://www.extension.umn.edu/family/live-healthy-live-well/healthy-children/overindulgence/online-course-for-parents/>

What can you encourage parents to do?

Strong Structure

Be in charge. Be the parent. Run the family. Make fair rules, make them known, and enforce them.

Chores. Teach every child age 3 and up to do chores.

Okay? When you say "yes" or "no" don't turn the power over to the children by saying "okay?"

Love

Love always and hold children accountable. Encourage competence. Be able to tolerate children's discomfort.

Enough

Teach about enough. Make choices special. Always give enough. Sometimes more than enough. Never too much.

Developmental Neglect continued on page 19



Developmental Neglect continued from page 18

Intent and Impact

Make your impact match your intent.
Get your own needs met.
Help children get their own needs met.

In conclusion, we authors recommend recognizing developmental neglect as an Adverse Childhood Experience risk factor and identifying overindulgence as one contributor to this type of neglect. ✨

Jean Illsley Clarke, MA, CFLE, is an author, educator and researcher, jiconsluts@aol.com.

David Bredehoft, Ph.D., CFLE, is a Licensed Psychologist and Professor Emeritus, Psychology and Family Studies, Concordia University St. Paul, bredehoft@csp.edu.

Connie Dawson, Ph.D. is an author and therapist, sdawsonphd@gmail.com.

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National Council on Family Relations
1201 West River Parkway
Minneapolis, MN 55454
888-781-3991
info@ncfr.org

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For membership information:
www.ncfr.org
888-781-9331
info@ncfr.org