

## PERCEPTIONS ATTRIBUTED BY ADULTS TO PARENTAL OVERINDULGENCE DURING CHILDHOOD

**DAVID J. BREDEHOFT<sup>1</sup>**  
Concordia University – St. Paul

**SHERYLL A. MENNICKE**  
Concordia University – St. Paul

**ALISA M. POTTER**  
Concordia University – St. Paul

**JEAN ILLSLEY CLARKE**  
J.I. Consultants – Minneapolis

*Overindulgent parents inundate their children with family resources (material wealth, time, experiences) at developmentally inappropriate times. Surveys were collected from 730 subjects of which 124 identified themselves as adult children of overindulgence (ACO). Results indicated that ACOs were: overindulged most often by both parents; overindulged for a significant period of their lives; and overindulged due to parental issues such as poverty, chemical dependency or overwork. ACOs simultaneously felt both positively and negatively about the overindulgence, that is, they felt loved, confused, guilty, bad and sad. Overindulgence was related to physical abuse, sexual abuse, and addiction. ACOs reported being affected by the overindulgence into adulthood, indicated by symptoms such as overeating, overspending, and experiencing problems with childrearing, interpersonal boundaries, and decision making. Implications for parents and family educators are presented.*

Concerned parents often consult family educators and pediatric-care professionals, asking if what they are doing is going to “spoil” their child (Nelms, 1983; McIntosh, 1989; Wilson, Witxke, & Volin, 1981). Nelms (1983) indicated parents experience ambivalence and confusion when they do not know the difference between “nurturing parental behaviors” and “indulgent behaviors.” Nurturing behavior leads to

---

<sup>1</sup> Components of this research were reported at the meetings of the Minnesota Council on Family Relations and the National Council on Family Relations. The authors thank Alison Anderson, Adam Erickson, Kevin Schlieman, and Robert Cullen, Concordia University psychology students who served as research assistants on this project and Heather Dyslin who assisted in manuscript preparation.

David J. Bredehoft is Professor of Psychology and Family Studies and chairs the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Concordia University, St. Paul, MN. Sheryll A. Mennicke is Associate Professor of Psychology, Concordia University, St. Paul, MN. Alisa M. Potter is Associate Professor of Sociology, Concordia University, St. Paul, MN. Jean Illsley Clarke is Director of the Self-Esteem and Transactional Analysis Center, Minneapolis, MN.

To obtain a copy of the survey, contact David J. Bredehoft, Professor of Psychology and Family Studies and Chair of the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Concordia University, 275 Syndicate Street North, St. Paul, MN 55104-5494 [bredehoft@luther.csp.edu](mailto:bredehoft@luther.csp.edu).

healthy attachment between parent and child, while overindulgent behavior on the part of the parent leads to excessive self-centered and immature behavior in the child (Clarke & Dawson 1998; McIntosh, 1989). The construct of overindulgence has not been well represented in parenting research, consequently the authors looked to research in two related areas; the spoiling of children and parenting styles.

In the process of studying the lives of poor, vulnerable, and harassed children, Coles (1977) studied the effects of affluence. The author stated, “‘Privileged’ children keep struggling with their perceptions of what life is like in America for others, for the less fortunate. [T]he ‘privileged’ seem, in fact, frightened and guilty and confused and conflicted – in their own ways, victims” (p. xiv).

Parents and grandparents, friends and relatives, educators and therapists voice similar concerns about today’s children. Many believe children now are in a privileged generation which is showered with excess materialism. Hausner (1990), a therapist who has done extensive counseling with parents and children of affluent families, cited numerous problems resulting from affluence: “Just as poverty has a profound influence, so too does affluence. It creates distinct opportunities as well as problems...spoiled children with obnoxious behavior and superior attitudes, unmotivated adolescents who care only for their stereos and clothes, reckless teenagers living delinquent and self-destructive lives” (p. 9).

## **Spoiling Children**

### **Spoiled Child Syndrome**

Swain (1985) and McIntosh (1989), practitioners in the fields of mental health and pediatrics, independently identified the “spoiled child syndrome.” Swain (1985) suggested that this syndrome “occurs when the parent indulges the child’s every whim or wish” (p. 67). Further, it has to do with a parent relinquishing power to the child and results in children who are “obnoxious, ill-tempered, ill-mannered, selfish, and often immoral” (p. 67). McIntosh (1989) expanded the definition by suggesting that the spoiled child syndrome was:

characterized by excessive self-centered and immature behavior, resulting from the failure of parents to enforce consistent, age-appropriate limits. Spoiled children display a lack of consideration for others, demand to have their own way, have difficulty delaying gratification, and are prone to temper outbursts. Their behavior is intrusive, obstructive, and manipulative (p. 108).

Both definitions highlighted behavioral outcomes resulting from spoiling children. While one definition suggested the spoiled child syndrome resulted from relinquishing parental power to the child, the other believed that it is directly related to the failure of parents to enforce age-appropriate limits.

### **Spoiled Babies**

Solomon, Marin & Cottington (1993) surveyed 303 parents and developed a typology related to parental beliefs and the spoiling of infants. Type 1 parents (56%) in their study did not believe an infant younger than five years old could be spoiled. Type 2

parents (20%) believed an infant should be spoiled, and Type 3 parents (24%) believed infants could be spoiled, but should not be spoiled. In addition to identifying three distinct types of beliefs about spoiling, Solomon et al. found race, income and education differences between parenting types. Type 1 parents were more likely to be Caucasian and have higher incomes and higher levels of education. Type 3 parents were more likely to be African-American and have lower incomes and less education. Type 2 parents held belief patterns that fell statistically between Type 1 and Type 3. This study suggests that there were differences regarding parental attitudes concerning the spoiling of children. These differences were related to socioeconomic and education levels, as well as to ethnic groups.

Wilson et al. (1981) surveyed 531 parents in a rural Midwestern state on the subject of spoiling a baby. The survey defined a baby as a child younger than one year of age. Seventy-nine percent of the fathers and 66% of the mothers believed a baby could be spoiled. Parents agreed a baby was spoiled by allowing the child to have its own way (58% mothers; 54% fathers) and not setting limits for the child (53% mothers; 43% fathers). When asked to describe a “spoiled baby,” parents most frequently used negative terms: difficult to control, demanding, obnoxious, overindulged, and frustrated, while positive descriptions such as happy, alert, affectionate, pleasant, well-adjusted, sociable, content, and outgoing were used less often. Sixty-one percent of mothers and 56% of fathers indicated that the effects could be seen between the first and fifth year of life. Almost a quarter (23% mothers; 22% fathers) felt that the effects would continue to be seen throughout the teenage years.

### **Beyond Control Adolescents**

Perhaps, as Wilson, Witzke, & Volin’s (1981) study suggested, the effects of spoiling a child may last throughout adolescence. Robinson (1978) investigated child rearing and disciplinary methods of parents who identified their adolescent boys as serious control problems. The study matched boys on social and personal characteristics from two family groups: 15 families in which the adolescent boy was on probation with juvenile authorities for failure to obey his parents, and 15 families in which the adolescent boy was reported by his parents to be well behaved. “Parents of the beyond control adolescents were reported to be more inconsistent in setting and enforcing rules, less likely to praise, encourage, and show interest in their adolescents, and to be higher in hostile detachment” (p. 109).

Even though Robinson (1978) was not investigating the “spoiling of adolescents” per se, the results of the study lent support to the notion that there may be a link between parenting style and beyond control adolescent behavior. A parenting style that is inconsistent in setting and enforcing rules, hostile, and non-nurturing, may encourage “out of control” or “spoiled children.”

### **Parenting Styles**

How and to what extent parents sought to control their children has been one of the most heavily researched aspects of parenting. Baumrind (1966, 1983, 1991, 1996) and Rohner (1986, 1994) identified four parenting styles: authoritarian, authoritative, rejecting-neglecting, and permissive.

These four parenting styles were organized along two dimensions: parental responsiveness to children and parental demandingness of children. “Responsiveness refers to the extent to which parents intentionally foster individuality and self-assertion by being attuned, supportive, and acquiescent to children’s needs and demands” (Baumrind, 1996, p. 410). Salient features of parental responsiveness include warmth, clear communication, reciprocity, and attachment. “Demandingness refers to the claims that parents make on children to become integrated into the family and community by their maturity expectations, supervision, disciplinary efforts, and willingness to confront a disruptive child” (Baumrind, 1996, p. 411). Salient features of demandingness include confrontation, monitoring, and consistent contingent discipline.

According to Baumrind (1996) authoritarian parents were high on demandingness and low on responsiveness, imposed rules and standards and expected obedience and to control their children by using punishment to ensure compliance. Parents who used this style restricted autonomy so that their children’s self-will was overcome. Authoritative parents are high on both responsive and demanding dimensions. They set limits and consistently enforced them while explaining the reasons. With older children they encouraged open discussion, valuing both self-will and conformity. Rejecting-neglecting parents were detached from their children. They were not supportive and nurturant, and they placed few, if any, demands on their child’s behavior (Rohner, 1986). Permissive parents imposed few demands on their children for orderly conduct. Baumrind (1966) described child-centered permissive parents as high on responsiveness and low on demandingness. They allowed their children to make choices. They were supportive and nurturant, but avoided exercising control over their child’s behavior. Research (Coopersmith, 1967; Baumrind, 1983, 1991; Buri, Louiselle, Misukanis, and Mueller, 1988) suggested that warm, concerned, authoritative parents raised children with the highest self-esteem, self-reliance, resilience, optimism, maturity, and social competence, whereas authoritarian, rejecting-neglecting, and permissive parenting were associated with a variety of childhood problems including lack of self-assertion, lower cognitive competence, lower levels of individuation, social consciousness and autonomy, and external locus of control (Baumrind, 1983, 1991). What is overindulgence and when does parenting turn into overindulgence? How does overindulgence differ from spoiling children? Are Baumrind’s “permissive parents” overindulgent parents?

### **Defining Overindulgence**

Following a review of the literature and in-depth interviews with individuals who identified themselves as being overindulged as children, the authors developed a definition of overindulgence, which was used to frame this research. Overindulgent parents inundate their children with family resources such as material wealth, time, experiences, and lack of responsibility. They give children too much of what looks good, too soon, too long and at developmentally inappropriate times. Overindulgent parents may overindulge to meet their own needs, not the needs of their children. For example, they may have grown up in poverty and do not want their child to experience the same. When children are overindulged, they develop in an environment which is not realistic since they do not learn skills such as perseverance, coping with failure in effective ways, and compromising. Because overindulgence hinders children from completing their

developmental tasks and prevents them from learning necessary life lessons, it can be conceptualized as a form of child neglect.

### **Overindulgence Compared to Spoiling Children**

As reported earlier, there is no one definition of what it means to “spoil” a child (Swain, 1985; McIntosh, 1989). However, some common elements may be found in the existing definitions. Swain (1985) and McIntosh (1989) assumed the process of “spoiling children” stemmed from the child’s needs, not the parent’s. Both definitions (Swain, 1985; McIntosh, 1989) suggested that “spoiling” resulted in excessive, self-centered, obnoxious, and ill-tempered child behavior. In addition, spoiling a child resulted from the relinquishment of parental power, and the failure of parents to enforce consistent age-appropriate limits.

In contrast, the process of overindulgence stems from the parent’s needs, not the child’s. Overindulgent parents do not provide their children with necessary structure. In addition, they shower them with family resources at developmentally inappropriate times. This hinders children from completing their developmental tasks. Overindulgence can be considered a form of child neglect.

### **Overindulgence Compared to Permissive Parenting**

At the heart of this investigation is overindulgence. Is Baumrind’s “permissive parent” the same as the “overindulgent parent?” We believe not. We assert that not all permissive parents are overindulgent. Baumrind’s (1996) permissive parent type focused on the failure to enforce consistent, age-appropriate limits, which more closely fits the definition of “spoiling” children, whereas, the overindulgent parent type focuses on giving an overabundance of resources to children such as attention, material goods, time, and experiences. These actions meet parental needs, and deprive children of completing their developmental tasks.

## **Purpose**

The current study was designed to begin the development of a knowledge base about overindulgence. First, characteristics of adult children who identified themselves as being overindulged (ACOs) are described. Then, the adults’ perceptions of overindulgence and its effects are provided. Next, comparisons between adults who were overindulged as children and those who were not are made. Specifically, the two groups are compared on their own parenting styles, their self-indulgence, and the types of relationships they seek out as adults. Using results from these investigations, recommendations for parents and parent educators are made.

## **Method**

### **Sample Description**

Participants for the study were selected through a convenience sampling from four groups: participants attending workshops on overindulgence or other family related topics; trained parent facilitators; parents attending parenting classes; and students in psychology classes at a small private midwestern college. Surveys were completed by 730 subjects (85.5% female and 14.5% male). Participants’ ages ranged from 17 to 83 (Mean = 42.8 years). Of the 730 participants, 124 identified themselves as adult children

of overindulgence (ACOs). The ACO subsample was 87.7% females and 12.3% males. ACOs ranged from 19 to 80 years of age (Mean = 42.2 years).

### **Questionnaire and Procedures**

The questionnaire for this study was developed by the authors, following a series of in-depth interviews with self-identified ACOs. The survey was then reviewed and field-tested in a workshop setting. Respondents were asked to answer questions on background demographic characteristics and then they read the following definition of overindulgence which the authors had developed from interviews with adult children of overindulgence:

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

Parents who overindulge give a disproportionate amount of family resources to one or more children in a way that appears to meet the children's needs but does not. Overindulged children experience scarcity in the midst of plenty. They have so much of something that it does active harm or at least stagnates achieving their full potential. Overindulgence is a form of child neglect. It hinders children from doing their developmental tasks and from learning necessary life lessons.

After reading the definition, respondents categorized themselves as being overindulged or not indulged as children. Subjects who identified themselves as overindulged answered both closed and open-ended questions concerning their own overindulgence, then proceeded to general questions on overindulgence. Participants not experiencing overindulgence only answered general questions on overindulgence. Sample closed and open-ended questions included: "Was there physical violence toward you in your family?" "Check all of the following areas in which you experienced overindulgence: love, toys, clothes, privileges, lessons, summer camps, time with parents, holidays, sports, freedom, drugs, entertainment, no consistent chores expected, not having to learn skills that were expected of other children, not having to follow the rules, being allowed to take the lead or dominate the family, and having things done for me that I could or should do for myself."

## **Results**

Descriptive characteristics of the ACO subsample (N=124) and their perceptions of their overindulgence are provided first, followed by comparisons between adults who were overindulged as children and those who were not.

### **Demographic Characteristics**

ACOs reported high levels of education. Their family of origin was most commonly identified as dual parent with a slight trend toward higher levels of

Characteristic	Frequency
<u>Age</u>	
41-50 (Mode)	42%
<hr/>	
Characteristic	Percentage
<u>Sex</u>	
Male	12%
Female	88%
<u>Education</u>	
≤ 12th Grade	27%
B.A.	38%
M.A.	29%
Ph.D.	2%
Trade School	3%
<u>Perceived amount of money compared to other Families when growing up</u>	
A whole lot more money	7%
More money	28%
About the same amount of money	44%
Less money	17%
A whole lot less money	5%
<u>Family of origin</u>	
Two-parent	87%
Single parent	7%
Stepfamily	2%
Adoptive parent/Other relative	3%
<u>Number of children in family of origin</u>	
One	6%
Two	21%
Three	28%
Four	22%
Five	11%
Six	12%
<hr/>	
*n = 124	

family income. See Table 1 for additional demographic information. A substantial percentage (27%) of ACOs indicated that physical violence was present in their childhood homes. Of those reporting physical violence, 30% were spanked, 50% were hit with belts, sticks or other objects, and 20% were beaten.

The following quotes tell their stories. “My father threatened me a lot and beat me until I was temporarily paralyzed when I was young.” “My mother would lose control and hit us with objects such as a vacuum cleaner hose, shoes, hair brushes and a

yard stick.” “Sometimes we were spanked with a strap. A few times I was slapped across the face, and a few times hit until I was black and blue.” Seventy-two percent of ACOs reported psychological abuse. Psychological abuse included ridiculing, shaming, discounting and withholding love. Again, narrative data reflect these parent-child interactions: “My dad made fun of me when I made a mistake and called me stupid. I felt shamed.” “My father frequently ridiculed my abilities. He also withheld love, while my mother overcompensated in the opposite direction.” Finally, 15% of ACOs reported being sexually abused by a family member.

When ACOs were asked if there was addiction in their family of origin, 51% responded “yes.” Of those saying “yes,” a majority indicated the addiction was based on alcohol (66%), drugs (10%), work (10%), food (9%), perfectionism (2%), codependency (2%), and sex (2%).

<u>Areas of Overindulgence*</u>	
Percentage	Area
53%	Having things done for me that I could do or should do for myself
53%	No consistent chores expected
41%	Clothes
36%	Privileges
35%	Toys
32%	Freedom
32%	Being allowed to take lead or dominate in the family
32%	Not having to learn skills that were expected of other children
23%	Love
23%	Not having to follow rules
22%	Lessons
18%	Entertainment
17%	Holidays
14%	Summer camps
12%	Time with parents
10%	Sports
8%	Drugs

\*n = 124. Subjects could select more than one response.

### Perceptions of Overindulgence

The largest number of ACOs reported being overindulged by both parents (43%), followed closely by being indulged by mothers only (42%). Far fewer ACOs identified fathers only (11%), grandmothers only (4%), and grandfathers only (1%) as overindulgent. Overindulgence does not stop with the end of childhood. Thirty-nine percent of ACOs reported overindulgence continuing through adolescence, 9% through

young adulthood, and 9% through later adulthood; while 22% reported being overindulged throughout life with the indulgence still continuing.

ACOs reported being indulged in a variety of ways. Areas of indulgence cited most frequently included having things done for them (53%), having no consistent chores (53%), being given clothes (41%), being allowed privileges (35%), and being given toys (35%). See Table 2 for additional information.

More than half of the ACOs (57%) indicated that the overindulgence appeared to be related to another life event. Most frequently identified events were parental issues such as chemical dependency or guilt, the death of a family member, and illness or other medical issues relative to the child. See Table 3 for additional information.

Table 3

Life Events Related to Overindulgence\*

Percentage	Events
48%	Issue stemming from parent (poverty, guilt, chemical dependency, worked all of the time etc.)
18%	Death of a loved one (sibling, parent etc.)
15%	Illness
10%	Birth order
5%	Holidays
3%	A reward for when I was good
2%	Lack of communication

\*n = 62.

**Perceptions of the Effects of Overindulgence**

ACOs exhibited a mixture of positive and negative feelings as a result of being overindulged. A high percentage (48%) reported feeling loved, and 28% reported feeling good because they got everything they wanted, but 44% felt confused, while 31% felt guilty, bad and sad. See Table 4 for additional information.

Overindulgence appears to affect individuals well into adulthood. The great majority (71%) of the overindulged subjects reported having difficulty knowing what is enough, or what is normal as adults. Participants' comments confirm this: "I have extreme difficulty making decisions." "I need praise and material reward to feel worthy." "I don't have to grow up because other people will take care of me." "I feel like I need lots of things to feel good about myself." "I'm unlovable." "I have to buy gifts to be loved." "I constantly need outside affirmation from my friends." ACOs who reported difficulty knowing what is enough were asked to identify the adult situations that cause them the most difficulty. Most subjects reported the area of food (21%), followed by spending money and buying gifts (17%), parenting/child-rearing (17%), feelings of what's normal (14%), conflict with interpersonal boundaries and relationships (12%),

Table 4

Feelings Resulting from Overindulgence\*

Percentage	Feelings
48%	I felt loved
44%	I felt confused because it didn't feel right but couldn't complain because how can I fault someone who does so much for me
40%	I felt embarrassed because at times I was expected to know some skills that I never had to learn
31%	I felt guilty, bad, sad
29%	I felt good at the time, but later I felt ashamed
28%	I felt good because I got everything I wanted
27%	I felt embarrassed because I knew it wasn't right
23%	I felt bad because other kids didn't get what I did
19%	No matter how much I got I never got enough so I felt sad
15%	I felt good because I got to decide about everything
15%	I felt bad because the other kids made fun of me
14%	I felt embarrassed because other kids didn't have stuff
13%	I felt ignored
13%	I felt confused
11%	I felt embarrassed because other kids teased me
11%	No matter how much I got I never got enough, so I felt mad

\*n = 124. Subjects could select more than one response.

decision making (11%), and excessive activities such as working, going to school, exercising, playing and having fun (9%).

When asked which skills they feel are deficient because they did not learn them as children, ACOs open-ended responses were coded into the following categories: communication, interpersonal, and relationship skills (31%), domestic and home skills (13%), mental and personal health skills (12%), decision making skills (11%), money and time management skills (10%), and ability to be responsible (8%).

**ACOs Compared to Non-indulged Adult Children**

ACOs reported significantly greater indulgence of their own children than did the non-indulged subjects ( $\chi^2(3) = 40.92, p \leq .001$ ). In addition to overindulging their own children, ACOs reported higher levels of overindulging themselves than did subjects who were not overindulged by their parents ( $\chi^2(3) = 39.1, p \leq .001$ ). This self-indulgence resulted in gaining weight (16% of ACO respondents), feeling guilty (12%), and experiencing lower self-esteem (6%), poor health (5.6%), and loneliness (4%).

Finally, subjects who were overindulged as children reported being less likely to have had an extended adult relationship with someone who overindulged them than did subjects who were not overindulged ( $\chi^2(1) = 19.57, p \leq .001$ ). See Table 5 for additional comparative data.

Table 5

Number of Overindulged and Non-indulged Subjects Reporting Tendency to Overindulge Their Own Offspring, to Overindulge Themselves, and to Seek Out Indulgent Relationships as Adults\*

	ACO		ACO	
	Subsample		Subsample	
	Frequency/Percentage		Frequency/Percentage	
<u>Overindulge own offspring?</u>				
Never	3	(3%)	38	(8%)
Seldom	16	(16%)	165	(35%)
Sometimes	60	(60%)	241	(52%)
Often	21	(21%)	23	(23%)
	N =	100	N =	467
<u>Overindulge self?</u>				
Never	8	(7%)	90	(15%)
Seldom	29	(24%)	229	(39%)
Sometimes	61	(50%)	239	(40%)
Often	24	(20%)	33	(6%)
	N =	122	N =	591
<u>Extended adult indulgent relationship?</u>				
Yes	55	(46%)	394	(68%)
No	64	(54%)	189	(32%)
	N =	119	N =	583

\*Not all respondents answered all questions.

## Discussion

Individuals self-identified as overindulged children reported experiencing negative effects as a result of the indulgence, not only while it was occurring, but also into adulthood.

One of the most consistent findings of this study was subjects attributing overindulgence to inconsistent family environments, including homes in which abuse and neglect were common. Although subjects reported some positive emotions while being indulged, the indulgence produced negative feelings at the same time. Such ambivalent and inconsistent feelings have been found to be difficult for children to interpret and have a tendency to lead to feelings of insecurity and chaos (Sroufe, Fox & Pancake, 1983).

Reports of the high levels of physical and psychological violence in the households where overindulgence occurred were disturbing. More than a fourth of the ACO sample (27%) reported physical violence in their childhood homes. This is substantially higher than reported national figures. The United States Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect (1990) indicated that 2.5 percent of American children are maltreated each year, and child abuse accounts for approximately 14 percent of the reported cases of child maltreatment nationally. Such violence always leaves a mark on its victims (Malinosky-Rummell & Hansen, 1993), but in families where it is coupled

with overindulgence, the negative effect may be greater, again because of the difficulty children have in predicting inconsistent parental response.

Since participants in the survey indicated that the overindulgence had negative effects, it is disturbing that they were much more likely to overindulge both their own children and themselves compared to the non-indulged subjects. Clearly, preventative intervention from family and parent education programs for parents who are ACOs is warranted.

One surprising finding was that ACOs reported being significantly less likely to seek out and maintain additional overindulgent relationships in adulthood than did the non-indulged subjects. This may indicate that ACOs are able to recognize the negative impact of indulgent relationships and while they seemingly are unable to avoid overindulging their own children or themselves, they do make efforts to avoid relationships with others who would overindulge them.

Finally, a striking finding of this study was that the majority of the overindulged and non-indulged subjects reported that their parents did not adequately meet their emotional needs as children. This speaks to the importance of broad-based parent education programs for all types of parents.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study have numerous implications for both parents and family educators.

#### **Implications For Parents**

It is essential for parents to understand that there is a difference between nurture, structure, and overindulgence. Nurture is unconditional love. “[The] essential contribution to children’s growth and well-being [is] nurture” (Clarke & Dawson, 1998, p. 10). “But unconditional love is not enough. Children also need to learn limits, skills, and standards” (Clarke & Dawson, 1998, p. 10). This side of the parenting equation, structure, allows parents to set healthy boundaries and limits with children. There needs to be a balance between the two. Overindulgence is misguided nurture and inadequate structure. Nurturing children and providing them with structure is positive and helpful, while overindulgence is not. This is relevant because ACOs report overindulgence is more about “not having things done for them when they could do it for themselves,” and “having no consistent chores expected of them” than receiving clothes or toys.

Parents need to realize that continued support for a child’s emotional needs without overindulgence is critical to the emotional health of the child. Children experience a variety of feelings from overindulgence; some of them positive, others negative. At the very least, the overindulgent parent leaves a child emotionally confused.

Parents who overindulge miss opportunities to teach their children valuable life skills. Overindulgence appears to inhibit the development of a child’s communication and relationship skills, decision making, and time management skills. Further, overindulged children may not know how to take on adult responsibilities. They rely on others to complete tasks for them.

It is important for parents to understand and recognize that overindulgence may have long-lasting effects on children. For example, as adults they may have problems with overeating, and overspending, feel inadequate and overindulge their own children. The negative effects of overindulging can last well into adulthood.

Finally, parents who were overindulged as children frequently grow up and overindulge their own children. There appears to be a “cycle of overindulgence.” This could be because families in which overindulgence is occurring do not have a clear understanding of appropriate boundaries or the delicate balance between nurture and structure in the rearing of children.

### **Implications for Family Educators**

It appears that cultural messages to overindulge are pervasive throughout North American culture (Browne & Kaldenberg, 1997) and that overindulging children is a common problem (Clarke & Dawson, 1998). Family educators need to recognize the cultural pressure placed on parents to overindulge children in today’s society. Recognizing this, family educators can provide parental support, encouragement and permission not to indulge; for doing so may be harmful to a child’s psychological health. Further, family educators can give parents an alternative message which is to balance nurture and structure in childrearing.

This study found that a high percentage of ACOs (51%) grew up in families which had chemically dependent parents, thus family educators should be aware of this connection and its possible effects. Further, because overindulgence of a child is often related to another important life event, such as a death of a sibling or parent, family educators also need to build in support and education for parents who are confronted with or experience these challenging events. Finally, information on overindulgence should be made available to parents through a variety of sources: parenting books, parenting classes, books on marriage and family, and books on child psychology.

### **Conclusion**

This study is a first attempt at overcoming a gap in the literature on overindulgence. Previously, only a few research studies investigated spoiling children, while none investigated overindulgence directly. Further, the concept of overindulgence is quite different from the spoiled child syndrome (Swain, 1985; McIntosh, 1989) and the permissive parent which Baumrind (1966, 1983, 1991, & 1996) described.

This study has several limitations. The first limitation is its sample which, though large, is not representative and is disproportionately female. The issue of overindulgence may have been more salient for the sample than the general population. Second, the coding of open-ended questions is always prone to subjectivity. And third, because the questionnaire provided a description of overindulgence at the outset, it may have inadvertently led respondents to a response set consistent with the definition.

Nonetheless, this study fulfilled its purposes: to describe overindulged persons, their perceptions of overindulgence and its affects, and to compare adults who were overindulged as children and those who were not. Future studies should attempt to replicate these findings with representative samples.

Finally, family educators face important challenges to help parents and families to recognize the societal pressures placed on them to overindulge, and to help them to develop alternative strategies to bring balance into their lives.

## References

- Baumrind, D. (1966). Effects of authoritative parental control on child behavior. Child Development, 37, 887-907.
- Baumrind, D. (1983). Rejoinder to Lewis's reinterpretation of parental firm control effects: Are authoritative families really harmonious? Psychological Bulletin, 94, 132-142.
- Baumrind, D. (1991). Parenting styles and adolescent development. In J. Brooks-Gunn, R. Lerner, & A. C. Petersen (Eds.), The encyclopedia of adolescence (pp. 758-772). New York: Garland.
- Baumrind, D. (1996). The discipline controversy revisited. Family Relations, 45, 405-414.
- Browne, B. A., & Kaldenberg, D. O. (1997). Conceptualizing self-monitoring: Links to materialism and product involvement. Journal of Consumer Marketing, 14, 31-55.
- Buri, J. R., Louiselle, P. A., Misukanis, T. M., & Mueller, R. A. (1988). Effects of parental authoritarianism and authoritativeness on self-esteem. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 12, 271-282.
- Clarke, J. I., & Dawson, C. (1998). Growing up again: Parenting ourselves, parenting our children (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Center City, MN: Hazelden.
- Coles, R. (1977). Privileged ones: The well-off and the rich in America Volume V of children in crisis. Boston: Little Brown.
- Coopersmith, S. (1967). The antecedents of self-esteem. San Francisco: Freeman.
- Hausner, L. (1990). Children of paradise: Successful parenting for prosperous families. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Malinosky-Rummell, R., & Hansen, D. J. (1993). Long-term consequences of childhood physical abuse. Psychological Bulletin, 114, 68-79.
- McIntosh, B. J. (1989). Spoiled child syndrome. Pediatrics, 83(1), 108-115.
- Nelms, B. C. (1983, January/February). Attachment versus spoiling. Pediatric Nursing, 49-51.
- Robinson, P. A. (1978). Parents of "beyond control" adolescents. Adolescence, 13, 109-119.
- Rohner, R. P. (1986). The warmth dimension: Foundations of parental acceptance-rejection theory. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Rohner, R. P. (1994). Patterns of parenting: The warmth dimension in worldwide perspective. In W. J. Lonner & Malpass (Eds.), Psychology and culture. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Solomon, R., Martin, K., & Cottingham, E. (1993). Spoiling an infant: Further support for the construct. Topics In Early Childhood Special Education, 13(2), 175-183.
- Sroufe, L. A., Fox, N. E., & Pancake, V. R. (1983). Attachment and dependency in developmental perspective. Child Development, 54, 1615-1627.
- Swain, D. W. (1985). The spoiled child syndrome. In P. Houston; G. K. Leigh; I. R. Loewen & D. M. McNulty (Eds.), Changing family conference XIV proceedings (pp. 67-71). Iowa City, IA: The University of Iowa.

U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect. (1990). Child abuse and neglect: Critical first steps in response to a national emergency. Washington, DC: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office.

Wilson, A. L., Witzke, D. B., & Volin, A. (1981). What it means to “spoil” a baby. Clinical Pediatrics, 20, 728-802.

© Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences Education. Republished @ [www.overindulgence.info](http://www.overindulgence.info) by permission of the copyright holder. All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced in any manner without permission from the copyright holder. Direct questions to:

Dr. Helen C. Hall, Managing Editor, JFCSE  
School of Leadership & Lifelong Learning  
University of Georgia  
203 River's Crossing  
Athens, GA 30602-4809