Developmental Neglect – An ACE Risk Factor

by Jean Tlsley Clarke, MA, CFLE, David Bremehart, Ph.D., CFLE and Connie Dawson, Ph.D.

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?

Overindulgent 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 I'm good at.
- I have little self-esteem.
- I don't feel effective.
- Dysfunctional attitudes and thinking:
  - I see myself as weak and vulnerable.
  - I am not enough. I will never be enough.
  - If they don't like what I did, it's my fault.
  - I have difficulties finding meaning in times of hardships.

On parenting:

- Neither my child nor myself is responsible for the child's 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 overindulgence.
- "I feel full and still empty."

What is overindulgence?

This definition grew out of the findings of the Overindulgence Research Studies. According to Clarke, Dawson and Bremehart in their 2014 book How Much Is Too Much? Raising Liable, 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. This 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 child'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 not 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 elaboration 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
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 II identified the three ways overindulgence occurs:

1. Material overindulgence: Too many things, too many toys, or too much entertainment, or overscheduling. It leads to lack of appreciation and an overblown sense of entitlement.
2. Relational overindulgence: Overnurturing, 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?

In the study, it was noted that good-hearted parents do not intend to cause harm but are driven by the social expectation to give. Sometimes they are not comfortable seeing their child upset or sad they give in.

What can you encourage parents to do?

**Strong Structure**

Be in charge. Be the parent. Run the family. Make 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
Advance Childhood Experience risk factor and identifying overindulgence as one
contributor to this type of neglect. *

Jean I. Clarke, M.A., CFLE is an author,
educator and researcher, jclarkeol@gmail.com

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

Connie Dawson, Ph.D. is an author and
therapist, salmanophaligmal.com.

References
Bredehoft, D. J., Mennicke, S. A., Potter, A. M.,
during childhood. Journal of Family and
Consumer Sciences Education, 1(2), 3-17.
Bredehoft, D. J., Clarke, J. I., & Dawson, C.
(2003). Relationships between childhood
overindulgence and parenting attributes:
Implications for family life educators. Paper
presented at the 2003 National Council
on Family Relations Annual Conference,
November 8-11, 2003, Hyatt Hotel,
Vancouver, BC, Canada.

Bredehoft, D. J. (2014). How much is too
much? Technical appendix B in J. I. Clarke,
C. Dawson & D. J. Bredehoft, How much
is, too much? Raising little, responsible,
respectful children–from toddlers to teens–
in an age of overindulgence (pp. 335-339).
De Capo Press.

Bredehoft, D. J. (2013a). Empirical
connections between parental
overindulgence patterns, parenting
styles, and parent sense of competence–
Executive Summary: Study 9.

Bredehoft, D. J. (2014). Summer). Raising
children in an age of overindulgence.
National Council on Family Relations - Family
Focus, p.5-6, 10.

Clarke, J. I., Dawson, C., & Bredehoft, D.
(2014). How Much is Too Much? Raising
Little, Responsible, Respectful Children–
From Toddlers to Teens–In an Age of
Overindulgence. De Capo Press.

Dawson, C., & Bredehoft, D. J. (2006). The
unwanted and unloved long-term
results of overindulging children–Three
types of overindulgence and corrective
strategies for parents and institutions. In G.
R. Wink & K. Yip (Eds.), What compelling
perspectives on counselling. (pp. 87-90).
Alexandra, VA: American Counseling
Association.

welfare and overindulgence. Children
and Youth Services Review, 28(6), 610-619.

“This is the accepted version of the following article (Clarke, J. I., Bredehoft, D. J., & Dawson, C.
Network, 23(9), p. 17-19) which has been published in its final form at https://www.ncfr.org."