

WHEN PARENTS LOVE TOO MUCH



by Mitch Meyerson and Laurie Ashner

The Silver Platter

In the beginning, giving in seems easier than fighting back. Our parents only want what's best for us. They just want to help.

In a world where so many children are orphaned, abused, and mistreated, we feel ungrateful and ashamed because our biggest problem is that our parents love us too much.

If we allow it, our parents stay firmly enmeshed in our lives. We drown in the outpouring of their attention, concern, and anxiety. Gripped by guilt, we choke on resentment when we can't be all the things they expect us to be — we struggle to free ourselves. “Love me,” we want to say, “but don't love me so much!”

What is too much love? What differentiates parents who love in healthier ways from those who love too much?

♥ Parents who love give time, attention, and affection to their children and provide for their emotional and physical needs. Parents who love too much become enmeshed in their children's daily lives and see their children as extensions of themselves.

♥ Parents who love are determined to be the best parents they can be, while recognizing that it is impossible to be perfect. Parents who love too much “overparent” and overprotect their children in an effort to dispel anxiety over being “good” parents, or to make up for their own childhood deprivation.

♥ Parents who love encourages independence and growth while setting appropriate limits, thus providing a safe environment for their children to explore and promoting their autonomy. Parents who love too much discourage their children's independence, seek to control their children's thoughts and actions, and unconsciously wish to mold their children into the image of their highest expectations of themselves.

♥ Parents who love accept that their children have strengths and weaknesses. They provide a nonjudgmental atmosphere in which self-esteem is fostered. Parents who love too much unconsciously judge their children who cannot live up to their rigid expectations. They do *for* their children, rather than *with* them, fearing that their children will fail without their help.

♥ Parents who love communicate with their children in a direct, open, and honest way, creating an atmosphere of safety and trust. Parents who love too much often create insecurity and

mistrust by communicating indirectly with their children, seeking, unconsciously, to manipulate or control.

♥ Parents who love listen to their children and give out of a desire to meet their children's emotional or material needs. Parents who love too much unconsciously give to meet their own unmet desires and unfulfilled hopes, with little regard to what their children truly need.

♥ Parents who love encourage their children's internal strengths and qualities. Parents who love too much are more concerned with externals, and anxiously compare their children to others.

People who overparent their children may be rich or poor. They may be single, married, or widowed. They may work sixty-four-hour weeks, or rarely leave home. The capacity for overparenting is not a function of wealth. Nor does it have as much to do with time spent in the physical presence of the children as the hours spent mulling, brooding, and worrying about them. Overparenting is not necessarily spoiling children, although that can be one outcome. It is an intense emotional over-involvement coupled with a need to control the child. It encourages a mutual dependency that is powerful as well as painful.

Sometimes overparenting is reserved for one child in a family. It may be the firstborn. It can also be the baby. Sometimes it is the child who shows special talent, but it is just as likely to be the “problem” child who shows little ability at all. Which child is singled out has more to do with the parents' needs than the child's.

A parent's love forms the basis of a child's early self-esteem. Without parents' care, interest, and approval, children grow up with feelings of emptiness and worthlessness where our self-love should be. It would, therefore, seem logical that the more love we receive from our parents—the more attention, concern, and protection—the greater our sense of self-worth. Like most children who were loved too much, the anxious direction received from their parents throughout their life does little to bolster their self-esteem. In fact, their self-worth becomes tied to their parent's approval — feeling safest when pleasing them. The more controlled, the more passive they become.

Not all children submit to their parents' control willingly. Many rebel, only to give in and return each time the guilt becomes too great. Whether they rebel or submit, each pays a heavy cost for being overparented.

When parents see their child as a mirror, seeking to “mold” the child into the image of their highest expectations; when they enmesh

themselves in the day-to-day drama of their child's life, the child receives mixed messages with mixed results of responsibility.

Initially, children reach adulthood with a particular style of behavior and a certain set of beliefs about themselves. The following characteristics are typical of adult children who were overparented. *If a person grows up surrounded with smothering attention, overconcern, or unrealistically high expectations, these characteristics may develop:*

Problems with Intimacy and Relationships

Relationships with others are confounded by two extremes: neediness or an unconscious desire to distance people who come close. In either case, the child enters adulthood with the feeling that other people's needs for closeness are overwhelming. Intimacy is desired, yet feared. The child perceives based on the parent's treatment that with love comes high expectations for performance and may begin to question: "What if I can't be all a lover expects?" If I let someone become close to me, and I fail to be all that they want me to be, will I be smothered?"

The person may begin to push others out of their life by becoming overly needy and dependent, or by distancing them with aloofness or arrogance. Whatever the tactic, the result is the same: intimacy is craved, but they are too fearful to truly experience it.

Thrives on Approval from Others

Adult children who were overparented often become "people-pleasers," sensitive to the needs of others and preoccupied with "looking good." As children, self-worth was measured by how much approval was received from parents. Approval rarely, if ever, came from within. The child's self-esteem became dependent on praise and recognition from parents.

Now, as adults, they are constantly waiting for others to make them feel good and living for other's approval, which is a dangerous way to go because most of the time they will not get the approval they seek. Most people just do not care the way the mother or father did. This is reality, and it never stops frustrating the overparented person.

Has a Pervasive Sense of Guilt, Even When Not Responsible

"I feel guilty about everything!" is a frequent statement of children who were overparented. Such children realize in the early years that their parents will go out of their way to provide for them. Some of this giving is in material ways, but more in the form of attention-an eternal vigilance that quickly becomes smothering. These children develop a sense of debt toward parents who love them so enormously

They feel they should never be angry at parents, who have done so much for them. They learn to suppress any negative feelings, as they might hurt their parents. They have a desire to achieve things for their parents, to please them, and make them proud. When goals are not met they feel enormous guilt

Feels That Life Is Unfair

Early in childhood, the child who was overparented discovers that the world does not share all of the admiration and confidence in his or her talents that was routinely bestowed at home. Disappointment and insecurity follow.

Few are able to live up to the high hopes and expectations of their parents. Unfortunately, they grow doubtful about any of their accomplishments. Their parents told them that they were capable of so much that they only had to reach out and grab all life had to offer. When the world is not every wonderful thing the parents promised that it would be, life seems unfair.

Difficulty Following a Project Through from Beginning to End

Children who were overwhelmed by the unrealistic expectations of their parents often become dreamers with excellent schemes, plans, and intentions that are never carried out. Somehow they never finish anything they start.

Growing up with special attention and special favors is a blessing and a curse. On one hand, the overparented children feel protection and comfort from their parents. On the other hand, they learn that they will be rescued from any consequence even if they do not follow through.

The parents completed homework assignments, buffered arguments, found jobs, selected friends, and "pulled strings" to help their child. It is no mystery that the child came to expect that things would magically be taken care of. Thus, as an adult they start projects and wait for this genie, who never comes anymore. Adult children who were overparented can be easily spotted from their files, drawers, and notebooks that are brimming with unfinished poems, lists of things to do, ideas, and plans that will never be carried out.

Procrastination became the child's downfall when he or she internalized a message that they could not accomplish anything very well on his or her own and needed to be constantly protected. Or it happened when they internalized such high expectations or that any task began to seem like a setup for failure. Today, the adult plays it safe. He or she avoids the three Rs-risk, rejection, and responsibility—by rarely finishing what they start.

Tendency to Be Self-Critical

"I beat myself up emotionally every time I make a mistake," says one adult who was overparented. Adults who were loved too much as children are their own worst critics. They constantly feel judged by others, most often by their parents. Nothing they achieve is ever good enough.

Why, after having been given so much, and praised so often, are they so self-critical? As children, they were in the spotlight. They believed that the hopes and dreams of their parents lay in their hands.

In early childhood, children internalize a lot of "should" messages from their parents: They should be a doctor or a lawyer. They should get high grades in school. They should be popular. They should be happy all the time. Soon they do not need their parents to tell them what they should be—and at the same time, all of the things they are not. They develop a voice in their own heads called the "inner critic." The voice perpetuates a constant refrain of painful negative back talk.

As adults, they excel at embellishing the critical messages they received as children: "You can't do that, let me do it for you" becomes "I will only be loved if I'm successful. I have to look perfect and be perfect in everything I do or I'm a failure."

A thriving inner critic, nurtured on negative thoughts, subverts their self-esteem, feeds their depression, and leads them to avoid people and opportunities.

Subconscious Feelings of "Entitlement"

The child who was loved too much enters adulthood with the feeling, often subconscious, that he or she is entitled only to the best. They commanded special treatment as children, and soon came to expect it. When privileges, possessions, and attention are handed on a silver platter, the children start to believe that this is the way life works. They enter into adulthood and relationships, unconsciously expecting others to treat them in the same manner.

continued on page 18

Freeing Parents and Children to Live Their Own Lives

As disappointment grows, they look for relationships that will take care of them the way their parents did. They may choose an overly nurturing and self-depriving spouse to fit their expectations. These unequal relationships often end up in resentment and conflict.

Difficulty Having Fun or Appreciating the Moment

"Why get excited?" the adult child asks. When we were children, suppressing emotions and acting "in control" won approval. Outbursts of emotion were threatening or embarrassing to parents.

Now, they are afraid of their emotions and expect to be criticized for them. Now, a feeling of joylessness and a hesitancy to lose oneself in the fun of the moment persists even in the best times. Life is a serious business. Adult children who were overparented tend to live life intellectually, analyzing themselves and others.

Has Trouble Making Decisions

Decision-making, even about the most basic things, causes anxiety and insecurity in the child who was overparented. The "blessing" of others is sought, even when the best option is clear. Parents who love too much in an attempt to be protective and caring tend to help by making decisions for the child. This form of caring too much can be costly.

When efforts at making decisions are sabotaged by parents' zealous desire to help, they learn indirectly that their own decisions do not really matter. They never learn to trust their own intuition and judgment.

If this was their experience as children, they become very ambivalent adults. They look around for someone to rescue them by taking responsibility for their decisions. They often seek out a husband or wife who will play their parents' part. As a consequence, they can find themselves in the role of a child in adult relationships.

Fears Success

Children who were overparented become adults who are underemployed. They get a "late start" in life after a period of drifting. So often, they sabotage their own success. "The higher you climb, the farther you fall" is their rationalization for the opportunities they failed to take. Their biggest fear is that if they succeed, others will demand a sequel and they'll be unable to write one.

People have expectations of one another. That is a reality of life. But for people who have spent a lifetime jumping across the hurdles of enormous parental expectations, the slightest suggestion that they do more becomes a heavy load to bear.

Another reason to fear success is that it means taking responsibility. Overparented children received a message that they would always be taken care of. It is easy to give in to the pull of being forever protected by family members.

Success requires risk, taking responsibility, and more often, independence. Becoming independent, responsible and successful can be like flying on a trapeze without a net. If they leave their parents' safety net and separate emotionally from them, they fear that they will fall on their face.

Susceptible to Developing Eating Disorders

Bulimia, anorexia, and obesity are common among people who were overparented. This predisposition to developing eating disorders stems from a pattern of using food to meet emotional needs.

When parents enmesh themselves in their children's lives, they grow up with little emotional "space" of their own. Boundaries are not respected. These children never achieve a real sense of autonomy or independence. Overprotection and anxious attention can become so intense and intrusive that the children feel violated.

Sometimes parents' expectations became unendurable. One of the ways they use to calm fears is to become emotionally obsessed with food. Absorption with food is one means of wresting control from domineering parents. It can also be an attempt to build a shell and hide. Becoming overweight, or losing so much weight that people become anxious looking at them, helps keep others at a distance.

Loves Parents Too Much

Some of these characteristic struggles listed may trigger anger, anxiety, and the need to protect parents for overparented children. They may want to justify their parent's action, cover for them, defend them, explain them, and forgive them, because they love them and what has been discovered smacks of criticism of them.

Parents can be seen as weak, fragile, depressed, confused, or unhappy. While parents may not always be perfect in everything they do, they are hardly as weak or needy as they may be perceived. These are people who have managed households for twenty years or more, held jobs, raised children, made friends, planned vacations, gotten out of bed each morning, and survived more than their children can begin to understand. By anyone else's standards, they would be considered strong, competent, and vital. Still, their children see them as defenseless, and jump to protect them.

Now, as adults the overparented children need to see their parents more accurately. Otherwise, the adults become big participants in their own overparenting and are equally responsible. The dependence is mutual. The parents have been as troubled by loving too much as the children have been by loving them too much in return. It takes two to make a relationship, but it only takes one to make the relationship begin to change.

Surviving childhood, even in the best of families, is a difficult and demanding task. Sometimes parents' best intentions can indirectly undermine the strength and security they were hoping to nurture in the children they love so much. Sometimes children's own need can bind them to their parents, long after they should be relying on themselves. This is when support is needed in order to change. Only by fully exploring how and why they were loved too much can they begin to recover and change.

This is not an invitation to be ungrateful or to blame parents who have given so much to their children. It is not about blame. It is about self-acceptance, understanding, and change. ▼

Mitch Meyerson is an expert in the psychology of self-esteem and personal achievement. He is the author of many books and audiotapes as well as a musician and composer of songs and guided imagery tapes. Meyerson may be contacted by email at www.MitchMeyerson.com.

Laurie Ashner is a prominent journalist and expert in human relationships on personal growth topics. She has co-authored six books. Ashner may be contacted by email at www.Quickstudies.com.

• Excerpted from *When Parents Love Too Much* (© 1997 by Laurie Ashner and Mitch Meyerson, 1997) Hazelden, Center City, MN.