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Can a parent do too much for their child? An examination by
parenting professionals of the concept of overparenting.

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Abstract

Is there a point where parental effort can be too much? While the link between parenting effort and the wellbeing of children has been firmly established, contemporary discussion has proposed that extreme levels of parental protection of and responsiveness to children could be counterproductive. Research has not yet addressed this phenomenon to ascertain if overparenting is a genuinely different type of parenting approach. The purpose of the present study was to gain insight into the parenting actions considered by parenting professionals (psychologists and school guidance counsellors) to be overparenting. One hundred and twenty-eight professionals responded to an online survey about their observations of overparenting, with eighty-six respondents providing lists of the types of actions they believed were behavioural examples of the term. The survey data revealed that certain types of actions were considered to be indicative of overparenting, and that particular beliefs and outcomes may be involved in this parenting approach. Implications for parenting advice and education programs, and further research are discussed.

Key words: Overparenting; children; Helicopter parenting, parenting.

Research has established the link between particular parenting approaches and children's behavioural and emotional wellbeing (Baumrind, 1965, 1991). Baumrind's (1965 and 1966) seminal parenting research, extended by Maccoby and Martin (1983), established parenting styles based on combinations of high or low scores on two aspects of parenting posited as necessary for a child's wellbeing – *parental responsiveness*, the amount the parent responds to the child's needs, and *parental demandingness*, the parent's tendency to have rules, and demand responsible and mature behaviour from their child. Most findings have shown that the authoritative parenting approach, which is high in demandingness and high in responsiveness, is the ideal parenting method, improving children's wellbeing in areas such as self-esteem (Milevsky et al., 2007), self-reliance (Baumrind, 2005), a sense of security (Baumrind, 2005), and popularity with peers (Buri, Louiselle, Misukanis, & Mueller, 1988; Wenar, 1994).

As this approach to parenting (high in responsiveness and demandingness) has been shown to be the most efficacious for child outcomes in the social-emotional domains, parents who are thought to be using considerable effort in both areas have rarely warranted research designed to assess or improve their parenting approach. Indeed, substantial parental efforts in loving and caring for children by establishing highly affectionate relationships with them (Maselko, Kubansky, Lipsitt, & Buka, 2011), and providing safe, educational environments (Houtenville & Conway, 2008), are all assumed to ensure an upbringing that allows children and young people to thrive. Active shaping and manipulation of a child's environment is expected to produce greater competence and self-esteem in the child (Baumrind, 1993).

Recent popular media interest, however, has focussed on intensive parenting effort, predicting that it could impact negatively on children's wellbeing. Imprecise but common terms for this parenting style include 'helicopter parenting', and 'lawnmower parenting'. Helicopter parenting involves "hover[ing] closely overhead, rarely out of reach, whether their children need them or not" ("Helicopter parent", 2011). 'Lawnmower' parenting, involves "mothers and fathers...attempt[ing] to smooth out and mow down all obstacles" in the way of the child's success ("Helicopter parent", 2011). Authors and columnists around the world (Gibbs, 2009; Nelson, 2010) regularly use these terms in the popular media, detailing the dangers of this parenting approach.

These intensive parenting actions are often assumed to be extensions of valued parenting practices. In an article on the effect of parenting on university students, helicopter parenting was posited as "appropriate parenting characteristics taken to an inappropriate degree" (LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011, p. 405). This overly-effortful parenting approach has been generally hypothesised as being deliberately chosen by these parents in a loving but misguided attempt to improve their child's current and future personal and academic success. Many popular media authors posit there will be immediate or eventual harm for children who are parented with an excessively cultivating parenting approach, as they claim it does not allow children to develop independence or become fully-functioning, community-minded adults (Levine, 2006; Nelson, 2010).

Some authors have cited specific actions of parents who are perceived to do too much for their children. For example, LeMoyne and Buchanan (2011) hypothesised that parents of some university students were intrusive in specific areas of their child's life, particularly areas such as education where parents believed they could

improve their child's future competitiveness by micromanaging their child's academic responsibilities. Similarly, Ungar (2009) described overprotective parenting as being excessively concerned about their children in relatively safe environments, and parenting that does not show flexibility in parental rules as a child matures. Twenge and Campbell (2009) described parental overinvolvement as emphasising their child's specialness and self-esteem, resulting in parents putting effort into ensuring a child receives what they want at all times. Among other characteristics Levine (2006) identified were an intrusive presence in the child's life, elevated anxiety about the child, and protecting their child from consequences of their actions.

To date, most authors have described overparenting in particular areas of a child's life, such as parent overinvolvement in school achievement (Pomerantz & Moorman, 2007) or over communication with children who are university students (Nelson, 2010). However, there is no well-accepted or researched definition of overly effortful parenting or overparenting, if this style of parenting exists; neither are there empirical studies on the impact of excessive parenting on children (Ungar, 2009).

To research the concept, it is first important to ascertain what overly effortful parenting may comprise. One way to understand the concept is to consult professionals, who see a range of parenting practices in a range of circumstances, about what they perceive to be 'excessive parenting'. The aim of the current study is therefore to investigate actions considered by psychologists and guidance counsellors to denote the overuse of valued parenting practices, such as protection and responsiveness.

Method

Participants

The criterion for participation in this study was employment as a psychology or counselling professional and/or working with children and families. The recruitment process consisted of an invitation to the members of two professional associations of guidance counsellors or psychologists to complete an online survey. Survey responses were provided by 128 professionals. Of those who identified their profession, 34 (64%) were school counsellors or school psychologists, 12 (23%) were mental health professionals outside of schools, and 7 (13%) were teachers. Forty-five percent had over 25 years of experience working with children and parents, while only 9% had less than 5 years experience. Seventy-four percent were parents. Participants were not required to identify their gender or age as these variables were not considered.

Measure

Participants were presented with information about the project and asked to consent. If they consented, the following information was presented:

It can safely be said that most parents do the best job they know how to, and most parents work hard to give their children the best start in life. Recently, commentators have suggested certain groups of parents may 'overparent'. There has been some suggestion that this 'overparenting' involves overusing valued parenting practices like monitoring, protection or caring for their children. It has also been proposed that parents who 'overparent' don't alter their parenting style as their children develop, to give them more independence, or expect more from them. There has been

speculation that this 'overparenting' might be negatively impacting on children.

Participants were asked if they had seen any instances of this type of parenting. They had three options (Yes, many; Yes, some; No), with participants who had not observed overparenting exiting the survey. Respondents with experience with overparenting were asked to describe concrete but anonymous examples of overparenting actions. They were then given a list of parenting beliefs and actions and asked whether they thought these were associated with overparenting. This paper reports the results of the open-ended responses providing examples of overparenting.

Procedure

Ethical permission was obtained from the university human ethics committee. Participants were recruited from two sources - the Australian Psychological Society's research webpage and an email to the Queensland Guidance and Counsellors Association, advertising the research. Participants clicked on a hyperlink to the online survey (at Survey Monkey). A donation to Kids Helpline was offered as an incentive for completing the survey.

Data analysis

Due to the exploratory nature of the research, open-ended questions about overparenting were used to obtain an understanding of actions considered being too effortful. Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis was used to derive themes. After reading participants' responses to the question, initial codes were generated and key themes were identified. Themes were initially theory-driven: responses were coded in relation to Baumrind's parenting dimensions – parental responsiveness and demandingness. Baumrind (1991, p. 62) has described responsiveness as "the extent to which parents intentionally foster individuality,

self-regulation, and self-assertion by being attuned, supportive, and acquiescent to children's special needs and demands" and demandingness as "the claims parents make on children to become integrated into the family whole, by their maturity demands, supervision, disciplinary efforts and willingness to confront the child who disobeys" (Baumrind, 1991, pp. 61-62). Responses were coded as high or low in these dimensions, other themes were identified as they emerged. While many responses involved only one theme, others covered more than one. Examples from each set were re-read by the authors to ensure the theme represented a coherent set or needed to be further broken down.

Results

The majority of professionals reported familiarity and experience with actions they considered overparenting. Of the 128 people answering this question, 27% (n = 34) said that they had seen "many" instances of overparenting. Almost two thirds (n = 84) reported having seen "some" instances, and only 8% (n = 10) reported no experience of overparenting.

Examples of overparenting

Eighty-six people provided examples of overparenting. Most themes that emerged from the behavioural examples of overparenting appeared to mirror Baumrind's/Maccoby and Martin's dimensions of parenting – a parent's demandingness of maturity in a child, and their responsiveness to a child's perceived needs. The primary themes were grouped into six categories: low demandingness (Group 1); high responsiveness (Group 2); a combination of high responsiveness and low demandingness (Group 3); high demandingness of

outcomes (Group 4); a combination of high demandingness (re expectations) and low demandingness (re problem solution) (Group 5); and contextual factors (parental anxiety, SES factors, or characteristics of the child) (Group 6). Some perceived child outcomes from overparenting were incidentally reported.

Group 1: Low demandingness.

The primary theme involved parental actions that the professionals saw as presenting low demands of the child to become mature by developing life skills, becoming independent, facing difficult circumstances, and accepting consequences. Some responses reported instances where parents did not appreciate that their child was maturing or where they did not allow their child to undertake actions that would encourage further development of maturity.

Cutting up a 10 year old's food; Bringing a separate plate of food for a 16 year old to a party as he is a picky eater (not letting the child grow up) (#30)

Parents that believe that their 16yo does not know what sex is (#11)

Carrying instead of allowing child to walk (#12)

A parent who does not take into consideration the developmental changes in their child and still treats them like a baby. (#13)

One theme that emerged regularly was the parent not allowing an older child to use public transport, to attend a school camp, or learn to drive.

A mother who won't let her 17 year old son catch the train to school (#24)

Too many restrictions to allow child to participate in school camp (#7)

Not allowing the student to go for learners (written test) because they say driving is dangerous (#52)

Many examples of low demands on the child appeared to be associated with parents unwilling to have their child face unpleasant consequences for a child's poor choices or their failure to complete work.

Parents don't want their children to experience the consequence of their actions. The parents blame everyone else. The parents fight for the child to have what they want rather than tough it out and face the consequences. (#50)

I have had follow up phone calls from parents within 2 minutes of a student finishing a conversation with me - wanting to express concern, frustration, about what had been discussed with their child. With the child's emotions high and a 'one-eyed' view of what was discussed, they phone their parent who in turn takes immediate action to me. More often than not, their version of the 'supposed' conversation is completely inaccurate. I have had parents who will phone and make excuses for their daughter about forgetting something instead of the student speaking with me directly. I could go on..... (#3)

Many respondents reported low demands on children to cope with life not going their way, followed by parents placing high demands on other people or institutions. These were typically high expectations of the school delivering positive outcomes to the child, and a parent placing low demands on the child to face the situation and learn how to cope.

... Constant badgering of the school. A campaign to the school to make sure their child is in a specific class the following year... (#6)

Confronting teachers about their child's assignment or homework - making excuses, demanding concessions, even though clearly the student has not had any serious health or family situation preventing the work being completed. (#7)

Some professionals discussed these parental actions still occurring when children had become young adults.

Still preparing massive meals for adult children in their twenties, including breakfast... Providing very cheap or no cost housing for young adults and middle aged adult offspring. (#20)

Group 2: High responsiveness.

Responsiveness was sometimes to the point of befriending them.

They involve themselves in their child's social interactions, they see themselves as their child's 'best friend' rather than the parent. (#32)

Feeling affronted that their adolescent does not confide in them for everything. (#28)

Constantly being with a child or expecting a complete report of their day was also seen as being overparenting.

Sitting in a coffee shop monitoring their adolescent child, constantly playing with their child - not leaving the child with any autonomy or lack of supervision (#6)

Phoning their child a lot when they are out (#34)

Some participants reported that high responsiveness to a child could become intrusive, particularly in relation to the child's privacy.

Over involved... intrusions to child privacy, pathologising (#31)

A few saw those who overparent as perceiving the child's views and needs as being the most important in the family, even surpassing the parent's needs.

Parents who prioritise children's participation in a social event over their own need to take part in community activities and social events (#27)

Another theme was a parent's perception that their child was always right.

Taking the child's perception as the truth, regardless of the facts. (#33)

Parents are quick to believe their child over the adult and deny the possibility that their child was at fault or would even do something of that nature. (#57)

Group 3: High responsiveness and low demandingness.

Many respondents indicated that when parents excessively assisted their children, it was due to the parents' high responsiveness to them. When parents were highly responsive to their child's perceived needs and issues, some tried to protect

them from the consequences of their actions. Thus high responsiveness was often paired with low parental demands that children solve their own issues.

Parents who will rush to school at the whim of a phone call from their child to deliver items such as forgotten lunches, forgotten assignments, forgotten uniforms etc. (#3)

Question everything on the child's behalf as though they are always right— try to prevent the child from being able to problem solve through racing to their rescue—not allowing for failure or a struggle (#4)

Come to student's locker to check on whether daughter has all she needs to take home in afternoon. Knock on classroom door to bring daughter's lunch Seek assistance from IT team re student computer. Do student's homework for them (#5)

For example a student doesn't like the teacher because they are making them do their work so the parent complains to everyone. Has numerous staff involved until the child is moved to the class he wants to be in. Even though staying where he was [originally] was probably more beneficial to him learning about himself and developing an inner strength that he can cope. (#50)

Some respondents reported that parents' high responsiveness to their child resulted in them believing that their child had mental health problems or special needs. These respondents suggested that, if parents perceived their child was affected by these problems, they became less demanding of their child facing difficult challenges or coping with things not going their way. Instead insisting that the school altered the way it dealt with the child. This demand was despite professionals not believing the child had these issues or needs.

Parent who phones several school contacts several times a week telling of the difficulties the child is having, but the child appears to be well adjusted and coping very well. (#54)

Parents who regularly arrange meetings for advice for their child when most issues are normal developmental sequences. (#69)

Parent called counsellor to see her daughter as they were not talking and mother just wanted her to have someone to talk to (#84)

It was also reported that a parent's high attunement towards their child and belief their child was gifted could result in them wanting special treatment to ensure the child's potential was not adversely affected.

Have the child complete cognitive assessments very early in their academic life to 'prove' to the school how gifted their child is, and how unnecessary any form of behaviour management strategies may be which may 'damage' their development (#1)

Group 4: High demandingness.

Some professional's responses involved high parental expectations of academic outcomes and public behaviour.

Giving constant instructions to children in public places - often from afar, rather than up close and ensuring child cooperation e.g. Don't touch that, sit down, move away from that lady, don't touch that (again and again). (#16)

I find them very keen to be successful in parenting as they have been at their work so they assume their child is special or too intelligent in comparison to other children and push them all the time (#25)

Parents expecting children to do exceedingly above age appropriate expectations for independent play, chores, even taking on caring roles to nurture the parent (#41)

Some of these high demands of a child's behaviour appeared linked to an insistence on close supervision and monitoring of children's activities, so that freedom to interact with peers was restricted.

Parents preventing 13 year olds to attend any public place without parental supervision - not allowing attendance at movies or local shops because "not old enough" (#16)

Students not being allowed to leave the house to socialise when a senior at school. (#61)

Refusing to allow year 12s to attend a workshop in [location] as they were expected to find their own way home at 3.00 pm and [location] was perceived as too dangerous (workshop was opposite [name] school and there were 100s of students exiting from there at the same time). (#67)

High parental expectations and demands on a child may also require high levels of parental effort. If a parent is reminding a child about what they should do, is pushing them academically, and restricts their activities, parents also take on high levels of responsibility for the child.

Group 5: A combination of high and low demandingness.

Respondents reported some parents to have high demandingness of the child through their high expectations of particular outcomes. However, when those expectations were not achieved, they attempted to solve their child's issues or insisted that the school address them, rather than requiring that the child solve or cope with the issue.

Wanting to solve children's problems such as not achieving over 80% on tests (#38)

...Demand better grades on the final semester reports or threaten withdrawal from school (private and international school contexts) - especially if that family had been known to provide donations to the school for facilities etc ... (#1)

Not allowing a child to do any form of chores or have any responsibility - because can't do it right, but then expecting perfect behaviour, or that at age 16/17 can do everything perfectly. (#16)

Some parents reportedly were highly controlling of a child's choices. In these cases they were seen to have a high demand that the child conform to their expectations, while also being highly directive of their child and low in demand that the child should attempt to solve the issues or make decisions themselves.

Telling their child what to do rather than guiding them and teaching ways to cope (#34)

Parents insisting on making most decisions related to choices available to a child (e.g. school subjects, clothing, friends) (#17)

A student who said that his mother made him go to bed at 9pm. He is 16 years old. (#74)

Restriction of children's activities and modes of travel... (#62)

Interference in a child's social life may also be highly demanding of the child's social skills, or demanding of their success with peer friendships, while also undertaking actions that remove their responsibility to solve issues.

As a teacher I have seen parents getting far too involved in their 8-year-old's play and friend issues. I try to encourage the students to work it out themselves, not involving their parents. Some parents have been known to come into the school, find the "other" child and have a word with them, some parents have written a letter to the "other" child and had their child give it to them. (#45)

A parent confronting the parent of another student at a railway station because her daughter had not been invited to her birthday party; parents going on Facebook and requesting that something be returned to their daughter... (#6)

Group 6: Contextual factors.

Many respondents discussed their perception of high levels of anxiety in parents who overparent.

During group anxiety programs for parents and children, parents being unwilling/unable to tolerate their child's distress during exposure exercises - not even attempting exposure exercises because the child says 'no', despite the impact the child's anxiety is having on the whole family (#29)

Anxious parenting style... tendency to worry rather than normalise, (#31)

Parents not allowing their children to play outside for fear that they will be stolen. (#56)

Some respondents discussed their belief that certain socioeconomic or cultural groups were more likely to overparent.

In mostly high SE populations, and in some distinct cultural groups ...(#1)

Working in the context of private schooling, parents are very anxious about their child or young person's performance (#82)

Perceived child outcomes from overparenting.

Some respondents detailed child outcomes they saw as emerging from this type of parenting. These were not specifically asked for, and do not form a category of parenting actions; however, they provide further relevant information.

The main perceived child outcome of overparenting was a lack of resilience.

Parents not prepared for children to be resilient. They believe that regardless of effort their child must be rewarded. When these children experience failure they become extremely emotional in the school setting (#57)

Staying at home is another one that is common, the child doesn't want to come to school and the parent takes the easy way out and keeps them at home as they might have been bullied - even though they might be bullying others too or they might not have the skills to cope and therefore never learn them. (#50)

Children are not experiencing or dealing with many life events - parents are not wanting to upset their children, believing that they should not have to deal with unpleasant /stress invoking situations. Thus kids do not get a chance to learn how to cope with loud teachers, teasing, not getting what they want, wanting things to be immediate. (#21)

Some participants mentioned a sense of entitlement emerging in children who had been overprotected by their parents.

I have worked with quite a number of parents who are so overprotective of their children that the children do not learn to take responsibility (and the natural consequences) of their actions. The children may develop a sense of entitlement and the parents then find it difficult to work with the school in a trusting, cooperative and solution focused manner, which would benefit both child and school. (#58)

Inadequate development of life skills was also reported.

'Helicoptering' to ensure that their child does not have to be 'burdened' with any mundane tasks like learning to tie their shoe-laces, dry themselves, or even comb their own hair. This in turn became a major issue when the school would have to take these Year 5 - 6 students off to school camp, and they had NEVER learnt to dress, dry themselves, or make their own beds... (#1)

Transference of high parental anxiety to children was also a theme.

Being too emotionally involved, so that parent anxiety transfers to high school children so they refuse to go to school. (#20)

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the concept of overparenting, where parents may do too much for their children. Professionals—mainly school counsellors or school psychologists—offered behavioural examples of actions parents took that they saw as overparenting. The responses fitted with Baumrind's (1965; 1966) two dimensions of demandingness and responsiveness, with respondents often describing actions indicating low demandingness, high demandingness, a combination of low and high demandingness, and high responsiveness.

Low demandingness, or reduced expectations that the child should use or develop maturity, was often described. It appeared to be as a result of a parent taking extra responsibility for solving a child's issues, or asking a third party (such as the child's school or their peers) to alter their actions to ensure the child did not experience difficulty or disappointment. Thus a parent's reduced expectations of the child's ability to complete tasks resulted in compensatory effort by the parents or by other people. The colloquial term 'lawnmower parent' describes these types of parenting actions. Authors such as Levine (2006) have detailed similar compensatory effort designed to protect children from disappointment.

While not specifically on overparenting, research on low levels of demandingness, where parents act intrusively and undertake tasks that the child could be doing independently, is starting to emerge in anxiety research. Parental intrusiveness has been shown to be associated with higher levels of separation anxiety in children, speculated to be the result of a child's unfamiliarity with

situations where they have to complete actions themselves, and reduced self-efficacy in children (Wood, 2006). Some professionals in this study reflected this finding by indicating they noted a reduced sense of self-efficacy in children who they thought were overparented.

Other descriptions of overparenting involved high demandingness, such as high levels of parental supervision and monitoring of behaviour, and of high parental expectations of school results and peer relationships. Research on 'helicopter parenting' has often emphasised a parent's difficulty accepting their child's failures (LeMoynes & Buchanan, 2011). Much of the previous parenting research has focussed on children whose parents push them towards high levels of academic performance and have high levels of perfectionism (Ablard & Parker, 1997). However, there is no known research on extreme parental expectations of high achievement in other areas, such as peer popularity.

Some responses of high expectations of the child related to parents wanting a high level of control over their child, their results, and their future, with the parent then becoming the main instigator of solutions for the child when success might be in doubt. These actions appeared to be a combination of high expectations of outcomes, combined with low demands on children themselves, so that the parent steps in to help the child achieve. There has been a large body of work on autonomy support versus control in parents, showing the impact of parental control on a child (Grolnick, 2009; Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991). Research on parental control in academic settings has shown that, when parents are orientated towards control rather than supporting autonomy in their children, then the child may fail to develop autonomous motivation in academic settings (Grolnick, 2009). These overparenting actions, where parents assume responsibility for improving their child's experience

of life, may impact on their child's perceived ability to effect change in many aspects of their life, and on their sense of wellbeing. Further research is needed to investigate child outcomes associated with low levels of autonomy in many areas of their life.

Some perceived overparenting actions, such as not allowing their child to use public transport, could be interpreted as highly controlling; however, these actions could also be seen to be low in demandingness, by not forcing a child to mature and experience discomfort or inconvenience by taking public transport. Similarly, not allowing a child to drive may be restrictive, unless the child were driven everywhere they wanted to go. If a child's needs are at the centre of a family, it is possible all their needs are being met through extreme parental effort. Further inquiry would be needed to determine which level of demandingness these actions describe.

Consistent with some previous observations, high levels of responsiveness appeared to drive many actions that involved high and low demandingness (Levine, 2006, Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Baumrind (1991) described one aspect of responsiveness as being attuned to a child's special needs. It appeared that many professionals saw overparenting as being so responsive to the child, that the child's needs are at the centre of the parent's life, even at ages where the child should be taking on more independent responsibility for their life, such as early adulthood. If a parent insists their child is always right or gifted, or that they face constant danger, this may result in more parental focus and actions to ensure the child experiences success and safety.

Much of the previous research on high levels of responsiveness has been based on a permissive parenting style (high responsiveness combined with low demandingness) and this approach has been shown to be associated with lower

levels of achievement orientation, less self-regulation and reduced social responsibility in children (Baumrind, 1991). There has been limited research on extreme levels of responsiveness to children that is not combined with low demandingness; however, higher levels of responsiveness to children has been shown to increase a child's likelihood for risk of victimisation at school due to the likelihood of overprotective parenting (Georgiou, 2008). Recent Australian studies from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children suggest overprotective parenting is becoming more common in Australia, only slightly decreasing with the age of the child (Lucas, Nicholson, & Maguire, 2011).

The respondents suggested some parents focus on perceived child problems, and become highly demanding of schools to ensure the child was taken care of, even though the professionals saw this action as unnecessary. Many of the professionals reported that anxiety in parents impacted on the intensity of parenting actions. Parental anxiety has been hypothesised to be increasing in Australia, shown in statistics including the declining rates of child activity, such as walking to school or playing outdoors (Zubrick et al., 2010), and the community's tendency to overestimate the incidence of crime (Tulloch, 2004). It may be likely that if a parent is overly attuned and responsive to perceived potential dangers the child may face – whether it were a risk of abduction, or placed in a non-preferred class – it may encourage the parent to monitor and solve their child's potential issues in more intensive ways.

Respondents in this study perceived child outcomes from the parental actions as poor resilience, a sense of entitlement, high anxiety levels, poor life skills, and an inadequate sense of responsibility. Other research has shown similar outcomes of overprotective or overinvolved parenting. For example, Hudson and Dodd (2012)

have shown that overinvolved mothering is a risk factor for a child developing a clinical anxiety diagnosis in middle childhood.

In combination, the perceptions of respondents suggested a model of potential causes and effects of overparenting (see Figure 1). The respondents appeared to suggest that parents who are highly responsive to their children and want to ensure their child has a uniformly pleasant and unspoiled life, then try to protect the child from facing difficult circumstances. Over investment in their child may make parents highly aware of events in their child's life, and offer both triggers and opportunities for them to step in and help their child. Such actions are proposed to be related to beliefs about their child's inability to face difficulties, their uniqueness, potential for success, and risks of harm.

Parents who are highly responsive to their child may be more likely to invest intensive parental effort, and ask people and institutions the child encounters, to alter policies and procedures to maintain an ideal and pleasant life for them. Some actions to ensure safety and a life unhindered by unpleasantness include parents doing more for their child, with correspondingly less being done by the child—whether that means completing their homework, providing transport, helping them avoid discipline, or insisting that peers meet their child's needs. On the other hand, such parents may also be highly controlling, monitoring their child closely, overly restricting their activities, making decisions for them, or discouraging age-appropriate milestones such as learning to drive. They may demand to know every detail of their life or want to be perceived as a friend. This may be perceived as very controlling parenting by the child, or may produce a charmed life for the child, depending on the degree that restrictions are onerous.

Thus, based on the model, a tentative definition of overparenting is that it is very high levels of parenting responsiveness and high demands for child success, often resulting in parental behaviours that reduce demands on the child to undertake actions that would effect change in their own life. These overparenting actions are thought to result in reduced child resilience, a sense of entitlement, child anxiety, reduced life skills, and an inadequate sense of responsibility or self-efficacy.

(Insert Figure about here)

Limitations

Results of the study should be interpreted in the context of its limitations. The first question in the recruitment email—“*Do you work with parents who put a lot of effort into their parenting?*”—meant that the sample might have been biased towards professionals with experiences of overparenting. Because of this potential bias, the observation that only 8% reported no experience of overparenting may be an underestimate, and the reported frequency of overparenting actions may be an overestimate of the occurrence of the parenting approach. Further quantitative research will assist in determining the frequency and severity of overparenting actions in parenting populations in Australia.

Behavioural examples provided by respondents may also have been biased by the description of overparenting as “monitoring, protection and caring for children”: there may have been other facets of overparenting that were not included as a result. If respondents had been given another description, it may have resulted in different responses.

Parental supervision is ideally tied to the safety of the child’s surroundings, and the level of protection of a child should match the level of actual danger in the environment. Excessive parental involvement for some students could be the right

amount of support for other students, depending on the student's circumstances (Wolf, Sax, & Harper, 2009). While it could be argued that respondents in this study only gave examples where they considered parental demandingness or responsiveness to be inappropriate for the child's age, abilities, or environment, further research would be needed to clarify this issue.

Additional information about the role and work context of respondents (e.g., state or independent school; socioeconomic environment) may have provided further clues about potential determinants of intensive parenting. It is not clear whether the respondents' own personal experiences as parents may have influenced their responses, or whether their reports of parenting actions were first- or second-hand, or were biased towards or against parents.

Implications

While the current respondents indicated that some parents may be undertaking actions that could be harmful for children, it is likely that many had the best of intentions. High levels of parental involvement, protection and care have previously been shown to improve child wellbeing (Wenk, Hardesty, Morgan, & Blair, 1994). Western societies are strongly influenced by 'the ideology of intensive mothering' (Hays, 1996), and overparenting may be triggered by such advice. However, even positive features may be problematic if taken to extremes. Parents themselves may be negatively affected. Mothers who attempt to increase childhood intelligence and accomplishment through intensive effort and increased time spent with children may be at risk of exhaustion, stress, anxiety, and guilt (Wall, 2010).

The present study raises issues about the potential impact of overparenting on schools and other agencies, on other adults in the child's life, and on their peers. Not only do these impacts probably include excessive demands on parents' time, they

also are likely to cause difficulties for schools in maintaining discipline and providing proper care and opportunities to allow children to experience appropriate maturational experiences.

The professionals who participated in this study appeared to suggest that overparenting has, at its core, a mixture of higher responsiveness to children and lower demandingness, making it appear similar to Baumrind's description of permissive parents (high levels of responsiveness and low levels of demandingness). However, Baumrind (1991) also notes that a characteristic of permissive parenting is to "emphasize freedom over control" (p. 63). Is the child who is at the complete centre of a parent's world, whose every utterance and action highly examined and acted on, truly free? Are modern parents' higher efforts in both dimensions still producing better outcomes in children, as Baumrind has previously proposed, or is there now a level of parental responsiveness to a child that is too high? Does an extreme attentiveness to children and their imagined needs and issues, encourage parents to reduce their demands on their child, resulting in the child rarely facing adverse situations, learning to cope, and acquiring resilience, maturity, and other essential life skills? The current study raises the disturbing possibility that the answer is yes.

Hays (1996) has suggested that, post World War II, developmental psychology and child-centred parenting advice has demanded increasing amounts of parental resources in bringing up children in what is seen as an ideal parenting approach. More intensive parenting is often encouraged in parenting programs, and insufficient parental effort is seen as problematic (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). The current research suggests that the focus of parenting interventions should be on encouraging an optimal level of parental involvement and effort, rather than

encouraging parents to believe ever-increasing effort will produce better child psychosocial or academic outcomes.

Further quantitative research on overparenting beliefs and actions, and into associated child outcomes is clearly warranted. Such research will help parents know how best to undertake their key role in fostering the development of capable, resilient, and socially responsive future generations.

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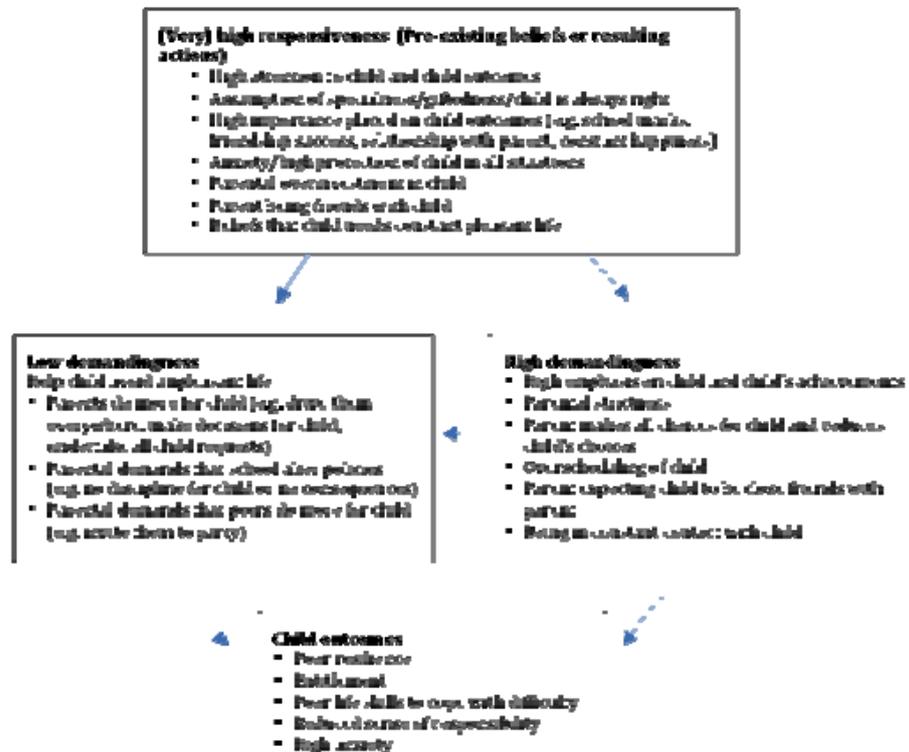


Figure 1. A proposed model of the potential causes and effects of overparenting

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