

# The Perfect Childhood: Why It's Bad for Kids

## The harm in overpraising and overprotecting your kid.

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### Reality Check

A teacher's comments in red on tests or papers, once considered instructive because the color makes you take notice, are fading away. Now, in places like New York City, Pittsburgh, and Trumbull, Connecticut, schools have abandoned the urgent red color for tones like blue or purple.

"My first-graders freak out when they see red," says McGhie Calahan, a teacher in Crossville, Tennessee. "I use blue or black to make comments. They're less harsh."

At an after-school sports program he attended when he was six, my son, Charlie, was awarded a trophy simply for participating. Every kid received a trophy and every trophy had its own inscription. The award my then-scruffy little boy received -- and he could barely lace his hockey skates at the time -- was for "Neatness."

Like most preschoolers, Will Theodore of Westford, Massachusetts, likes to draw, especially for his mom, Jennifer. At first she oohed and aahed over his every creation. His drawings were clever, amazing, works of art, she'd exclaim. One day after the four-year-old had placed a few squiggly lines on a page, he blurted to her, "Look, isn't this just beautiful?"

Time for a reality check. In our zeal to create a great childhood for our kids -- one in which they feel happy, safe and successful -- many parents and teachers are going to extremes. Determined to do anything -- *anything* -- to make life better for their children, parents have fallen for the myth that they can create a perfect childhood. They're called helicopter parents, hovering over their kids and micromanaging their lives. They've bought into the myth that a child's self-esteem depends on never having even the slightest adversity, upset or setback.

But the "no more tears" approach to raising kids is doing more harm than parents and teachers realize.

"Of course we love our kids like crazy," says Betsy Hart, a Chicago-area mother of four and author of *It Takes a Parent*. "But when we idolize -- and idealize -- them, we're not doing them any favors." In fact, the result of these good intentions is often just the opposite.

Kids can't nourish their true identities or feel good about their accomplishments if we feed them junk praise that bloats their egos and leaves them hungry for real self-awareness. There's strong scientific evidence that undeserved praise can do long-term harm, especially when doled out to malleable teenagers. What's more, kids with a solution-minded parent constantly lurking don't develop the mettle to solve life's inevitable problems.

"Mistakes are experiences that prepare youngsters for their futures," says Robert Brooks, PhD, of Harvard Medical School and co-author of *Raising Resilient Children*. "When parents rush to the rescue or take over, it sends the message, 'I don't think you're competent to handle things. I'm not sure I trust you to succeed.' "

Experts agree: To have a fuller, more competent life as adults, we need the freedom to fail a little more often as children. We need the freedom to make mistakes. Only then can we learn to succeed.

### The Trouble With Perfect

You see them everywhere: well-intentioned but overbearing parents, making tsunami-size waves in classrooms and on ball fields. In some school districts, it's become embarrassingly commonplace for assertive parents to pressure teachers to change grades. ("She's eight! Harvard's only ten years away!") Coaches and directors of other extracurricular activities get more of the same. Says Sharon Czelusniak of Queens, New York, a girls' soccer coach for eight years, "We had lots of parents who preferred that their children only play as forwards, even though our philosophy was for the younger kids to learn all the positions."

Pushy, grade-grubbing moms and dads take a toll on everyone in the system, not just the children. Surveys show, for example, that "parent management" issues are a major reason many new teachers leave the classroom for other professions, presumably less crazy-making ones.

The Millennials -- kids born after 1981 -- are America's most protected, overwatched generation ever, say Neil Howe and William Strauss in their book *Millennials Rising*. For a variety of reasons, their baby-boomer parents and other adults have been monitoring them like none other (I sheepishly recall over-monitoring my own Millennial). While no one is recommending we return to the days of wearing dunce caps and sitting in corners, the care of little egos can go too far. As Elisabeth Guthrie, MD, co-author of *The Trouble With Perfect*, writes, "Is it really to a child's advantage to have a

teacher say to a student who's given an incorrect answer, 'That's the right answer to another question'?"

If the multiplication tables or the capital of Virginia are open to interpretation, what can youngsters actually believe? When there are no wrong answers, when grades, talent and diligence all seem relative, why should children bother with accomplishment? (By the way, the Virginia statehouse is in Richmond.)

So how can parents help their kids without "hovering" like helicopters?

For starters, say the experts, parents need to get real about the abilities of their offspring, and then be more honest with them. Children need to be able to "assess strengths and weaknesses, monitor and refine their own performance," writes Mel Levine, MD, in his new book *Ready or Not: Here Life Comes*. That ability is enhanced when they have clear cues and realistic encouragement from adults they look up to. Director of the University of North Carolina's Clinical Center for the Study of Development and Learning, Levine notes that self-assessment becomes essential, especially in the years between 11 and 20.

New research in neuro-development shows that this is the stage when the brain's frontal region matures and neural connections become stronger. As this part of the brain begins to specialize -- important wiring for life -- preteens and teens begin to explore and focus on their interests and passions, finding the personal niche that leads to lifelong accomplishment and true self-esteem. What they don't need right now is false data.

## Taking Cues From Kids

"Human survival has always depended on accurate feedback," says Russell Barkley, PhD, professor of psychiatry at SUNY Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, New York. When we're not making the grade, the brain knows it instantly, says Barkley, "and sends a barrage of warnings: 'work harder,' 'come up with a new plan,' or 'slow down, you're making a mistake.'" "We literally can't fool ourselves, or even be fooled, into thinking everything's great when it's not. So "kids don't gain anything from syrup," says Barkley.

As Jennifer Theodore, the mother of four-year-old Will, realized, overdoing the praise can backfire. "Instead of telling my son that everything he does is a masterpiece, now I'll challenge him and say, 'What else can you do?' Or we'll discuss why we like some pictures better. He may be little, but he knows when he's doing something well and when he's trying hard."

That's true of kids in general, say the experts -- and also true when they're not performing up to snuff. If a child's not doing well, he tends to know it. "Children have an uncanny knack for the truth," writes Elisabeth Guthrie -- even very young children.

When a parent swoops in, however, kids' self-awareness is disrupted, and they can't practice finding their own answers. "Parents who overdo may have a child who doesn't engage in the thinking process," says Laura Berk, distinguished professor of psychology at Illinois State University and author of *Awakening Children's Minds*.

Instead of moving in quickly and forcefully, parents should take their cues from kids on when they need help. Psychologists call this background support "scaffolding." "There's a universal human need to master tasks on one's own, a drive to excel," says Berk. "When parents overstep the boundaries, they risk trampling natural self-motivation," she adds. Instead, it's our job as adults to make sure kids know we expect them to perform and behave.

Some of the words out of the mouths of babes reflect the innate need for autonomy. "I do it," and the all-too-familiar "No!" translate to "Back off! I need to work on this even if I get it wrong." (Parents, of course, may indeed have to help out little ones a lot of the time.) Children as young as 18 months old signal their inborn drive and competency needs by talking out loud to themselves in a motivating way. "When you eavesdrop on this private speech," says Berk, "you get insight into what the child finds challenging, what she wants to master." By the preschool years, this private speech begins to be internalized.

But not silenced: Self-communication remains a major tool of self-regulation. In the best cases, the core inner-voice message is *I think I can. I think I can.* "Yes -- just like *The Little Engine That Could*," says Berk. Parents scaffold that message of optimism when they let kids in on their own inner speech and everyday strategies. A mom might mention to a child, for example: "This is a hard recipe. I think it'll be easier if I start by chopping all the vegetables."

## Keeping in Close Touch

By giving up the myth of the perfect childhood, we may gain something better -- the good childhood. Tameka Watkins, of Daphne, Alabama, for example, seems to have a natural aptitude for parenting. She sits with her ten-year-old son, Cornelious -- nicknamed C.D. -- each night as he tackles his homework, but she doesn't do it for him. When he tells her what he's learning, she listens with interest. A report from the National Assessment of Educational Progress found that students like C.D. who discuss their studies at home have higher average reading scores. The opportunity to talk about and reflect on what he knows will serve this honor student well through his school years.

While C.D. helps his mother clear the table, they talk about what's on his mind. Some nights it's his dream of being a police officer. Tameka encourages her son's "what if" thinking, his vision for the future, and ties it to current achievements. "You know, the police have to solve problems," she might tell him, "just like you did in science class." And when he visits his mom at her job as an exercise technician, her sunny professionalism sets an example of fulfillment in a self-chosen task.

Tameka is what Robert Brooks calls "a charismatic adult," someone who helps the child learn significant things about himself. "Children gather inner strength and a resilient mind-set from this affectionate notice," he says.

Not overly praised, not overprotected, not constantly rescued -- but listened to, understood and supported, C.D. is receiving the best possible gift of childhood from his mom. It's the chance to be himself.

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