

Are we *over-parenting* *our children?*

FOR A HAPPIER FAMILY LIFE, GIVE CHILDREN THE RIGHT FREEDOMS, SAYS PATRICIA FLOKIS

If we think back to our own childhoods, most of us would be hard-pressed to recall being enrolled in more than one extracurricular activity at once. If we were bored, we were told to play in the backyard, not escorted to a playground or play date. Our parents didn't do our homework for us, put more than one toy in the parcel for pass-the-parcel at our birthday party, nor plan their weekends around us. So, why are we becoming super-sensitive to our children's feelings, fearful of their physical safety and obsessed with doing all we can for them? Here, childhood experts advise just how much 'parenting' our children really need, and how best to give it to them.

WHY WE OVER-PARENT

So why aren't we following our mum and dad's more casual approach to parenting, considering we turned out okay? There are several reasons why we're over-parenting, says clinical child psychologist Dr Simon Crisp of Neo Psychology. "Firstly, we're having fewer children per couple in Australia, so there's greater focus on the individual child. Secondly, the current generation of mums and dads has tended to reject their parents' model of parenting because they feel contemporary life is so different. Parents are often both working, the use of technology has increased and we're more liberal with our social values and morals," he says.

"Parents are also seeing that today's children are suffering more from mental health problems. They're facing new threats like cyber-bullying, and more immediate and graphic news reporting is increasing our perception, whether rightly or

wrongly, that the world is a more dangerous place for children than it used to be," adds Crisp.

Clinical psychologist Anna Cohen of Kids & Co. Clinical Psychology agrees that over-parenting can stem from insecurity about how we've decided to raise our children. "Whether they choose to parent the way they were parented or make a conscious decision to parent differently, sometimes it's not a good parent/child match," she says. "You can then end up with parents who are extremely protective and emotionally linked in with their child, to a point where it's almost suffocating for the child, or parents who feel they don't have the skills to manage problems, so they turn a blind eye to everything."

Fear of being judged is another reason we find ourselves micro-managing our children's lives. "Again, in this public world we live in, parents do feel like there's someone watching over their shoulder ready to make them feel inadequate, so they deal with this by making sure that ▶





everything is going well for their child,” explains Crisp.

Other parents, stretched by work commitments, feel as if they don't have time for 'problems' with their children, Crisp continues. "So they try to pre-empt things going wrong to stave off a crisis. However, parents need to make time to help kids to overcome and learn from problems once they've occurred, even if it takes longer. If we don't, we're robbing our children of the opportunity to confidently tackle issues and become better prepared for failures and challenges they'll face in later life."

WHEN CARING TOO MUCH HURTS

Feeling frazzled? Constantly questioning your parenting skills? Worried you're not doing enough for your child, even though they seem happy and well-adjusted? Then, it's more than likely that you're over-parenting. "Effective parenting involves using your judgement about when to step in and when to step out of your child's life," says Crisp. "If you feel like you're constantly monitoring everything that's happening in your child's life, especially when that leaves you anxious and with no time for yourself, you might be too involved for the good of your child as well as yourself."

And, of course, there are consequences for children when their well-meaning, but highly strung, parents are watching their every move or standing by ready to bust in and help resolve every playground squabble. "Anxiety and



depression can also be transmitted from parent to child," says Crisp, "so parents anxious about the risks their child faces can inadvertently 'teach' their child to be anxious about facing difficult situations or new challenges. Instead, we have to be telling our child, 'Yes, this is going to be hard, but that's okay – this is how you get through it.'"

"Children observe everything we do," adds Cohen, "so parents need to model a better way of dealing with their own worries and fears. We want to help our children become independent by overcoming their own reservations and by building up their self-efficacy – that sense they can do something on their own. Children need to learn to fight their own battles without parents immediately coming to the rescue. They need to make their own mistakes

and learn from them. Parents need to provide love, guidance and security, but we can't wrap them up in cotton wool. We need to allow them to experience consequences, too."

GETTING THE BALANCE RIGHT

If your child asks to ride her bike in the street or climb a pretty large tree, don't veto the idea outright to save yourself the stress. Ask yourself, 'What am I teaching my child? Am I teaching my child to be a competent human being?', says Cohen. "All parents will have different ideas on what's right or wrong for that particular child at that particular time, but trust is paramount. Allow them to do it gradually. First with you and then without you, when

you know they're trustworthy and doing the right thing."

Crisp agrees. "Kids can feel that parents don't give them the chance to do things for themselves and to experience the excitement and the confidence that comes from being independent. So, if there's an opportunity for your child to walk home from school or go to the corner shop, use it. Not only is it good for them, but it'll help you to gradually learn to let go and not feel so worried."

Having rules is okay, too; for example, making sure they come home by a certain time or making them phone to let you know where they are or if they move from a designated spot. Children will respect these conditions, not resent them. "Every child is different," says Crisp, "but when we match the level of independence that we give them with their ability to exercise good judgement, then kids will generally go along with the conditions we've set out because they know that eventually they'll earn the right to greater freedoms. It's when parents are overly restrictive that children, particularly adolescents, will dismiss the parent's role in providing constraint and pull away even harder."

Of course, a parent should never agree to anything that makes them

feel uncomfortable or that they deem unsafe or too risky. "Parents should always feel confident to be able to say 'no', but it's much more likely to be accepted by the child when they've already had other opportunities to show that they can do things or go places," explains Crisp.

In the end, parents should be working towards making themselves redundant, rather than being on call

24 hours a day. "Stand back and let your children explore freely and make mistakes, step in as late as possible and only if they're in immediate danger or if they become overwhelmed and want parental guidance," says Crisp. "Try to resist the temptation to make things smoother and easier in the shorter term by doing everything for them and take the time to let them learn that they can work things out for themselves." 🚫

When it pays to 'over-parent'

Crisp would like to see parents restrict their children's exposure to adult issues. "The irony is that we're protecting our children in areas where they should be allowed more freedom, like riding their bikes around the block, and not in areas where we really should assert stricter control and limits, like the media and the Internet," he says.

"Children are being exposed to complex and overwhelming – and often irrelevant – adult issues like never before. Children can't discriminate between what's appropriate for them to be resolving or dealing with and what's an adult issue.

Being so overburdened can create feelings of hopelessness – 'I don't think I can manage this' – and anxiety. From an early age, parents need to teach children that what they see on TV or what they read on the Internet is not always true or something that they have to worry about."

An advertisement for RESCUE SLEEP spray. It features a woman lying in bed looking stressed, a large blue alarm clock showing 9:00, and a box of the product. Text includes: "8am meeting with the boss!", "I can't sleep - STOP thinking!", "Will I fit into my dress this Saturday?", "Look for the NEW in store display", and "Mental checklist, full schedule, meetings, can't sleep? RESCUE Sleep® has been traditionally used to relieve sleeplessness associated with recurring and worrying thoughts. Always read the label and use only as directed. If symptoms persist consult your healthcare practitioner. Available in spray and drops from pharmacies and health food stores. For more information on RESCUE Sleep® please visit www.rescuemedicine.com.au".

8am meeting with the boss!
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RESCUE SLEEP SPRAY

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