

CAN PARENTS HURT THEIR CHILDREN BY CARING TOO MUCH?

Absolutely. Most parents want their children to have better lives, have more opportunities, be more successful than they as parents have been. Such a desire can blur a parent's judgment.

Such parents believe they are responsible for scripting, designing, crafting their child's success. They are well intended in their objectives, but this over-zealous attitude and resulting actions can undermine the child's self confidence, it can seriously hurt the parent child relationship and actually lead to failure by the child.

There are three main ways this shows up in parenting.

First, when parents feel obligated to run interference for their child. The "system" (school, sports, the law) hold a child responsible for their actions. Parents too quickly rush in to defend their child against the "system" even though the child has made some poor choices. They try to smooth out the "speed bumps" that are a normal part of growing up and teach valuable lessons about life. Life is unfair and it is to the child's advantage to experience both the natural injustices that occur and the justice of poor decisions. Parents need to be there to help them understand these and get through them. If they don't learn this as a child they will as a young adult, when the world is less kind, maybe in college, where they will have to figure it out and cope alone. Warning signs:

- "Teacher is being unfair." Take a step back and discuss the circumstances with the teacher first, before accepting the child's perception as totally and completely accurate and objective. Children have been known to skew stories in their favor (as the kids say, "duh."). We probably did when we were kids.
- "The teacher is expecting too much of you." The message here is "I, as your parent, believe you cannot do this." It is better to talk to the teacher and say to your child "it may be hard, but I believe you will give it your best effort. I am proud of you for trying."
- "The ref doesn't know his job. That was a terrible call. You got shafted." If you watch professional sports you see what we spectators think are bad calls a lot. Better to be prepared for them than surprised.
- "You have too much homework. Let me help with that." Tempting. It seems right, but it isn't. Talk with the teacher. How are other students doing with the work load? Get the bigger picture. Teachers usually have a very good idea of what students are capable.

A second area is pushing for success. Parents resort to belittling, humiliation, screaming, pressuring believing success is determined by "riding them." What actually happens is the child becomes:

- fearful of competing;
- fearful of displeasing or disappointing the parent;
- fearful of the parent; fearful of failure.
- resentful of the parent
- some children begin to withdraw

Most people experience a fair amount of failure. For children it is a stress that requires parental support and wisdom to help them be persistent and not quit. Over zealous parents who push too hard for success will likely see it backfire and accomplish the opposite of what they desire.

How do you know when “too hard” is?

- How happy is the child with this activity?
- Does the child try to find excuses to avoid it?
- Did the child really pick the activity?
- Does the child have to be pressured to practice? (more than just reminded)
- Has it altered the relationship between the parent and child, creating a negative tension?
- Does the child avoid the parent?
- What does the child say when asked by a neutral party about the activity?

Third is the overscheduled child. Parents believe they are providing the child with opportunities, opening doors to success. It is truly a small number of very gifted children who will become superstars. Parental desire will not make the child a superstar. Usually it is inborn, inherent talent. Spending quality time with parents is better than to be booked into too many after school activities. It may actually be robbing them of their childhood where their normal child play (not video games!) is in fact preparation for growing up.

Parents need to ask themselves the tough question: “whose need are they meeting?” Too often it is the parent’s, not the child’s. When a child says they want this activity more than anything else, parents need to consider is it to please the parent? Did the parent want to do this as a child? Did the parent do this and fail? Did the parent do this and succeed and now want their child to taste the same result?

It becomes very easy to rationalize and justify one’s actions as being in the child’s best interest. Be careful.