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How to Land Your Kid in Therapy

WHY THE OBSESSION WITH OUR KIDS' HAPPINESS MAY BE DOOMING THEM TO UNHAPPY ADULTHOODS. A THERAPIST AND MOTHER REPORTS.

By *Lori Gottlieb*

IF THERE'S ONE thing I learned in graduate school, it's that the poet Philip Larkin was right. ("They fuck you up, your mum and dad, / They may not mean to, but they do.") At the time, I was a new mom with an infant son, and I'd decided to go back to school for a degree in clinical psychology. With baby on the brain and term papers to write, I couldn't ignore the barrage of research showing how easy it is to screw up your kids. Of course, everyone knows that growing up with "Mommy Dearest" produces a very different child from one raised by, say, a loving PTA president who has milk and homemade cookies waiting after school. But in that space between Joan Crawford and June Cleaver, where most of us fall, it seemed like a lot could go wrong in the kid-raising department.



LOU BROOKS

As a parent, I wanted to do things right. But what did "right" mean? One look in Barnes & Noble's parenting section and I was dizzy: child-centered, collaborative, or RIE? Brazelton, Spock, or Sears?

The good news, at least according to Donald Winnicott, the influential English pediatrician and child psychiatrist, was that you didn't have to be a perfect mother to raise a well-adjusted kid. You just had to be, to use the term Winnicott coined, a "good-enough mother." I was also relieved to learn that we'd moved beyond the concept of the "schizophrenogenic mother," who's solely responsible for making her kid crazy. (The modern literature acknowledges that genetics—not to mention fathers—play a role in determining mental health.) Still, in everything we studied—from John Bowlby's "attachment theory" to Harry Harlow's monkeys, who clung desperately to cloth dummies when separated from their mothers—the research was clear: fail to "mirror" your children, or miss their "cues," or lavish too little affection on them, and a few decades later, if they had the funds and a referral, they would likely end up in one of our psychotherapy offices, on the couch next to a box of tissues, recounting the time Mom

did this and Dad didn't do that, for 50 minutes weekly, sometimes for years.

Our main job as psychotherapists, in fact, was to “re-parent” our patients, to provide a “corrective emotional experience” in which they would unconsciously transfer their early feelings of injury onto us, so we could offer a different response, a more attuned and empathic one than they got in childhood.

At least, that was the theory. Then I started seeing patients.

MY FIRST SEVERAL patients were what you might call textbook. As they shared their histories, I had no trouble making connections between their grievances and their upbringings. But soon I met a patient I'll call Lizzie. Imagine a bright, attractive 20-something woman with strong friendships, a close family, and a deep sense of emptiness. She had come in, she told me, because she was “just not happy.” And what was so upsetting, she continued, was that she felt she had nothing to be unhappy about. She reported that she had “awesome” parents, two fabulous siblings, supportive friends, an excellent education, a cool job, good health, and a nice apartment. She had no family history of depression or anxiety. So why did she have trouble sleeping at night? Why was she so indecisive, afraid of making a mistake, unable to trust her instincts and stick to her choices? Why did she feel “less amazing” than her parents had always told her she was? Why did she feel “like there's this hole inside” her? Why did she describe herself as feeling “adrift”?

I was stumped. Where was the distracted father? The critical mother? Where were the abandoning, devaluing, or chaotic caregivers in her life?

As I tried to make sense of this, something surprising began happening: I started getting more patients like her. Sitting on my couch were other adults in their 20s or early 30s who reported that they, too, suffered from depression and anxiety, had difficulty choosing or committing to a satisfying career path, struggled with relationships, and just generally felt a sense of emptiness or lack of purpose—yet they had little to quibble with about Mom or Dad.

Instead, these patients talked about how much they “adored” their parents. Many called their parents their “best friends in the whole world,” and they'd say things like “My parents are always there for me.” Sometimes these same parents would even be funding their psychotherapy (not to mention their rent and car insurance), which left my patients feeling both guilty and utterly confused. After all, their biggest complaint was that they had nothing to complain about!

At first, I'll admit, I was skeptical of their reports. Childhoods generally aren't perfect—and if theirs had been, why would these people feel so lost and unsure of themselves? It went against everything I'd learned in my training.

But after working with these patients over time, I came to believe that no florid denial or distortion was going on. They truly did seem to have caring and loving parents, parents who gave them the freedom to “find themselves” and the encouragement to do anything they wanted in life. Parents who had driven carpools, and helped with homework each night, and intervened when there was a bully at school or a birthday invitation not received, and had gotten them tutors when they struggled in math, and music

lessons when they expressed an interest in guitar (but let them quit when they lost that interest), and talked through their feelings when they broke the rules, instead of punishing them (“logical consequences” always stood in for punishment). In short, these were parents who had always been “attuned,” as we therapists like to say, and had made sure to guide my patients through any and all trials and tribulations of childhood. As an overwhelmed parent myself, I’d sit in session and secretly wonder how these fabulous parents had done it all.

Until, one day, another question occurred to me: Was it possible these parents had done too much?

Here I was, seeing the flesh-and-blood results of the kind of parenting that my peers and I were trying to practice with our own kids, precisely so that they *wouldn’t* end up on a therapist’s couch one day. We were running ourselves ragged in a herculean effort to do right by our kids—yet what seemed like grown-up versions of them were sitting in our offices, saying they felt empty, confused, and anxious. Back in graduate school, the clinical focus had always been on how the *lack* of parental attunement affects the child. It never occurred to any of us to ask, what if the parents are *too* attuned? What happens to *those* kids?

VIDEO: Lori Gottlieb speaks to parenting expert Wendy Mogel about the ways well-meaning parents can ruin their children.

CHILD-REARING HAS LONG been a touchy subject in America, perhaps because the stakes are so

high and the theories so inconclusive. In her book *Raising America: Experts, Parents, and a Century of Advice About Children*, Ann Hulbert recounts how there's always been a tension among the various recommended parenting styles—the bonders versus the disciplinarians, the child-centered versus the parent-centered—with the pendulum swinging back and forth between them over the decades. Yet the underlying goal of good parenting, even during the heyday of don't-hug-your-kid-too-much advice in the 1920s (“When you are tempted to pet your child, remember that mother love is a dangerous instrument,” the behavioral psychologist John Watson wrote in his famous guide to child-rearing), has long been the same: to raise children who will grow into productive, happy adults. My parents certainly wanted me to be happy, and my grandparents wanted my parents to be happy too. What seems to have changed in recent years, though, is the way we think about and define happiness, both for our children and for ourselves.

Nowadays, it's not enough to be happy—if you can be even happier. The American Dream and the pursuit of happiness have morphed from a quest for general contentment to the idea that you must be happy at all times and in every way. “I *am* happy,” writes Gretchen Rubin in *The Happiness Project*, a book that topped the *New York Times* best-seller list and that has spawned something of a national movement in happiness-seeking, “but I'm not as happy as I should be.”

How happy *should* she be? Rubin isn't sure. She sounds exactly like some of my patients. She has two wonderful parents; a “tall, dark, and handsome” (and wealthy) husband she loves; two healthy, “delightful” children; a strong network of friends; a beautiful neo-Georgian mansion on the Upper East Side; a law degree from Yale; and a successful career as a freelance writer. Still, Rubin writes, she feels “dissatisfied, that something [is] missing.” So to counteract her “bouts of melancholy, insecurity, listlessness, and free-floating guilt,” she goes on a “happiness journey,” making lists and action items, buying three new magazines every Monday for a month, and obsessively organizing her closets.

At one point during her journey, Rubin admits that she still struggles, despite the charts and resolutions and yearlong effort put into being happy. “In some ways,” she writes, “I'd made myself less happy.” Then she adds, citing one of her so-called Secrets of Adulthood, “Happiness doesn't always make you feel happy.”

Modern social science backs her up on this. “Happiness as a byproduct of living your life is a great thing,” Barry Schwartz, a professor of social theory at Swarthmore College, told me. “But happiness as a goal is a recipe for disaster.” It's precisely this goal, though, that many modern parents focus on obsessively—only to see it backfire. Observing this phenomenon, my colleagues and I began to wonder: Could it be that by protecting our kids from unhappiness as children, we're depriving them of happiness as adults?

Paul Bohn, a psychiatrist at UCLA who came to speak at my clinic, says the answer may be yes. Based on what he sees in his practice, Bohn believes many parents will do anything to avoid having their kids experience even mild discomfort, anxiety, or disappointment—“anything less than pleasant,” as he puts it—with the result that when, as adults, they experience the normal frustrations of life, they think

something must be terribly wrong.

Consider a toddler who's running in the park and trips on a rock, Bohn says. Some parents swoop in immediately, pick up the toddler, and comfort her in that moment of shock, before she even starts crying. But, Bohn explains, this actually prevents her from feeling secure—not just on the playground, but in life. If you don't let her experience that momentary confusion, give her the space to figure out what just happened (*Oh, I tripped*), and then briefly let her grapple with the frustration of having fallen and perhaps even try to pick herself up, she has no idea what discomfort feels like, and will have no framework for how to recover when she feels discomfort later in life. These toddlers become the college kids who text their parents with an SOS if the slightest thing goes wrong, instead of attempting to figure out how to deal with it themselves. If, on the other hand, the child trips on the rock, and the parents let her try to reorient for a second *before* going over to comfort her, the child learns: *That was scary for a second, but I'm okay now. If something unpleasant happens, I can get through it.* In many cases, Bohn says, the child recovers fine on her own—but parents never learn this, because they're too busy protecting their kid when she doesn't need protection.

Which made me think, of course, of my own sprints across the sand the second my toddler would fall. And of the time when he was 4 and a friend of mine died of cancer and I considered ... not telling him! After all, he didn't even know she'd been sick (once, commenting on her head scarves, he'd asked me if she was an Orthodox Jew, and like a wuss, I said no, she just really likes scarves). I knew he might notice that we didn't see her anymore, but all of the parenting listservs I consulted said that hearing about a parent's death would be too scary for a child, and that, without lying (because God forbid that we enlightened, attuned parents ever lie to our children), I should sugarcoat it in all these ways that I knew would never withstand my preschooler's onslaught of cross-examining *whys*.

In the end, I told my son the truth. He asked a lot of questions, but he did not faint from the shock. If anything, according to Bohn, my trusting him to handle the news probably made him more trusting of me, and ultimately more emotionally secure. By telling him, I was communicating that I believed he could tolerate sadness and anxiety, and that I was here to help him through it. Not telling him would have sent a very different message: that I didn't feel he could handle discomfort. And that's a message many of us send our kids in subtle ways every day.

Dan Kindlon, a child psychologist and lecturer at Harvard, warns against what he calls our “discomfort with discomfort” in his book *Too Much of a Good Thing: Raising Children of Character in an Indulgent Age*. If kids can't experience painful feelings, Kindlon told me when I called him not long ago, they won't develop “psychological immunity.”

“It's like the way our body's immune system develops,” he explained. “You have to be exposed to pathogens, or your body won't know how to respond to an attack. Kids also need exposure to discomfort, failure, and struggle. I know parents who call up the school to complain if their kid doesn't get to be in the school play or make the cut for the baseball team. I know of one kid who said that he didn't like another kid in the carpool, so instead of having their child learn to tolerate the other kid,

they offered to drive him to school themselves. By the time they're teenagers, they have no experience with hardship. Civilization is about adapting to less-than-perfect situations, yet parents often have this instantaneous reaction to unpleasantness, which is 'I can fix this.'

Wendy Mogel is a clinical psychologist in Los Angeles who, after the publication of her book *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee* a decade ago, became an adviser to schools all over the country. When I talked to her this spring, she said that over the past few years, college deans have reported receiving growing numbers of incoming freshmen they've dubbed "teacups" because they're so fragile that they break down anytime things don't go their way. "Well-intentioned parents have been metabolizing their anxiety for them their entire childhoods," Mogel said of these kids, "so they don't know how to deal with it when they grow up."

Which might be how people like my patient Lizzie end up in therapy. "You can have the best parenting in the world and you'll still go through periods where you're not happy," Jeff Blume, a family psychologist with a busy practice in Los Angeles, told me when I spoke to him recently. "A kid needs to feel normal anxiety to be resilient. If we want our kids to grow up and be more independent, then we should prepare our kids to leave us every day."

But that's a big if. Blume believes that many of us today don't really want our kids to leave, because we rely on them in various ways to fill the emotional holes in our own lives. Kindlon and Mogel both told me the same thing. Yes, we devote inordinate amounts of time, energy, and resources to our children, but for whose benefit?

"We're confusing our own needs with our kids' needs and calling it good parenting," Blume said, letting out a sigh. I asked him why he sighed. (This is what happens when two therapists have a conversation.) "It's sad to watch," he explained. "I can't tell you how often I have to say to parents that they're putting too much emphasis on their kids' feelings because of their own issues. If a *therapist* is telling you to pay *less* attention to your kid's feelings, you know something has gotten way out of whack."

LAST OCTOBER, IN an article for the *New York Times Magazine*, Renée Bacher, a mother in Louisiana, described the emptiness she felt as she sent her daughter off to college in the Northeast. Bacher tried getting support from other mother friends, who, it turned out, were too busy picking up a refrigerator for a child's college dorm room or rushing home to turn off a high-schooler's laptop. And while Bacher initially justified her mother-hen actions as being in her daughter's best interest—coming up with excuses to vet her daughter's roommate or staying too long in her daughter's dorm room under the guise of helping her move in—eventually she concluded: "As with all Helicopter Parenting, this was about me."

Bacher isn't unusual. Wendy Mogel says that colleges have had so much trouble getting parents off campus after freshman orientation that school administrators have had to come up with strategies to boot them. At the University of Chicago, she said, they've now added a second bagpipe procession at the end of opening ceremonies—the first is to lead the students to another event, the second to usher the parents away from their kids. The University of Vermont has hired "parent bouncers," whose job is

to keep hovering parents at bay. She said that many schools are appointing an unofficial “dean of parents” just to wrangle the grown-ups. Despite the spate of articles in recent years exploring why so many people in their 20s seem reluctant to grow up, the problem may be less that kids are refusing to separate and individuate than that their *parents* are resisting doing so.

“There’s a difference between being loved and being constantly monitored,” Dan Kindlon told me. And yet, he admitted, even he struggles. “I’m about to become an empty-nester,” he said, “and sometimes I feel like I’d burn my kids’ college applications just to have somebody to hang around with. We have less community nowadays—we’re more isolated as adults, more people are divorced—and we genuinely like spending time with our kids. We hope they’ll think of us as their best friends, which is different from parents who wanted their kids to appreciate them, but didn’t need them to be their pals. But many of us text with our kids several times a day, and would miss it if it didn’t happen. So instead of being peeved that they ask for help with the minutiae of their days, we encourage it.”

Long work hours don’t help. “If you’ve got 20 minutes a day to spend with your kid,” Kindlon asked, “would you rather make your kid mad at you by arguing over cleaning up his room, or play a game of Boggle together? We don’t set limits, because we want our kids to like us at every moment, even though it’s better for them if sometimes they can’t stand us.”

Kindlon also observed that because we tend to have fewer kids than past generations of parents did, each becomes more precious. So we demand more from them—more companionship, more achievement, more happiness. Which is where the line between selflessness (making our kids happy) and selfishness (making ourselves happy) becomes especially thin.

“We want our kids to be happy living the life we envision for them—the banker who’s happy, the surgeon who’s happy,” Barry Schwartz, the Swarthmore social scientist, told me, even though those professions “might not actually make them happy.” At least for parents of a certain demographic (and if you’re reading this article, you’re likely among them), “we’re not so happy if our kids work at Walmart but show up each day with a smile on their faces,” Schwartz says. “They’re happy, but we’re not. Even though we say what we want most for our kids is their happiness, and we’ll do everything we can to help them achieve that, it’s unclear where parental happiness ends and our children’s happiness begins.”

His comment reminded me of a conversation I’d just had with a camp director when I inquired about the program. She was going down the list of activities for my child’s age group, and when she got to basketball, T-ball, and soccer, she quickly added, “But of course, it’s all noncompetitive. We don’t encourage competition.” I had to laugh: all of these kids being shunted away from “competition” as if it were kryptonite. Not to get too shrink-y, but could this be a way for parents to work out their ambivalence about their own competitive natures?

It may be this question—and our unconscious struggle with it—that accounts for the scathing reaction to Amy Chua’s memoir, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, earlier this year. Chua’s efforts “not to raise a soft, entitled child” were widely attacked on blogs and mommy listservs as abusive, yet that didn’t

stop the book from spending several months on the *New York Times* best-seller list. Sure, some parents might have read it out of pure voyeurism, but more likely, Chua's book resonated so powerfully because she isn't so different from her critics. She may have been obsessed with her kids' success at the expense of their happiness—but many of today's parents who are obsessed with their kids' happiness share Chua's drive, just wrapped in a prettier package. Ours is a have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too approach, a desire for high achievement without the sacrifice and struggle that this kind of achievement often requires. When the Tiger Mom looked unsparingly at her parental contradictions, perhaps she made the rest of us squirm because we were forced to examine our own.

Chua, says Wendy Mogel, “was admitting in such a candid way what loads of people think but just don't own up to.” In her practice, Mogel meets many parents who let kids off the hook for even basic, simple chores so they can spend more time on homework. Are these parents being too lenient (letting the chores slide), or too hard-core (teaching that good grades are more important than being a responsible family member)? Mogel and Dan Kindlon agree that whatever form it takes—whether the fixation is happiness or success—parental overinvestment is contributing to a burgeoning generational narcissism that's hurting our kids.

A FEW MONTHS AGO, I called up Jean Twenge, a co-author of *The Narcissism Epidemic* and professor of psychology at San Diego State University, who has written extensively about narcissism and self-esteem. She told me she wasn't surprised that some of my patients reported having very happy childhoods but felt dissatisfied and lost as adults. When ego-boosting parents exclaim “Great job!” not just the first time a young child puts on his shoes but every single morning he does this, the child learns to feel that everything he does is special. Likewise, if the kid participates in activities where he gets stickers for “good tries,” he never gets negative feedback on his performance. (All failures are reframed as “good tries.”) According to Twenge, indicators of self-esteem have risen consistently since the 1980s among middle-school, high-school, and college students. But, she says, what starts off as healthy self-esteem can quickly morph into an inflated view of oneself—a self-absorption and sense of entitlement that looks a lot like narcissism. In fact, rates of narcissism among college students have increased right along with self-esteem.

Meanwhile, rates of anxiety and depression have also risen in tandem with self-esteem. Why is this? “Narcissists are happy when they're younger, because they're the center of the universe,” Twenge explains. “Their parents act like their servants, shuttling them to any activity they choose and catering to their every desire. Parents are constantly telling their children how special and talented they are. This gives them an inflated view of their specialness compared to other human beings. Instead of feeling good about themselves, they feel better than everyone else.”

In early adulthood, this becomes a big problem. “People who feel like they're unusually special end up alienating those around them,” Twenge says. “They don't know how to work on teams as well or deal with limits. They get into the workplace and expect to be stimulated all the time, because their worlds were so structured with activities. They don't like being told by a boss that their work might need improvement, and they feel insecure if they don't get a constant stream of praise. They grew up in a

culture where everyone gets a trophy just for participating, which is ludicrous and makes no sense when you apply it to actual sports games or work performance. Who would watch an NBA game with no winners or losers? Should everyone get paid the same amount, or get promoted, when some people have superior performance? They grew up in a bubble, so they get out into the real world and they start to feel lost and helpless. Kids who always have problems solved for them believe that they don't know how to solve problems. And they're right—they don't."

Last month, I spoke to a youth soccer coach in Washington, D.C. A former competitive college athlete and now a successful financier, he told me that when he first learned of the youth league's rules—including no score-keeping—he found them "ridiculous."

How are the kids going to learn? he thought. He valued his experience as an athlete, through which he had been forced to deal with defeat. "I used to think, *If we don't keep score, we're going to have a bunch of wusses out there.* D.C. can be very PC, and I thought this was going too far."

Eventually, though, he came around to the new system, because he realized that some kids would be "devastated" if they got creamed by a large margin. "We don't want them to feel bad," he said. "We don't want kids to feel any pressure." (When I told Wendy Mogel about this, she literally screamed through the phone line, "Please let them be devastated at age 6 and not have their first devastation be in college! Please, please, please let them be devastated many times on the soccer field!") I told the coach this sounded goofy, given that these kids attend elite, competitive schools like Georgetown Day School or Sidwell Friends, where President Obama's daughters go. They're being raised by parents who are serious about getting their kids into Harvard and Yale. Aren't these kids exposed to a lot of pressure? And besides, how is not keeping score protecting anyone, since, as he conceded, the kids keep score on their own anyway? When the score is close, the coach explained, it's less of an issue. But blowouts are a problem.

He told me about a game against a very talented team. "We lost 10–5, and the other team dominated it. Our kids were very upset. They said, 'We got killed!' and I said, 'What are you talking about? You guys beat the spread! The team we beat last week lost 14–1!' The kids thought about this for a second and then were like, 'You're right, we were great! We rule!' They felt so much better, because I turned it around for them into something positive. When you get killed and there's no positive spin, the kids think they're failures. It damages their self-esteem."

At the end of the season, the league finds a way to "honor each child" with a trophy. "They're kind of euphemistic," the coach said of the awards, "but they're effective." The Spirit Award went to "the troublemaker who always talks and doesn't pay attention, so we spun it into his being very 'spirited,'" he said. The Most Improved Player Award went to "the kid who has not an ounce of athleticism in his body, but he tries hard." The Coaches' Award went to "the kids who were picking daisies, and the only thing we could think to say about them is that they showed up on time. What would that be, the Most Prompt Award? That seemed lame. So we called it the Coaches' Award." There's also a Most Valuable Player Award, but the kid who deserved it three seasons in a row got it only after the first season,

“because we wanted other kids to have a chance to get it.” The coach acknowledged that everyone knew who the real MVP was. But, he said, “this is a more collaborative approach versus the way I grew up as a competitive athlete, which was a selfish, Me Generation orientation.”

I asked Wendy Mogel if this gentler approach really creates kids who are less self-involved, less “Me Generation.” No, she said. Just the opposite: parents who protect their kids from accurate feedback teach them that they deserve special treatment. “A principal at an elementary school told me that a parent asked a teacher not to use red pens for corrections,” she said, “because the parent felt it was upsetting to kids when they see so much red on the page. This is the kind of self-absorption we’re seeing, in the name of our children’s self-esteem.”

Paradoxically, all of this worry about creating low self-esteem might actually perpetuate it. No wonder my patient Lizzie told me she felt “less amazing” than her parents had always said she was. Given how “amazing” her parents made her out to be, how could she possibly live up to that? Instead of acknowledging their daughter’s flaws, her parents, hoping to make her feel secure, denied them. “I’m bad at math,” Lizzie said she once told them, when she noticed that the math homework was consistently more challenging for her than for many of her classmates. “You’re not bad at math,” her parents responded. “You just have a different learning style. We’ll get you a tutor to help translate the information into a format you naturally understand.”

With much struggle, the tutor helped Lizzie get her grade up, but she still knew that other classmates were good at math and she wasn’t. “I didn’t have a different learning style,” she told me. “I just suck at math! But in my family, you’re never bad at anything. You’re just better at some things than at others. If I ever say I’m bad at something, my parents say, ‘Oh, honey, no you’re not!’”

Today, Wendy Mogel says, “every child is either learning-disabled, gifted, or both—there’s no curve left, no average.” When she first started doing psychological testing, in the 1980s, she would dread having to tell parents that their child had a learning disability. But now, she says, parents would prefer to believe that their child has a learning disability that explains any less-than-stellar performance, rather than have their child be perceived as simply average. “They believe that ‘average’ is bad for self-esteem.”

THE IRONY IS that measures of self-esteem are poor predictors of how content a person will be, especially if the self-esteem comes from constant accommodation and praise rather than earned accomplishment. According to Jean Twenge, research shows that much better predictors of life fulfillment and success are perseverance, resiliency, and reality-testing—qualities that people need so they can navigate the day-to-day.

Earlier this year, I met with a preschool teacher who told me that in her observation, many kids aren’t learning these skills anymore. She declined to be named, for fear of alienating parents who expect teachers to agree with their child-rearing philosophy, so I’ll call her Jane.

Let’s say, Jane explained, that a mother is over by the sign-in sheet, and her son has raced off to play. Suddenly the mother sees her kid fighting over a toy with a classmate. Her child has the dump truck,

and the other kid grabs it. Her child yells, “No! That’s mine!” The two argue while the other kid continues to play with the truck, until finally the other kid says, “This one is yours!” and tosses her child a crappy one. Realizing the other kid won’t budge, her child says, “Okay,” and plays with the crappy toy.

“Her kid is fine,” Jane said. “But the mother will come running over and say, ‘But that’s not fair! Little Johnnie had the big truck, and you can’t just grab it away. It was *his* turn.’ Well, the kids were fine with it. Little Johnnie was resilient! We do teach the kids not to grab, but it’s going to happen sometimes, and kids need to learn how to work things out themselves. The kid can cope with adversity, but the parent is reeling, and I end up spending my time calming down the parent while her kid is off happily playing.”

Jane told me that because parents are so sensitive to how every interaction is processed, sometimes she feels like she’s walking on eggshells while trying to do her job. If, for instance, a couple of kids are doing something they’re not supposed to—name-calling, climbing on a table, throwing sand—her instinct would be to say “Hey, knock it off, you two!” But, she says, she’d be fired for saying that, because you have to go talk with the kids, find out what they were feeling, explain what else they could do with that feeling other than call somebody a “poopy face” or put sand in somebody’s hair, and then help them mutually come up with a solution.

“We try to be so correct in our language and our discipline that we forget the true message we’re trying to send—which is, don’t name-call and don’t throw the sand!” she said. “But by the time we’re done ‘talking it through,’ the kids don’t want to play anymore, a rote apology is made, and they’ll do it again five minutes later, because they kind of got a pass. ‘Knock it off’ works every time, because they already know why it’s wrong, and the message is concise and clear. But to keep my job, I have to go and explore their feelings.”

Another teacher I spoke with, a 58-year-old mother of grown children who has been teaching kindergarten for 17 years, told me she feels that parents are increasingly getting in the way of their children’s development. “I see the way their parents treat them,” she said, “and there’s a big adjustment when they get into my class. It’s good for them to realize that they aren’t the center of the world, that sometimes other people’s feelings matter more than theirs at a particular moment—but it only helps if they’re getting the same limit-setting at home. If not, they become impulsive, because they’re not thinking about anybody else.”

This same teacher—who asked not to be identified, for fear of losing her job—says she sees many parents who think they’re setting limits, when actually, they’re just being wishy-washy. “A kid will say, ‘Can we get ice cream on the way home?’ And the parent will say, ‘No, it’s not our day. Ice-cream day is Friday.’ Then the child will push and negotiate, and the parent, who probably thinks negotiating is ‘honoring her child’s opinion,’ will say, ‘Fine, we’ll get ice cream today, but don’t ask me tomorrow, because the answer is no!’” The teacher laughed. “Every year, parents come to me and say, ‘Why won’t my child listen to me? Why won’t she take no for an answer?’ And I say, ‘Your child won’t take no for

an answer, because the answer is never no!”

Barry Schwartz, at Swarthmore, believes that well-meaning parents give their kids so much choice on a daily basis that the children become not just entitled, but paralyzed. “The ideology of our time is that choice is good and more choice is better,” he said. “But we’ve found that’s not true.”

In one study Schwartz and his team conducted, kids were randomly divided into two groups and then asked to draw a picture. Kids in one group were asked to choose a marker to use from among three; kids in the other group were asked to choose from among 24 markers. Afterward, when the pictures were evaluated by an elementary-school art teacher who did not know which group had produced which pictures, the drawings rated the “worst” were by and large created by kids in the 24-marker group. Then, in a second part of the experiment, the researchers had the kids pick one marker from their set to keep as a gift. Once the kids had chosen, the researchers tried to persuade them to give back their marker in exchange for other gifts. The kids who had chosen from 24 markers did this far more easily than those who had chosen from only three markers. According to Schwartz, this suggests that the kids who had fewer markers to select from not only focused better on their drawings, but also committed more strongly to their original gift choice.

What does this have to do with parenting? Kids feel safer and less anxious with fewer choices, Schwartz says; fewer options help them to commit to some things and let go of others, a skill they’ll need later in life.

“Research shows that people get more satisfaction from working hard at one thing, and that those who always need to have choices and keep their options open get left behind,” Schwartz told me. “I’m not saying don’t let your kid try out various interests or activities. I’m saying give them choices, but within reason. Most parents tell kids, ‘You can do anything you want, you can quit any time, you can try this other thing if you’re not 100 percent satisfied with the other.’ It’s no wonder they live their lives that way as adults, too.” He sees this in students who graduate from Swarthmore. “They can’t bear the thought that saying yes to one interest or opportunity means saying no to everything else, so they spend years hoping that the perfect answer will emerge. What they don’t understand is that they’re looking for the perfect answer when they should be looking for the good-enough answer.”

The message we send kids with all the choices we give them is that they are entitled to a perfect life—that, as Dan Kindlon, the psychologist from Harvard, puts it, “if they ever feel a twinge of non-euphoria, there should be another option.” Mogel puts it even more bluntly: what parents are creating with all this choice are anxious and entitled kids whom she describes as “handicapped royalty.”

As a parent, I’m all too familiar with this. I never said to my son, “Here’s your grilled-cheese sandwich.” I’d say, “Do you want the grilled cheese or the fish sticks?” On a Saturday, I’d say, “Do you want to go to the park or the beach?” Sometimes, if my preschooler was having a meltdown over the fact that we had to go to the grocery store, instead of swooping him up and wrestling him into the car, I’d give him a choice: “Do you want to go to Trader Joe’s or Ralphy’s?” (Once we got to the market, it was “Do you want the vanilla yogurt or the peach?”) But after I’d set up this paradigm, we couldn’t do anything unless he

had a choice. One day when I said to him, “Please put your shoes on, we’re going to Trader Joe’s,” he replied matter-of-factly: “What are my other choices?” I told him there were no other choices—we needed something from Trader Joe’s. “But it’s not fair if I don’t get to decide too!” he pleaded ingenuously. He’d come to expect unlimited choice.

When I was my son’s age, I didn’t routinely get to choose my menu, or where to go on weekends—and the friends I asked say they didn’t, either. There was some negotiation, but not a lot, and we were content with that. We didn’t expect so much choice, so it didn’t bother us not to have it until we were older, when we were ready to handle the responsibility it requires. But today, Twenge says, “we treat our kids like adults when they’re children, and we infantilize them when they’re 18 years old.”

Like most of my peers, I’d always thought that providing choices to young children gave them a valuable sense of agency, and allowed them to feel more in control. But Barry Schwartz’s research shows that too much choice makes people more likely to feel depressed and out of control.

It makes sense. I remember how overwhelmed and anxious I felt that day I visited the parenting aisle at Barnes & Noble and was confronted by all those choices. How much easier things would be if there weren’t hundreds of parenting books and listservs and experts that purport to have the answers, when the truth is, there is no single foolproof recipe for raising a child.

And yet, underlying all this parental angst is the hopeful belief that if we just make the right choices, that if we just do things a certain way, our kids will turn out to be not just happy adults, but adults that make us happy. This is a misguided notion, because while nurture certainly matters, it doesn’t completely trump nature, and different kinds of nurture work for different kinds of kids (which explains why siblings can have very different experiences of their childhoods under the same roof). We can expose our kids to art, but we can’t teach them creativity. We can try to protect them from nasty classmates and bad grades and all kinds of rejection and their own limitations, but eventually they will bump up against these things anyway. In fact, by trying so hard to provide the perfectly happy childhood, we’re just making it harder for our kids to actually grow up. Maybe we parents are the ones who have some growing up to do—and some letting go.

As Wendy Mogel likes to say, “Our children are not our masterpieces.”

Indeed. Recently, I noticed that one of my patients had, after a couple of sessions of therapy, started to seem uncomfortable. When I probed a bit, he admitted that he felt ambivalent about being in treatment. I asked why.

“My parents would feel like failures if they knew I was here,” he explained. “At the same time, maybe they’d be glad I’m here, because they just want me to be happy. So I’m not sure if they’d be *relieved* that I’ve come here to be happier, or *disappointed* that I’m not already happy.”

He paused and then asked, “Do you know what I mean?”

I nodded like a therapist, and then I answered like a parent who can imagine her son grappling with that very same question one day. “Yes,” I said to my patient. “I know exactly what you mean.”

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