

Spoiled Children or Healthy Babies?

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Few parents make it through their offspring's babyhood without being told that all their efforts to nurture and respond to their baby will surely spoil her. And if it's not spoiled children that new parents are warned against, they're told not to let themselves be "manipulated" by baby. Attachment parenting is not the same as indulgently giving your child everything she asks for. We stress that parents should respond appropriately to their baby's needs, which means knowing when to say "yes" and when to say "no." Sometimes in their zeal to give children everything they need, it's easy for parents to give their children everything they want, and this is indeed harmful. Parents must learn to distinguish between a child's needs and a child's wants.

Needs and Wants

Yet, telling the difference between needs and wants is not a problem that parents have to wrestle with during their early months of parenting. In the beginning, wants and needs are the same. During the first several months of life, a baby's wants are a baby's needs. A consistent "yes" response teaches babies trust, which will make them more accepting of "no" later on, when they start wanting things they should not have. If you learn to know your baby by responding readily to his needs in the early months, you'll have a good sense of when it's appropriate to say no later on.

New parents often ask, "Won't holding our baby a lot, responding to cries, nursing our baby on cue, and even sleeping with our baby create spoiled children?" Or they ask if this kind of parenting will create an overly dependent, manipulative child? Our answer is an emphatic no. In fact, both experience and research have shown the opposite. Attachment fosters eventual interdependence. A child whose needs are met predictably and dependably does not have to whine and cry and worry about getting his parents to do what he needs.

"Attachment parenting implies responding appropriately to your baby; spoiling suggests responding inappropriately." – Dr. Sears

The Spoiled Children Theory

The spoiling theory seems scientific. At least it seemed logical to the childcare "experts" who popularized this idea, beginning in the early part of the 20th century. They thought that if you rewarded crying by picking the baby up, he would cry more, so that he would get picked up more. It turns out that human behavior is a little more complicated than this. It is true that if you carry a newborn baby in your arms much of the time, the baby will protest when put down in the crib. This baby has learned how to feel right, and she lets you know when she needs help getting that feeling back. However, in the long run, this rightness within her will make her less likely to cry for attention. She gets used to feeling right most of the time, and her parent's responsiveness shows her how to recognize her own needs. Spoiled children happen when kids are put on the shelf, left alone, forgotten about—the way that food spoils. There was no scientific basis for this spoiled children theory, just unwarranted fears and opinions. We would like to put the spoiled children theory on the shelf – to spoil forever.

Practice Attachment Parenting

The attachment style of parenting is not the same as overindulging kids or creating inappropriate dependency. The possessive parent, or "hover mother," is constantly in a flurry around her child, doing everything for him because of her own fears and insecurity. Her child may become overly dependent, because he has been kept from doing what he needs to do. An attached mother recognizes when it is appropriate to let her child struggle a bit, experience some frustration, so that he can grow. This is why we continually emphasize putting balance in your chosen parenting style. Attachment differs from dependency. Attachment enhances development; prolonged dependency will hinder development.

Pick them up quickly and they'll get down quickly. Or, as one sensitive mother of a well-attached child said proudly, "He's not spoiled; he's perfectly fresh!" Spoiling does become an issue a few years from now, when overindulgence or permissiveness signals a parent's inability to set limits and provide boundaries. This happens most often in children who are materially bonded or whose parents are still trapped in dysfunctional patterns from their own childhood.

What does the science say?

Attachment studies have spoiled the spoiled children theory. Researchers Dr. Bell and Dr. Ainsworth at John Hopkins University studied two sets of parents and their children. Group A were attachment-parented babies. These babies were securely attached, the products of responsive parenting. Group B babies were parented in a more restrained way, with a set schedule and given a less intuitive and nurturing response to their cues. All these babies were tracked for at least a year. Which group do you think eventually turned out to be the most independent? Group A, the securely attached babies. Researchers who have studied the affects of parenting styles on children's later outcome have concluded, to put it simply, that the spoiled children theory is utter nonsense.