

## **Is It Really Possible to Love Too Much?**

An excerpt from *Parents to Love Too Much*

By [Jane Nelsen](#) and Cheryl Erwin

Many people are confused or offended by the possibility, as suggested by the title of this book, that parents can love “too much.” Actually, love is not the problem: it is the choices parents make *in the name of love* that are at issue, particularly since the outcome of those choices usually is not evident until it may be too late to change them.

The time has come to encourage parents to examine their own assumptions and choices about raising children, and to understand that what may seem at a given moment like the loving thing to do may not, in fact, *be* the most loving thing to do. It is not our intention to bash or to blame parents; both authors work with parents and (most important) are parents themselves and understand only too well how challenging the task can be. Our desire is to help parents become more aware of the long-range results of the choices they make in the name of love.

### **Creating Weakness**

You may have heard the story of the little boy who watched a butterfly struggling to emerge from its chrysalis. He felt sorry that the butterfly had to struggle and thought he would help by opening the chrysalis. The butterfly fluttered a few feet, then drifted to the ground and died because it did not have the muscle strength to keep flying – strength that would have been developed through its struggle to leave the chrysalis. This struggle to learn and grow is built into the life story of most of the animal kingdom for a very good reason. It is meant to be built into the human story as well.

How often do we take the role of the little boy and rescue our children from struggles that will help them build the strength they need to handle the even bigger struggles they will certainly encounter in their lives? And why do we do it? These questions will be answered in greater detail in later chapters, but a simple answer is that even the most loving parents lack knowledge about the long-range effects of what they do.

### **Knowledge (and Lack Thereof)**

The little boy would not have followed his emotions if he had understood that he was hurting rather than helping the butterfly. Much of what we do is due to lack of knowledge – another key to unlocking the mystery of loving too much. We don’t know of any parents who would rescue or overprotect their children if they truly understood that they are doing more harm (in the name of love) than good.

We know that parents who “love too much” have very good intentions. However, they may not be aware that their loving intentions do not produce the results they hope for. Their children may be missing opportunities to learn to truly value themselves (instead of feeling loved only when they are pampered), and to value others (instead of loving only those who are willing to pamper them). Too many parents do not realize that when they overprotect and/or rescue their children (to protect them from difficult situations and hurt feelings); they are leading their children to develop the belief that they are not capable, resilient problem-solvers.

### **Loving Too Much is Normal**

If you are a normal parent, it is likely that you “love too much” to one degree or another. In fact, there are few if any parents (except, perhaps, pathologically ill individuals who are not capable of loving at all) who have not engaged in loving their children too much. Take a moment and see if you recognize yourself in any of the following behaviors. (It’s okay: we all do them.)

**Overprotection.** Overprotective parents fail to recognize when their children are capable and competent. They refuse to let their children climb to the top of the jungle gym, ride their bikes around the corner, or encounter situations where their feelings might be hurt. As children get older, overprotective parents try to prevent their children from making mistakes instead of seeing the value of mistakes as a learning process that builds strength and skills.

Keeping children safe is imperative, but overprotection may cause them to become timid and nervous about their own capabilities. Some children simply rebel the cause of many power struggles. Overprotection consumes a huge amount of parental energy and children usually prove to be ungrateful: they rarely appreciate it properly.

**Rescuing.** Parents who rescue frequently find themselves on their white charger, galloping to their child’s school at 9:07 a.m. with forgotten homework (which the parents themselves may have completed because the child waited until the last minute) or lunches. They intercede with teachers over behavior problems or simply confiscate the stolen candy rather than having their child endure the agony of a return trip to the grocery store. They make the missed car insurance payment themselves, rather than following through with the agreement to take away their teenager’s driving privileges. “They’re just kids,” these parents say. They eventually find themselves wondering why these same kids find it impossible to take responsibility for anything.

**Permissiveness.** Most of us have been told that permissiveness is bad for children. But it’s just so much *easier* than having to enforce all those rules! Sometimes, too, parents believe that children deserve space to blossom and explore, and that the word “no” will somehow stifle their creativity and self-esteem. These parents usually receive a rude awakening when they realize their children have not developed self-discipline, self-control, or concern for others. They feel hurt and offended when others do not want to be around their “spoiled brats.”

**Excessive control.** Lecturing, nagging, punishing, and making children's choices for them may not make you misty-eyed with emotion, but parents who do a lot of this can be heard saying things like, "I love you too much to let you become a delinquent." Once again, children often prove unappreciative and resort to resistance or sneakiness. Parents often choose excessive control because they think the only alternative is permissiveness. There are many options between these two extremes which will be discussed throughout this book.

**Giving in when children whine, coax, cry, or have temper tantrums.** It's fun to give children the things they want and see their faces light up with joy. It's the whining and crying part that isn't fun. Many parents went without the things they wanted or needed when they were growing up and honestly want their children to have a better time of it than they had. Others just hate dealing with tantrums and public disapproval in "Toys R Us." Either way, children (being human) learn to work the system and more of the same inevitably follows.

**Making too many decisions for your children to protect them from the opportunity to learn from mistakes (which may include learning from failure).** It's tempting to tell a daughter, "No, don't waste all that time trying out for the cheerleading squad; you'll only get your feelings hurt," when parents are pretty sure she won't make it. What might have happened if Thomas Edison's mom had worried about the damage to his self-esteem and persuaded him to give up that crazy light bulb idea after 40 or 50 failures? Most parents are shocked when we suggest that it might be better for their children to experience an F on their school paper rather than the nagging control of their parents – or even worse, parents who do the paper for them. This does not mean abandonment. Parents can be very encouraging by helping their children explore the consequences of their choices and what they learned from them in a supportive atmosphere..

**Indulgence (buying too many material things).** Indulgent parents really believe that their children cannot handle going without brand-name jeans and sneakers, eating at McDonald's just about every night, and having the latest toy craze. Indulgent parents believe they are doing "the loving thing" by providing their children with a TV (and all the other latest technology) in their rooms.

These parents are also the most likely to be heard asking how they can get their kids to clean up their rooms (and the living room and the bathroom and the front yard), or why the kids expect an immediate replacement for every toy they break (and they break a lot of toys). After all, if they are indulged materially, it only follows that children think they should be indulged in every other way.

**Unreasonable expectations (pushing children to excel in school or sports).** These are the parents who sign up for the best schools before their children are born, buy a computer for their one-year-old, start a reading program at two by placing word

cards on every item in the house, and sign Johnny up for golf at four because the golf course is a great place to make business deals. During the school years they try to get their children enrolled in gifted programs, and engage in endless power struggles over homework, believing their children will be failures in life if they don't excel in school, something that has been proven erroneous in many research studies (which will be discussed in later chapters). The children of these parents sometimes spend hours with a therapist dealing with their hurt and depression because they believe that they were loved conditionally rather than encouraged to blossom in their own way. Some live their whole lives trying to live up to their parents' expectations, while others drop out and become couch potatoes in total rebellion.

**Not expecting enough in the area of your child's contribution to the family (such as chores and problem solving).** Childhood should be a time of magic and fun, right? And kids never do this stuff the right way anyway. Too many parents find it easier to "just do it themselves" than to engage in power struggles over chores. These parents are often exhausted and resentful. They might be surprised if they knew how discouraged their children feel. Of course children rebel when being ordered around to do things that are not on their list of priorities. However, they are much more willing when parents engage them in the problem-solving process – and they learn important life skills as well, .. Involvement begets ownership, connection, confidence, and cooperation. (We will expand on this in later chapters.)

**Praising excessively because children need high self-esteem.** These parents find everything their children do "*wonderful*" and "*fabulous*." They have "One Hundred Ways to Praise Your Child" posted conspicuously on the refrigerator because they have learned that praise builds self-esteem. They have also run out of wall space for framed children's art work. They don't realize that they are creating "approval junkies" instead of confident, creative young people.

**Fighting your children's battles for them – with their teachers, the neighbors, and their friends.** These parents send friends home for not being nice to their child, tell Mr. Smith next door that his window was already cracked and the baseball barely touched it, and insist that if the geometry teacher were doing his job, their child wouldn't be flunking. Other adults and children scatter and hide when they see these parents coming. And, their children learn that they don't have to be accountable.

**Allowing children to "rule" the home, and consistently putting children's needs ahead of adults' needs.** They eat pizza because the children always want it, go to Disneyland every year because that's what the children want to do, and have never gone away for the weekend together because the children might miss them or cry. They feel cranky and resentful, but the children are happy. Isn't that what matters most? The disillusionment sets in when they discover that their children aren't really happy after all. Instead of feeling gratitude, they whine for more and have temper tantrums when things don't live up to their expectations.

**Working long hours to provide material wealth (which often results in the double-bind of not having enough time and then indulging children to assuage guilt).** All parents want their children to have a good life in a good neighborhood with good schools. And working parents do not damage their children, Dr. Laura notwithstanding. But hard-working parents who knock themselves out to provide a lifestyle for their children are sometimes bewildered to find that the time they have to spend together doesn't meet anyone's expectations.

**Thinking they know who and what their children should become, or seeing children as possessions or a reflection of their own success.** These are the parents who bore colleagues and neighbors to tears with long recitations of their offspring's prowess in school or sports. Or who insist that little Jimmy is going to be a concert pianist when the whole neighborhood knows that Jimmy spends every spare moment tinkering with car engines. Does father really know best? Are these parents trying to change petunias into roses? Do they really love their children for who they are – or only for the people they hope they will someday become?

**Fighting for custody of children (forcing them to choose between two parents or others who love them).** Surely a loving parent has the right to custody of her child. But what if there is more than one loving, healthy parent? Some parents conduct custody battles for years while children walk tightropes between them. These parents never take the time to "get into their child's world" to understand the damage they are doing in the name of loving them. [FN For the Sake of the Children, Prima.] Sometimes there is no "happily ever after" for these children.

**Allowing adult children to stay in their comfortable nest because they can't afford to live in the manner to which they have become accustomed on their own.** You mean loving too much doesn't end when children are 18? But it's hard to find a good job. Apartments are expensive. He won't eat right. According to recent data, there are more adult children over the age of 25 living at home now than ever before in history. It's a good thing these parents love their children: they're going to be together for quite a while!

If you can admit to any of these behaviors (and many of us can admit to most of them), you have indulged in loving too much and can understand why we believe that loving too much is simply part of the human condition – and of normal parenting. However, you also may have realized that it is not beneficial to children *in the long term*. In a nutshell, that is our definition of loving too much – actions done in the name of love that are not beneficial to children.

So, the good news is that you are normal. The best news is that you can do even better to prepare your children for success in today's world. Our definition of success is "happy, contributing members of society." Happy because they feel loved unconditionally while still learning the life skills that will give them courage, confidence and capabilities to fulfill their dreams, not yours. Contributing because they

understand the importance of giving as well as taking in family, school, and community settings.

By the way, “better” does not mean perfect. For the very reasons you love too much (human emotions being a huge factor), you are likely to fall into trap of loving too much over and over.

If loving too much is normal and you’re likely to do it again, why read a book about it? Because awareness can help you avoid the “loving too much” trap more often and/or help you make amends when you fall into it. We are not suggesting perfection. We are suggesting awareness and the skills necessary to correct mistakes when they are made. The courage to be imperfect [FN, a statement often quoted by Rudolf Dreikurs] is one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself and your children. They can learn, from your example that it is okay to make mistakes, to learn from them, and to correct them whenever possible. Understanding the long-range results for your children of what you do today will help you make choices that may feel “unloving” at the moment, but that will benefit your children immensely.

### **Emotions**

Have you ever seen a mother bird tending her nest? She patiently warms her eggs until they hatch, then devotes herself to nourishing her young. What would happen if the mother bird became emotional and failed to push her baby birds out of the nest at the appropriate time (which seems to be an instinctual act) because she was worried that her poor little darlings might “suffer?” Those little birds might start acting like some of our children who do not want to leave their comfortable nests. Why should they when they are fed, clothed, and provided with all the materials things their little hearts desire – everything they have seen advertised in the media or have been told by their friends that they should have? Instead of learning to fly and to forage for worms themselves (becoming capable birds), these babies would never get the chance to develop their wing muscles or their survival skills.– just like some of our children.

### **When Emotions Replace Common Sense**

Emotions are an important key to understanding why parents love too much. Many of our children are failing to become capable adults because their parents follow their emotions instead of their common sense. Loving parents want to protect their children from emotional suffering. (And children may truly believe they are suffering if they can’t have the latest toy or CD.) When parents rescue them from this suffering, they rob children of the opportunity to learn that they can deal with disappointments – or, God forbid, that they could work hard (*really* suffer) to earn their hearts’ desires.

This probably makes sense to you. So why is it so hard to accept and even respect the suffering our children will encounter (knowing it builds strength, character, and coping skills) instead of protecting them from it? Because we love our children too much.

### **From One Extreme to the Other**

Conventional wisdom usually includes only permissiveness or overprotection as symptoms of loving too much. However, parents may not be aware that when they are excessively controlling (in the name of love), their children may develop the belief that they are valued only if they are pleasing others or are living up to the expectations of others. As we have seen, there are many ways to love too much, and sometimes parents mix them all together – being permissive one moment and excessively controlling the next. Throw in materialism and it is a wonder our children develop any character at all.

### **Materialism**

There is a new disease in the world today. It is called affluenza. Affluence has increased our tendency to “love too much” in the wrong ways. Many parents in past generations did not have the means to provide their children with too many things. One mother reported reading the Christmas chapter in *Little House on the Prairie* to her young son, who looked up at her in amazement. “They got an orange for Christmas?” he said. “And they were *happy*?” Affluenza creates another disease called “more, better, different.” Count the times in a day that your children ask for (or obtain from their generous allowances) some material object.

Parents (who have a vague feeling that affluenza is not a healthy state) sometimes try telling their children, “I can’t afford it,” when they can. Their children know this isn’t true and take it as their clue to begin the “Oh yeah,” campaign. They beg, plead, bargain, whine, sulk, or scream. Parents give in. They don’t seem to know that is okay to say, “I *can* afford it because I have worked hard to achieve financial stability, and have developed strength and character in the process. I love you too much to deprive you of the same opportunity.” (This allows us to repeat that loving too much is not the problem when that love is translated into choices that help children develop strengths instead of weaknesses.)

Have you ever noticed that children know when you mean it and when you don’t? If you say anything with conviction (kindly and firmly) and then follow through by not giving in, the “Oh yeah,” campaigns will cease. It is okay to show a little empathy and to express your faith in your child. That is the kindness part. “I know you are feeling frustrated and angry. I have faith in you to handle this and to figure out what to do about it.” Saying what you mean, and meaning what you say, is the firmness part.

### **Possessiveness**

When parents treat children as possessions, it is hard to know if the motive is lack of knowledge about the effects their actions have on the child, or if it is just plain selfishness. Possessiveness is a good example of loving too much--doing harm in the name of love.

The movie *Saving Isaiah* provides an excellent example of a parent who is willing to tear her child apart in the name of love. While deeply addicted to drugs, the birth mother throws her child in a garbage dump. The child is rescued and subsequently

adopted by a loving family. The birth mother later recovers and decides she wants her child (now four years old) back because, "I'm his mother." A truly loving mother might have thought more about what would be best for her child. This mother eventually did – but not until she had caused her child excessive pain. (Although we believe that children should not automatically be rescued from the difficult events that occur in their lives, parents are never justified in inflicting traumatic pain on children.)

The birth mother wins a court battle and is given custody of "her" child. It is heart-wrenching to watch as the little boy is torn from the arms of his adoptive mother. Isaiah screams and sobs until he falls asleep. He then goes into a deep depression for months (with occasional bursts of destructive anger, in one case knocking down chairs in a restaurant) before the birth mother realizes she has not done the best thing for her child. She finally loves him too much (in a healthy way) to continue inflicting misery on her child and returns him to his adoptive mother. The pure joy on the child's face as he runs to his adoptive mother almost makes up for the horrible scene where he is torn from her arms. Then the adoptive parents have an opportunity to show love: they agree to visitation rights for the birth mother, knowing that a child can love more than one adult.

Those of you have seen the movie know that we have not mentioned the fact that Isaiah was an African American child and that his adoptive parents were white. As far as we are concerned, that is a political issue and we hope for a world when race truly has nothing to do with love and what is best for a child. An African American child raised with a white family (or a white child raised with an African American family) will undoubtedly encounter struggles (until the world changes) – and with loving support, will have the opportunity to develop strength in the process.

But that's Hollywood, right? *Saving Isaiah* provides an example that is beyond the realm of normal parenting. However, its extreme nature demonstrates the things that can be done to children in the name of love. And there are equally intense, if less dramatic, examples in every family court, where divorcing parents tear their children apart while claiming to love them.

### **Sharing Instead of Tearing Apart**

Parents often fail to understand that it is infinitely easier for children to love many adults (parents, stepparents, grandparents, and so on) than to have to choose between them. Divorcing parents sometimes get caught up in their emotions and use their children to get even with their ex-spouse. Or they may lack knowledge about the effects their actions have on their children. Sometimes they're just selfish. If you question these parents, they will claim they want custody of their children "because I love them."

Parents "love their children too much" when they can't see that they are doing "bad" while claiming to do "good." Unless safety, abuse, or neglect are factors, it is almost always better for children to have open access to *both* parents. As we will learn



in later chapters, guilt over divorce, custody battles, or single parenting often leads parents to love too much by being permissive or overindulgent. Loving too much can be a difficult trap to climb out of no matter what sort of family you have.

There are many, many ways that normal, well-intentioned parents love too much. In this chapter we have given you a taste of what we mean by loving too much. In future chapters we will explore why it is harmful to children, why we do it, and what parents can do instead. Parents can let their love motivate them to choose actions that are beneficial for their children—even when those actions may not “feel” loving at the moment. As we have said before, it is not “loving too much” that is the problem. The problem is loving too much in the wrong ways. All parents can learn to say, “I love you so much that I will not rush to rescue you and deprive you of the opportunity to learn how capable you are.” Parents *can* love in ways that produce healthy, competent, resourceful children. This book will show you how.