

Study highlights the importance of letting kids take the lead

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Parents today often look for teachable moments—and opportunities abound. When reading a book with a child, for example, it might mean discussing story plots with him. If she isn't allowed to play a videogame,

it means explaining why.

There's good reason for this: Research has shown that engaged parenting helps [children](#) build cognitive and emotional skills.

Too much parental direction, however, can sometimes be counterproductive, according to a new study led by Jelena Obradović, an associate professor at Stanford Graduate School of Education, published March 11 in the *Journal of Family Psychology*.

In the study, the researchers observed parents' behavior when kindergarten-age children were actively engaged in playing, cleaning up toys, learning a new game and discussing a problem. The children of parents who more often stepped in to provide instructions, corrections or suggestions or to ask questions—despite the children being appropriately on task—displayed more difficulty regulating their behavior and emotions at other times. These children also performed worse on tasks that measured delayed gratification and other executive functions, skills associated with impulse control and the ability to shift between competing demands for their attention.

Obradović and her co-authors found that the phenomenon occurs across the socioeconomic spectrum.

"Parents have been conditioned to find ways to involve themselves, even when kids are on task and actively playing or doing what they've been asked to do," said Obradović, who also directs the Stanford Project on Adaptation and Resilience in Kids (SPARK). "But too much direct engagement can come at a cost to kids' abilities to control their own attention, behavior and emotions. When parents let kids take the lead in their interactions, children practice self-regulation skills and build independence."

Obradović's research, which introduces a far more granular measure of parental engagement than traditional methods, shines new light on how parents help and hinder their children's development during the pivotal transition to elementary school.

It also comes as today's parents, increasingly derided as "helicopter" and "snowplow" caregivers, are spending more time with their kids than their own mothers and fathers did—even before the COVID-19 pandemic turned many parents into primary playmates and homeschoolers.

A deeper dive into parent-child interactions

Finding the right balance when engaging with children is especially important around kindergarten, said Obradović, whose research examines how caregiving environments contribute to child health, learning and well-being over time. The onset of elementary school is an especially challenging time when kids are expected to manage their attention, emotions and behaviors without parents' direct help.

"This is a really important shift, when parents have to learn to pull back," she said.

For their research, Obradović and her co-authors—Michael Sulik, a research scientist at SPARK, and Anne Shaffer, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Georgia—brought together a diverse group of 102 children ages four to six and their primary caregivers in a Stanford lab.

For two and a half hours, the kids worked on a series of tasks that have been used by child development specialists for decades to measure self-regulation, as well as executive functions deemed either "cool" (when emotions don't matter) or "hot" (when emotions are high). The children also participated with their parents in structured activities requiring

different degrees of adult interaction.

In a novel approach, the scholars had each parent and child observed separately. Using video recordings, the interactions were broken down second by second and evaluated independently. This allowed Obradović and her team to identify subtle shifts in how parents engage with their children. During a 25-minute activity, for example, a mother might follow her son's lead for 13 seconds, then withdraw for 5 seconds, then direct him for 35 seconds.

Typically, when researchers study a given aspect of parenting, they assign a single rating for the entire interaction. But that approach can be biased by the researcher's overall impression of the parent-child relationship.

Most caregivers seem supportive and caring, said Obradović. "On average, you don't see a lot of parents yelling at their kids or being intrusive or checking their phones," she said. "But there is a lot of variability within those averages, and our goal was to discover more subtle differences among parents who are generally doing fine."

These moment-by-moment shifts in parental engagement matter. "These are subtle things, but the message that children are getting may not be so subtle," Obradović said.

Permission to take a break

For their analysis, Obradović and her collaborators created a measure of what they call "parental over-engagement." They noted the moments when a child was working independently or leading an activity, and they calculated the ratio between times when parents intervened in ways that were meant to be helpful (not harsh or manipulative) and times when parents followed the child's lead.

The researchers found a correlation between high levels of parent involvement when a child is focused on a task and children's difficulties with self-regulation and other behaviors. This was most apparent for children's "hot" executive functions.

When a child was passively engaged, the researchers didn't find any link between parental over-engagement and children's self-regulation. According to Obradović, this suggests that there is no harm in parents stepping in when children are not actively on task.

Obradović said the point of the study is not to criticize parents. "When we talk about parental over-engagement, we're not saying it's bad or obviously intrusive engagement," she said. "There's nothing wrong with suggesting ideas or giving tips to children."

But it's important for parents to be aware that teachable moments have their place, she said. Helping a preschooler to complete a puzzle, for example, has been shown to support cognitive development and build independence. And guidance is important when children are not paying attention, violating rules or only half-heartedly engaging in an activity.

Sometimes, however, kids just need to be left alone or allowed to be in charge. This message may be especially relevant during the pandemic, Obradović noted, when [parents](#) may wonder how much direct involvement their children need, especially with everybody balancing new obligations.

"Have that honest conversation with yourself, especially if your kid is doing OK," she said. "As stressful as this time is, try to find opportunities to let them take the lead."

Provided by Stanford University

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