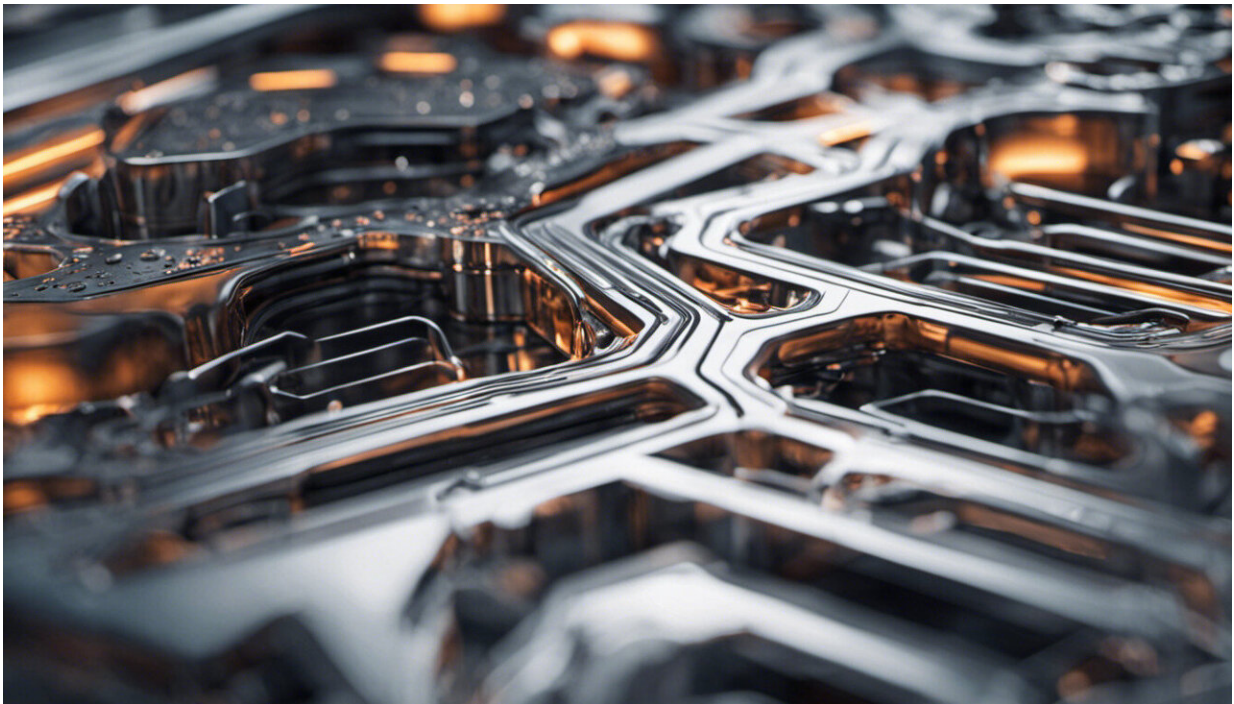


Can parents give their children too much attention?

June 26 2023, by Amy Brown



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Parents today spend [more time](#) with their children than ever before. Yet, at the same time, they worry more than previous generations about doing enough—believing a lack of engagement may harm their child's future [success and well-being](#).

This can have negative impacts. Increased [social pressures](#) on mothers to be engaged with their children, compared to fathers, is negatively affecting [maternal well-being](#). The [COVID-19 pandemic](#) and home schooling intensified this.

This raises an important question: how much attention is enough? Is it harmful to leave your child to their own devices? Should you ever ignore a child? Or conversely, can you overly engage with your child? As is usually the case with [child development](#), the answer is somewhere in the middle (and most parents, reassuringly, are doing "enough").

We know that a supportive parenting approach is important for child development. [Attachment theory](#) states that when a baby has its needs met by a parent or primary caregiver in an appropriate and consistent way, they are more likely to go on to develop a secure attachment to that person.

This helps them to feel more confident in themselves and the world, leading to more positive cognitive, social and emotional development. However, while secure attachment is important, ever rising levels of attention won't necessarily increase it proportionally. Instead, it is important to carefully consider the degree of engagement and balance this with supporting children to reach appropriate stages of resilience and independence.

One piece of evidence which gets dragged up a lot when attachment is discussed is research on the outcomes of children placed in Romanian orphanages. These children were typically significantly deprived of interaction, affection and care and did not have opportunity to develop a secure attachment. Studies of their [later development](#) found that they had poorer physical, cognitive and social developmental outcomes.

These studies are important, but a world away from the spectrum of

parental engagement that most parents worry about today.

Research examining more typical parent-child relationships finds that, yes, when [mothers](#) and [fathers](#) are more connected to and involved with their children, social and emotional outcomes improve.

Talking and reading to children in their early years is particularly important for [language and literacy](#) skills. Listening to, and supporting, children to understand and learn to [regulate their own emotions](#) is also important for later emotional and social well-being.

Curiosity, confidence and narcissism

On the other hand, children also need room to take the lead in their own growth and development.

Overly intensive or "helicopter" parenting, where parents are reluctant to leave their child to experience activities alone (obviously sometimes this is impossible, for example if the child has additional learning needs), can actually increase risk of [anxiety and poorer coping skills](#) in the children when they become teenagers and young adults.

That's because children learn through having the opportunity to [make mistakes](#), taking small, [age-appropriate risks](#) during play and [having the chance](#) to decide which activity they will engage in.

This builds feelings of competence, agency and autonomy. Boredom, in moderation, also encourages [active and creative play](#) which has many positive outcomes for physical, cognitive and social development, and has also been linked to [increased curiosity](#).

Conversely, when a child's day is controlled for them and their path always smoothed, they can struggle to develop the [coping skills and](#)

[resilience](#) needed for everyday life.

And while it may seem attention will ultimately boost confidence, there is some evidence showing that when parents are overly focused on their children—living their lives through them, constantly validating them and putting intense pressure on them to perform—this can increase [narcissistic traits](#) in children when they reach young adulthood.

Changing and adapting

How much engagement a child needs also [naturally changes over time](#). Babies and children develop physically and emotionally as they grow, and parenting that adapts to these changes is typically associated with better outcomes.

It doesn't make sense to leave a young baby who has no ability to support themselves alone for long periods to "encourage their independence." That will instead likely increase stress hormone levels in their young, developing brains. But telling your pre-teen that they need to entertain themselves for the afternoon (at home) is supporting their growth.

This brings us the concept of a happy medium and one of my favorite 20th century pediatricians—[Donald Winnicott](#) and his concept of "[good enough mothering](#)". Winnicott spent many years watching mothers and babies and concluded that sometimes not being able to meet a baby's needs immediately and perfectly was a good thing.

Although he believed that responding to a baby's needs was important, he also believed that sometimes, having to wait a little because you are finishing something else, helped a baby learn that although they are loved and cared for, the world is not a perfect place.

This theory has been explored over the years and written about

extensively in terms of broader "[good enough parenting](#)," which is essentially supporting a happy medium.

Finally, one fascinating study looked at how much parents [felt pressure](#) to spend more time engaging with their children, and how much time they actually spent reading, doing sports, or watching television with them.

Surprisingly, there was no [significant relationship](#) between the parents who felt the most and least pressure, suggesting that no matter how much time you spend engaging with your child, those feelings never really go away.

Perhaps that is the most important lesson. The vast majority of parents do enough (and if you're worrying about it, it's likely you do). Instead those feelings are driven by social judgment of all things parenting related. Let's challenge that, instead of spending all that energy on worrying whether our [children](#) get enough attention.

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