



## Madeline Levine, PhD

**The Price of Privilege**  
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**Q: How do you distinguish between parental involvement and overinvolvement?**

A: I think most parents have good instincts and know where they fall on this continuum. If you're not sure about your level of involvement, your child is usually only too happy to tell you when you're overinvolved. While a child's appraisal of overinvolvement is not always accurate, it can alert us to take a moment and re-evaluate.

Appropriate involvement is about moving our children towards independence. Alternately, overinvolvement tends to keep our children dependent on us. For example, in my practice were two fourteen-year-old boys who were in the same freshman history class at the local high school. They were both writing their final paper when, at 11:00 pm, the electricity in our neighborhood briefly went out. When the lights came back on, they found that they had lost all their work. Frustrated and appropriately upset, they both needed to figure out how to deal with the reality that it was close to midnight and they would have to start all over again (they both learned a lot about saving their work

on the computer that night!). Each boy went to his mom for help. One mom was very sympathetic, very supportive, made her son some hot chocolate, let him blow off some steam, assured him that he would be able to re-write his paper, and then sent him back to start over again. In the other family, the boy persuasively argued to his mother that he had already put in hours of work, that his note cards attested to his knowledge of the subject and that he had a big basketball game the following day. He asked her to re-write the paper for him. She did.

The first mom's involvement was appropriate because she supported her son and taught him to look inside himself for the skills that it would take to meet this particular challenge, thereby encouraging the development of perseverance and frustration tolerance. The second mom—not a "bad" mom, by the way, but an overinvolved mom—deprived her son of the opportunity to find out *for himself* that he was capable of meeting an age-appropriate challenge. Unfortunately, in this second scenario, the mom was encouraging dependency, not independence. It is likely that if this kind of overinvolvement is pervasive, this young man will get in the habit of looking outside himself for help when he confronts challenging situations (and when you're a teenager, challenge is a daily companion). Instead of developing self-management skills for dealing with set-backs—skills like self-control, delay of gratification, frustration tolerance, perseverance—kids with overinvolved parents tend to look for external support, either from other adults, their peers or, even more maladaptively, from material goods or drugs.

We are all occasionally overinvolved. We're parents, after all. Overinvolvement becomes a problem when it becomes a regular and persistent way of dealing with our children.

**Q: You've discussed the importance of the serenity of the mom—why do you think this quality is such a significant predictor of a child's sense of self?**

A: Imagine being small, powerless, and dependent on those around you to meet your most basic needs for food, shelter and comfort. This is how all children start out. This dependence on others, mom in particular, will continue for years as the emerging child builds confidence, a sense of self, and skills to effectively manage the environment (everything from learning not to eat paste in preschool to figuring out which college to attend in late adolescence.)

When I talk about the serenity of moms, I am, of course, talking about the serenity of the primary caretaker; in most families this is the mother. While many men have become much more involved in child raising, the vast majority of kids still spend far more time with their moms than with their dads. Research has repeatedly shown that children are more impacted by their mother's emotional health than their father's.

In order to effectively manage the ever-shifting developmental challenges of childhood and adolescence, kids need stability, predictability, what I call an "inviting, listening presence," and freedom to concentrate on their own development. An unhappy, anxious, depressed or substance abusing mom cannot be available in these ways. Children whose moms suffer from significant emotional distress often find themselves attending to the needs of their mother rather than the other way around. This is what psychologists call the "parentified child." In this scenario, the children's own developmental needs for self-discovery and self-development are sacrificed, in a generally futile attempt, to relieve mom's unhappiness.

As mothers, we've all been told that our greatest task is to raise our children well. It's hard to argue with this noble sentiment. However, I think that in the process, many mothers have overlooked their own needs. Many of us are far from home, often juggling work and family, with little of the support that woman have always needed in going about the difficult task of raising children. We need to worry a little less about being vulnerable, work a little harder at maintaining our own friendships and interests, and remember that the greatest gift we give our children is our own *relative* peace of mind.

**Q: You refer to your three sons' experiences over the course of your book, with their permission. Why do you think they were so open to your sharing their situations with your readers?**

A: I love this question because as many times as I asked my sons to clarify their willingness to share their own histories, I've never gotten much more than a uniform "Why would I care?" from all three of them. In spite of my pleas to be more articulate for the sake of my readers, this question obviously needed little elaboration in their collective eyes.

So, of course, I was left to mull over their surprise that anyone would worry about sharing their history. One of the things that interested me about this is the fact that my three sons are profoundly different in many ways. There is a large variation in how private, verbal, and psychologically minded they each are, so the answer to this question wasn't simple. And because they're terrific kids, I knew that their

"Why would I care?" wasn't indifference or rebellion.

There are things that I talk about in *The Price of Privilege* that are fairly easy for me to follow in my own home, and things that are more difficult. Boundaries are sometimes hard, forthrightness is always easy. I was brought up by loving parents who were clear that regardless of my accomplishments or failures, I was always loved. While I certainly never talked with them as easily or as frequently as my own sons talk with me, I'm certain that I could have said or done almost without risking their love. That didn't mean they wouldn't disapprove, but their love was a constant and a given. I think that the gift I had of two loving parents made it easy for me, in my turn, to create a home where, whether I approved or disapproved of certain behaviors, my kids knew that my love for them was never on the line. They are loved for who they are. And so, frankly, I think they go out into the world with the expectation that, regardless of any particular story, they will be well thought of.

**Q: What do you think accounts for many parents' prioritizing performance over learning among their school-aged children?**

A: I'm not certain that most parents are aware that they are prioritizing performance over learning. There's a particular culture out there and we're all living in it. That culture, like all cultures, has a set of values that it promotes: one of which is that success is primarily measured by easily observable symbols like grades, trophies, and prestigious college admissions. Behind each of these symbols of success is an individual, a corporation or a business (including education) that stands to profit from our anxiety, that without these symbols, our children are not likely to be successful. No matter how much a culture markets itself, it cannot be sustained without our buy-in.

Most adults know that life is far more complex than what casual observation reveals. People can have fortunes and be miserable; alternately they can have little in the way of status or material goods and lead happy, productive lives. Yet our anxiety about making certain that our children have a competitive edge is driving some parents to make poor decisions. In order to be life-long learners, children have to be engaged in the work they do. That means that the process of learning is more important than the measurement of learning. Kids can't experiment, they can't take risks and they can't expand their thinking when their eyes are glued to grades.

There is a seat for every child who wants to go to college in America: As the Baby Boomers retire, there is only one young adult to take the place of every two jobs that exist. The fear of scarcity that keeps us pushing our kids has been largely manufactured. While our children may not be as financially successful as we have been, they are unlikely to be holding out cups on street corners. At some point the next generation will not financially surpass the generation before. So what? Our real job is to make sure that our children have the opportunity to figure out who they are, what their skills are, and how they will manage the inevitable challenges of life. We should be emphasizing our children's effort and improvement as these are the capacities that facilitate real learning, real self-development, and achievement.. Ultimately, real success rests on character, a physical and emotional well-being, social intelligence, and true engagement with the world, not your long-forgotten junior high school history grade.

**Q: In the course of publicity and promotion for your book, what kinds of questions have you received from readers and fans of your work that most surprised you?**

A: Frankly, after being a psychologist for 27 years, there is little that surprises me! There is a type of question however, one that comes up repeatedly and in many different variations, that is emblematic of how rudderless and confused parents can feel at times. The depth of this confusion has been surprising to me. The questions usually have to do with whether or not parents have the right to exert authority. For example I've been asked, "I found cocaine in my fifteen-year-old son's bedroom. Should I do anything?" or "I was putting away the laundry in my thirteen-year-old daughter's bedroom and found condoms in her dresser. I'm worried that she will accuse me of snooping. Should I just let it be?" Yikes! Yes, you should do something if you find drugs in your teenager's room and no, you shouldn't ignore sexual activity in early adolescence.

What is surprising is that parents feel so anxious about "getting it right" that they've lost some of their common sense. My seventeen-year-old son attended one of my talks and was flabbergasted that anyone would need *my* advice on curfews, drugs, computer use or general bad behavior. "I thought moms knew this stuff," he said. Most of us used to, before we lost trust in our instincts. Before life was so child-centered. When we still had the easy back and forth of other moms to rely on.

I've also been surprised by the overwhelming hunger on the part of parents to both share their concerns and to seek an alternative vision for their children's lives as well as their own. I have been deeply touched by how many people have come forth with stories of sadness, of mistakes, of grief and of regret. The loss of a sense of connection has left so many of us feeling adrift. I've been heartened by people's willingness to reach out, to share and to continuously strive to be better parents, better people. Feeling like a successful parent, one who is raising successful children is a complex and arduous job. The willingness to explore the true meaning of success--takes courage because it calls into question some of our deeply held beliefs. I am overwhelmed by the number of courageous people I have had the good fortune to meet and speak with in these last two years.

It is clear to me that parents, educators and students themselves are anxious to find ways to push back against a culture that has so narrowly defined success. This narrow definition ignores the developmental needs of children, does not recognize that real success is complex, and as a result does not allow many children to thrive. For those of you who share these concerns and are looking for solutions, a new organization has been formed. Challenge Success, a project of the Stanford University School of Education and co-founded by myself, Denise Pope, Ph.D., and Jim Lodbell, M.A., offers strategies, curricula and interventions for parents, schools and youth. For more information go to [www.challengesuccess.org](http://www.challengesuccess.org).