

Names used in this column are changed to honor client confidentiality.

Spoiled For Life

Jail time is a common occurrence for John.

Why is that?

He has a nasty habit of picking fights and throwing fits when he doesn't get his way. Even in jail, if people don't cater to John's demands, he resorts to threatening and hostile behavior.

John's behavior hasn't changed much since he was a small child. That's because his blustery, bullying temper tantrums weren't nipped in the bud before he became an adult. Instead, such displays were rewarded—he got his way. Unsurprisingly, he still expects the world to bend to his every whim.

In one of our counseling sessions, I asked John for his perspective on his upbringing. His father was remote, paying him little attention. Conversely, his mother was always there for him, perhaps, to make up for a distant father figure.

"She would do anything to make me happy," he said. "She got up in the middle of the night and cooked me a hamburger whenever I asked her to."

Clearly, John is the product of an overindulging upbringing. Overindulgence is about overdoing and over-giving. The overindulged child is given excessive freedom, flattery and power.

According to Jean Illsley Clarke, Connie Dawson and David Bredehoff in their book, [*How Much Is Enough?*](#) Overindulgence isn't merely "about too much stuff or too many privileges. It's also about too much attention and wobbly rules."

They also write about the impact of overindulgence on adult life. Far from possessing low self-esteem, these people possess inflated self-esteem. They carry around the notion that the world owes them—that they're entitled. When their expectations aren't met, they lash out and feel justified doing it.

John saw nothing wrong with his mother's servant-like behavior, and he saw no correlation between where he is today and how he was raised. That's unfortunate for John because his incarceration—life frittered away in lock-up—will almost certainly continue until he manages to take a good, hard look at himself.

Self-centeredness—the belief that we're the center of the universe—is ingrained in all of us at birth. It's linked to the survival instinct. But it isn't meant to last forever. Normal maturation entails the development of a social conscience. In the process of growing up, self-centeredness should naturally be tempered with selflessness—a realization that others are important and deserving of respect and consideration.

We can't have a healthy society if people cannot work together cooperatively. John didn't grow up in a household where cooperation was taught. Rules were not firmly established and enforced, so he has little respect for them today. Worse, because he didn't experience consequences for his unruly conduct, he never learned accountability—a sense of responsibility for his actions.

At best, overindulged children can be an annoyance, and they grow up to be narcissistic, equally-annoying adults. In the worst cases, like John, they become a danger to society.

Such adults are socially impaired. Lacking basic social skills, they tend to alienate friends and coworkers. Typically, they falter when it comes to behaving unselfishly. And when things go wrong, they tend to blame others. Self-scrutiny is a foreign concept to them.

John's mother didn't do him a favor by getting up in the middle of the night to cook hamburgers. He would have benefited more—both personally and socially—had she stayed in bed.

Children need to learn how to deal with life's letdowns. Accommodating a child's every wish stymies the development of resiliency. They benefit from exposure to the word "no"—not said harshly or critically, but firmly. How else are they going to learn that it's possible to be happy without getting their way every time?

If I were counseling John's mother, I would point out that while she's giving her son everything he wants, she's overlooking what he really needs. Simply making him happy shouldn't be her goal. Childhood is more than just an opportunity for happiness; it's a spawning ground for necessary skills to live a rewarding life. To be well-rounded, we need to learn how to cope with refusals and rejections, setbacks and disappointments, limits and restrictions.

If John makes a request now, his mother's focus should move beyond the immediate. Before giving in to John, she needs to ask herself if it will help or hinder his growth. Will it prepare him for his future? Will it help or hurt him when he tries to make friends, get along with colleagues, or create a family? Will he be an asset to society?

Children are poor judges of what's right for them. That's why they have parents.