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How Spoiled Are Our Children? No Simple Answer

By [PERRI KLASS, M.D.](#)

A mother asked me last week whether I thought she was spoiling her child. It was the typical pediatric exam-room version of the question: In the weary, self-doubting voice of the recently postpartum, she wondered if it was right to pick up and feed her crying baby.

These days, a lot of parents are wondering about the spoiling question. A recent book review by Elizabeth Kolbert in *The New Yorker* [compared American children unfavorably with the self-reliant and competent children of a tribe in the Peruvian Amazon](#); she discussed "the notion that we may be raising a generation of kids who can't, or at least won't, tie their own shoes."

A parenting column in *The New York Times* acknowledged that [Ms. Kolbert's observations had struck home with many contemporary parents](#); more recently, an opinion piece [advised parents to stop protecting their children from every disappointment](#).

We're clearly having another of those moments - and they do recur, across the generations - when parents worry that they're not doing their job and that the next generation is consequently in grave danger. In cultural [convulsions](#) about how spoiled the children are, disapproving adults look back fondly on the rigors of their own childhoods. But many of the same parents (and grandparents) who are now worrying were members of the generation that Vice President Spiro T. Agnew [accused Dr. Benjamin Spock](#) of having spoiled.

Indeed, the overprivileged and overindulged child was a stock character in 19th-century novels: As veteran governesses who presumably knew the territory, the Brontë sisters wrote powerful portraits of spoiled older children. The culture changes, but many of the battlegrounds remain the same.

In the pediatric office today, parents often bring up spoiling, as that mother did last week, in reference to young babies, sleep and feeding. It's as if the later, more confusing questions about how to respond to a child's demands crystallize in those early months when the new baby cries and the parents worry.

The official pediatric line - I said some version of this to that mother last week - is that you can't spoil babies by taking good care of them. But even that doesn't turn out to be simple.

"It's important to be there and to be responsive and responsible, but it also doesn't mean that you have to be totally at the whim of the baby," said Dr. Pamela High, a professor of [pediatrics](#) at Brown University and medical director of the Fussy Baby Clinic at the Brown Center for the Study of Children. "You're teaching them patterns and routine and regularity."

Parents can meet a baby's needs while still allowing her a chance to learn to settle down and sleep without being held. In a randomized study on babies with colic that was published this year by Dr. High's group, when parents got help with issues of feeding, sleep, routine and their own [mental health](#), [those colicky babies cried less and slept more](#).

As children get older, setting limits and establishing family routines and expectations gets more

complicated. But it's still a question of balancing immediate gratification and larger life lessons.

It's also an area where we still feel comfortable and righteous blaming and judging other parents - and ourselves.

Problematic childhood behaviors once attributed to incompetent or destructive parenting are now understood to be hard-wired, set by [genetics](#), reflecting neurological differences. We don't blame bad parenting for [autism](#) now, or [A.D.H.D.](#) But "spoiled" evokes traits and behaviors for which we're often quick to hold parents responsible.

As Roald Dahl put it in 1964 in "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory," "A girl can't spoil *herself*, you know."

Dr. Mark Bertin, a developmental behavioral pediatrician in Pleasantville, N.Y., affiliated with New York Medical College, sees a wide range of [children with behavioral problems](#), teasing apart contributions of neurological wiring, temperament and family style.

Though parenting style is hard to study, he points to a body of research that cumulatively suggests that [children benefit from strategies that build self-control and emotional resilience](#).

"We're talking about kids who aren't brought up with limits," he said. "We all want our kids to be happy moment to moment, but there are some skills you learn from growing up with limits and the opportunity to experience frustration."

The saying-no and limit-setting challenges for parents of young children often revolve around food, sleep and media. "By setting limits, we're teaching them what our values are and the way we think they can lead a happier, productive life," Dr. High said.

With older children, you get into the issue of stuff. "When I think of spoiling, you're talking about attention and you're talking about things," Dr. High said. "I don't think you can spoil with too much attention to what your kids are doing and thinking and suffering from, but I think you sometimes have to be careful about things."

You don't have to be wealthy to overindulge a child with stuff. And offering things that substitute for parental attention is particularly problematic. Is the child with a huge television in the bedroom and unfettered access to all screens overindulged - or neglected?

I can't tell you whether children today are more spoiled or whether more of them are spoiled. There are real differences in child-rearing over time, some reflecting the culture's larger trajectories of affluence and technology. But then there are also the recurring bouts of self-examination and self-criticism that reflect adult engagement with parenthood. Whatever the generation, responding to the wants and needs of children while trying to teach the lessons that will fortify their characters is a tricky assignment. We get it wrong some of the time, no matter what we do.