A Review of Research on the Effects of Parental Overparenting on Children's Social Adaptation

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Abstract

Overparenting means that the actual parenting level of parents exceeds the required parenting needs of their children. As a parenting strategy, parental overparenting affects children's social adaptation. By integrating global studies and from the perspective of positive psychology, this review aims to analyse and discuss the impact of overparenting on social adaptation, propose intervention strategies, summarize shortcomings and propose an outlook. The ultimate goal of this review is to expand the horizons of research on overparenting and to identify appropriate ways to correct overparenting and improve children's social adaptation ability.

Keywords

overparenting, helicopter parenting, positive psychology, social adaptation

1. Introduction

Children are the future pillars of a nation, whose education holds paramount importance. Families serve as the first school for children, and they play a critical role in their development; only by establishing family education as a means of helping children develop in an all-round way can we better promote children's comprehensive literacy and diversified growth.

Positive psychology is an emerging science that uses the theoretical and practical results of psychology research to explore the positive qualities of human beings and positive mental states and promote human mental health and self-actualization (Ji, 2024), which tends to leverage psychological theories and methods to tap into positive forces and help to realize human self-worth to achieve the purpose of positive development and growth in human beings. From the perspective of positive psychology, family parenting fully emphasizes the positive role of parenting and builds an educational model in which parents assume leadership while children take initiative, which is conducive to children's personality growth in a harmonious and healthy environment.

Overparenting has garnered increasing attention from scholars, with studies revealing its detrimental effects on children's social adaptation. Moreover, scholars have concluded that many studies on overparenting have been conducted in Western countries (Leung & Shek, 2024), while relevant studies in China are still relatively limited. Owing to China's intensive parenting tradition and historical one-child policy, Chinese individuals may consider overparenting more normatively and acceptably than Americans do (Hong & Cui, 2023). Given

that overparenting have become the norm in Chinese society, there is a need for more research on overparenting in the Chinese context.

Therefore, this review aims to explore the impact of family overparenting on children's social adaptation, propose suggestions for family education from the perspective of positive psychology, expand the field of view of the study, and provide insights into seeking appropriate ways to mitigate overparenting and improve children's social adaptation ability.

2.   Conceptualization of Overparenting

Overparenting refers to the actual level of parenting that surpasses the required parenting needs of the child, representing a strategy in which parents are overly involved with their children and develop inappropriate parenting (Segrin et al., 2012, 2013). According to Hu Yixin et al., overparenting is divided into two levels, school and family, but the essence is consistent with the concept proposed by Segrin et al. Both are overly concerned with the needs and state of children and are a kind of parenting that exceeds the normal limits of the children's behavioral constraints, emotional responses, etc. (Jiao et al., 2024). There is more agreement among scholars on the concept of overparenting, so this review follows the concept proposed by scholar Segrin. However, there is no academic consensus on the classification of overparenting. Terms such as intensive parenting, invasive parenting, and helicopter parenting are similar to this approach (Han & Tian, 2022), whereas scholar Zhang Jiaying proposed helicopter parenting as a subtype of overparenting (Zhang, 2023). However, more scholars now believe that helicopter parenting and overparenting are the same (Cook, 2020).

Overparenting is caused by demographic variables, parental traits, and cultural norms (Xia & Kong, 2021). Currently, scholars generally agree that overparenting is a form of parenting that produces direct and sustained harm to children, with adverse outcomes such as depression, anxiety, increased perceived stress and decreased life satisfaction and self-acceptance (Hong & Cui, 2023; Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012; Segrin et al., 2012).

3.   Conceptualization of Social Adaptation

There is no consensus on the concept of social adaptation. Social adaptation is also known as social adjustment, and Herbert Spencer was the first scholar to use the term. He suggested that individuals can accomplish the adjustment of internal and external relationships through specific adaptations such as conformity, self-control, compliance, obedience and assimilation (Chen, 1995). This is consistent with what He Ling et al. argue that social adaptation is an important way for individuals to integrate into social life, improve social status, and realize the value of life (He & Yao, 2017). Zhu Zhixian defines social adaptation as "the process of acceptance of existing social lifestyles, behavioral norms and moral norms by individuals" (Chu, 1989). The former places more emphasis on the interaction between the individual and the social environment and is a comprehensive reflection of the individual's state of psychological and social coordination in social life, whereas the latter places more emphasis on the individual's adaptability to the external environment.

Liu Jing et al. reported that social adaptation consists of two features: the individual maintains external harmony with the external environment, his or her psychology maintains internal balance, and the internal balance and external harmony are closely related to each other (Liu & Dai, 2022).

4.   Impact of Overparenting on Social Adaptation

Parental overparenting directly or indirectly affects children's social adaptation, and the negative impact is predominant. An analysis of the literature reveals that the impact of excessive parenting on children's social adaptation is manifested in three main aspects: behavioral adaptation, emotional adaptation, and interpersonal adaptation.

4.1   Behavioral Adaptation

4.1.1   Problem Behavior

Overparenting is correlated with more problematic behaviors in children (Schiffrin et al., 2014). In terms of gaming and social media addictive behaviors, overparenting was not associated with family overparenting in China, whereas the latter was more affected by maternal overparenting than paternal overparenting in the U.S. sample (Hwang et al., 2022). With respect to drinking behaviors, some scholars have reported that overparenting can increase the likelihood of adult children drinking through lower levels of psychological need fulfilment and self-control (Cui et al., 2019). However, studies have also demonstrated that students' drinking-related risk can be mitigated through the effective use of highly engaged parenting. These specific mechanisms and findings remain to be further explored.

4.1.2   Career Exploration Behavior

Excessive parenting can hinder children's autonomy, making them more dependent on their parents, and they may engage in responsibility-avoiding behaviors in the process of choosing a career, deferring to their parents, hoping for parental involvement to avoid exerting more effort, and ignoring their personal potential and their own pursuits, which manifests themselves in disengagement from higher career exploration goals and participation in fewer career exploration behaviors (Wen et al., 2023).

4.2   Emotional Adaptation

Parental overintervention may convey an "emotional exclusion philosophy" (e.g., suppressing negative emotions), leading to limited emotional expression in children and increased internalizing problems (e.g., anxiety, depression) (Segrin et al., 2012). Additionally, while parents support their children emotionally, they fail to grant sufficient autonomy to fully utilize their children's abilities, resulting in lower levels of life satisfaction and higher levels of anxiety and depressive tendencies (Chen, 1995; Jiao et al., 2023).

4.3   Interpersonal Adaptation

Research has shown that overparenting impairs children's interpersonal interactions, reduces communication with others, eliminates opportunities to exercise social skills, and increases the risk of developing social anxiety (Yang et al., 2020). Some studies have also shown that in emerging adulthood (18–29 years old), higher levels of overparenting correlate with lower levels of school engagement and peer attachment (Gao et al., 2024). Reduced peer attachment further undermines trust and fosters relational estrangement, which is consistent with the findings of Segrin et al. (2015). In addition to relationships with peers, overparenting is also associated with a lower quality of parent–child communication and indirectly produces lower family satisfaction. Similarly, the closer emerging adults are to their parents, the more likely they are to be negatively affected by overparenting behaviors and more reluctant to believe that the way they behave produces optimal outcomes in romantic relationships, i.e., impaired relationship efficacy, which in turn affects intimacy between these individuals and their spouses (Jiao et al., 2024). Conversely, overparenting may positively correlate with development in early adolescence because of parents' own need for parental supervision and protection, the new school environment, and cultural values (Leung et al., 2020).

5.   Intervention Strategies

On the basis of various studies, the following suggestions are proposed to improve the impact of overparenting on social adaptation from a positive psychology perspective.

5.1   Family-level Strategies

At present, one of the basic values of family education governance is parental professionalization. Although there is still a certain gap between parents and fully mature professionals (e.g., teachers) in terms of educational professionalism, "quasiprofessionalism" has already become a natural attribute of family child-rearing in terms of social benefits and knowledge and skills (Yu, 2022). Parents should adopt the scientific concept of family

education and objectively weigh and grasp the "degree" of their children's education to avoid the phenomenon of "overparenting". On this basis, the following recommendations are proposed:

5.1.1 Transforming Educational Concepts and Respecting Autonomy

Parents should view their children as individuals with independent will, respect their individual characteristics, increase their self-efficacy, give them the courage and ability to face the world independently, and act as helpers in their children's journeys rather than overly controlling them. Moreover, the behavior of pointing out learning opportunities for their children can reduce overparenting, i.e., parents intervene less when they perceive any learning opportunities for their children and increase interventions in activities they do not perceive as learning opportunities, which in turn can have a negative impact (Shachnai et al., 2024). This encourages parents to stop overintervention to appreciate the process of their children learning valuable lessons from trying to accomplish tasks on their own.

5.1.2 Creating a Positive Atmosphere and Exploring Positive Paths

The application of positive psychology in family education can be summarized in three ways: parental exploration, child exploration, and mutual respect between parents and children (Hao, 2020). Parents need to view the parent–child boundary, replace preaching and control with listening and acceptance, actively guide their children's thinking, understand their real needs, and focus on their independent growth; children ought to learn with an open mind, realize self-education, stimulate motivation for change and intrinsic potential, develop new skills, improve independent problem-solving ability, and fully and effectively utilize the family's resources so that they can thrive and grow up (Hu & Pei, 2024).

5.1.3 Increasing Communication and Building good Relationships

A lower quality of parent–child communication increases the risk of overparenting, making individuals dissatisfied with the family environment. Parents should communicate more with their children; improve the quality of their communication; and use their emotions, words, and actions to influence their children, helping them feel positive forces within the family environment.

5.1.4 Raising Educational Expectations and Maintaining Parent–Child Consistency

Yang Xue et al. reported that both parents and offspring have consistently high educational expectations, which can effectively transmit family capital and help children's development. If the former is high and the latter is low, it hinders the positive effects of family resources and parental emotions and subjects children to double pressure from family and school, which restricts their development (Yang & Wei, 2024). However, there is no research evidence on how to maintain consistently high educational expectations, and further exploration is needed.

5.2 Social-level Strategies

5.2.1 Strengthening Parents' Education and Providing Mentoring Training

Education is implemented for parents to change or enhance their concept of education so that they can acquire the knowledge and skills to raise and educate their children (Gu, 1998). The development of parenting education in China is still in its early stages, while positive parenting programs in foreign countries have gradually formed a clear operation mode of research and development, evaluation, promotion, implementation, and redevelopment of the link. Moreover, under the influence of the concept of evidence-based medicine, the pursuit of rigor and high quality is still in the process of continuous improvement (Cai & Zhang, 2020). Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to research on parents' education, actively draw on the experience of successful projects abroad, and construct a theoretical system of socialist parenting education with Chinese characteristics to provide high-quality parenting education services for parents, help parents establish the concept of positive parenting, and avoid overparenting.

5.2.2 Coordinating Social Resources and Building Support Networks

Schools are the main venues for carrying out education, playing a leading role in collaborative parenting. Social education is a continuation of family and school education. Both are indispensable. To compensate for

the development of capabilities, policy support and guarantees should be clarified by laws and regulations; the division of work should be clarified by the coordinating management department; existing resources should be fully utilized; and the opening and sharing of various resources should be promoted.

6.   Summary and Future Directions

To summarize, although various studies on overparenting theories have been conducted, several shortcomings remain:

a) In terms of localization studies, some scholars have taken a multidimensional look at overparenting in the context of China's actual situation from the four dimensions of culture, economy, class, and gender. Nevertheless, owing to its complexity, there is still a need to conduct qualitative research, such as interviews and case studies, in conjunction with the characteristics of traditional Chinese culture and the contemporary Chinese family structure, to explore in depth the localized characteristics of overparenting and the factors influencing it.

b) With respect to research objects, it is expected that the research objects will be gradually expanded in the future. Currently, the impact of overparenting on social adaptation is focused mainly on college students in early adulthood, with a lesser effect on students in early adolescence (Wen et al., 2023). Only some studies have shown that adults who receive higher levels of overparenting have lower dating ability, are more likely to marry later, and tend to perceive being single as more favourable than being married (Han & Tian, 2022; Jiao & Segrin, 2021). There is a lack of sufficient research to prove the impact of overparenting on social adjustment (e.g., occupational competence, marital relationships) in adulthood. At the same time, the part of the population in early adulthood that fails to attend college has been neglected. Future studies should recruit more than just college-bound individuals and include emerging adults entering the workforce. Study participants may be recruited in a variety of ways, including but not limited to, the use of social media, websites, etc., to publicize recruitment. In the case of students or office workers, crowd recruitment can also be carried out through cooperation with schools or organizations and other relevant institutions. Moreover, there is a lack of consideration of cross-cultural differences in the research process. On the basis of the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, some scholars speculate that the indicators of overparenting may vary from culture to culture (Leung & Shek, 2024). Some scholars even believe that overparenting may lead to the fulfilment of basic needs at different cultural levels (Hong & Cui, 2023). In the future, when selecting samples from different cultural backgrounds, we should try to maintain matching in terms of the sampling frame and demographic data.

c) There is a lack of scientifically proven interventions to improve the impact of overparenting on social adaptation. Prof. Seligman, the father of positive psychology, believes that a thriving life depends on five elements: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment (PERMA for short). On the basis of positive psychology theory, which is centered mainly on PERMA theory, the Positive Psychology Research Center School of Social Sciences at Tsinghua University proposed a core model for positive education with "six modules and two systems", including six modules—positive self, positive emotion, positive engagement, positive meaning, and positive accomplishment—and two systems—a physical and mental health regulation system and a character strengths and virtues cultivation system—which is now being actively promoted (Positive Psychology Research Center at Academy of Social Sciences Tsinghua University, 2025). However, this model is limited to the comprehensive cultivation of students by teachers in schools and does not mention the significant role of family education. Moreover, the validity of the specific mechanisms and intervention results should be further verified. The intervention potential of positive psychology should be fully utilized by shifting from "repairing deficiencies" to "cultivating strengths".

In conclusion, there is a need to increase localized research in China in the future to improve theoretical research on the basis of expanding the content of the study and then to explore practical interventions from the perspective of positive psychology and to verify their effectiveness to improve overparenting to promote healthy social adaptation of children.

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