The Overprotective Mother

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When his parents first came to me for help, Ronnie, who was then nine years old, showed every sign of being what we used to call a “spoiled brat.” A little tyrant at home, selfish and demanding of his parents, he responded to any denial or disciplinary measure with an outburst of temper. He was aggressive and bossy with other children, with the result that he had few friends and spent most of his afternoons at home, reading or talking or playing with his mother, who was known as an unselfish, devoted parent, a model to her friends and neighbors.

“She gives her whole life to that boy,” was a frequent observation made about Ronnie’s mother.

Ronnie had a good record at school. He was bright and interested in his studies, though his teachers had noted his tendency to interrupt others and dominate the class. Ronnie could be good when he wanted to. Why should he be such a demon outside of school?

I am a subscriber to the truism that the problem child is almost invariably the product of problem parents, and have said it many times. But it is important to realize that by no means all parents of psychologically difficult children are ignorant or unloving. In many cases the parent is as much a victim as the child. It is circumstances that are to blame.

This is frequently the case with the oversolicitous or overprotective mother—a common cause of abnormal, antisocial behavior on the part of the child. In this drama the mother plays an unconscious role. Moved by forces of whose existence she is unaware, she responds by dominating or indulging her child to a point which can interfere with normal adjustment and development.

I didn’t have to find out many of the details of Ronnie’s case before I began to suspect this was the trouble here. The “model mother” reports were a tip-off; it is typical of the overprotective mother that she denies herself many normal interests and relationships in order to devote herself unstintingly to her child. The fact is that, unconsciously, she may be encouraging him to stay at home in order to avoid the hurts and hazards of normal play with children his own age.

Further study confirmed these early suspicions. Ronnie’s mother made him so completely the center of the universe that he never had a chance to learn what children ought to know about the rights of others, or to do things for himself and thus develop as an independent personality. Long after it was natural for her to do so, for example, she had continued to bathe and dress Ronnie, and she still insisted on driving him to and from school.

Characteristic of the overprotective attitude was her unreasonable exaggeration of the dangers of letting him cross streets by himself. Actually, the few suburban blocks between their home and the school were perfectly safe, even for children much younger than Ronnie. Roaming and exploring a little on the way home from school are normal ways for children to learn and grow. His mother’s anxiety thus deprived Ronnie of these and many other childhood experiences that have a proper, necessary place in the business of growing up.

As frequently happens in these cases, Ronnie’s father was pushed into the background. Finding that any attempt on his part to discipline the child met with resistance from the mother, he had long since given up, in the interests of peace, and accepted the passive position assigned him. Though he had to put up with a son who was often ill-tempered and more critical of him than a small boy should ever be of his father, I found their relationship fairly pleasant on the whole. Apparently the worst in the child was brought out by his mother, and the abnormally close bond he had with her.

The cause of the abnormal affinity of mother and son was not hard to find as I studied this interesting family more closely. An only child, Ronnie had been born, after five or six childless years, to parents who were in their thirties when they were married. Thus he became the sole object of maternal feelings that had been pent up for years. Ronnie had one or two severe illnesses when he was a baby—experiences which no doubt added to his mother’s anxieties, realizing as she did that she would have no more children.

I could find no evidence that Ronnie's mother had been deprived of normal love during her own childhood and was compensating for this lack by excessive feelings about her son—a fairly common cause of overprotectiveness. Neither was there evidence that her relations with her husband failed to gratify her craving for love, another common cause. It was a simple case of "too little, too late" to satisfy the maternal drive, which in Ronnie's mother was strong, and rather to her credit than otherwise.

The fact that Ronnie's parents had sought advice about his temper tantrums and aggressiveness was a sign that they knew something was wrong.

The first and most important step toward correcting the situation was to get both parents to realize what was happening, and how it was hurting their child. Since they were intelligent and truly loved their son, this was not hard to do.

Recognition alone, however, did not solve the problem in Ronnie's case and will not in most cases of overprotectiveness. The habits of thinking and doing that have developed over a period of several years cannot be wished out of existence overnight. Often it is desirable to send the too-protected child away to camp or even to boarding school, so that he will be physically beyond reach of the mother's overpowering impulse to shelter or indulge him and thus dominate his life.

When this is unnecessary or impossible, a systematic effort must be made to keep the youngster busy at school and neighborhood activities and away from home. This is hard on the mother at first, but when she understands that the problem is as much hers as her child's, she is usually equal to the discipline that is required.

It is important, however, for the child to realize that he is loved as much as he ever was. The new attitude, while firm, should be kindly and objective, else confusion and rebellion may result.

Serious as it may become, the problem of overprotectiveness arises from a mother's love of her offspring. To correct it, her love must be directed into the proper channels, but not in any way diminished or destroyed. Overindulged boys and girls are usually not happy themselves in antisocial behavior, and often express a wish that "somebody would make them behave the way they ought to." That is the way to help them do so.

Chapter 17

How to Be a Jewish Mother
A Very Lovely Training Manual

Dan Greenburg

The Basic Theory

There is more to being a Jewish Mother than being Jewish and a mother. Properly practiced, Jewish motherhood is an art—a complex network of subtle and highly sophisticated techniques.

Master these techniques and you will be an unqualified success—the envy of your friends and the backbone of your family.

Fail to master these techniques and you hasten the day you discover your children can get along without you.

Basic Philosophizing

You will be called upon to function as a philosopher on two distinct types of occasions:

(1) Whenever anything bad happens.
(2) Whenever anything good happens.

Whenever anything bad happens, you must point out the fortunate aspects of the situation:

"Mal Mal?"
"What's the commotion?"