

# Smother Mother: Why Intensive Child-Rearing Hurts Parents and Kids

A new study delves into what makes extreme mothers more stressed and depressed

By JUDITH WARNER

Believing yourself to be the absolute center of your child's universe, the one and only sun around which his or her happiness and well-being wax and wane, isn't good for your mental health.

That, at least, is the message from a team of psychologists at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Stumped for years by the "parenthood paradox" – the fact that, while people generally consider parenthood to be one of the most fulfilling experiences in life, social science research often finds that it leads to negative mental health outcomes – colleagues Kathryn M. Rizzo, Holly M. Schiffrin and Miriam Liss decided to find a way to test to see whether it was particular attitudes toward child-rearing, rather than parenthood per se, that led some mothers, at least, to a markedly less happy place.

They had 181 women with young children take a survey specifically designed to test the degree of the mothers' adherence to "intensive mothering beliefs" – i.e. the general notion that a woman should ideally devote her ideally herself heart, body and brain to her children, at each and every moment of each and every day. What they found was that the women who most strongly believed that they were their child's "most capable parent" (in other words, had what the researchers labeled "essentialist" views of motherhood as woman's unique calling) had higher levels of stress and lower levels of life satisfaction. Those who subscribed strongly to the belief that parenting is "difficult" or "challenging" showed higher levels of depression and stress, as well as lower levels of life satisfaction. Those who believed that parents' lives should revolve around their children also reported lower levels of satisfaction with their own lives.

The trap that too many women today have fallen into, the authors warned at the end of their paper, is believing that, to be good mothers, they must "sacrifice their own mental health to enhance their children's cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes." Given that decades of scientific studies have solidly established that having a stressed, depressed or otherwise unhappy mother is bad for children's mental health, it's quite likely, they said, that "intensive mothering" is harmful for kids, too.

"Intensive parenting may have the opposite effect on children from what parents intend," they concluded.

Many sociologists have previously noted, however, that fealty to "hyper-involved," "intense" parenting practices isn't equally shared by all women of different ethnic backgrounds and socio-economic classes. As Middlebury sociologist Margaret Nelson has written, parents of "lower educational and professional status" tend to have a very different style of interacting with their children – setting more "non-negotiable limits" for example, investing a whole lot less in the cultivation of their children's potentially limitless emotional and intellectual unfolding. This is not (just) because the lower-status women have different sorts of life demands pressing upon their time and other resources; it's because they have a different idea of good motherhood, one that appears, perhaps, to offer some protection against the perfectionist misery of so many middle or upper middle class moms.

Nelson has, in recent years, focused her work on the particular pathologies of what she calls the "professional middle class." Chief among them: the web of anxious, child-centered behavior that we've come to know as "helicopter parenting" and that, Nelson has said, is chiefly "designed to maintain and reproduce class status." In other words, a great deal of what so many of today's most assiduously devoted mothers do is designed, consciously or not, to assuage their anxiety. Is it their belief that what they're doing is vitally and uniquely essential that leads them to be stressed and depressed, as the Mary Washington researchers suggest? Or are their anxiety-fueled lives stressful and depressing? I would tend toward the latter explanation. And I'd suggest that, if we want to make a better world for mothers and kids alike, we start by addressing what ails the anxious and beleaguered middle class.