# Treat Us Like Teenagers: Reports by Adolescents on Infantilizing Parenting Practices from South India

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## Abstract

Parental influences play a significant role during adolescent development. This paper highlights infantilizing parenting practices and their impact on adolescents' personal, emotional, and interpersonal domains. 120 adolescents between 16-18 years of age were recruited from two pre-university colleges in Bengaluru in South India. Infantilizing parenting practices were assessed (Epstein, 2019). A semi-structured tool developed by the researchers was used to understand the impact of infantilizing parenting practices. Results showed moderate to low infantilizing parenting experiences and not the absence of them. The impact of these experiences showed significant concerns in skills such as communication, interaction abilities, initiating tasks, stepping out of the house to do things independently, and ability to explore opportunities. They also reported lack of assertiveness, inability to lead, poor self-management in stressful situations and dependency on parents. This paper also adds to the literature on infantilizing parenting practices from an Indian context.

*Keywords*: Infantilization, Adolescence, Parenting Practices, Infantilizing Parenting, Indian Parents

## Introduction

Infantilization is an approach that involves the treatment of an individual with less maturity whilst disregarding their actual level of maturity, ability and capabilities (Gresham, 1976) virtues, experiences and personhood (Brady, 2014) in completing certain tasks. The childlike treatment of older adults has a negative response and hence it leads to lack of independence and later elicits childlike responses (Simon, 2018). Whitbourne and Cassidy (1994) described infantilization as a demeaning mode of communication and reported that a person who experiences infantilization has an experience of hostility, behavioral regression, and a tendency to become territorial. The worry about being infantilized appears to be a sensible concern, as it is likely to generate feelings of disrespect and a sense of dehumanization in certain individuals (Dolinsky, 1984). Kitwood's (1993) theory of malignant social psychology highlights infantilization as a conflict in development, generating the process of deskilling and low confidence in initiation of activities in an individual. Infantilization is also understood as the absence of instrumental filial responsibility that occurs when expectations for child engagement in instrumental duties are absent. This lack of challenge and parental expectation is developmentally inappropriate and can cause risks to their development (Jurkovic, 1997).

Adolescence is described as a developmental stage in the life course where acquired abilities and capacities from childhood are used for achievement in adulthood (Petersen, 1987). It is a phase with significantly more qualitative changes than other stages of development (Dubas & Petersen, 1996). During adolescence, psychosocial development is often accompanied by stress, changes in behavior, and/or issues that parents may not be able to recognize, which can subsequently affect the adolescent's mental health. Additionally, infantilizing parenting is associated with the risk of lower functioning (Jurkovic, 1997), anger in teenagers (Annie, 2019), inability to cope with life independently (Craig, 2008), and externalizing symptoms in adolescents (Nuttal, Zhang, Valentino, & Borkowski, 2019).

Infantilizing parenting practices can be recognized as inappropriate usage of language, tone of speech, and inappropriate nicknames, such as baby, for an adolescent. In India, infantilization often goes unnoticed, as it is culturally embedded in the family system as an approved way of showing concern or protection by parents. However, this is problematic

because infantilization is considered a determinant that invades an individual's personality, often leading to incompetency (Whitebourne, Culgin, & Cassidy, 1995). It also affects the self-esteem and confidence of young adults, making them feel incompetent in initiating things and causing a barrier for them to reach their full potential. The adolescent might respond to infantilization with self-sabotaging behaviors such as substance abuse, overeating and continuous feelings of helplessness, which may result in self-harm (Skager, 2009)

Instilling moral values and maintaining traditions are vital in Indian parenting. The belief that every child is part of the family and community, children and adolescents, are taught, guided, expected, and monitored to make decisions that are appropriate to the entire family status or the values those the family holds. Most parenting styles emanate from the way the parents were raised in a young age. This limits their knowledge on other types of parenting and hence restricts opportunities for the children. Too much reliance on what they learnt during their childhood, valuing too much on what others' think, paying too much attention to the notions and ideas of relatives are very commonly seen parenting practices. Parental practices, which use control, have a tremendous impact on adolescents who are social beings (Darling and Steinberg 1993). Parental monitoring and exerting control of an adolescents' socialization circle is culturally a legitimate (Bush and Peterson, 2013) and positive (Darling and Steinberg, 1993) style to complement their development.

The parenting styles affect adolescents differently based on just the father, mother, or both parents (Simon & Conger, 2007). This study revealed that more mothers exerted control on adolescents than fathers did. A similar finding was described earlier in a survey conducted among adolescents in Bangalore city, India (Thomas & Parthasarathy, 2009). Although practical explanations on the impacts of parenting on children and adolescents are available (Baumrind, 1991, Simon & Conger, 2007, Maccoby & Martin, 1983), we found minimal literature on the impacts of infantilization.

There are not many structured programs aimed at enhancing parenting abilities from India. However, there are plenty of write-ups, tips, and guidance available for parents to read and comprehend. One parenting program from the Indian context (Thomas, Parthasarathy, & Bhugra, 2013) on the parenting of adolescents has focused on enhancing parental abilities to help adolescents develop personal, interpersonal

and societal skills. Less empirical evidence was found on infantilizing parenting practices. Therefore, it is important to try and understand infantilizing parental experiences and their impact on adolescents in India.

## Methods

120 adolescents aged 15 to 18 years, pursuing a pre-college degree (10+2) in two pre-university colleges in Bengaluru South selected to participate in the study using convenient sampling. We approached the school for permission to recruit participants after obtaining ethical clearance from NIMHANS. After obtaining permission from the college authorities, consent was taken from the class teachers and adolescents for participation in the study. A consultative team was formed informally who consisted of three professors from Psychiatry, Child and adolescent psychiatry, and Psychiatric social work to validate tools for Focused Group Discussion (FGD) and the main study. The researchers developed a set of open-ended and specific questions on impacts of infantilizing as well as cultural contexts of parenting for conducting FGD. The consultative team validated this. The questions for the FGD included; Do you think you are treated like a child by your parents? If so what are the situations in which they do it? What makes them behave that way? What do you feel about this way of treatment? How such treatment has impacted you? This FGD in the first phase helped us in understanding about the infantilizing experiences and their impact among teenagers who were in the same school where we recruited participants for the main study. Ten teenagers, a teacher and a mental health professional participated in the FGD.

## Tools used

**Impact of infantilizing parenting practices assessment:** This tool to Tools to assess the impact of infantilizing parenting practices was developed by the authors based on the FGD findings (skills deficits in parents, parenting based on 'what others will think'?, ' what parents compromised in their teenage', ' look at the other child', ' you are too young for decision making'), inputs from key interviews  with three mental health service providers such as a psychiatrist, a clinical psychologist and  a psychiatric social worker specialized in Child and adolescent mental health (impact of being parented, cultural contexts, family relationships), and from literature reviews (lack of independence, decreased responsibility taking, child- like behaviours,  lack of self-

respect, deskilling, low confidence in initiation decreased self-esteem). The consultative team approved 21 items after removing the repeated ones. This semi structured tool finally assessed impact on emotional, personal, and interpersonal life situations of the adolescents. Each item was scored zero to five. The final score given in table is the mean score on each item.

**Socio-Demographic data**. The socio-demographic data sheet included age, sex, religion, domicile, occupation, education, socio-economic status, family background and family type.

**Infantilizing parenting practices (Epstein, 2019)**. Additionally, another tool Infantilizing parenting practices (Epstein, 2019) was used to identify the extent of infantilizing parenting practices. The infantilizing parenting tool comprised of statements as such as; over the past year has anyone restricted your activities in any of the following ways? Listened to, read, or viewed your private communications? And tried to restrict your communications? Higher scores on the infantilization tool indicated more and lower scores indicated less infantilizing parenting experiences. We did pilot administration of all tools among ten participants in a session before the assessments were taken to the larger group. In the main study, tools were distributed to the participants in the classroom environment, after explaining to them about the topic of research and its purpose. We gave them information and clarifications were made before as well as during the administration of the tools.

**Statistical Analysis**

Descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation were computed to describe the characteristics of the samples. Shapiro-wilk test was used to check for the assumption of normality (p-value > 0.05) and parametric testing procedure was carried out accordingly. Independent sample t-test & One-way ANOVA was used for determining statistically significant difference in infantilization scores between various socio-demographic categories. All statistical analysis was carried out in SPSS Version 22.

## Results

**Socio Demographic, Educational and Family Data**

Out of the 120 adolescents of the study, 65 (54.4%) of them were 15-16 years old and 55 (45.8%) were in the age group of 17 and 18 years.

More than half of them (63, 52.5%) were male and the rest female (57, 47.5%). Most of the participants followed the Hindu religion, and were from an urban background. 113 (94.2%) participants belonged to a middle socio-economic background. 74 (61.7%) participants were heterosexually oriented, 11 (9.2%) belonged in the others' (LGBTQ) category and 35 (29.2%) participants did not give any answer on sexual orientation. Four (3.3%) of the adolescents were employed. 48 (40%) participants scored less than 60% in their latest examination whereas 34 (28.3%) scored between 60%-70%, 27 (22.5%) scored between 70%-80% and 11 (9.2%) of them, scored above 80%.

Half of the participants (61, 50.8%) took part in one or more extracurricular activities in college. Though 86 (71.7%) of them had their own mobile phone, a larger portion of them (42, 35.0%) used it for a maximum of two hours per day whilst 31 (25.8%) reported using it for more than three hours a day. Nine (7.5%) of them said they had some sort of mental health consultation in the past.

Family profiles of the participants revealed that a majority of the families (99, 82.5%) belonged to a nuclear set up and 21 (17.5%) participants belonged to a joint family system. 101 (84.2%) participants had siblings, 43 (35.8%) participants were the youngest in the family, 38 (31.7%) were the eldest sibling, and 19 (15.8%) were single children.

An interesting finding from the question about their sense of control over themselves is that 75, (62.5%) felt that they had a complete to moderate level of control on matters related to themselves, while 45 (37.5%) participants felt that they had mild to no control over matters related to their own life. Though more than half of the participants reported that they had control over their own matters, some reported (21, 17.5%) that there was control exerted only by their mother. 14 (11.7%) said that their fathers alone exerted the control and 19 (15.8%) said control was exerted by both parents. In addition to this, 16 (13.3 %) of the participants reported that besides their parents, a third member (romantic partner or a sibling) also controlled matters of their life.

### Infantilizing Parenting Experiences

A majority of the adolescents (88, 73.3%), had a low infantilizing score suggesting that they experienced less infantilization, while the remaining experienced moderate levels of infantilization. The scores of infantilization parenting experience we received from adolescents ranged between 03-79 (0-120 as per the scale). There is no significant

difference of mean infantilization score between age groups, gender, order of birth, extracurricular activities, adolescents having mobile and not, and family type. The infantilising parenting scores is illustrated in the following Table 1 .

**Table 1**

*Independent sample t-test & One-way ANOVA analysing statistically significant difference between infantilizing score between socio-demographic and other categorical variables*

| Variable | Categories | Infantilization score | | Test Statistic | p Value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | *M* | SD | | |
| Age | 15 and 16 (n= 65) | 28.92 | 17.47 | 0.03 | 0.98 |
| | 17 and 18 (n= 55) | 29.00 | 15.51 | | |
| Gender | Male (n= 63) | 28.03 | 17.82 | -0.64 | 0.52 |
| | Female (n= 57) | 29.98 | 15.07 | | |
| Family type | Nuclear (n= 99) | 29.04 | 15.47 | 0.09 | 0.93 |
| | Joint (n= 21) | 28.57 | 21.29 | | |
| Extracurricular activities | Yes (n= 60) | 29.55 | 16.39 | 0.39 | 0.69 |
| | No (n= 60) | 28.37 | 16.78 | | |
| Own mobile | Yes (n= 86) | 30.49 | 15.94 | -1.62 | 0.11 |
| | No (n= 34) | 25.09 | 17.59 | | |
| | 60%-70% marks (n= 34) | 26.79 | 16.49 | | |
| | 70%-80% marks (n= 27) | 34.67 | 13.65 | | |
| | >80% marks (n= 11) | 18.64 | 14.14 | | |
| Order of birth | Eldest (n= 38) | 27.16 | 18.41 | 0.46 | 0.71 |
| | Middle (n= 20) | 30.00 | 13.67 | | |
| | Youngest (n= 43) | 30.93 | 17.34 | | |
| | No siblings (n= 19) | 27.00 | 13.76 | | |

*Note:* significance at 5% level

**The Impact of Infantilizing Parenting Practices on Adolescents**

Infantilizing parenting practices had an impact on adolescents and the range of scores assigned to these impacts is between zero to five. Table 2 shows that in the different aspects of impacts, the adolescents have scored more than average of above 2.5 as the mean score which signifies that it has had an impact on them. The adolescents have reported that these are as a result of being treated as a child by their parents.  s

## Table 2 s

*Impact of infantilizing parenting practices reported by adolescents in connection with parenting practices*

| Sl. No. | Different aspects of impact | Mean Score[*] |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Poor communication skills | 3.72 |
| 2 | Lack of willingness to interact with people who differ from norms | 3.65 |
| 3 | Anxiety in initiating any tasks because parents kept me away from opportunities and challenges as I am a child | 3.59 |
| 4 | Hesitation to explore new ideas because parents did not encourage to approach them | 3.59 |
| 5 | Lack of assertiveness because parents did not allow to be assertive and speak out for self | 3.58 |
| 6 | Feeling of running away from home because doing things independently is not encouraged by parents | 3.51 |
| 7 | Inability to manage self during stressful situations because parents never expected me to deal with stress by self | 3.47 |
| 8 | Too much reliance on parent's opinion for every issue | 3.45 |
| 9 | Inability to take lead because parents positioned me as a follower | 3.44 |
| 10 | Lack of openness towards changes as parents always communicated conviction about negative outcomes | 3.43 |
| 11 | Lack of tolerance towards individual and cultural differences because parental fixedness on following specific community | 3.41 |
| 12 | Feeling of being uncomfortable in stepping out of house because parental restriction to go out by self | 3.38 |
| 13 | Inability to express self in any situation because parental disapproval on voicing out | 3.38 |
| 14 | Inability to identify own role because of parental strictness to follow the rules set up by parents. | 3.32 |
| 15 | Hesitation to take up responsibilities because parental conviction of adolescent's incapability to take up responsibility | 3.31 |
| 16 | Inability to take decisions since parents always took decisions on behalf of the adolescent | 3.28 |
| 17 | Feeling of being incompetent in comparison with others of the same age on practical knowledge and skills due to excessive restrictions | 3.12 |
| 18 | Feeling of being unsure about identity and role in society as expected to abide by parent's set of rules, regulations and values | 3.07 |

| 19 | Feeling of being sad because of parental neglect on suggestions and contributions in family meetings | 2.91 |
| 20 | Feeling of being discouraged when opinion is not accepted by parents | 2.83 |
| 21 | Doubting of self on parental treatment like a child and not acknowledging my growth | 2.82 |

[*] *Note*. Max score = 5

The impact is reflected in their poor communication abilities, interaction abilities, difficulty in initiating tasks, difficulty in stepping out of the house to do certain things, not taking up opportunities, lack of assertiveness, inability to lead and poor self-management. They also had conflicting thoughts where they want to live away from home but are dependent on their parents. Adolescents also have reflected that they are unsure about their wants and roles as an impact of the infantilizing parenting experiences.

**Discussion**

This paper attempts to understand the experiences of infantilizing parenting practices and its impact on 120 adolescents who were in the age group of 15-18 years. The socio-demographic details of these adolescents are not significantly different as most of them belong to nuclear families, follow the Hindu religion, are heterosexually oriented and their academic performance is average and above.

There is less research on infantilizing parenting practices in the Indian context. The results give scope for sensitization, education and intervention in education programs, management training and skill training for parents in clinical as well as educational settings. The infantilization scores showed low to moderate levels of experiences which emphasizes the presence of infantilizing parenting practices and not the absence of it. The findings may also indicate that the impacts of infantilizing parenting experiences could be varied based on the levels of infantilization, infantilizing situations, infantilizing frequencies, and domains of infantilizing. Our findings imply that there is a need for strengthening the existing programs for parenting adolescents and to also include assessments related to infantilization. This reflects also on the cultural context where parenting practices with teenagers are usually child centric and needs to shift to a teenage centric one.

The study highlights adolescents' feelings that they are being controlled. Though some amount of parental control and monitoring is culturally approved to complement the adolescent development, parental monitoring of adolescents' every action in their social circle could make them feel more controlled than supervised. Adolescents need to be given opportunities to take up responsibilities to prove themselves.

Adolescents in this study have connected outcomes in their life to infantilizing parenting practices adopted by their parents. The analysis of impacts showed that infantilization affected their life skills, which are required for an adolescent to be psychosocially competent. The primary skills that are impacted are communication and expressive language skills, which in turn affects one's socialization. Hesitation to interact with people who have different norms and intolerance towards cultural differences are serious compromises in their development and they hamper the broadening of adolescent socio-cultural perspectives. It appears to be a serious hazard in the adolescent phase, to have their socio-cultural perspectives limited.

Attention needs to be drawn to the psychological impact of infantilizing parenting practices. The adolescents in the study have reported to be anxious prone with low self-esteem and high reliance on parents. These findings enlighten the need for parents to develop self-reliance in adolescents by helping them be more independent in handling their emotions and anxieties. The approach to develop confidence in parents by the adolescents is also another perspective, which could be discussed in the parenting programs. These results indicate greater significance in school settings, as  the impacts are mostly in the life skills domains of the adolescents. Inclusion of life skills training, personal development programmes, and independent living skills  in the holistic skills programmes are of paramount importance. Effective use of parent meetings  are implied to sensitize them about healthy parenting practices (reflective, resourceful, reasonable, responsible) and its impact on children and adolescents.  Parenting behaviours are influenced by parental exposures, experiences, parental personality, quality of their marital relationships and some factors of the children. It will be a good to sensitize the parents to differentiate between child centric and parent centric parenting practices. Collaborative efforts among school, parents and adolescents could yield better results in behaviours of adolescents.

The purpose of raising kids and parenting teenagers is to help them be independent, responsible and free individuals. An infantilizing style of parenting limits the progression of adolescents on a personal front and makes them overly dependent on their parents to the point where they hesitate to explore new ideas and opinions, and have poor assertive, coping and decision-making skills. This parenting style also makes adolescents prone to running away from home as a reaction or a response to unacceptable events or matters. A significant portion of the society is trying to get their children to be high achievers in this competitive era. Ironically, some of these adolescents seem to end up as followers who are intolerant to changes and are not in a position to take up responsibilities. Adolescents require empathetic understanding from their parents during this period of development. This understanding has a greater role to play in either the negotiation or maintenance of the boundaries and relationships (Laursen & Collins, 2009) between parents and adolescents.

**Conclusion**

This study reveals that adolescents experience infantilization from parents and it has negative outcomes on adolescents. The results highlight the importance of looking through the eyes of teenagers to understand how they connect these impacts as an offshoot of the infantilizing parenting practices. Teaching parents to incorporate adolescent views and adopt an adolescent centric parenting style is an important implication of this study. By using culturally standardized tools, studies can be conducted to assess the level of infantilization in adolescents who have experienced infantilizing parenting practices. This study also gives a scope to further understand the situations of infantilization in an Indian context. Though in Indian culture some amount of infantilization is acceptable, its impact on adolescents shouldn't be ignored and sanctioned.

**Acknowledgement**

the participants and college authorities for their support during data collection. We also have immense gratitude for the guidance and support that the professors and our colleagues at the Department of Psychiatric Social Work, NIMHANS have given us.  We thank Ms Jamie Tambor and Ms Charmaine Ann D'Souza  for proof reading this paper. This study has no conflict of interest.

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