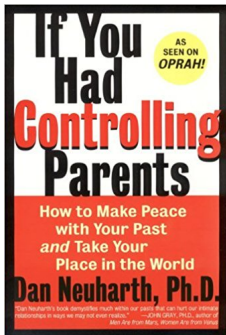


## If You Had Controlling Parents

Written by Dr. Dan Neuharth Ph.D  
Thursday, 02 November 2017 00:00

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### Smothering Parenting: Life Under a Microscope

*Slight, porcelain-skinned Margaret, a 33-year-old [attorney](#) specializing in family law, grew up with a lawyer father who loved heated discussions, always insisting Margaret argue with him and defend her positions. Unfortunately, he never allowed her to win, badgering her until she capitulated.*

*At age nine, Margaret began reading a book about a veterinarian, which her father covertly confiscated since he wanted her to be a doctor, not a vet. When Margaret asked where the book went, her father responded, "What book?" When she was 12, Margaret developed a taste for bland foods — vanilla ice cream, white bread and potatoes — so her father endlessly shoved the spicy foods he preferred under her nose. As 16-year-old Margaret was writing her college-application essays, her father grabbed them, read them disapprovingly, sat down at the kitchen table and rewrote them. When 17-year-old Margaret was packing for college, her father began yanking clothes out of her suitcase, telling her exactly what and how to pack.*

Margaret recalls, "My father had this uncanny way of questioning, of saying, 'Are you sure? Are you sure?' You couldn't say no. After all, as a lawyer he convinced people for a living." Margaret coped by mentally replaying conversations with her father every night. "I'd lay in bed and tell him off, telling him that this was counterproductive to my growing up. But I would never dissent out loud."

Margaret acknowledges that her father, who had Perfectionistic as well as Smothering

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characteristics, may have had good intentions. But his heavy-handed actions, like rewriting her college application essays or re-packing her bags, left her feeling like her “feet had been chopped off.”

### Uniform feelings

While some [parents](#) like Margaret’s dad want their children to mimic their thoughts, others focus on uniformity of feelings.

*Sharon, a 31-year-old graduate student, grew up under the emotional thumb of her father David, a Jewish Holocaust survivor. David was a newborn when his [parents](#) managed to get him to a Catholic orphanage just before they were sent to concentration camps. Miraculously both parents survived, although they became estranged, and David’s mother subsequently found him. For years David’s parents passed him back and forth, even resorting to abduction. Perhaps as a result, David could not stand for his own child to be out of his sight. “Even when I was four or five he carried me around like I was a baby,” Sharon says*

This intense attention was not always positive. In her adolescence Sharon’s father called her “buck teeth” and told her, “Your thighs are as big as mine.” He defended his remarks as “good character-building.”

At 16, after her parents divorced, Sharon confided to her father that she was having a hard time adjusting to her new stepmother; her dad became furious and branded her “self-centered.”

Only years later, Sharon realized her Smothering father was self-absorbed. “He has this chasm in him: people in blackness, screaming, climbing walls, being gassed. I have it too. It is in our psyche. But because he has this pain inside of him he thinks that nobody else’s pain is as much. He could never hear me out when I felt hurt.”

In the midst of a divorce when she was interviewed, Sharon has often picked controlling men as partners. “My heart just opens to men like it did to my dad and I get taken advantage of,” she

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admits.

I do not minimize the trauma of the Holocaust or the legacy of emotional difficulty facing survivors and their descendants. That Sharon is suffering the impact of the Holocaust a half century later is testimony to how potently that trauma endures. For Sharon's father, like many other Holocaust survivors, generating life through childraising became a sacred pursuit. As one Holocaust survivor told *The New York Times* on the 50th anniversary of the death-camp liberations, "Our vengeance was rebuilding life" through children.

When Sharon's father sought to rebuild life, the uncertainty and horror of his crucial early years as well as his parents' ongoing rift almost certainly led him to focus intently on his daughter in an effort to protect her. Perhaps David, having lived as an orphan until age four, was also unconsciously trying to live out through his daughter the childhood he never had. Unfortunately, his grip was too tight for Sharon's optimal emotional development.

Uniform values

Some Smothering parents become overbearing in encouraging their children to adopt their values.

*At age six, Cui, now a 27-year-old sales representative, lay in bed reciting her multiplication tables as her father stood over her. This nightly ritual was part of her Chinese-immigrant parents' campaign to stress academic achievement. During grade school, whenever Cui's mother's friends visited, her Smothering, Using mother would hustle Cui off to her room to retrieve her awards for academic excellence.*

*"Mom used me as a showcase to her friends," Cui recalls. "I was like the chess-champion daughter in 'The Joy Luck Club' who was forced to play and valued only when she won. When I saw that movie, I started crying during the opening titles and didn't stop until after the closing credits."*

*Cui was raised with the expectation that she would become a doctor. But when she told her*

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*parents during her sophomore year at Princeton that her pre-med grades weren't high enough, her parents were crestfallen. Within minutes her mother brightened and said, "Okay, then you'll be a lawyer!"*

[Smothering parents](#) are unaware of how little they see their children as separate. They easily make incursions into their children's lives because they do not see their actions as intrusive. Cui says, "I got strokes for external accomplishments, never just for being the person I am. I feel like I have lived my life to please others."

Both Cui's parents came to the USA in their teens, cut off from their families, after narrowly escaping China before the 1949 civil war broke out. Their struggle to fit into American culture is familiar to many immigrant and multi-ethnic families. In addition, Chinese culture highly values academic achievement and has different views of individual freedom and responsibility than does American culture. But in their efforts to adopt American values, Cui's parents lost sight of their daughter's needs.

### [Excessive scrutiny](#)

Some Smothering parents scrutinize their children in the most invasive ways possible.

*When 48-year-old social worker Tina was four, her mother thought Tina was too thin so she hovered over her at mealtimes until she finished the huge helpings prepared for her. But when Tina was six, her mother decided her daughter was too fat. She put her on a crash diet and, whenever Tina was outside the home, taped a sign to Tina's back reading, "Please Do Not Feed Me."*

*Her mother, a nurse, scrutinized Tina's bodily functions and provided frequent "home remedies:" enemas if Tina had not had a daily bowel movement, douches as early as age nine, and penicillin shots stolen from the hospital at Tina's first sign of a cold or sniffle. "Growing up was like being a patient in a sick ward," Tina admits.*

*Her mother picked out her daughter's clothes without consulting her. Tina recalls pictures of*

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*herself as a somber little girl with bangs and a turned-up nose, wearing garish outfits four sizes too big. "I was overfed, horribly dressed, had thick glasses and was very nervous," Tina remembers. "I've seen people in wheelchairs, shrunken and paralyzed, who have a better body image than I had."*

Like many controlled children, Tina had little privacy. She and her siblings were forbidden to close doors; they all showered, used the bathroom and slept with the door open. "It wasn't until I went away to college that I realized this was not normal."

Tina found it was fruitless to be herself except in her private world of imaginary playmates and someday hopes. The smothering scrutiny in her childhood has translated into an adult feeling of a "bottled-upness." For much of adulthood Tina has lacked confidence in her choices, expected others to think poorly of her, and found it hard to ask for what she wants.

—Samantha, 40, artist

*40-year-old artist Samantha, a pretty, curly-haired blonde in the throes of puppy love at 13, blushed when her eighth-grade boyfriend gave her roses, her first. Rushing home, she breathlessly asked her mother for a vase. Instead, she got a sour look and an order to put the roses in the garage. For the next week, Samantha spent a good part of her days in the hot, dusty garage, watching her roses slowly wilt.*

*Samantha's mother also became downright sullen when Samantha wanted something. At seven, on a day-long shopping trip with her mother, Samantha asked to go to the bathroom and was told, "Shut up. If you ask one more time I'm going to leave you behind in this store."*

*By age 14 Samantha had become interested in spirituality and asked to go to a Christian summer camp. Her mother informed her she couldn't go because of a family vacation that had already been scheduled. Yet the camp date arrived and nobody went anywhere. "When my mother didn't want to do stuff she'd say we had a family-schedule conflict," Samantha remembers. "She just didn't want to inconvenience herself."*

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Conditional love is the trademark of Depriving parents. As long as their children conform to their desires, these parents lend emotional support. But when they're disappointed, Depriving parents withdraw their love — remarkably, instantly and utterly. This leaves children so unsure of their standing that they're desperate to please. They learn that love is ephemeral and erratic or contingent on good behavior. They also learn that they have no control over whether they receive love. Whereas Smothering parents tell their children what they *should* want, Depriving parents tell their children simply

*not to*  
want.

Children who grow up with Depriving parents vividly recall the experience of repeatedly losing parental love and support. "My mother had so much more power over me because of what I didn't get than because of what I did," Samantha confesses. "So I became even more dependent on her."

Perhaps Samantha's mother repeatedly deprived her daughter because she felt personally

deprived. Perhaps seeing her daughter happy made her aware of her own unhappiness, and she found the disparity intolerable. Since she didn't know how to make herself feel better, she may have unconsciously tried to make her daughter feel worse.

Samantha remembers how her Depriving, Abusing mother's approval washed in and out like the tide. She frequently threatened to disown Samantha if she didn't follow parental desires; and, in fact, Samantha's 24-year-old brother was disowned for dating a native American against parental wishes. As soon as the couple broke up, Samantha's parents began speaking to their son again. And, when Samantha's 19-year-old sister announced she was moving in with a boyfriend, her parents again threatened to cut ties. The sister backed down and lived at home for two more years until she married.

After Samantha graduated from high school her parents commanded her to make plans to become a nurse so she could take care of them in their old age. Instead, she left the state. Her parents did not speak to her for six years. Samantha finally returned for a visit, only to find her room had been turned into a sitting room and her belongings thrown out. Her mother housed her in a trailer in the driveway, though a spare bedroom sat unused.

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However, the worst deprivation Samantha suffered was parental protection: from age nine to 12, Samantha was repeatedly left with a grandfather who molested her.

### Discounted dreams

One of the major ways Depriving parents wound their children is by ignoring or discounting their future dreams.

*David, a 50-year-old highly successful salesman, was an only child of Jewish merchants in a small Mississippi town. He vividly recalls his elation when an aunt gave him a Brownie camera for his 13th birthday. David passionately wanted to be a photographer when he grew up, but his parents pronounced his career dreams impractical. "Photography is a waste of time," they said. "Stick to what is familiar and take over our store when we retire." To discourage his interest in photography, they refused to let him buy film. For months David pointed and clicked his useless camera for hours on end, eventually giving up.*

Children need affection, encouragement and physical contact. When they're deprived of them they can feel invisible. David cannot recall being hugged, kissed or told he was loved by his parents. The only physical comfort he had was from "Mammy," an African-American housekeeper who recognized David's needs and provided solace. On Saturdays she'd take him to a movie, where she was allowed to sit with him in the white's section. "If I hadn't had Mammy I would have been in much worse shape," he is convinced.

David longed for recognition for his good grades but his Depriving, Perfectionistic parents rarely made even a comment. "I did everything I was supposed to but they never approved. They never asked me how I felt, they just told me how I should react. Rules were more important than feelings." On family car rides, David's parents plunked him in the back seat and talked about him as if he weren't there.

While his mom kept after David to follow the rules, his dad rarely spoke to his son. David remembers weekly drives to the big city with his father to take Hebrew classes for his bar mitzvah. During the two-hour trips not a word was spoken. While he felt thankful for his father's presence, he hungered for deeper emotional contact.

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Looking back, David recognizes that there were some unavoidable reasons for the deprivation in his childhood. Both David's parents lost their mothers before age five. Because of those early losses,

sadness lingered in his family for two generations. In addition, as Jews in the deep South in the 1940s and 1950s, his family may have felt they needed to behave in a certain fashion. This may explain why David was told so often to be quiet and "proper."

Regardless of the reasons, David paid the price. Successful he may be, he still struggles with loneliness. Lacking an early experience of steady emotional warmth, he has yet to have a long-term intimate relationship. "If I'd gotten a few hugs and a few moments of conversation in my childhood, it might have changed a few things," he muses. He can hardly bear to watch TV or movie scenes of fathers and sons. "It cuts me like a knife to see a father and son close," he admits.

One of David's few joys comes on vacations where he takes photographs — in part, to replace the photographs for which he had no film as a child.

### Ignored gifts

While some Depriving parents like David's discount their children's interests, others ignore their children's innate gifts.

*Shari is a 32-year-old marketing executive who'll never forget fidgeting on the stage at her junior high school at 13, scanning the audience for her mother. Shari had placed in the 98th percentile on national scholastic tests and was being honored in an awards ceremony. Her mother never showed.*

*"My mother's attitude was like it was expected that I do well," Shari comments wryly. "The most she'd ever say was, 'That's nice, dear.' But if I didn't mop the floor perfectly I'd get spanked."*



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*In grade school her mother tried to force left-handed Shari to write with her right hand so she would be more “normal.” When Shari asked “Why?” her mother taped her mouth shut.*

*Over time, Shari’s straight-A average fell. At 17, she dropped out of high school and got a high-school equivalency degree so she could work. “I don’t remember getting any sort of positive direction from my mother. She never told me what to do with my life. She just told me what not to do.”*

Shari was raised by a Depriving, Abusing single mother. Now herself a single mother, she recognizes that much of her mother’s control came from the demands of that daunting role. In addition, Shari, an African-American, believes that some of her mother’s harsh control had cultural and historical roots: “Black children grow up under a microscope. I think it goes way back to the slave days when a black child could have been killed for acting too rambunctious around white people. I think black parents from my mother’s generation and earlier felt a need to control their children so they wouldn’t get negative attention.”

Regardless of what Shari the adult can see in retrospect, Shari the child felt unwanted. At nine, Shari was so upset she decided to drown herself in the bathtub. When her mother left for work, Shari wrote a will giving her toys to friends. She left the will on the kitchen table, filled the tub, and stuck her head in. “Of course my attempt didn’t work,” Shari smiles. “I kept coming up for air. Finally I just went to bed and fell asleep.” When her mother came home and discovered the will in the kitchen, “She didn’t seem concerned, just sort of sarcastic. My mother wasn’t really there emotionally even when she was there physically.”

Shari’s relationship with her mother has improved since Shari became a parent. But she still wonders what she might have become had her mother encouraged her: “I feel like I have spent so much of my life just trying to heal my childhood. Who knows what I could have been? I had the grades and intelligence even for medical school, if only I’d had more support.”

### Why parents deprive

Parents withhold affection for many reasons. Some, with severely limited access to their

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feelings, have little love to give. Many controlling parents are emotionally disturbed or self-absorbed and can barely perceive others' troubles. Still others are so uncomfortable with touch and intimacy that they cannot allow their children near them.

This excerpt is from the very interesting book If You Had Controlling Parents,(released in 1999) and available on [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), .ca and .co.uk

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**About the author:** Dr. Dan Neuharth, Ph.D. is a marriage/ family therapist and best-selling author based in the San Francisco Bay Area. He has more than 25 years' experience providing individual, couples and family therapy. His clinical specialties include personality disorders and helping people create more fulfilling relationships. He writes a blog on narcissism for PsychCentral.com and leads frequent workshops on how to cope with narcissists and other difficult people. Dr. Neuharth is the author of If You Had Controlling Parents: How to Make Peace with Your Past and Take Your Place in the World (HarperCollins Publishers, 1999) and Secrets You Keep From Yourself: How to Stop Sabotaging Your Happiness (St. Martin's Press, 2004). His official website is [DrDanMFTcounseling.com](http://DrDanMFTcounseling.com). He has a PhD in Clinical Psychology (1992) from California School of Professional Psychology in San Francisco CA/ He also has a Master's degree in Clinical Psychology (1988) from John F Kennedy University in Orinda CA. The readers can reach him at [dan@drdanmftcounseling.com](mailto:dan@drdanmftcounseling.com)