

HOW 'EMPOWERED' ARE THEY REALLY? UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONDING TO CHILDREN WHO ARE 'OVER-EMPOWERED' WITHIN FAMILY BREAKDOWN.

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One of the greatest achievements of our society must be the empowerment of children. Almost universally, children have been used, exploited or ignored. Now, as professionals, we are dedicated to giving children a voice, so that they are heard amid adult concerns and priorities. Right at the head of the Welfare Checklist stands 'the ascertainable wishes and feelings of the child'.

But there are some children to whom too much power is given. Millie, 11, has become something of a confidante to her mother after her dad left two years ago. She responded to her dad's recent message inviting her to spend time with him: 'Dear Peter, You should have thought about that when you left. I have made my choice.' Jaden, six, tells the Family Court Adviser that he doesn't want to go with Daddy because they have to go on the bus and 'there are better toys at Mummy's', adding '... I don't have enough fun and you must listen to children.' Children like Millie and Jaden are sometimes termed 'over-empowered' and this can be a form of harm.

Little has been written or researched about 'over-empowered' children. This article represents an attempt to understand how their situation can be recognised without either undermining their developing self-efficacy or destroying their relationship with the parent caring for them. It is the outcome of a seminar in which a group of six psychologists and a Family Court Adviser came together to think about the needs of over-empowered children, each bringing their own case studies and distinct professional perspectives.

An initial definition

The 'over-empowerment' of children arises when they are:

- involved in adult decision-making and given power and autonomy that is inappropriate for their age and developmental stage
- treated as though they are 'mini adults' who have the same thoughts, understanding and moral perspectives as their parents.

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