

## Infantilization Across the Life Span: A Large-Scale Internet Study Suggests That Emotional Abuse Is Especially Damaging

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### Summary

When competent adults – women, the disabled, teens, the elderly and others – are treated like children, negative outcomes sometimes follow: depression, anxiety, suicidality, damaged relationships, and a loss of a sense of control over one’s life. With teens in the U.S., infantilization has also been linked to delinquency, family conflict, conduct problems, anger, and low self-esteem. The present study employed an internet-based test to determine how infantilization varies by age, gender and other demographic factors, as well as to determine which types of infantilization do the most damage. The test, which measured 15 types of infantilization, was taken by a convenience sample of 24,298 individuals between ages 12 and 90 (mean age 27.5) in 131 countries (mainly the U.S. and Canada). The test showed high internal consistency reliability, and test scores were moderately predictive of answers to criterion questions about sense of control, happiness, depression, anger, and personal and professional success. Each of the six regression analyses we conducted singled out emotional abuse as the best predictor of adverse outcomes, and emotional abuse also emerged as a strong component in a factor analysis. Infantilization was highest during the teen years and decreased through adulthood, beginning to increase again during old age. Strong effects were also found for gender (females were more infantilized than males), education (less education was associated with greater infantilization), and sexual orientation (heterosexuals were less infantilized than all other groups). Infantilization was also higher for people who were unemployed and for those who reported having been in therapy within the past year. The study confirms that infantilization is associated with negative outcomes – especially among the powerless – but it sheds no light on how we can get people to treat others with more respect. If anything, problems of this nature seem to be getting out of hand in contemporary society, with abusive political rhetoric, internet abuse, and partisanship dominating the headlines daily. Our data, collected between 2011 and 2017, appear to reflect this trend, with total infantilization scores increasing by 30% over this period.