

Are You Overindulging Your Child?

Mary L. Hughes, Family Life Field Specialist

When parents overindulge their children, they are doing more harm than good. Overindulgence isn't harmless. It sets children up for unnecessary discomfort and failure and can make parenting a very bumpy road.

Overindulgence in children is all around us. It is not exactly like spoiling but does show similar traits. Over-indulgence is not directly related to affluent families. It can happen in families of any income level and in families with more than one child. Children who are overindulged can have serious difficulties in many areas of life, both when they are young, as well as when they are adults.

Overindulgence is not necessarily centered on material things. An article in February 2004 printed in Family Information Services (a Minneapolis-based independent organization providing continuing education for parent and family educators) overindulgence can be divided into three types: giving the child too much, over-nurturing and soft structure:

1. *Giving the child too much or too many things* goes beyond just toys and clothes, but includes anything that costs money. Children who are overindulged with too many material things often fail to learn the skill of knowing what is enough.
2. *Over-nurturing* is doing things for children that they could or should be doing for themselves. All children need nurturing to survive. This is not about giving too much love. It is more about hovering over a child or depriving a child of the opportunity to reach out and experience things on his or her own. It deprives the child of feeling the thrill of achievement or experiencing consequences. Making mistakes and then learning from the experience is not an option when the "helicopter parent" is preventing experiences from happening, or swooping in for the rescue before anything can go wrong!
3. *Soft structure*, the third type of over-indulgence, is giving children too much freedom. It can mean giving children choices that are not age appropriate, not insisting they follow rules set by the parents or letting children make decisions that should be made by the adults within the family. Not giving children responsibilities for chores and 'family work' deprives them of contributing to the family's well-being, and sets up an 'attitude of entitlement.'

If you are concerned that a child you care about is being overindulged, ask yourself these four expert-recommended questions:

- Does the situation keep the child from learning tasks that support his or her development?
- Does the situation give disproportionate amounts of family resources to one or more children? (money, space, time, attention)
- Who benefits the most from the situation— the child or the parent?

- Is the child's behavior potentially harmful to others or society in some way?

According to a study of grade school children by the Center for a New American Dream, when children want something new they are prepared to ask nine times before their parents will "give in." You don't have to give in — and you shouldn't. As a way to stop overindulging your child, learn to say no, and learn to say no in as many ways as you possibly can.

Some common troubles that overindulgence breeds are: the inability to delay gratification and knowing when 'enough is enough', selfish thinking, incompetence in everyday skills, self-care skills, and interpersonal skills, difficulty in establishing a sense of personal identity, and an inability to take personal responsibility.

Overindulgence, though often unintentional, can be identified. The person who experiences overindulgence can change old habits and set a new course toward more responsible living.

For more detailed information about identifying and stopping overindulgence, locate a new book written by Drs. Jean Illsley Clarke, Connie Dawson, and David Bredehoff, **How Much is Enough?**

Contact your local ISU Extension office or our website at www.extension.iastate.edu for more information about family development and parenting skills that grow healthy, mature family members who are responsible, resilient, and respectful.

Mary L. Hughes

Family Life Field Specialist
ISD Campus/ISU Extension
3501 Harry Langdon Blvd.
Council Bluffs, IA. 51503
712-366-7070 (phone)
712-366-7024 (fax)