



# The Effects of an Effortless Childhood

## Responding to Overindulged Children

**H**ere is a sample of the responses I get from parents and grandparents after telling them I do research on overindulging children and how it affects them in adulthood:

*She's my favorite grandchild. I have a right to spoil her if I want to! I don't see a problem with that!*

I had a difficult time when I was growing up after my mother died. I don't want my children to work and do chores like I had to! That's why I do everything for my children - because I want them to love me.

*I can see that overindulgence might be bad for them, but what I am doing is indulging them, not overindulging them. So, what if I do it every day!*

I am a recent immigrant to the U.S. and that's what I thought you were supposed to do - give them everything they want! Isn't that your secret for making children happy?

*Why shouldn't I give my kid everything he wants? I have the money to do it, and besides, I enjoy it and he really likes it! What's the harm in overindulging anyway?*

I admit, these are fair questions to ask - so what is overindulgence, and what is the harm in it?



### What is Overindulgence?

The book, *How Much Is Enough? Everything You Need To Know To Steer Clear Of Overindulgence And Raise Likeable, Responsible And Respectful Children—From Toddlers To Teens* (Clarke, Dawson & Bredehoft, 2004) states that:

Overindulging children is giving them too much of what looks good, too soon, too long. It is giving them things or experiences that are not appropriate for their age or their interests and talents. It is the process of giving things to children to meet the adult's needs, not the child's. Overindulgence is giving a disproportionate amount of family resources to one or more children in a way that appears to meet the children's needs but

does not, so children experience scarcity in the midst of plenty. Overindulgence is doing or having so much of something that it does active harm, or at least prevents a person from developing and deprives that person of achieving his or her full potential. Overindulgence is a form of child neglect. It hinders children from performing their needed developmental tasks, and from learning necessary life lessons. (p. xvii)

Overindulgence is not about one thing—spoiling children—it is about three:

- **Too much,**
- **Over-nurture, and**
- **Soft structure.**

**Too Much:** too many toys, clothes, activities, sports, lessons, camps, privileges, entertainment.

**Over-nurture:** doing things for children that they can and should be doing for themselves at each developmental stage. It also involves excessive parental attention (hovering and smothering).

**Soft structure:** not having rules, not enforcing rules, not having chores, giving too much freedom, allowing children to dominate the family.

**What is the harm in overindulging a child? And why should we be concerned?**

After reading about the harm that overindulgence really does, many parents may want to consider doing things differently.

1 Our research participants said they had a huge hole in their daily lives because they lacked many adult life skills which are important for being a capable person (Bredehoft, Mennicke, Potter, & Clarke, 1998). This skill deficiency resulted from a type of overindulgence called over-nurture. Over-nurturing is not about giving too much love. Over-nurturing is providing too much care—care that may look loving, but that keeps a child from achieving his or her full potential.

The most *common missing skills* were:

- communication, interpersonal, and relationship skills,
- domestic and home skills,
- mental and personal health skills,
- decision making skills,
- money and time management skills, and
- the ability to be responsible.

2 As adults, the participants from our research (Bredehoft, Mennicke, Potter, & Clarke, 1998) said *they now have difficulties* with:

- food,
- spending money and buying gifts,
- feelings of what’s normal,
- conflict over interpersonal boundaries and relationships,
- decision making, and
- engaging in excessive activities (such as working, going to school, exercising, playing, and having fun).

3 Overindulged children grow up facing *numerous challenges as parents* (Bredehoft, 2006; Walcheski, Bredehoft, & Leach, 2006). They reported:

- feeling ineffective;

- believing they are not in control of their own life or their child’s behavior; and
- thinking they are not responsible for their child’s actions, and that raising good children is due to fate, luck, or chance.

4 Overindulgence is the process parents unintentionally use to instill materialistic values in their children. We found that when overindulged children grow up they are more likely to become “externals” rather than “internals” (Bredehoft & Armao, 2008b).

*Externals are focused on themselves* by being concerned about wealth, fame, and image.

- Externals want:
- to become rich and super wealthy;
  - to become famous;
  - to achieve a “unique look”; and
  - to have people comment often about how attractive they are.



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*Internals are focused on personal growth, relationships, and giving back.*

Internals want:

- to grow and learn new things;
- to be able to look back on their life as meaningful and complete;
- to share my life with someone and have a committed, intimate relationship;
- to work to make the world a better place; and
- to help people in need.

**5** Our research clearly shows that the impact of childhood overindulgences lasts well into adulthood (Bredehoft, Mennicke, Potter, & Clarke, 1998). *Listen to the pain* in the words of these adults who were overindulged as children (Clarke, Dawson & Bredehoft, 2004):

“I have extreme difficulty making decisions.”

“I need praise and material reward to feel worthy.”

“I don’t have to grow up because other people will take care of me.”

“I feel like I need lots of things to feel good about myself.”

“I’m unlovable.”

“I have to buy gifts to be loved.”

“I constantly need outside affirmation from my friends.”

Now that you are aware of the hazards of overindulgence, consider doing things differently. Choose one of the tips below and try it in the upcoming week.

### Why do we overindulge our children?

Overindulgence starts from a good heart. Parents try to shield their children from the pains and difficulties they had to endure while growing up. Sometimes parents are responding to their own feelings of guilt, fatigue, and anxiety.

*I grew up in poverty. It was terrible and I don't want my children to experience that same thing, that's why I give them everything.*

Both of us work. We feel guilty that we don't have as much time to spend with our children as our parents did. Besides, we are beat when we get home and don't have the energy. That's why we give in.

*My parents were extremely rigid and I hated that! That's why I don't have rules or make them follow rules!*



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### Tips for avoiding overindulgence:

- Ask, "Am I doing this for my child, or am I really doing it for me?"
- Ask, "Am I doing something for my children that they really are old enough to be doing for themselves?"
- Let children make decisions that are appropriate for their age.
- Hold children accountable for their behaviors.
- Teach children to do chores and expect them to complete them.
- Practice saying, "You have had enough for now."
- Emphasize and model the life goals of meaningful relationships, personal growth, and community contribution.
- Teach how to save and share.
- Teach respect for people and things.
- Insist that children figure out how they will replace a belonging that was carelessly damaged or ruined.
- Learn to say NO.

### Endnote

1. For in-depth discussion on the overindulged child and the classroom see Bredehoft, D. J., & Armao, C. K. (2008). "What teachers can do when overindulged children come to school." *Lutheran Education Journal*, 142(1): 25-35.

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**Confession:** We confess that we love the works of darkness more than your light. We have sought to satisfy our deepest longings through material things of creation rather than through you, our Creator. We are quick to judge others, yet we fail to see our own failings. We ignore the cries of the poor and grow weary of working for justice. Restore us, O God; let your face shine on us, that we may be saved. Amen

**Absolution:** Hear the glad tidings of God! The word was made flesh and lived among us. Clothed in our humanity, Jesus Christ is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters and claims us as beloved children of God through our baptism. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven and restored to wholeness. In him we are free to serve God and our neighbor without fear. Amen.

(Incarnation Lutheran Church, 2007, p. 3)

Remember none of us are perfect. At times each of us overindulges the children in our care. When we do, we need to recognize it, confess it, and receive absolution. Only then will we be able to change and live in His grace.

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**RRR** See **Review, Reflect, Resolve** on page 42 for discussion questions about the topics covered in this article.