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Raising children in an age of overindulgence

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Raising children in an age of overindulgence

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Several highly visible cases labeled “affluenza” by the press have recently generated countless hours of airtime on radio and TV and in the press. This is testimony to the fact that we live in an age of overindulgence. Has overindulgence become the new normal? Some everyday examples:

4-Year-Old and Screen Time

While at the local coffee shop you see a dad come in with his 4-year-old daughter. He orders drinks and then sits down to check email on his computer. To keep his daughter occupied, he gives her an iPad. Daughter like father, they both stayed glued to their devices for more than an hour without uttering a word to each other.

3-Year-Old Disrupts Dinner

You and your spouse are eating at a local restaurant. A family with a young child sits in the booth behind you. As the meal progresses, the child becomes impatient, squirms, and begins to fuss. He finally calms down when his mother gives him a favorite toy. Soon he begins hitting the booth with his toy. His parents ignore it. Then he reaches over and hits you on the head with his toy. Both parents laugh and comment, “How cute,” but do nothing to prevent it from happening again and again.

Unfortunately, overindulgence has become the new normal.

What is Overindulgence?

Overindulgence meets an adult’s needs not a child’s needs. Overindulgence is giving children too much of what looks good, too soon, and for too long. Adults overindulge when they do things for children that they should be doing for themselves. Adults overindulge when they give a disproportionate amount of family resources to one or more children. Overindulgence does harm (Clarke, Dawson & Bredehoft, 2014).

When Does it Begin?

Overindulgence patterns begin between parent and child from a very early age, such as early childhood, and research suggests that in many cases they continue throughout childhood and adolescence and even into adulthood. In our first of 10 studies on

overindulgence, 39% reported overindulgence continuing through adolescence, 9% through young adulthood, and 9% through later adulthood. Of the respondents, 22% said they have been overindulged throughout their lives and that it was still continuing (Bredehoft, Mennicke, Potter, & Clarke, 1998).

Occasional indulgences add color, joy, and even excitement to life, but when they become a pattern, they become overindulgence. Our research (Bredehoft, Clarke & Dawson, 2003) identified three types of overindulgence patterns: *too much* (too many toys, clothes, camps, sports, etc.); *over-nurture* (doing things for children that they should be doing themselves); and *soft structure* (not having rules, not enforcing rules, not having chores). Parents can overindulge in one, two, or all three ways. Some examples with options:

Too Much

—You have a very popular parenting blog and each week UPS brings boxes and boxes of new toys for you to review and endorse. Your 4-year-old son thinks they are all for him. He thinks, “It’s better than Christmas, Hanukkah, and birthday rolled into one!” You think, “What’s the harm? It makes him happy.” The problem is your garage is full of boxes of toys and you have to park the cars outside.

Why not hire your son as a toy tester? Give him a job. He plays with each toy, rates it, tells what he likes and what he dislikes. You both agree ahead of time on a number to keep and a number of toys he will donate to charity. He can decide which charities.

—As a parent, you believe that it is important that your three young children be engaged in activities. It has gotten out of hand: church, preschool, sports, music les-

sons, and on and on. You are having difficulty keeping track and getting everyone where they need to be, especially since you and your spouse both work full time.

One possibility is to have a monthly family meeting and do a family calendar listing all activities, deciding which ones stay and which ones can be eliminated, and determining rules for adding new or unexpected activities.

Over-Nurture

—Your baby daughter is creeping across the floor to get a toy; you pick it up and give it to her.

Let her learn to get it herself; that enhances competence and confidence.

—Your 5-year-old son makes a bad baseball card trade with a friend and comes crying, wanting you to get it back for him.

After he calms down, talk to him about living with the deal he made, and then help him to develop rules for the future trading of prized possessions.

Soft Structure

—Your 3-year-old son throws a tantrum every time you go through the checkout line. He expects you to buy him something—a toy, candy—and if you do not, he cries, yells, and screams. You give in. Next time the tantrum is louder and longer.

Consider making a rule about buying toys and candy when you go shopping. Share that rule with your son. Remind him of the rule each time you go into a store, several times in the store, particularly at checkout. Each



David Bredehoft

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time he throws a tantrum, apologize to the clerk, leave your items, and go to the car. Wait till he calms down and only then return to the store to purchase your items.

—Your 8-year-old daughter has chores she conveniently forgets. You have tried a number of tactics to get her to do them, but they haven't worked. She waits you out. You give up and do them yourself. Besides, you do them better.

One option is to announce a new family policy: no chores—no services. If she balks at chores, discontinue family services such as rides to friends' houses or favorite snacks for school lunches.

Risks of Overindulging

Parents often ask, "What's the harm in overindulging my child?" I tell them what they are risking. I ask: "Are these characteristics the ones you want for your child as an adult?" Our studies indicate that parents who overindulge their children risk raising kids who:

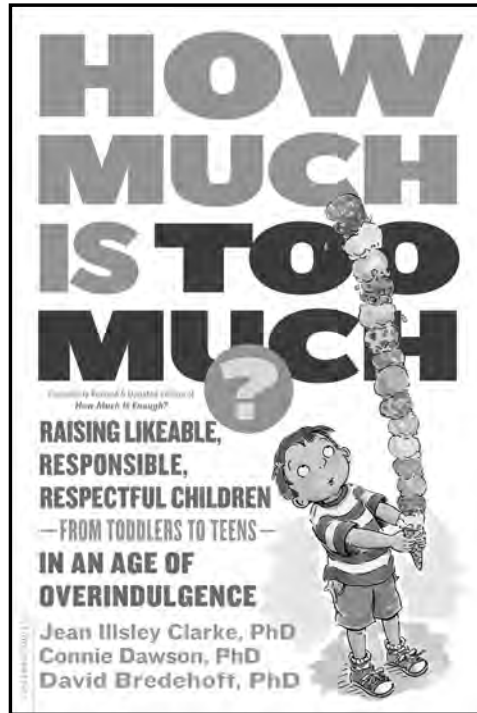
- feel that they are center of the universe;
- have an overblown sense of entitlement;
- are ungrateful;
- have not learned valuable adult life skills;
- are irresponsible;
- have poor boundaries;
- need immediate gratification;
- have poor self-control;
- are materialistic;
- have overspending and overeating problems;
- have goals of wealth, fame, and image, and do not have goals of meaningful relationships, personal growth, or making the community better.

How do I know if we are overindulging?

The Test of Four

Parents often ask, "How do I know if we are overindulging?" That's a challenging question. Each situation has to be examined individually. We have a tool we teach parents to use when examining a situation. We have parents ask four questions. We call this tool the Test of Four.

1. Does it hinder the child from learning his or her developmental tasks?
2. Does it use a disproportionate amount of family resources for one or more children?
3. Whose needs are being met? Does it benefit the adult more than the child?
4. Does it do harm to others, society, or the planet?



If, after you examine the situation, there is a "yes" answer to one or more of the Test of Four questions, it probably is overindulgence. Now think about 4-year-old and screen time, the 5-year-old in the shopping cart, and the 3-year-old disrupting dinner. In your own mind apply the Test of Four to each case. What did you decide?

What Can Parents Do Instead?

I have found that overindulgence comes from a good heart. I believe parents do not want the worst for their child—they want the best. The problem is they often go overboard. Here are a few suggestions for parents who are struggling with overindulgence.

—*Recognize and Own it.* The first step is becoming aware that you are overindulging. Own it and choose to do things differently.

—*Use the Test of Four.* The Test of Four is a powerful tool and like any tool you get better the more you use it.

—*Work on One Problem Area at a Time.* It is easy to say "I want a total parenting makeover, and I want to do it now," but this is unrealistic and defeating. Instead, identify one overindulgence problem area that routinely surfaces between you and your child. It could be with any of the three types of overindulgence: Too Much, Over-Nurture, or Soft-Structure. Choose only one. Think of a new, more effective way to respond.

—*Forgive Yourself for Your Parenting Mistakes.* We all make mistakes. We are all human. Learn to forgive yourself for your parenting mistakes so you can learn more effective ways of parenting.

—*Ask for Help and Support.* We live in an age of overindulgence. I don't think we can change that. That said, we are in charge of the choices we make in this overindulgent world. One choice is to ask others for help, or to surround yourself with parents who are also concerned about overindulgence—find allies. Another choice is to join a parenting group and receive as well as give others help. ■

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