



# Did You Know?



FAMILY SERVICES NEWSLETTER  
Mandala Children's House • Anne Kangas, L.C.S.W.

## How Much Is Enough?

### STEERING CLEAR OF OVERINDULGENCE



"Remember that not getting what you want is sometimes a wonderful stroke of luck."

- The Dalai Lama



#### Giving Too Much

We all want to give our kids the best of everything. But sometimes, despite our best intentions, we cross the line and give our children too much. In the holiday season, parents are often wrestling with the question of "how much" and we struggle with whether to buy that extra toy a child so dearly longs for. Yet we also have nagging doubts about our kids getting "too much stuff," and we wonder, deep down, if we really *are* giving them too much? We wonder if perhaps we may actually be overindulging them.

I came across a great parenting book that offers some helpful, down-to-earth ways of looking at the question of overindulgence. *How Much Is Enough* (by J. Clarke, Ph.D., C. Dawson, Ph.D., and David Bredehoft, Ph.D.) is a timely read at this time of year for sure, but even more, it can help parents set the stage for a more balanced and loving way of raising children long-term. The authors take a broad look at the whole spectrum of excess, and they offer no-guilt/no-blame strategies for a reasonable approach. They help us understand the hidden dangers of overindulgence and the long-term damage it can cause to children over the years. I will try to share some of the highlights of their research so that you too can benefit from their useful words.

#### What Is Overindulgence?

Over indulging children is giving them too much of what looks good, too soon, and for 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 be meeting 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 that person from achieving his or her full potential.

Overindulgence is a form of child neglect. It hinders children from performing their needed developmental tasks, and from other necessary life lessons.

*(How Much Is Enough by J. Clarke, Ph.D., C. Dawson, Ph.D., and David Bredehoft, Ph.D., Introduction)*

## Way Too Nice

Overindulgence comes from good intentions. It can creep into any family. It doesn't necessarily look bizarre or out of the ordinary, say the authors. Even very wise parents can overindulge their children once in a while. That's not the problem. Occasionally indulging a child is not going to cause long-term difficulties. As they point out, "occasional indulgences add color, pleasure and joy to life. When those same indulgences become a pattern, however, the result is very different. The pattern is called overindulgence."

## The Key word Is "Over"

*Over-doing, over-giving. Too much...too many...too often...too long.* What happens, then, is that instead of getting appreciation and joy from our children, we get whines and demands for more. Instead of seeing the positive intent of our giving, we see that our indulgence has created the negative impact of over-indulgence. Let's understand this better.

IF YOU WATER A PLANT TOO MUCH, IT DIES.  
EVEN IF YOU ARE WATERING IT TOO MUCH OUT OF LOVE, IT STILL DIES.  
— Ada Alden

## Overindulgence Is More Than Spoiling

I like the way the authors clarify the difference between "spoiling" and "overindulgence":

"Spoiling" is a word usually used to describe a child whose behaviors are annoying to adults. *He demands what he wants right now. She interrupts. He gets away with things.* However, a child can be overindulged and not act demanding, ungracious, and self-centered, especially if the parental message is *I'll do this for you if you make me look like a good parent.* Those children can be charming and well-mannered. Also, by reason of personality, neurology, or early history, a child who is acting "spoiled" may have parents who are not overindulging but are doing everything they can to correct those irritating behaviors. (p. 4)

## ★ ★ ★ THREE WAYS OF OVER-INDULGING YOUR CHILD ★ ★ ★

The authors clustered the top fifteen ways of overindulging (in box to right) into three types of overindulgence: giving too much, over-nurturing, and too little structure. These can occur one at a time, or two or three can occur simultaneously. Clearly, the problems are compounded the more the overindulging overlaps.

### • GIVING TOO "MUCH"

*I'm having a hard time teaching Charlie to take care of his toys, his mom lamented. He has so many that if something gets lost or broken, he doesn't care. He just plays with something else.*

The authors describe this type of overindulgence as "giving too much or too many things, including not

Often, the "too much" form of overindulgence can appear to meet a child's needs, but does not. As a result, the child experiences scarcity in the midst of plenty.

only toys and clothing, but anything that costs money: sports equipment, lessons, entertainment, vacations, junk food, tobacco, alcohol, or illegal drugs. In addition, 'too much' can also mean allocating a disproportionate amount of family resources to one or more children. Often this 'too much' form of overindulgence appears to meet a child's needs, but does not. As a result, the child experiences scarcity in the midst of plenty." (p. 8)

## Failing to Learn What Is Enough

When children experience too much and too many on a constant basis, they actually experience a sense of scarcity, because they fail to learn the vital skill of ascertaining what is "enough." What the authors learned most vividly in their research, they claim, was that adults who were indulged as children

experience significant angst about knowing how much is enough—whether it’s work, play, money, food, clothes, sex, alcohol, entertainment, or sleep. As they say so eloquently, “*enough* is an elusive concept taught slowly over many years by adults who say, *You’ve had enough*, whether it’s candy, presents, excitement, recreation, or stimulation.” We are also challenged to consider that there is pain for the indulger, too. Think about this example of a mother who, when told her son had robbed a bank, responded sadly, *I can’t understand why he did that when I always gave him everything he wanted*.

- **OVER-NURTURING**

*Three year old Sophie was carried whenever she demanded to be carried: in and out of childcare, the store, or their house of worship. At four, Mom was still dressing and undressing her. Sophie could not zip her own jacket. Mom loved doing it and hadn’t noticed that the other children were managing their own clothing. At six, Mom was still using smother-love. “Sorry to cancel our luncheon,” Sophie’s mom apologized to her friend. “Sophie had a restless night and a bad dream, so I’m going to keep her how and just be with her this morning.”*

### **Smothering With Too Much Care**

Over-nurturing is providing too much care—care that may look loving, but that keeps a child from achieving his or her full potential.

Parents over-nurture by “over-doing, spoiling, giving too much attention, doing things for children that they should be learning to do for themselves, and allowing children to think only about themselves, not about others (p. 9).” All children need nurturing, of course, but over-nurturing is going too far. It is smothering children with too much care and attention. When

we over-nurture by doing too much for our children, we keep them from mastering the things they need to learn for themselves. We rob them of developing important life skills.

### **It’s Not About Love**

The authors make it very clear that over-nurturing is *not* about giving too much love. As they say, there is no such thing as giving too much love. Loving your children allows them to grow. But, “true love does not hover or intrude or deprive a child of the opportunity to reach out, to learn new skills, to feel the thrill of achievement, or to experience consequences. Love does not continue to do things for a child that are no longer appropriate for his or her age.”

*“Nate should not be learning that he is the center of the universe and that any behavior is acceptable. He should be learning that he can trust and rely on competent adults who love him and who know when to stand in the way of his demands. A two-year old who is allowed to dominate adults learns to be annoying and obnoxious and eats up the emotional resources of the parents.” (p. 30)*

- **SOFT-STRUCTURE**

*“My dad was rigid,” Eric explained. “We had too many rules. That’s not going to happen in my house. There will be no rules and no ‘shoulds’ for my children.”*

### **A Lack of Firm Boundaries and Clear Expectations**

Soft structure is giving children too much freedom and license. It can mean giving children choices and consequences that are not appropriate for their age, interests, or talents. It can also be not insisting that they learn important life-skills.

Soft structure is when parents do not have rules, or they don’t insist that rules be followed, or when parents shield children from the consequences of their behaviors and choices and don’t insist that they learn life skills. Soft structure can also be when parents fail to insist that children consider the impact of their actions on the family, the group, and society.

All children need firm structure to feel safe and become socially responsible. Unfortunately, children will grow up emotionally stunted without it. Firm structure, as defined in *How Much Is Too Much*,

includes “establishing and enforcing rules, creating firm boundaries, monitoring children’s safety, teaching children skills for living, and insisting that they do chores.”

### Giving Children Too Much Power

“Soft structure is giving children too much freedom and license. It can mean giving children choices and experiences that are not appropriate for their age, interests, or talents. It can also be not insisting that they learn important life skills.” (p. 9)

More and more, we are seeing situations today where families forget that adults are supposed to be in charge—and the children have taken on the job! Parents either directly give their children the power, or they give it to them indirectly by abdicating or default. Letting children make decisions that should fall to adults is a good example of this default position. Sadly, this gives children a false sense of power and an overblown sense of responsibility.

Another example of soft structure is not requiring children to do chores. This deprives children of the opportunity to contribute to the family’s success and well-being. I have always noted that the families where the children feel most tightly connected are those where they are expected to give a lot in terms of time and effort to the family. These children seem to feel significant and important because their contribution counts. The authors mentioned that the area participants referred to the most in their overindulgence study was resentment over not being given chores. They suggest to their readers that we think about this the next time our children complain about doing chores!

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## NURTURE IS ONE HALF OF THE PARENTING SANDWICH & STRUCTURE IS THE OTHER HALF.

*“Structure is the “how-to” of care,” say the authors. “It’s the bones.*

*Nurture cushions the bones, but it is the bones themselves that are necessary to hold the body up.” (p.114)*

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## The HAZARDS of Overindulging

The authors researched and talked with over 1200 people to fully understand the consequences of overindulgence. Their findings are quite interesting. While one would think that overindulgence would give children the benefits of abundance, the truth is very different. Children who are overindulged can experience difficulties in many areas of life, both when they are young and when they become adults.

### The authors found that over-indulged children may have:

- Trouble learning how to delay gratification
- Trouble giving up status as the constant center of attention
- Trouble become competent in
  - everyday skills
  - self-care skills
  - skills for relating to others
- Trouble taking personal responsibility
- Trouble developing a sense of personal identity
- Trouble knowing what is enough
- Trouble knowing what is normal for other people

### “ENOUGH”

is a beautiful word!



Overindulged children too often don’t have the chance to know and identify what they need.

They don’t learn to trust that they know what or how much they need. Since they don’t know what “enough” is, they can’t experience abundance.

Abundance is that glorious experience that warms the heart. It is being able to have some extras that make life more enjoyable.

Abundance is sometimes having a feast.

Having TOO much can mean that nothing is ever enough.

“Enough for now” is a crucial component in teaching children about delayed gratification. This is a skill many overindulged adults lack.

## Overindulgence can cause great pain in adult life.

As the authors learned from their research subjects, the pain revolves around not knowing how to do things that everyone seems able to do, feeling that others resent you, expecting to stay the center of attention and have others be responsible for you, and the stress from not knowing what is enough—enough food, clothing, money, work, play, and so on. In the words of one respondent, *I tend to overdo everything—work, spending, acquiring things, talking, eating. I am terrified of being insatiable.* (p.79)

## ★ ★ ★ THE TEST OF FOUR – CLUES TO OVERINDULGENCE ★ ★ ★

Developmental Tasks?	Family Resources?
Who's Needs?	Possible Harm?

Here are some things to look out for. If any one of these clues is clearly present, there is an overindulgence problem. This is a simple, easy-to-use format to think about decisions you make.

### (1) Does the situation hinder the child from learning the tasks that support his or her development and learning at this age?

Here are some questions one could ask in different scenarios:

- Does Mom doing Nicholas's chores for him keep him from learning any developmental tasks, such as learning self-help skills and learning responsibility and follow-through? Also, was he given too much power?
- Does Christopher's mother stepping in and talking for him keep him from learning any developmental tasks?
- Does Elizabeth's mother buying her a toy after she begs and whines and pleads (they were on a birthday gift-buying expedition) hinder Elizabeth from learning anything? Does it keep her from learning that she is not the center of the universe, and that we all must wait for special things?

This first clue to overindulgence is especially important because children are trying to make sense of themselves and the world from the time they are born onward. Consider toys, as an example. Children's play is their work, so their toys ideally should provide some learning or some experiences that prepare them for later on in life. If a child is not taught to care for and store her toys, she is not learning responsible life skills. If the toys do not allow her to construct and manipulate and design, her creativity is not enhanced. Too many toys can also interfere with the development of the life skills of focus and perseverance. (NOTE: The chart at the end of this newsletter can be very helpful in

## Childhood Feelings

REPORTED BY ADULTS  
OVERINDULGED AS CHILDREN

- *I felt loved.*
- *I felt confused because it didn't feel right, but I couldn't complain because how can I fault someone who does so much for me?*
- *I felt embarrassed because at times I was expected to know some skills that I'd never had to learn.*
- *I felt guilty, bad, sad.*
- *I felt good at the time, but later I felt ashamed.*
- *I felt good because I got everything I wanted.*
- *I felt embarrassed because I knew it wasn't right.*
- *I felt bad because other kids didn't get what I did.*
- *No matter how much I got, I never got enough, so I felt sad.*
- *I felt good because I got to decide about everything.*
- *I felt bad because the other kids made fun of me.*
- *I felt embarrassed because other kids didn't have stuff.*
- *I felt ignored.*
- *I felt confused.*
- *I felt embarrassed because other kids teased me.*
- *No matter how much I got, I never got enough, so I felt mad.*

(How Much Is Enough p.7)

knowing what is appropriate to expect for each child's age.)

**(2) Does this situation exist to benefit the adult more than the child?**

- *Was mom doing Nicholas's chores to avoid a confrontation with him, which benefitted her by allowing her to avoid conflict –something she is afraid to deal with?*
- *Did Mom do what Christopher could do for himself? Was it meeting her needs or Christopher's?*
- *Did Mom agree to the purchase of a toy to please Elizabeth or was it to satisfy her own need to look like a good mom or to feel like a good mom by not disappointing her?*

The issue of whose needs are being met is extremely important in determining whether a child is being overindulged. The authors suggest posing the question this way to ourselves:

*Is what I am about to do more for my child or more for me?  
Was that behavior, that choice, that event, that object, more for me or more for my child?*

If we answer honestly, we will keep from inflicting our children with the pain of overindulgence.

**(3) Does the child's behavior potentially harm others, society, or the planet in some way?**

- *Does consistently letting a child off the hook prevent him from learning mutual respect and responsibility, which could actually pose a risk to others later on? What if a child does not learn to develop a social conscience? This can impact his ability to function successfully in the adult world and operate as a productive member of society.*
- *Is any harm being done? Do Mom's purchases model adult overindulgence for the child?*
- *Are family relationships being strained or compromised?*

Use the Test of Four in your own situations to look carefully at all the angles. We can all be blind to seeing how our seemingly benign "indulgences" are actually compromising our children's ability to stretch and grow and learn important skills that prepare them for life.

★ ★ WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE INDULGE TOO MUCH? ★ ★

Children who experience a constant stream of overindulging with "too much" usually...

- *Do not know what is "enough."*
- *Disrespect others and their property*
- *Believe and act as if they are the center of the universe.*

Source: *How Much Is Enough?* Jean Clarke, Ph.D., Connie Dawson, Ph.D., and David Bredehoft, Ph.D. Marlowe and Co, 2004.



May we all have just "enough" this season!

<b>Job of Child at Developmental Stage</b>	<b>Examples of Helpful Parenting</b>	<b>Healthy Decisions A Child May Make</b>	<b>Examples of Overindulging</b>	<b>Decisions An Overindulged Child May Make</b>
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## DECISIONS CHILDREN MAY MAKE AT EACH DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE



<b>Birth to 6</b>	Mom waits until baby Zach calls her or	<i>I can know what I need and ask for it.</i>	Mom offers the breast or bottle to	<i>I don't know when I am hungry. I don't</i>
<b>School Age</b> To learn what is one's own responsibility and what are others' responsibilities, rules and structures.	Father asks Jerrod if he needs ideas for getting himself ready for the school bus, no excuses to the school bus if he is tardy. More complex chores.	<i>I need to learn to be responsible for myself and to others. I am capable.</i>	Jerrod is often late for the school bus, so his dad packs Jerrod's lunch and waits for him and takes him to school.	<i>I am not competent. I don't need to learn how to take care of myself. I don't need to care for others.</i>
<b>6-18 Months</b> To reach out and explore her world and learn to trust her senses. To attach to her caretakers.	safe area with safe objects for Stephanie to explore in her own way. Parents let child play with pots and pans and provide a few toys at a time.	<i>learn about my world. I can trust my senses.</i>	Stephanie reaches for a toy, a parent hands it to her or plays the toy for her. Her parents surround her with toys too mature for her.	<i>out for what I want. I don't know how to explore my world.</i>
<b>18 Months to 3 Years</b> To start cause-and-effect thinking. To give up the belief that he is the center of the universe. To learn to follow simple commands: come, stop, go, wait, sit.	Sometimes Charlie gets what he wants and sometimes he doesn't. Adults carry this out in a matter-of-fact way, with no criticism. Adults expect Charlie to follow simple commands: come, stop, go, wait, sit.	<i>I have to take others' needs into account. I can say no and be angry and still be loved. I can learn to follow directions.</i>	Every time Charlie says no, the adults give in. Charlie gets what he wants more and more. A tantrum or a demanding attitude will get him anything.	<i>I am the center of the universe. I can have whatever I want. I don't have to consider other people.</i>
<b>3 to 6 Years</b> To assert an identity separate from others. To learn ways of exerting power. To learn that behaviors have consequences.	Julie is told before entering the grocery store whether she may or may not have candy. That directive is followed without criticism or apology. Julie does simple chores.	<i>I can ask for what I want and expect parents and their rules to be dependable. I can become capable.</i>	Julie whines for a candy bar at the checkout line at the grocery store. Dad says no three times and then buys two bars for her.	<i>Only my wants count. I don't have to take other people's needs, wishes, or feelings into account. I can have whatever I want.</i>



<b>Teen</b> To emerge gradually as a separate, independent person, responsive to others and responsible for her own needs, feelings, and behavior.	Parents negotiate with Rosa about what chores she can reasonably be expected to do and when and how she can get where she needs or wants to go.	<i>I am responsible for myself and to others. I am a contributing family member. I am capable.</i>	Rosa has many school activities, so her parents do her household chores for her. Her parents change their schedules to drive Rosa whenever she wants a ride.	<i>I don't need to be competent enough or valued enough to be a contributing member of my primary group.</i>
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