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## Overindulgence - What's the Big Deal?

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Have you heard these familiar statements?

“But all my friends have one!”

“If you loved me, you’d do this for me.”

Have you heard yourself say the following?

“Let me just do it for you...”

“I’ll let you borrow the car if you stop complaining.”

These statements are red flags that overindulgence may be occurring.

### WHAT IS OVERINDULGENCE?

According to overindulgence expert Jean Illsley-Clarke, overindulgence is “giving too much, for too long, too soon.” Overindulgence is more than spoiling. We often think of “spoiling” as giving too many things (toys, privileges, etc.) to our kids. Overindulgence is more than just giving too many things, and can look like the following:

- 1) Giving too much to your child
- 2) Over-nurturing your child
- 3) Having soft or little structure in the home

All overindulgence comes from a place of well meaning and love, and parents may overindulge for a number of reasons. They want to make their child happy, may have the affluence and ability to give more, or may want to give their child things they never had in their own childhood. Or, they may just be trying to get through the day, and giving in is an easy way to appease a fussy child.

However, as we’ll discuss in a moment, overindulgence *can* have negative consequences. Often times, parents who overindulge don’t have a basic understanding of child development and how it can be negatively impacted by overindulgence.

#### TOO MUCH

This is what most people think of when they see a spoiled or overindulged child. It’s simply giving too many things to your child – whether it is toys, food, or activities.

A child who is receiving too much expects things to be given to them. “I want the new iPhone – all my friends have it!” Or, a parent may do everything she can to entertain her child because he complains, “I’m bored!”

#### OVER-NURTURE

Over-nurturing does NOT mean loving your child too much, or being too nurturing when your child needs to be nurtured. These are both good things. Instead, it basically means doing

things for your child that he or she should be able to do for himself or herself, based on what is developmentally appropriate.

For example, a child who is learning to tie his shoes is being over-nurtured when a parent says, “You’re taking too long, let me do it for you.” A teenager who is applying for colleges is being over-nurtured when the parent makes all the phone calls to the admissions offices. These are tasks that the child and teen should be able to do, because they are developmentally appropriate.

### **SOFT STRUCTURE**

Kids need rules, limits, and structure. Structure and routine gives them a sense of security, allows them to develop self-discipline, and provides a foundation for when life gets a little disorganized and out of control.

Parents can overindulge when they fail to provide rules, limits, and structure for their kids. They can also overindulge when they shield kids from the consequences of not following these rules.

For example, let’s say a child spent the afternoon playing video games because there are no rules on screen time. The child didn’t study for her test the next day and ended up failing the test. Her parent would be overindulgent if he called the teacher to demand a retest. Instead, the child should have to face the consequences of not studying for a test like she was supposed to do.

## **WHAT’S THE BIG DEAL?**

Illsley-Clarke and her colleagues have been studying overindulgence for years, and through their research they have discovered how it can impact children in the short- and long-term.

- Overindulged children have no accountability for their actions, and as a result, the parent has little to no control over the child.
- Overindulgence can lead to dysfunctional thinking in adolescence.
- Adults who were overindulged as children tend to lack everyday skills and tend to not want to grow personally, or develop meaningful relationships, as they get older.
- Overindulged children have an inability to delay gratification (“I want it NOW!”), which can lead to them being ungrateful and unappreciative in adulthood.

## **WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?**

If this is all sounding too familiar, you may be overindulging your child. But there is hope – here are some things parents can do to reduce overindulgence and get back on the right track:

1. Recognize that you overindulge and choose to do things differently.
2. Use “**The Test of Four**”

When you think you may be overindulging your child, ask yourself the following questions:

- Will doing or giving this keep my child from learning what he or she needs to learn at this age?

- Will doing or giving this use a disproportionate amount of family resources, including money, space, time, energy, or attention, to meet the wants (not the needs) of one or more of our children?
- Will doing or giving this benefit me, the parent, more than my child?
- Will doing or giving this deplete or otherwise harm others, the community, or the environment in some way?

If you answer “yes” to one or more of the questions, it’s possible that overindulgence is about to occur. Time to re-think your decision!

(You can read more about The Test of Four here:

<http://www.extension.umn.edu/family/live-healthy-live-well/healthy-children/overindulgence/test-of-four/>)

3. Work on one problem area at a time
4. Forgive yourself for your parenting mistakes
5. Ask for help and support

Becoming more aware of what overindulgent behavior looks like is the first step in the right direction. With practice, you should be able to recognize when you’re overindulging your child and can take a minute to rethink what you’re doing. Although it can be difficult in the moment, your children will thank you in the long run!

As always, if you have questions or concerns about this topic, feel free to contact us at YSB! We’re here to help.

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## Resources

[www.overindulgenceinfo.org](http://www.overindulgenceinfo.org)

<http://www.extension.umn.edu/family/live-healthy-live-well/healthy-children/overindulgence/test-of-four/>