

Family Tapestries Strengthening Family Bonds



Fact Sheet

Indulging Our Children and Harming Them in the Process

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Indulged, entitled, advantaged, over-scheduled, and spoiled—these are all words used by some to describe today’s youth. According to *Webster’s New World College Dictionary*, indulge “implies a yielding to the wishes or desires of oneself or another.” It is the opposite of discipline, “training that develops self-control, character, or orderliness and efficiency.”

Who are these youth? Where did they get such a reputation? Unlike many social issues that seem to plague those with limited resources, indulged children usually come from families with medium to high incomes. These youth are the product of a booming market economy, devoted parents, and a society that values individualism. The strong economy made it possible for parents to fulfill their children’s desires—a TV in each bedroom, video games, personal computers, cell phones, a fast sports car for their 16th birthday, and other trend-setting toys.

Wanting their children to be happy and successful, now and in adulthood, many parents do all they can to give their children a competitive advantage. Some parents may play classical music to the unborn, enroll toddlers in elite preschools, and juggle schedules so that older children can participate in early-morning and after-school enrichment activities. Others even opt for cosmetic surgery so their child will have the perfect look or performance enhancing drugs so they can out-do classmates. To do less, some parents incorrectly believe they would appear neglectful and uncommitted. For many, parenting has become a competitive sport. As Dr. William J. Doherty points out in his book *Take Back Your Kids*, “keeping up

with other parents is behind much of our difficulty in handling our children’s peer-driven demands” (Doherty, 2000, p. 152).

A study conducted by Dr. Dan Kindlon at Harvard University found a negative impact on the development of character in children who are indulged. In his book *Too Much of a Good Thing*, Kindlon describes the many ways that well-intentioned parents over-indulge their children: parents are generous with money, toys, and material possessions; allow too much freedom in how children can behave; provide too much help; and, frequently have unrealistically high expectations for children’s school and extracurricular performance.

Dr. Alvin Rosenfeld and Nicole Wise concur with Kindlon. In their book *The Over-Scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap*, the authors state, “by scrutinizing every detail of how they look and act, by expecting them all to achieve at a notable level, we are setting them up for a fall—and ourselves for trouble down the road” (Rosenfeld & Wise, 2000, p. 147). Parents are really not helping their children when they go to extraordinary lengths to assure their success.

Problems Related to Indulgence

Kindlon identifies seven syndromes or problems of character that appear in indulged children. The seven problems include:

- **Self-Centeredness**—An inward focus leads to self-consciousness and an acute awareness of one’s imperfections. Teenagers feel they will

never meet their parents' high expectations. The result is low self-esteem.

- **Anger**—Youth cite “not having enough time together with their parents” (Kindlon, 2001, p. 91) as the primary reason they are mad.
- **Driven**—In a competitive society, youth must focus on their goal and constantly work toward it. These are the high achievers.
- **Not Motivated**—Unlike the driven, these youth could care less. They are adrift, discouraged, and often depressed.
- **Eating Problems**—Childhood obesity is at an all-time high, and anorexia and bulimia continue to plague many young people.
- **Self-Control Problems**—Drugs, tobacco, alcohol, and early sexual involvement entice youth. The higher the family income, the higher the chance that children will have a drug and/or alcohol problem. Because parents have been quick to gratify their desires, youth find themselves unable to resist temptation.
- **Spoiled**—Youth tend to want it all and want it now. What spoils youth is not only an abundance of money and material possessions, but also their lack of willingness to help with projects and chores. They have an attitude of entitlement to do only what they want, when they want.

What Is a Parent to Do?

It is clear that children who are shielded from pain, discomfort, and unhappiness fail to develop the skills they need to cope with adversity. Family life and psychology professionals offer a variety of recommendations to parents on how to avoid over-indulging their children. Their suggestions follow.

Kindlon believes that quality family relationships help to shield children from the syndromes. In addition, he identified five family characteristics that separated the youth that did or did not have the seven syndromes. In youth without syndromes:

- families ate meals together
- parents were married
- children had household responsibilities
- children did not have a phone in their bedroom

- families were involved in community service (Kindlon, 2001, p. 177)

Kindlon recommends the use of Time, Limits, and Caring (TLC). He writes, “Time—just being there for our kids, being around, being present, being available, spending time with our kids. Limits—being able to say no, incur our children’s wrath, and push them to do things that are often difficult for them to do. And Caring—taking an active interest in our children’s lives, being willing to listen to what’s on their minds and participate in their activities, even if they’re not inherently interesting to us” (Kindlon, 2001, p. 198). Kindlon also recommends that parents work together to provide consistency with rules and punishments for breaking the rules. He believes that allowances should only be given when chores are done and that the amount should be divided into savings, spending, and retirement accounts.

Rosenfeld and Wise suggest that parents think carefully about what they value and then align their behaviors with their values. Children are keen observers and will imitate their parents’ behaviors. They recommend that parents examine their choices and identify those that are really important. Evaluate “the plans, the goods, the advice, the activities, the lessons” (Rosenfeld & Wise, 2000, p. 247). Continue those that enrich life and eliminate those that only add stress. Spend time doing the things that truly matter.

Most parents want their children to be happy. But happiness cannot be purchased. True happiness is acquired when individuals are involved in pursuits that are meaningful to them. By re-evaluating priorities, responsibilities, and schedules, and aligning them according to family values, parents and children may acquire the happiness they seek.

References

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- Kindlon, D. (2001). *Too much of a good thing*. New York: Hyperion.
- Rosenfeld, A., & Wise, N. (2000). *The over-scheduled child: Avoiding the hyper-parenting trap*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.

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