

## Your Child's Happiness: When Getting Less Means More

What is it that you want most for your children? If you're like the majority of parents, the first answer that comes to mind is "for them to be happy". No one would argue with that, but *how* one gets to happiness is a much more important question.

One route that has been proven NOT to work has been the route of overindulgence. While we may all spoil or indulge our children from time to time, a consistent pattern of doing so is not a good thing. The motive for overindulging is usually tied to making or keeping a child happy. But anyone who has been in the habit of overindulging eventually learns that the opposite occurs: Children who have been overindulged are more likely to be unhappy, demanding, and unappreciative of what they have been given.

Don't stop reading if you think that overindulging is just about giving kids too much *stuff*. The authors of *How Much Is Enough* point out that overindulged children are those who take an inordinate amount of the family's resources, be that time, energy, money or things. They talked to 1200 adults and came up with the most common ways these adults were overindulged as children. These included: Parents doing things for their kids that they should have done for themselves; NOT expecting the kids to do any chores; having too many toys or clothes; having too much freedom and too few rules; being kept "entertained" by parents and being scheduled for multiple activities.

The problem with overindulgence is that despite its varied forms of "abundance", it robs the child in many areas. For example, the overindulged child may miss the opportunity to be a contributing member of the household. He may miss the chance to learn how to deal with frustration and *delaying* gratification. He may have difficulty not being the center of attention, which will impact his skills in relationships. She may miss the opportunity to develop competence at everyday tasks, which in turn affects development of a sense of identity and self-esteem.

All of these above-mentioned skills are exactly the kinds of tools young people need in order to find (themselves and) happiness in their own lives. So, what can you do? Here are a few ideas:

1. Recognize the multitude of ways your child can help out (i.e. contribute) at home, starting at a young age. For example, a two or three year-old can help put away specific toys. A child of five can help make simple lunches, get his own clothes out for school, and clean up (e.g. hang the towel, put clothes in hamper) after his bath. As children grow and mature, they grow increasingly capable of helping.
2. Let your child see that he/she is not always the center of attention. Mom and Dad, or single parents, need to demonstrate that they have interests of their own.

3. Set and maintain boundaries. Remember that your child needs lots of love, but also he needs to hear the word "no". If your child is sometimes unhappy with you, that is a GOOD sign. You are being a parent (job #1, before being a friend to your child).
4. Demonstrate and model your values to your child. If you value giving and service, show that to your child through your own activities. Expect your child to do the same, on a scale appropriate to his/her age.
5. Help your child learn the concept of "Enough". Overindulged children lack an understanding of this important concept. Children learn about "enough" informally. When you set a limit on the number of chips your child can snack on, you are teaching about "enough" ("You've had enough treats for now; I'm putting the rest away.") When you enforce bedtime, your child is learning about enough ("Time for bed now; you've been reading Harry Potter long enough.") When you share (money, resources ) with others, you are demonstrating that you have enough to give some of your abundance away. Your children will see your values in action.

(For more information on this topic, you may want to read "How Much Is Enough", by J. Clarke, Ph.D., C. Dawson, Ph.D., D. Bredehoft, Ph.D.)