

How Much Is Enough?

From the book, How Much Is Enough by Clarke, Dawson and Bredehoft

Childhood overindulgence is linked to a lack of important life-skills and unhelpful attitudes and beliefs in later life.

What Is Overindulgence?

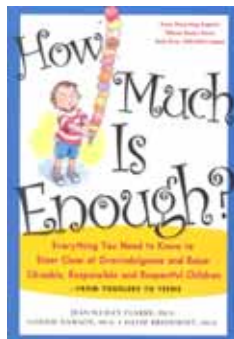
How Much Is Enough? states: "Overindulgence is giving children too much, too soon, or too long." It's giving things or experiences that are not appropriate for a child's age, interests or talents. Overindulgence is having so much of something that it does active harm or deprives children from achieving their full potential. It's a form of child neglect because it hinders children from learning necessary life lessons.

Recognizing Overindulgence

Overindulgence undercuts self-discipline. If children always get what they want, how do they learn to deal with disappointment? How will they learn to put someone else's needs ahead of their own? How will they learn how to delay gratification? How will they ever be satisfied with what they have? How will they ever know when enough is enough?

Four common clues to overindulgence are:

- Hinders child from learning tasks that support development and learning.
- Gives disproportionate amount of family resources (money, space, time, energy, or attention) to one or more of the children.
- Benefits adult more than child.
- Child's behavior is potentially harmful to others, society, or the planet.



Areas of overindulgence are: too many things, over-nurturing, and soft structure. This issue focuses on too many things.

Too Many Things

Clothes, toys, lessons, and entertainment are some of the "things" where children may be overindulged. Children who experience too much usually do not know what is enough, disrespect others and property, and believe and act as if they are the center of the universe.

The following example clearly shows overindulgence and how Joshua's parents turned around the "too much" to build strengths in their child.

Joshua's Birthday Toys

Joshua was the first grandchild on both sides and a great favorite of his aunts and uncles. The week before Joshua's seventh birthday, packages poured in from loving relatives. Dad insisted that Joshua wait for his birthday to open them. On that big day the boy's in-town relatives arrived with more gifts. Joshua tore through the whole pile, throwing the wrappings aside, barely glancing at each gift before dropping it, ignoring anything that was said to him, and grabbing for the next gift. When the pile of presents was gone, he looked startled and demanded, "Is that all?"

Joshua's behavior is common in two year olds, but it definitely is not appropriate for a seven year old. Joshua showed no appreciation for the gifts or people who gave them. His parents were embarrassed and even lost track of what gift came from whom. What to do?

Joshua's parents felt relatives were not likely to stop the flow of gifts so they devised a plan. Before his next birthday, they asked relatives to send a picture of themselves with only one gift. Days before his eighth birthday, his parents helped Joshua clean off his toy shelves and give outgrown toys away. Joshua resisted, but his parents held firm. The afternoon before his birthday, Joshua got to open the first gift. He was told he could not open another gift for two hours. He whined and manipulated, but his parents were unyielding. Together they examined the gift and talked about how he would use it and care for it. They looked at the picture of the givers, remembering the last time they had seen those folks, and imagined what they had said when they chose the gift. During the rest of the two hours, Joshua played with the gift and wrote a thank you note, drew a thank you picture, or made a thank you phone call. Only after the thank you was finished could Joshua open the next gift.

The next afternoon, when in-town relatives arrived, Joshua's parents insisted that he show each of the pictures with gifts from out of town relatives before opening more presents.



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Joshua was still the center of attention, but he learned about including others, something about delaying gratification, and he was moved beyond the excessive sense of entitlement he displayed at his seventh birthday. The "too much" from the year before was transformed into a cherished family ritual.

Over Scheduling

Overindulgence is also possible by over-scheduling a child by providing too many lessons, camps, sports, clubs, and other activities. Too many activities, the pressure of being too busy, and not having any time for self are symptoms of over-scheduling. Allow your child to have free play time. And, seek balance between outside activities and family time.

Too Little, Enough, Abundance, and Too Much

When you think about "things" for your child, try putting it onto a continuum from too little to too much. Too little is insufficiency. Enough is sufficiency. Abundance is occasional indulgence. Too much indicates overindulgence. Help your child learn how much is "enough."

To learn more about overindulgence, I recommend reading the research-based book, **How Much Is Enough?** (2004) by Jean Illsley Clarke, Connie Dawson, and David Bredehoft, published by Marlowe and Company.

Adapted from: Clarke, J., Dawson, C., & Bredehoft, D. (2004). *How much is enough?* New York: Marlowe & Company.

This document can be made available in alternative formats, such as large print, Braille, or audio tape, by contacting your county Extension office. (TTY 1-800-947-3529)

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