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Spoiled Rotten

Valorie L. Zonnefeld
Dordt College, valorie.zonnefeld@dordt.edu

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Abstract
Zonnefeld challenges parents to rethink giving children too much, whether material possessions or activities. She instead suggests that true love wisely holds back and urges parents to consider that helping children mature may equate to giving them less.

Keywords
child development, child rearing, parenting, overindulging, spoiling

Disciplines
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Comments
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I have three children who give daily evidence that my husband and I are less than perfect parents. We have the additional advantage of having a teenager who, like many other teens, is a self-proclaimed expert on parenting and regularly shares his tips and pointers. Despite my own failings and insecurities as a parent, I have become uncomfortable with the frequent praise I see in our society for overindulging children. My youngest child looks forward to the day when her older siblings are gone so she can “be spoiled,” as she puts it. She sees pampering as a positive experience and equates it with extra special treatment. Even more troubling are the bumper stickers, comics, T-shirts, and yard signs that tout the importance of grandparents spoiling children. While there are definitely times when special treatment can make a child understand how important and treasured she is, when special treatment becomes the norm, it loses its exceptional quality. These references to pampering children demonstrate a larger concern—that of our culture’s overindulgence of children, to their detriment.

As a child I remember envying my peers who were indulged. As classmates we knew who was spoiled and exactly why this was the case. One advantage of hindsight is that I now see the ways in which the parental coddling of some of my classmates left them ill prepared to be responsible adults. What may have seemed like an effort to protect and nurture actually led these students into some tough days as young adults. What amounted to a childish jealousy for me has turned into an appreciation for the discipline and moderation in which my parents reared me, even if I thought they were overly strict at the time.

WHAT DO WE LOSE?

We live in a culture of excess. Many of us have access to more wealth than we did while growing up. So what does it look like to raise children in this environment of material prosperity and cultural excess? Is it really that bad to provide our children with all of their needs and wants? Spoiled children are similar to rotten food. Fruit that receives too much of good resources, like sunlight, air, and heat, spoils and becomes rancid. In a similar sense, if our children receive too many good things, including praise, material possessions, independence, or assistance, they also spoil.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (m-w.com, 2013) defines spoil as “to impair the disposition or character of by overindulgence or excessive praise.” What if we swapped out “spoiling” in the popular slogan “Grandma’s the name, spoiling’s the game” with this definition: “Grandma’s the name, impairing dispositions and character by excessive indulgence is the game.” Is this really the legacy we want to leave for the children we love? I think not.

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Jean Illsley Clarke (2013) studies overindulgence and defines it as “giving too much of anything to a child so that it slows their learning and developmental tasks.” She outlines three forms of overindulgence: over-nurturing, soft structure, and giving too much.

Over-nurturing occurs when parents perform tasks their children are capable of doing themselves, including homework, household chores, problem solving, and interpersonal skills. The eventual result is adults unaware of how to clean, balance a checkbook, or book a plane ticket. Ironically, this parental protection prevents kids from becoming competent and decreases self-esteem when they see their peers capable of accomplishing such tasks. An example of this protection is the true story of a college freshman who, during an exam, asked whether he could step outside to call his mom so she could help him relax. Our task as parents is to work ourselves out of a job as our children competently take on responsibility for themselves. I suspect that cell phones have enabled and will continue to allow parents to “save the day” when, at times, it may be best for the child to internalize coping skills.

Soft structure refers to parents who set too lax a structure for their children or do not enforce the structures they have set in place. Boundaries are important for kids, who feel safe when they know their limits. Boundaries also perform an important role in protecting children from possible harm. My parents’ insistence that I not play in the street protected me from physical harm. Similarly, insisting that cell phones stay out of teens’ bedrooms allows young people to sleep without the temptation and interruption of social obligations.

Giving too much refers to both material possessions and activities. The human appetite for more is insatiable, and it is important to teach at an early age the difference between wanting one more luxury item (a toy, a movie) and needing a pair of shoes that fits. Similarly, some children are enrolled in so many activities that their schedules do not allow for downtime. Children, like adults, need downtime to not only recharge but to fuel creativity and exploration. We need to help our children make choices that meet their needs rather than indulging every request.

Clarke, along with her colleagues Bredehoft and Dawson, outlined ten risks of overindulgence on their website titled Raising Likeable, Responsible, Respectful Children in an Age of Overindulgence. Risks include self-centeredness, disrespectful attitudes, helplessness, confusion of wants and needs, entitlement, irresponsibility, ungratefulness, lack of self-control, problems with relationships, and distortion of personal goals.

The Bible speaks clearly about discipline through verses like Proverbs 23:13: “Do not withhold discipline from a child.” But what about the danger of materialistic excess? The beginning of this chapter gives a strong argument for material moderation: “Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint. Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone” (Proverbs 23:4–5). It is so tempting to indulge the children in our families, churches, and neighborhoods, but I challenge you to consider that true love wisely holds back.

WHAT DO WE LOSE?

What do our children lose when we overindulge them: work ethic, ingenuity, creativity, empathy, self-confidence, peace? We all want what is best for the children we care for. I challenge us as a Christian community to rethink when “the best” may equate to less. Think about a banana that has rotted from too much of a good thing; then resist giving your children too much, allowing them instead to mature, not spoil.

REFERENCES


Valorie Zonnefeld and her husband, Ryan, live in Sioux Center, Iowa, with their three children. Valorie teaches in the math department at Dordt College. The author asks that, should you spot her in public with her children, you please refrain from laughter—at least until you are out of earshot—over the irony of her writing an article on parenting while her child does (fill in the blank). Parenting certainly is a humbling task!