

THE PROBLEM WITH INDULGENCE

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We hear the term 'indulgence' bandied around a lot, but I don't think we realize that there are many forms in which it comes. We usually think of indulgence in relation to spoiling children by giving them way more stuff than they can possibly appreciate.

I am constantly astounded at the number of gifts that children get for Christmas and birthdays. I recall walking into a friend's home one Christmas and, without a word of a lie, the living-room floor was covered with Christmas gifts - approximately four feet out, and all the way around the tree. All of these gifts were for four adults and two children. I was absolutely appalled by the ridiculous amount of money that must have been spent on so few people.

There are many reasons why parents spend excessively. Some spend money in the mistaken belief that they are keeping their kids 'happy'. Many bow to pressure when their child says, "That's not fair!" John's parents bought him a new bike so I want one just like it." It is the 'keeping up with the Joneses' ploy.

Some parents try to create happiness by buying stuff for their kids to compensate for their own guilt, or perhaps because of a marriage breakup or lack of time spent with them. In the case of the Christmas tree story above, I am sure our friends were compensating for the fact that they had recently lost a son and their means of dealing with their grief was to lavish all their attention and money on the one daughter they had left – which then extended to all the family. One parent told me that he was going to spoil his kid rotten in compensation for the fact that he (the father) was given very little in his life. Here's the outcome of that theory. Spoil your kids rotten and you'll get rotten kids. Pity the school when that child arrives!

Some parents may over-compensate in other ways e.g. when one parent is indulgent the other often becomes the disciplinarian. It is very easy to want to 'love' the child, but not want to appear 'mean' by providing structure and discipline. Guess what? Kids want structure and discipline!

Making excuses for your child's inappropriate or negative behavior by saying such things as, "Oh, well! Boys will be boys", or, "Isn't that cute?" is indulgent. In doing so, the child grows up being unaware of what appropriate social behavior is. Giving in to kids' whining is indulgent. Allowing children to be disrespectful is indulgent. Sticking up for them when they are wrong is indulgent.

When my husband was a principal, a number of parents over the years came to the school yelling and cussing him out in front of their child without discussing the problem or even wanting to know the teacher's side of the story.

Even when it was proven the child was actually wrong, parents would often slam their way out of the school in anger. What was this type of behavior teaching their child? What the parent was actually saying was, "This is how you deal with authority!" It's the sort of indulgent behavior that has disastrous outcomes for the child.

Shielding a child from taking responsibility for his/her own actions is indulgent. We counseled a family whose son totaled four vehicles in quick succession. The parents kept replacing them. The teenager suffered no consequences for his own recklessness.

Indulging your children masks a number of issues. 'Stuff' does not bring lasting happiness. Neither does it replace what children really need, which is quality AND quantity time with parents. Being showered with lots of toys tends to lower the toys' value and kids will be less inclined to look after them. Giving in only changes the authority base from parent to child. Children will disrespect a parent who gives in. Kids want boundaries and clear expectations. Excusing negative behavior or sticking up for your children when they are wrong does not teach them the true meaning of right and wrong.

Not requiring your children to do chores around the house is a form of indulgence. When children are not required to help with family chores they can get the feeling that the world revolves around them and they usually acquire a selfish attitude. They do not develop an appreciation for team effort. When they have not been taught how to do chores, they are ill prepared for the real world when they leave home.

Indulgence has no positive outcomes. It gives a distorted view of life. It creates unreasonable expectations that those outside of the family cannot match. It does not prepare children for a healthy, balanced life ahead. One cure for indulgence is learning to say 'NO'. It is teaching children that not all their wants will be met, or that some things will not be approved because they are not aligned with the family's chosen and agreed upon values.

If you have any comments or questions on this subject, please do not hesitate to contact us at sally@forefrontfamilies.org. We invite you to also check out our website at www.forefrontfamilies.org and our blog site at www.forefrontfamilies.blogspot.com for further assistance.