

Santa Morn

A weekly look at events and programs for

How to detect overindulgence: The test of four

Guest Commentary

By Jean Illsley Clarke Ph.D.

Parents want to give it, their children want it, they both feel good about it, but what if they're overindulging? How can they tell? The research that supports the book "How Much is Enough? Everything You Need to Know to Steer Clear of Overindulgence and Raise Likable, Responsible, and Respectful Children" gives us four clues. A "yes" answer to any of the four questions indicates we better think carefully about overindulgence. A "yes" to all four screams "watch out, this is a risky situation!"

THE FIRST CLUE

Will doing or giving this interfere with, or slow down my child's learning what she needs to learn at this age? Finding out about child development can be a steep learning curve for someone whose last close contact with children was during his own childhood. But learn it we must, or we risk pushing the child to grow up too fast or teaching him to be incompetent by holding him back.

Does Hank know that surrounding his son with toys that do everything with the push of a button keeps his toddler from developing important hand and brain patterns that come from manipulating blocks, banging kitchen pans, stacking tubs, taking things apart and putting them back together hundreds of times?

Does Denise know that teaching money management skills to her school-age daughter implies that her daughter has an allowance that is not enough to buy everything she wants, and that Denise needs to insist that her daughter save some money every week, as well as put some aside for her religious institution or charity giving?

There are lots of ways Hank and Denise can learn about children's developmental tasks. They can use books, magazines, classes, or ask older parents. "How Much Is Enough?" also has simple descriptions that can be copied and put on your refrigerator for easy reference.

THE SECOND CLUE

Will giving this thing, activity or experience use a disproportionate amount of family resources on one or more of your children? Resources mean money, as in buying another expensive video game

when the credit cards weren't paid in full last month. It might mean space — will this set of drums take space the family needs for other uses? It could be time, as when driving this far and this often for a child's lessons means mother gives up her exercise program. Maybe supporting a particular activity takes more energy than dad has to give. Does this skew the family's attention so much toward one child that the other family members lack attention? What about psychic output? Will this activity be so demanding that the parents feel drained or worried? It is important for children to learn to take their places within the family system so that they receive support, but also understand that they are valued and contributing family members.

THE THIRD CLUE

Is this activity done more to please the parents than for the benefit of your child? Marcia insisted that her daughters be fashionably dressed in order to impress the mother's friends. Nathan sent his son to baseball summer camp because he, Nathan, had always wanted to play baseball. His son preferred the saxophone to the catcher's glove. Participants in the

research studies in the overindulgence project reported that their childhood overindulgence was

done to meet some need of their parents, not the child's need.

THE FOURTH CLUE

Does this situation potentially harm others, society, or the planet in some way? If yes, that is a signal it is overindulgence. Does Jason leave the water from the hose running the entire time he washes, dries and polishes the car? Does Mindy throw out a full bottle of shampoo because she just saw an add on TV that promised a new brand will make her hair look sexier?

TIPS FOR PARENTS:

- Practice using the test of four on situations that look like overindulgence to you.
- Attempt to let children learn new skills at their own pace. Teach them to do things that benefit the whole family.
- Be proud of your children for who they are and get your own needs met in the adult world.
- Teach children to be considerate of others and the environment.

(Jean Illsley Clarke Ph.D., Connie Dawson Ph.D., and David J. Bredehoff Ph.D. are co-authors of "How Much is Enough? Everything You Need to Know to Steer Clear of Overindulgence and Raise Likable, Responsible, and Respectful Children." Jean can be reached at jiconsults@aol.com. To read more about overindulgence go to www.overindulgence.info.)

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