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Family Focus

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Finding balance in parenting is always a challenge. You don't want to be too authoritarian or too permissive. Sometimes, of course, you may veer too much in one direction or the other, but then it's important to get back to aiming for the middle ground.

If you sometimes indulge your child a little too much, there's no problem. This is to be expected. However, if you find yourself catering too often or feel like you've lost control and authority, it's time to make a shift.

Here are more indications that you may be overindulging your child:

1) You are not trying to implement the concept of the family bed, but your child continues to come in at night and sleep in your bed. Or your child refuses at bedtime to sleep in his own bed, so you give up and let him sleep in yours.

Of course, children will need to come in at night to seek comfort and reassurance at times. Overindulging takes place when you allow this to become a regular, routine practice.

One client, "Amanda," a single mom of an 8-year-old son admitted that she always let "Josh" sleep in her bed because it was too hard to get him to stay in his own bedroom. He didn't have many nightmares or safety concerns; rather he just preferred to sleep in her bed with her. Amanda worried that she might inflict emotional distress if she rejected Josh when he wanted to be with her.

Josh had developed other issues, such as stealing candy and small toys from the local stores and lying to his mother, teachers and others in positions of authority. I suggested to his mother that some of these problems could start to resolve once she established healthy boundaries for Josh.

We worked on incentives for Josh to sleep through the night in his own bed and a new bedtime routine giving him a lot of his mom's attention before bed. Amanda needed to sacrifice sleep for a while in order to escort Josh back to his room several times per night. I encouraged her to have a sleeping bag and pillow available to put on the floor by the foot of her bed for very occasional emergencies when needed. It was important that the sleeping bag arrangement not be too comfortable and cozy.

After a period of time, with many failed attempts, Amanda was finally able to develop the new norm for Josh to sleep in his own bed. Then she went to work on the other ways in which she had been overindulging her child.

2) You provide too many toys and games when your child is young, and then too many new clothes, electronics, and a new car when your child is older.

When children are too indulged with material goods, they can lose sight of the value of what they have. The focus can become more on what they want next instead of being content and grateful with what they have. They can become too self-centered, entitled and demanding.

In addition, a parent can inadvertently condition a child so that he or she needs a new stimulus (i.e. toy or new clothes) in order to feel happy and satisfied. With each new object the desire for something new and exciting can grow, so that a child has difficulty being content with the smaller things in life.

As always, we parents serve as role-models for our children. If you shop often, in stores or online, and use "retail therapy" as a pick-me-up, you may be demonstrating to your children that purchasing and owning material goods is necessary for maintaining satisfaction in life.

It is relatively simple to make adjustments in this area, if need be. Your children will protest, of course, but if you are determined to change the direction of their focus, you can help them find other ways to achieve gratification.

They can donate their unused toys, games, and clothes to charity. They can set aside a portion of their

allowance or gift money to donate to a good cause. They can go with you to volunteer, or if they're older they can volunteer on their own. They can appreciate experiential time with family and friends more, doing simple things like playing games or going on a hike, so that spending time together becomes the big payoff. (We're not talking Disneyland and Hawaiian vacations here!)

Helping your children decrease dependence on objects for contentment and excitement, and instead providing them with a whole range of possibilities, is one of the biggest gifts you can give them.

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