

PARENTING: THE PITFALL OF INDULGENCE

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Parenting in the 21st century is perhaps more difficult than it has ever been. The influences that our children are exposed to are diverse and many are not life enhancing. Peer pressure pushes for behaviors that a few generations ago would never have occurred in our wildest imagination. Standards of conduct for kids have changed dramatically, make parenting all the more difficult. I can remember on the last day of school when I graduated from high school, we seniors only had to show up to pick up our report cards. One of the guys showed up wearing Bermuda shorts and got sent home to change and threatened with not being allowed to participate in graduation! Yep, things have changed, and parenting is harder.

A part of what has fueled that change is the increase in the number of families that are affluent. While affluence isn't a bad thing *per se*, it can actually make parenting harder, believe it or not. Again, to go back a hundred years or so to my childhood, if we wanted to play softball or football, it meant grabbing up the neighborhood kids, walking a few blocks to the playground or school yard, choosing sides, making up some rules to fit the number of players we had and going for it. There were no parents involved. No coaches. No carpooling to practice. No out of town games to get to. Just a pick up game and a few hours of fun. If anybody was in control of what we were doing it was us, and maybe the person who owned the ball we were using.

As many of you readers know, today sports are very organized and require a lot of parental involvement. Again, that's not a bad thing on the face of it, but it can get out of control. The cost in money, time and lost family together time is often considerable. And now and then, I've noticed the kids lose their enthusiasm for the venture before the parents do. And I've also noticed, that it usually is just not one team, but several sports, music lessons and multiple other structured activities. Not just for one child either, but for several at the same time. Every body is run ragged in getting every body to every thing. Something is wrong with this picture.

Usually when parents talk with me about this, I hear they are just trying to provide for their kids what they didn't have themselves. The motive is to "give the kids every opportunity." At one level that's to be commended, but it can easily get out of control. A common problem for couples who see me professionally that involves their kids is the amount of money they spend on the kids and the amount of stuff (read: video games, computers, and more) the kids have. The parents either disagree over how much is enough, or they feel trapped in trying to set limits for their kids, especially when they hear their kids say, "but so-and-so has one" or "so-and-so gets to do that."

I think it's great that many in this generation can provide more opportunities and more "stuff" for their kids than past generations. On the other hand, I would plead for better decision making about this. Here are a couple of things to consider:

- **Do you want the kid to have something or be involved in something more than the kid does?** This is a clear warning sign that you are dealing with your own needs rather than the child's. Maybe you are trying to keep up with the pressure out there

to provide all we can to our children. Maybe you are working through some of your own childhood disappointments. Whether it's these things or something else, rethink your decision.

- **The child doesn't take care of what you give him/her.** This might be clothes, toys, equipment or the like that are abused, lost, or simply not cared for. This is pretty clear evidence that the child doesn't understand the value of the item. If your response is to fuss and then replace the item, the child is probably being over indulged. Rather than helping the child learn to be responsible, you may be teaching the child to be irresponsible. If your child doesn't take care of things, develop an agreement in which he/she understands how something is to be maintained and what the consequences are for not maintaining it. For example, if the child leaves a toy on the floor and it gets broken, you don't replace it, the child does using allowances or other of his/her money. If the child chooses to do without the thing, that's OK too.
- **Require some chores for which there is no allowance or pay.** I'm OK with giving kids a reasonable allowance. This can be a good way to help them learn to be responsible with money. I'm OK with occasionally paying them for special tasks, like helping clean out the attic. However, as one of the requirements of living in this nice home, everybody has certain things they are to do on a regular basis. In the same way that dad may take care of the cars and mom may do the cooking, tasks *for which they are not paid*, children should do things like take out the trash, yard work, and the like, for which they are not paid. The principle is: it takes a lot of work to have our house be nice and since it is *our* house, we all have a part of the responsibility. Scale the tasks to the child's age and ability, and then expect and require compliance.

Rearing children is always hard. Consider looking at how you as parents may be making it harder than it needs to be and then consider making some small changes that can have big benefits.