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Family Focus

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There is often a fine line between loving parenting and indulgent parenting. Because so many parents have wonderful intentions and are highly motivated, sometimes they may overlook how much they are actually doing for their children.

Here are a few more signs that you may be over-indulging your children:

1) You have abandoned date nights with your spouse or partner and most other social activities that don't involve the whole family. Your life revolves around your children.

Yes, this is a personal preference and one that does not necessarily cause any harm. But sometimes it can. If couples don't commit to spending time with each other away from their children, they run the risk of losing their personal connection with each other. Instead, they may become enmeshed in their roles as mom and dad in the family.

Not only do you not experience the positive elements that brought you together in the first place - perhaps a sense of fun and adventure, or shared interests apart from your family, or solid communication, or all of these - but you also demonstrate to your children that they are the prime people in your lives, and not each other. Or the family is the primary entity, and not the adult partners.

In addition, not devoting special time to your spouse or partner may have an adverse effect the emotional health of your children. You and your significant other will consistently subordinate your own needs and feelings to those of your children. In this way, the children are the central figures in the family in a heightened way. Of course children benefit from feeling very integral and significant to their parents. However, too much of a good thing can cause children to have an inflated sense of their own importance. And later on, they may well have expectations that others in their lives will cater to their needs as well.

One couple I worked with had varying views on the issue of making time for one's partner. "Sam" felt alienated from his wife of 12 years, and initiated couples therapy. He frequently suggested going out to dinner or a concert so they could spend time together alone. They even had a built-in babysitter because his wife's sister was living with them. "Maura," Sam's wife, stayed home with their two young children who were in first and third grades. She resisted Sam's efforts to have couples time, and was quite content to limit their time together to shared family activities. Naturally, Sam felt quite hurt and rejected.

It's always interesting to see why people react the way they do. Neither of Maura's parents had spent much time with her and her sister while they were growing up. They were constantly working and socializing and didn't pay much attention to their children. As children, Maura and her sister had a retinue of babysitters. In therapy, Maura was able to realize that lavishing attention on her own children was her way of dealing with the hurt she had experienced in childhood. She also realized that she was unconsciously guarding against repeating the hurtful pattern she had experienced with her own parents. She had often felt abandoned and didn't want her children to experience this.

Happily, once Maura recognized what was holding her back from going out with her husband, she willingly planned and participated in regular dates together.

2) If your child is slightly unhappy or bored, you take it upon yourself to "fix it" instead of letting him or her learn how to resolve the situation themselves.

Naturally, if your child is very unhappy you will want to help him or her through it as best you can. But when the inevitable happens, and your child (over the age of 3 or 4) is just mildly dissatisfied and bored, this is an opportunity for him to learn how to help himself. Not only will he achieve more satisfaction and self-confidence while learning to solve his own problem, but he will also potentially be happier for doing so. He will know that he has the ability to help himself at these times so they won't feel so daunting to him.

If you feel guilty or responsible when your child is unhappy or bored, try to use these times as learning

experiences for you both. Make only a few casual suggestions, along with a calm message that you know he'll figure out what he can do. Then, after you see results of his ability to self-direct, you can provide positive reinforcement by praising his efforts.

3) You don't assign your child regular chores.

Giving children household chores at an early age helps to build a lasting sense of mastery, responsibility and self-reliance, according to research by Marty Rossmann, professor emeritus at the University of Minnesota.

Chores also teach children how to be empathetic and responsive to others' needs. One essential component of selecting possible chores for your child is to be sure some are family-based, such as vacuuming the living room or doing everyone's dishes. It's not enough for your child to just take care of her own room or laundry, for example; in order to build a sense of caring and empathy she needs to help others as well as herself.

Let your child select which jobs she wants to perform from a list you create (then vary them over time if she wants), and try to avoid tying chores to punishment or monetary payoffs. The more matter-of-fact you can be about the message, "We all do chores and help each other," the better.

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