

# Be careful not to overindulge children this holiday

**My husband and I want to give our children the things we didn't have when we grew up, especially during the holidays. How can we tell if we're going overboard?**

Your question isn't unusual. Many parents express confusion between healthful, nurturing parental behavior and being overindulgent. The difference is key: Nurturing behavior leads to self-reliance, high self-esteem, and a healthy relationship between parents and children, while overindulgent behavior breeds self-centeredness and immaturity in children.

A 1998 study in the *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences Education* offers insight into telling the difference: Nurturing behavior combines unconditional love with healthy doses of structure, limits, boundaries and expectations, while overindulgence includes:

- Inundating children with family resources, including material things, time or experiences, at developmentally inappropriate times.
- Having few or no consistent expectations that children will perform household chores, complete tasks, learn skills appropriate to their age group, or take other responsibilities.
- Allowing children too many privileges or to dominate family life.

Interestingly, overindulgent behavior stems from parents' needs to feel competent or good about what they can do for their children, not their children's developmental needs. Adults who described themselves as being overindulged as children reported both feeling loved



as a child, but also confused about expectations, and embarrassed that they never learned skills they should have learned as children.

The study's authors, who also help manage a Web site (<http://www.overindulgence.info>) said overindulgence can have long-lasting effects: It appears to affect communication and relationship skills, decision-making, and time management abilities into adulthood.

So, what can you do? First, take a step back and examine the day-to-day expectations you have for your children. Do you have reasonable rules that are consistently enforced? Do you resist stepping in to "help" your children complete tasks? Do they have chores that allow them to act as contributing members of the family? Do they have limits on their freedom that are lifted as their age and experience merit?

As for gift-giving, first decide what your budget can afford and don't go over that limit. Then, review basic premises of overindulgence: Are you giving your children gifts so you feel good, rather than what's appropriate for them? Do you have few or no expectations that your children will give, as well as receive gifts? Is the entire focus of the holiday dominated by the children? If the answer to any of these is "yes," it's time to refocus -- put less emphasis on the children's gifts, and more on family traditions and activities.

*Family Fundamentals* is a monthly column on family issues. It is a service of Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to *Family Fundamentals*, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1044, or [f Filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu](mailto:f Filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu).



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By Martha Filipic  
(614) 292-9833  
[f Filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu](mailto:f Filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu)

**Dear Subscriber:** This column was reviewed by Melinda Hill, Extension educator for Ohio State University Extension in family and consumer sciences in Wayne County.

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**Section of Communications  
and Technology  
News and Media Relations**  
2021 Coffey Road  
Columbus, OH 43210-1044  
(614) 292-2011

208 Research Services  
Building  
1680 Madison Ave.  
Wooster, OH 44691-4096  
(330) 263-3780

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