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Typical mother/daughter conflict

photo by Chris Fritchie

## The Age of Indulgence

By Kathryn MacDonell

**PARENTING IS LIKE** charting a course across the ocean. If the wind is right and you hold a steady course, you'll arrive at port and all will be well. But if your child gets hold of the wheel, you're in for a rocky ride. You could be set adrift or worse yet, sink. Is it time to take back the controls and steer a steady course for home?

Dr. Dan Kindlon comes to the rescue, as a navigator in rough parenting waters. With more than 20 years of clinical practice, he lectures widely to groups of parents, educators and mental health professionals. He is an expert in child development from Harvard University. Dr. Kindlon is the author of four books including the 1999 New York Times bestseller *Raising Cain*; *Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*, *Alpha Girls: Understanding the New American Girl* and *How She is Changing the World*; *Tough Times, Strong Children*; and, *Too Much of a*

*Good Thing: Raising Children of Character in an Indulgent Age.*

In *Too Much of a Good Thing*, Dr. Kindlon wakes us up to today's sad reality, "Well-meaning parents end up hurting their kids by giving them too much: too much money, too many toys, too much leeway in behavior, too much help and too often unrealistic expectations for performing in school or on the soccer field."

I'm one of the guilty. Guilty of doing too much, giving too much and expecting too little. But I did it for the best of reasons; because I want my kids to be happy and live a good life, an easy life. I'm discovering that indulging my children isn't necessarily the route to a happy, carefree life; not for them and not for the parents. That sinking heart sensation tipped me off. I wasn't doing my best when I gave in because I was tired or because it was easier than listening to whining (when my kids were younger)

and arguing (now that they're teens). I had a sneaking suspicion that indulging my kids was depriving them of the chance to learn important life skills. Dr. Kindlon's impressive research in *Too Much of a Good Thing* proves it.

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He headed up the Parenting Practices at the Millennium Study (PPM) that focused on advantaged kids from middle- and above-income families. The

interviewers questioned 654 teenagers across the country, surveyed 1078 parents of kids between the ages of 4 and 19, and conducted 50 interviews with parents, teachers, teenagers, counselors, therapists and school administrators.

In addition, Dr. Kindlon extensively reviewed previous studies on privileged families and their children. The startling results confirm parents today are indulging kids at a great risk to their happiness and development.

“What we want for our children is a perfect life, devoid of hardship and pain,” Dr. Kindlon states. “But their

happiness as adults is largely dependent on the tools we give them, tools that will allow them to develop emotional maturity: to be honest with themselves, to be empathetic, to take initiative, to delay gratification, to learn from failure and move on, to accept their flaws and to face the consequences when they’ve done something wrong.”

Dr. Kindlon also found that about 90 percent of parents weren’t happy with their parenting skills. That’s a relief – I thought I was the only one! Parenting is slippery business, just when you think you’ve got it figured out the tides change. The first step in raising kids who aren’t over-indulged is to ask yourself some of the hard questions, so you have a clear understanding of your parenting style.

### WHY DO WE INDULGE?

We want to give our kids opportunities and things we didn’t have. This is the age-old stance in parenting. In our desire to help our children develop to their fullest potential, we are often overindulgent. We give them too much too soon and hinder their development. Parents with the best intentions of making their children happy actually increase the chance that their children will be depressed.

The origins of indulgence come from within us. We overprotect and over

manage our kids’ lives and focus on achievement and success. If they fail, we think we’ve failed. Making mistakes is hard and life can be disappointing; we want to cushion our children from anything that makes them uncomfortable. Parents

today bend over backward to make sure their kids are comfortable. We cocoon them long after the infant stage to protect them from discomfort.

### WHAT ARE WE AFRAID OF?

We’re afraid our children won’t love us. We want them to like us and be our friend. It seems simple, but it’s true. We’re afraid

to exert our authority for fear our offspring will be emotionally scarred if their requests aren’t met. Children know how to give us the cold shoulder and they know our weak spots. We seek their approval and shower them with “love,” so they’ll love us back. Our children are the physical extension of us and too often we indulge our own unfulfilled lives and dreams in them. And, there’s a darker fear – contemporary parents fear being too much like our own parents.

“It’s important to distinguish between when we are parenting our kids and when we are re-parenting ourselves as children,” Dr. Kindlon asserts.

### WHAT’S WRONG WITH INDULGING?

Children who have it too easy are at risk. Dr. Kindlon found disturbingly high incidences of anxiety and depression in children from affluent families whose lives focused mainly on competition and winning. Parents have to be aware of these forms of indulgence and act as the safety net to rescue kids when they are at risk.

Dr. Kindlon observed seven forms of risky behavior, which he named the Seven Syndromes of Indulgence. You may recognize your child and wish to read

Dan Kindlon’s book for more details about each syndrome.

- Self-centeredness
- Anger
- Obsessive ambition
- Lack of motivation
- Eating Disorders
- Self-control problems
- Spoiled behavior

These are not qualities that will see our children through tough times. We can’t buy them emotional maturity and strength – they have to earn it by learning from their mistakes. Pay close attention to how compassionate your children are. Are they honest with themselves and others? Do they realize they live in a privileged world? Do they appreciate what they have?

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### HOW CAN WE STOP?

Say ‘No’ instead of ‘Yes.’ Kids need to learn to say ‘No’ in risky situations, such as being offered drugs or being pressured into early sex. We have to be the role model and help them learn ‘No’ at home. Setting limits is good for kids and so is having consequences for breaking those limits. Children need some degree of hardship, challenge and discipline to learn some of the hard lessons in life, so they become responsible, compassionate and accountable. Dr. Kindlon recommends:

1. Choose one limit on which you and your partner can be consistent.
2. Determine the punishment if it isn’t followed.
3. Discuss it with your kids, listen to their opinions, but remember the final word belongs to the parents.

By talking to your kids about setting limits, the value of making mistakes,



Dr. Dan Kindlon & his book, *Too Much of a Good Thing*  
photos provided by Dr. Dan Kindlon





*Entertainment wins over homework every time*  
photo by Chris Frütchie

It can cause discomfort, even anger, but it tells children we care enough about them to hold the line and protect them from risky situations. And caring is the active interest we show and participation we take in whatever interests our kids have. It means listening enthusiastically to them talk about their latest obsession with a sports or music figure, or the boy or girl at school, even if it bores you. Find out who your kids really are and what they think.

Parents need to update TLC to include time, limits and caring. Investing time means being present with your kids.

#### TOGETHERNESS MATTERS

Rituals such as eating dinner and attending religious services as a family make a world of difference. These activities give children a sense of belonging and a healthy sense of self. With hectic extracurricular activities scheduled over the dinner hour, mealtimes today are often on-the-run fast food and in-the-car. Striving to make mealtimes and church frequent family events is worth the effort. Dr. Kindlon's research confirms these types of activities result in children who are "less depressed, less permissive about sex, less likely to use drugs and more likely to work to their intellectual potential."

As parents, we want the best of both worlds for our children: the emotional closeness and the ability to set limits. Our children's happiness depends on the tools we give them. By taking responsibility for their actions, they'll gain the inner wisdom they need to navigate the world.

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delaying gratification and dealing with boredom, you'll strengthen their characters rather than hinder them.

#### HOW TO PARENT WELL

We have a hard time being both a friend and a parent. The most difficult parenting challenge is knowing when to back off and when to push. The tricky task is teaching kids commitment through close supervision (and yes, nagging), then getting out of the way to let them master something on their own. You can help them do the research for their paper; just don't write it for them. Find a balance between being over-involved and under-involved.

Beware of the obstacles on your own path and avoid them whenever you can. Get enough sleep so you can maintain an even keel. Balance your world – and set your priorities firmly on the horizon with work and family obligations. Avoid

falling into the "too much to do with too little time" scenario. Develop your good "inner parent" so you can stay healthy along the journey.

#### TLC

We think of TLC as the trio of tender, loving care – essential components for healthy, happy offspring. Positive reinforcement is a tried and true technique in changing behavior. But alongside those ingredients, we need more to ensure our children form the strong characters the world requires of them. Parents need to update TLC to include time, limits and caring. Investing time means being present with your kids, hanging out so you are comfortable just being together rather than always doing. For bigger families spending one-on-one time with each child (a regular date) is vital, so they feel important. Setting limits often means saying "No."