

## Helping the Helpless Child

Brian Smith's broken leg means there are some things this second grader can't do for a while. But the Smiths expect their seven-year-old to do the things he can do. They don't want him to become helpless.

Jana Smith's severe allergies could be life threatening, but the Smiths are carefully teaching their 10-year-old to protect herself. They want her to live a normal life and not to act helpless.

Good work so far. No overindulgence there. But how come they don't see what they are doing to nearly teenage Catlin? Bright, articulate, attractive, healthy Catlin. Catlin, who needs so much comforting. Mother Smith, who understands the importance of not letting Brian and Jana become helpless over physical infirmities, doesn't seem to realize that emotional strength and resilience are equally important.

Catlin finds life hard. Every evening she tells her mother about the travails of the school day. "A girl I don't even know made fun of my jeans" Or, "I didn't like my lunch." Or, "It's too far between classes." Mother, ever ready to respond to a needy tone of voice and a dejected posture, comforts in as many ways as needed to elicit a weak, "Thanks, Mom."

Meanwhile, Brian and Jana are taking care of themselves, and criticizing Catlin for being a crybaby and a wuss. Mother glares at them and applies more comfort to poor helpless Catlin.

When the children get home from a family day at the beach, Brian and Jana go about putting their gear away and come into the kitchen looking for food. Catlin, who dropped her beach bag on the floor, is softly moaning, "Tired, tired," her head on the counter. Mother Smith has already provided a glass of lemonade and is rubbing Catlin's back and crooning, "What can I get for you?" Mother continues to pet Catlin while she directs the other two children to the refrigerator. Meanwhile, the muffled moaning continues, "Oh, oh, I'm so tired." Later the family is playing cards. Catlin, miraculously recovered from the day at the beach, goes all helpless and needy when they aren't all playing the exact game she wants, and Mother comforts her.

It's easy for an outsider to see that things are out of balance in the Smith family. The parents are missing the problems of helplessness Catlin has developed, and her manipulations. An observant and caring friend, after complimenting the mom on the fine job she is doing with Brian and Jana, casually says, "I've been wondering about all the comforting Catlin gets." Mom Smith responds quickly, "My mother didn't comfort me and I'm making sure that Catlin gets all the comforting she wants." Ah, yes, overindulging by giving our children too much of what we didn't get enough of. This is the tricky thing about overindulgence. It comes from a good heart. Poor Mom Smith, with good intent, is encouraging helplessness and manipulation in a child who should be learning the internal resources to take care of herself.

Mom could have said, "Looks as if you found the day too tiring. Next time we go to the beach we'll have you only stay half of the day. Pick up your gear, and go rest in your room until it's time for you to set the table."

Results of the Overindulgence Research Studies indicate that doing things for a child that she should be doing for herself has a negative impact on her adult life. When Mom decides to get her own needs met directly and replaces the over-comforting with support and skill-building, Catlin will have the chance to play catch-up and become strong instead of helpless.

[You can read more about the results of overindulging children in the \*How Much is Enough? Everything You Need to Know to Steer Clear of Overindulgence and Raise Likeable, Responsible, and Respectful Children\* by Jean Illsley Clarke, Connie Dawson, and David Bredehoft, Da Capo Press, 2004.](#)