

Mold the Perfect Child

The recipe is more discipline and far fewer toys, says this behavioral scientist



JR. ACHIEVEMENT
Overindulgence
creates unhappy kids.

Dads want the very best for their children, but often they go overboard in their ambition and get it very, very wrong, argues David J. Bredehoft, Ph.D., chairman of the department of social and behavioral sciences at Concordia University, in St. Paul, Minnesota. "Parents who spoil their kids mean well, but they just give too much: too much stuff or too much love or too much freedom," says the coauthor of *How Much Is Enough?*, a book about balancing love and discipline. "Spoiling our children doesn't make them happy; it makes them very unhappy." Kids who are well-rounded and content have parents who are firm but democratic, says Dr. Bredehoft.

BEST LIFE Everybody spoils their kids to an extent. Is it really a problem?

DAVID BREDEHOFT It's a huge problem, because overindulged kids don't learn many of the life skills they need to become fully functioning, happy adults. They tend to have an increased sense of self-importance, while at the same time, they have money-management issues, relationship problems, poor conflict-resolution skills, trouble taking responsibility for their actions, and problems making decisions. And it's cyclical: When an overindulged child becomes a parent, he believes that he can't control his kid's behavior and that he's not responsible for it. He feels incompetent as a parent because he lacks the skills to parent effectively.

BL What's the worst way to spoil a child?

DB The biggest problem seems to be over-nurture, which is when parents give their children too much attention and do things for them that the kids should be doing for themselves. For instance, parents are not only signing their college-age kids up for classes, but also sitting in on interviews their children have with recruiters. The other type of overindulgence is soft structure, when parents don't have rules or don't enforce rules, such as a curfew, and don't allow the kids to learn skills by doing chores.

BL How can a dad know if he's spoiling his children, and what can he do?

DB He should ask himself four questions: (1) Does what I'm doing interfere with my child's development? (2) Does it cause a disproportionate amount of family resources (money, time, attention) to be spent on one or more of my kids? (3) Am I doing it to benefit me, the adult, more than my child? (4) Could it potentially harm my child or others, including myself? Any "yes" answer suggests he may need to make some changes: Put a time limit on TV. Make the child pick up his room instead of doing it for him. Establish rules for how things will be dealt with, rules that have consequences. A balance between structure and discipline is the key to turning out a well-adjusted person who can handle life's challenges. **SARA WELLS**