



Giving to Children

When Is Too Much Not Enough?

By Bob Kenny

As a parent, I have two fundamental concerns about giving to my adolescent son. First, I worry about not giving him enough and disappointing him. Second, I worry about giving him too much and spoiling him or inhibiting his motivation.

I don't like to see my son disappointed—or the look on his face when it happens. It is especially hard when I think I could have prevented it. Of course, I know he will survive, and I understand that there will be times in life when he will be disappointed. I just don't want to be the one to do it.

results of a research study that Dr. Kindlon and his colleagues at Harvard University conducted on children and parents from affluent and wealthy homes. (Most of the participants were upper middle class; some were wealthy, and some were very wealthy.) The researchers asked more than 600 adolescents, and a thousand of their parents, questions about their lives. They asked if the children were happy, how they got along with their parents, what kinds of things they owned, and what was required of them by their parents.

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I also know that not wanting to disappoint my son is more about me than it is about him. Still, I want him to have everything he needs to reach his potential, so he can make a great contribution to the world. If he wants one more video game, what harm could that do? And isn't everyone getting the \$65 jeans from A&F?

Recently, I came across a book entitled, *Too Much of a Good Thing: Raising Children of Character in an Indulgent Age*, by Dr. Dan Kindlon (Miramax, 2003). The book discusses the

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Approximately 60% of the parents surveyed admitted that their children were spoiled. Even more interesting, the children agreed. The researchers also found that alcohol and drug use is common among affluent adolescents, as is depression and anxiety. Around 60% of the kids had used tobacco, alcohol, or other illegal drugs during the previous month. Forty percent of the teenagers from affluent and wealthy homes reported that they considered themselves to be seriously depressed, but very few parents thought their children were depressed.

I found these findings intriguing, so I telephoned Dr. Kindlon to discuss them. During our conversation, I realized that the problems found among affluent adolescents are caused neither by the affluence itself, nor by giving our children too much. It seems, as Dr. Kindlon suggests, that the problems of affluent children occur because we do not give enough. Dr. Kindlon says that we need to give our children more of three things: more time, more limits, and more care. TLC. What children want most from adults is their presence, not their presents. Children like getting gifts, but being with people who care about them means the most.

Sometimes I think we give our children too much of the wrong things and not enough of the right things because we are using our children's happiness to make *us* happy. As Dr. Kindlon says, "It's kind of a children-as-Prozac phenomenon." This makes us reluctant to be strict or set limits here and now. After all, we don't want to disappoint them. But we have to determine: Do we want them to be happy right now at this moment or do we want to give them the tools to have a long and happy life? The two choices sometimes conflict, and, unfortunately, the necessity of choosing happens not once, but every day. We need to make that decision again and again.

I wondered how other parents do it, so I asked Dr. Kindlon, "Were there any happy kids in your study? And if so, how were they different from their unhappy peers?"

"We did find some happy kids," he answered, "and there were some common factors that distinguished them: (1) Their families frequently ate dinner together, (2) They had to keep their room clean, (3) They weren't allowed to have a phone in their room, (4) They regularly did community service. I am not saying that the factors are causal, but they did seem to stand out as common factors in happy kids."

It makes sense. It takes a lot of effort to coordinate dinner together (to give the time), to see that the children take care of their room (to give limits and expectations), and to encourage service to the community (to give the gift of caring). When we give to our children in this way, we are teaching them to give as well, both at home and in the community. We are in fact creating a pattern of giving that counters the syndrome of indulgence.

It isn't easy, it isn't quick, and often, there is no immediate apparent result. But we can't give up. Research clearly shows that when we give our children time, limits, and the opportunity to care, we give them a gift that lasts for years to come. ■