

# un-spoil your kid

Of course you want to make your children happy. But you also want to raise future adults who are appreciative and grateful. Find the perfect balance with our expert tips.

by DENISE SCHIPANI photographs by STEPHANIE RAUSSER

**C**hristina Ali admits that her son Issac, 7, is pampered. And she knows exactly why: When Issac was in kindergarten, Ali, who lives in Cooperstown, Pennsylvania, was attending college full-time while also taking care of her twin fifth-graders. Stretched too thin, she slowly began indulging Issac's every wish in an effort to avoid his inevitable tantrums. But his behavior can be out of control. "At the store, he always has to get Matchbox cars or he'll whine or scream. At home we have to cook a separate meal for him, not what everyone else in the family is having," she says. The result: Issac is overindulged and self-centered—and Ali feels responsible. "I realize now

that I shouldn't have given in so often, but I was exhausted and simply trying to salvage my sanity," she says.

Parents cave for all sorts of well-intentioned reasons. We like to please our kids and create happy memories. We want trips to stores and restaurants to be pleasant and hassle-free. Plus, giving in is a lot easier than saying no. Many moms and dads also feel guilty for the time they spend away from their children, whether due to work, the need to run errands, or (heaven forbid) the opportunity to socialize with other adults. It's understandable: "When you only have a few hours a day to be with your kids, you don't want to ruin the fun," says Louis J. Lichtman, Ph.D., author of *A Practical Guide for Raising a Self-Directed and Caring Child*.

Although there's nothing wrong with buying your kid an occasional small toy during a supermarket run or taking him to the zoo as a special treat, you raise the risk of creating a spoiled brat if you do these things in response to his incessant pleading. Your job is to reinforce good behavior, not bad.

But too often things go the other way. In a *Parents* poll, 42 percent of readers admitted that their child is spoiled and 80 percent think spoiling kids now will affect them in the long term. "You do your kids a terrible disservice if they go out into the world thinking it revolves around them," says Dr. Lichtman. If your child acts entitled, it's not too late to reverse this behavior with the help of these attitude-adjusting tactics.

### Avoid apologizing for disappointments.

"I'm sorry" has its place in family life, for example, when you lose your temper or accidentally throw away your child's precious artwork. But there's no need to be remorseful about not being able to

## The reason kids have meltdowns is that success

## Don't engage the behavior and it will stop ... eventually.

buy her pricey boots that aren't in your budget or putting off a trip to the park because you have to cook dinner.

It's beneficial to empathize with her disappointment, since doing so shows that you respect her feelings. Just don't harp on what caused it ("I know you're sad that we can't visit the playground, but we don't have time today; we'll go another time"). "Helping a child accept that she won't get everything she wants is an important life lesson," notes Karen Ruskin, Psy.D., a family therapist in Sharon, Massachusetts. (That said, if you promised her a playground visit and can no longer swing it, you should express regret for the change of plans.)

If your 6-year-old remains determined to get those Uggs, say something like, "Yes, those are awesome boots. What do you think about teaming up on this one? Here's what I'm willing to pay toward them; you can save for the rest." This gives her some control over the decision and lets her know that she needs to earn special things rather than simply be given them.

### Don't debate your house rules.

If my husband and I left it up to Daniel, 9, and James, 7, we'd never attend church. Instead of debating why we go, I simply say, "This is what we do together as a family." Endless bickering is pointless since the outcome is predetermined. Plus, I don't want my boys to argue about other house rules, such as wearing their bike helmets or clearing their breakfast plates. "Your kids

have the right to be disappointed or upset when they don't get their way, but you shouldn't engage them in a verbal back-and-forth," says Amy McCready, author of *If I Have to Tell You One More Time... The Revolutionary Program That Gets Your Kids to Listen Without Nagging, Reminding, or Yelling*.

### Manage meltdowns.

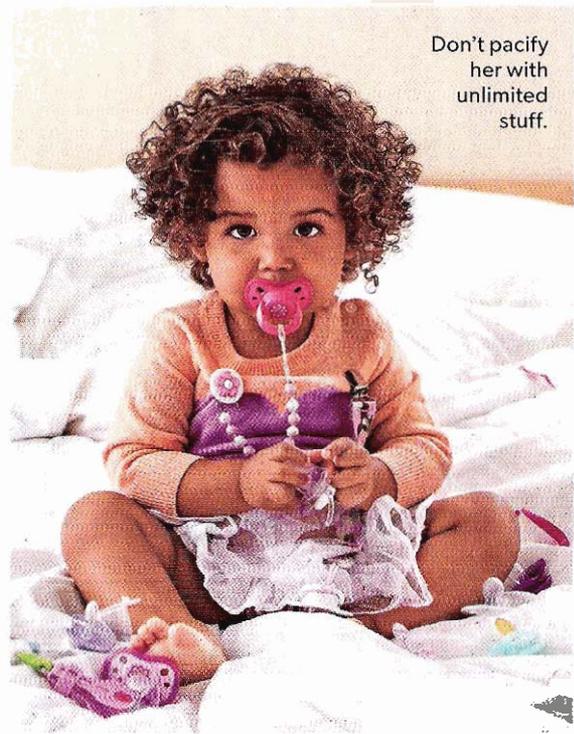
More than once on her shopping trips, Mary Austin, of Lincoln, Nebraska, has had to dash down the baby-care aisle, tear open a package of pacifiers, and hand them to her two girls to stop their screeching. To Austin, buying extra Binkies was a small price to pay for doing her errands in peace. But pay she did—by teaching Kandi, then 4, and Mackaly, then 3, that crying got them exactly what they wanted.

No parent likes listening to a tantrum, whether it's from a child who refuses to leave a playdate or an 8-year-old who slams her door over your refusal to buy her a cell phone. But giving in is far worse. The main reason a kid will continue to have meltdowns is that they're successful. Don't engage the behavior and it will stop ... eventually. If you're home, simply ignore it (as long as your child is not in danger of hurting herself or others), suggests McCready. While you need to keep an eye on your tantruming child in a public place, giving the behavior too much attention virtually guarantees a repeat performance. Instead, calmly take your child to the car where she can finish, as Austin learned to do. When kids realize that you won't be manipulated when they make a scene, they're less likely to try that tactic in the future.

### Teach your kids the lost art of patience.

Spoiled kids feel entitled not only to get the things they want but to get them immediately. We live in a touch-screen world of instant gratification. You can reach someone via text in seconds.

Don't pacify her with unlimited stuff.





The more toys you buy him, the less he may value the ones he has.

Almost any question they ask can be answered with a quick Google search. Thanks to Skype, your child can “see” Grandma anytime she wants. These technologies cause kids to develop unrealistic expectations about getting what they want when they want it, says Dr. Ruskin. (One reason for this may be that they see you getting impatient waiting for, say, a page to load or a text to be returned.) And since many requests—for stickers, collectibles, sweets—offer easy ways to bring a smile to their face, we tend to say yes more often than we should. But doing so won’t help your child learn to be patient or discriminating.

Refusing or at least holding off on indulgences will help your child develop self-discipline and allow him to place a higher value on the things he receives. Dr. Lichtman recalls that after his then 5-year-old daughter began getting an allowance, he didn’t buy her a balloon at the street fair that year. “I said, ‘If you really want one, you

can use your own money.’” She wound up using her cash for something else.

It’s critical to teach your kids restraint by example as well. Look for opportunities for them to see you waiting for the things you want. If you see a pair of jeans at the mall that you decide not to buy, for instance, let your child know why (“They fit well, but my old jeans still look good” or “I’ll wait until they go on sale”).

### Give encouragement instead of gifts.

My son Daniel is far from the best soccer player on his team. He enjoys the camaraderie and postgame snack as much as the games. So when he assisted on a goal last season, I almost bought him something special to mark the occasion. I’m glad I didn’t make that mistake. He got ample payoff from reading about the “great goal-winning pass by Daniel in the second quarter” in the coach’s weekly e-mail of game highlights. “A child who receives

compensation for every little accomplishment will start to lose his natural drive to excel at things,” says McCready. By contrast, specific praise (“You’ve worked hard on your passing, and it paid off in today’s match”) will stick with your child a lot longer and boost his motivation.

That said, there’s nothing wrong with acknowledging your child’s achievement, whether it’s for a great effort in building a block tower or a positive report card. As long as you label your treat a celebration rather than a reward, letting him pick his favorite place for dinner or enjoy an ice-cream sundae with his buddies won’t spoil him. Promise. ☺

### get more!

Are you a spoiler? Our quiz will tell you if you give in to your kids’ wishes too often or have the right touch with discipline. Take it at [parents.com/spoiler](http://parents.com/spoiler).