



# What is Enough? A Guide for Today's Parents

by Suzita Cochran, Ph.D.

## Introduction

Some might call me hypervigilant. I like to think I'm good at noticing the world around me. As a clinical psychologist I was further trained to observe, from small details about a child, to larger trends in a parent's experiences. As a mom of two boys and a girl, ages thirteen, eleven, and eight, it's often a different story. I count myself lucky if I notice it's time again for dentist appointments or swimming lessons.

In my life, the psychologist part came before the parent part. The first thing I realized as a parent was that all those psychology textbooks implied parenting was much more clear cut and straightforward than I found it to be at our house. In fact one of the most helpful parenting skills I've learned over the years is how to live in the gray zones because so few parenting decisions and actions are black and white, or happen quickly.

When I was parenting young children, I noted that we parents of little ones were tired a lot. But we were also often stressed out, thinking we should be doing more for our kids. Sometimes it felt like a daily battle between the forces of stress (You really should get out there and compare preschools!) and the forces of fatigue (I think I literally just fell asleep while reading *Duck in a Truck* to Annie.)

## Scarcity Thinking

After I had kids, I noticed the vast majority of young parents like me were affected by scarcity thinking which was seemingly everywhere. Scarcity thinking is the belief that there's not enough to go around.

“If I’m not able to join that pediatrician’s practice, my son will suffer since everyone knows she’s the best in town.” A scarcity mentality holds that there won’t be sufficient resources and opportunities when your turn comes if you don’t secure your position now. “If I don’t get my daughter into the best elementary and middle schools, she’ll never be prepared to take the Advanced Placement courses in high school. And every one says if you don’t take all the A.P. courses, your chances of getting into a good college are nil.”

Scarcity thinking suggests there is one right path to parenting, one right way to do things. And scarcity thinking is hard to dispute because it always seems to have science backing it up. “Well he doesn’t have to learn to swim right away, but studies show that because kids cross midline with their bodies while swimming, they will be better readers and writers later since these skills also require crossing midline.” Like I said, it’s just plain stress-inducing!

Around the time Stephen, my oldest, was ready for preschool, I began hearing parents talking about windows of opportunity (psychology textbooks refer to them as critical periods) in their children’s development. Because of these windows, many of us considered sending our youngsters to a bilingual preschool since foreign language learning is easier for children who start before the age of six. And of course children who’ve learned foreign languages during that window of opportunity early in life will find learning a musical instrument easier. Both happen in a similar part of the brain. And while we’re at it, many parenting magazines (and some scientific journals) claim that children who have learned to play an instrument early in life will have an easier time with math throughout their lives.

All of this information makes a certain kind of sense when you hear about it, but the message that I took in underneath it all was, “There’s one best way to parent. If you don’t choose this

route your child will suffer in some way later. And by the way, you won't be able to make up for it because you will have missed the critical period of brain development." Have you noticed that whenever people want to make parents feel extra-guilty they throw in the phrase "brain development"?

Slowly the vines of scarcity thinking crept into my parenting outlook and influenced my decisions, moods, and plain old day-to-day enjoyment of this life experience. I found myself feeling competitive with, instead of happy for, friends who landed a coveted spot at the most desirable preschool or elementary school. Underlying all of this was a win-lose mentality. If another parent got something, it felt as though my family lost out in some way. There was not enough to go around. Rumors traveled the parenting grapevine about parents who somehow illegally maneuvered around the lottery system to place their exceptional youngsters into top schools.

Yet as my kids grow older, I want them to be inoculated against scarcity thinking. This attitude motivates people by fear, leading them to believe there won't be sufficient resources for them to lead a fulfilled life; that there won't be enough opportunity for work when their time comes. This thinking makes kids feel they should always be doing more instead of appreciating where they are now. Advertisers love the scarcity worldview. They use it to remind us there is always something we lack. We'll only feel better after we buy their product, while supplies last! Scarcity thinking divides us, making us feel alone and disappointed. It's no way for kids to think.

All the consequences of scarcity thinking suck our energy like those old refrigerators we're supposed to get rid of. If instead we had an attitude of enough, we'd still have all that extra energy at our disposal. We could spend it to help our kids understand themselves and their passions

more clearly. We could put that extra energy into more creatively solving the problems that arise in our lives and communities. When there's no longer only one right way to do something, it frees us to think more innovatively and imaginatively. We'd likely be willing to take more risks. We could use our extra energy to give to others who genuinely don't have enough. Basically, we could live more deeply, connectedly, and contentedly.



## What is Your Point of Enough?

In order to help our kids cultivate an attitude of enough, we first need a good grasp of how much is enough in our own lives. Whether it's a material item (shoes) or a non-material one (free time), how do you know when you have enough of something? "Enough" seems to reside at the sweet spot between needing more and wanting more. It's a calm, settled, balanced place. Enough is a place where one easily feels gratitude and appreciation. At this sweet spot, we have access to the bigger picture and can gain perspective.

In *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff*, which I have read so many times the pages are fraying, one of Richard Carlson's suggestions is to use the back burner of our minds when making big decisions. In decision-making we regularly use the front burner - conscious consideration, asking the opinions of others, writing out pros and cons. But with the back burner method, we can also access our unconscious mind when making big decisions such as what is enough for us.

One of my professors in graduate school suggested we ask a question we've been struggling with quietly to ourselves before drifting off to sleep at night. This is another way to gain access to unconscious thinking processes. If you do this, my advice is to have a pad of paper nearby at all times, because the answers inspired by our unconscious minds are likely to be delivered at inopportune times. You'll be driving, soaping up in the shower, or even telling your child a bedtime story, when suddenly a new way of approaching a complex problem will literally pop into your head. Just grab that pad (when at a red light), write down your new wisdom, and then turn back to your task at hand.

## 80% Full or the Other Extreme?

Eating is the activity through which it's easiest for me to practice the concept of enough. The Japanese use the term "hara hachi bu" which means eat until you are eight parts (80%) full. I like this idea (unless I'm really hungry). The concept of enough seems to be intertwined within hara hachi bu. If you know there is enough to go around, that there is enough for you, you'll experience that calm, settled feeling while eating. Hara hachi bu also requires an internal focus on the messages of our body, rather than an external focus on factors such as the amount of food left on your plate or a waiter's suggestions. Using our own internal cues to gauge our point of enough is always healthier and more accurate than relying on messages from others.

I assume the Japanese incorporate the idea of hara hachi bu into other areas of their lives as well. This is more challenging for me, and I've noticed, my kids.





How do we know when we are 80% full of pants, kitchen gadgets, or iPad applications? We're still working on this in our home.

The opposite of hara hachi bu is a strategy we're all familiar with - gorging oneself. We've all done it. Our kids have likely done it. Think back to last Halloween. When my friend Eva lived in the mountains outside Santa Fe, New Mexico, she and her husband could not receive any TV channels. When they moved back into town their apartment came with cable access. Eva did what most people would do. She watched more television than she ever thought possible. She said she watched so much TV that eventually TV made her feel nauseated. Today, five years later, when she thinks back on that time she still feels a little sick. These days Eva watches two shows a week. She's found her place of enough.

Our son Stephen has loved books for many years. He rarely meets a book that isn't worth picking up and leafing through. And books are easy to acquire. We live biking distance from a well-stocked used bookstore. Stephen's room, though, is small. Nevertheless, for a while he collected and assembled large piles of books "to read next". During that time my husband Todd and I would weave our way around stacks of upcoming reads to tuck Stephen into bed.

Eventually I think Stephen realized the numerous book piles were beginning to oppress him. He found himself in a place quite a bit past "enough". These days Stephen keeps on hand two or three books to read next. He also saves certain beloved book series in his room to read again and again. It's not as if his bedroom is empty, but Stephen has found his "enough" sweet spot, at least when it comes to books. International soccer jerseys are another matter!

It's hard to recommend the gorging method as a path to finding one's point of enough in all areas of life. It's fairly inefficient, often expensive, and frankly hard for friends and family to watch. The two differing strategies of hara hachi bu and gorging highlight the challenge of figuring out our spaces of enough. But just because something is a challenge doesn't mean it isn't worth attempting.

## Using Stories to Cultivate an Attitude of Enough in Ourselves and Our Kids

When I was working as a psychologist at the local mental health center, I was continually struck by how often the stories my clients' parents had told about them followed them into adulthood. I had one client whose father referred to her as the drama queen of the family, never quite taking her concerns seriously. Although she later became a successful biologist, she still doubted that her colleagues considered her research worthy. Another of my clients was the younger brother of an accomplished ballet dancer. Always less coordinated than his sister, his family referred to him as having two left feet. Now as an adult he's completed numerous triathlons, but still thinks of himself as clumsy. The experiences of my clients were a constant reminder of the power our words as parents have over the way our children define themselves, and envision their future potential and the world in which they live.





In *Raising Your Spirited Child*, Mary Sheedy Kurcinka recommends parents carefully choose the words they use to describe their kids' strengths and weaknesses. By using words with positive connotations we can reframe certain aspects of our kids' behavior for ourselves and for them. "By merely changing your vocabulary you can alter the way others see your child." Why not frame impulsive or hyperactive behavior as exuberance? Anxious can be relabeled cautious. Picky can become selective. And argumentative can turn into strongly committed to one's goals. The list is endless.

After reading this suggestion about reframing, I thought of my friend Isabel who seems to do this naturally with her daughter, Chloe. Chloe is six and quite shy. It's extremely difficult for her to ask other kids to play and hard for her to join larger groups already playing together. But Chloe is also very socially aware and therefore feels bad about herself for being so shy. I've heard Isabel tell her, "It's okay. Everyone is different. You're a person who watches things before joining in. You like to see what each kid is doing so when you're ready to play you'll know just where to start." I watch Chloe's worried face noticeably soften when her mom reminds her of this. Isabel told me she also frames Chloe's behavior this way for each new teacher so they won't get too frustrated with Chloe's reluctance to join the others or try new things.

Okay, now it's just a matter of hunkering down and creating these stories for my kids. The tired part of me wants to know, "Isn't there a website for this? There should be!" It feels challenging to generate numerous positive narratives on my own, or even a couple. Here's what I've come up with so far. Often friends of mine see a positive aspect in my kids that I haven't noticed or have forgotten about. I'm going to listen for these perspectives and build stories around them. I've also noticed that I have more energy to create a positive spin about one of my

children right after someone else has seen them in a pessimistic light. I use my surge of “Mama-bear” defensive energy to reframe the situation more optimistically. This isn’t to say that I erase something wrong or hurtful my child has done, but I try to create a new story that allows the child to make amends and includes the moral that a bad behavior doesn’t make a bad child.

Generating narratives about my kids is hard work, but I see it as worth the effort (even if I complain to myself sometimes while making that effort). I’ve certainly had times when my reframe of a situation fell flat. Picture receiving a disaffected, blank stare from a (my) thirteen year-old. But then there are the times when it truly works. Perhaps one of my kids is feeling completely defeated and I remind him that he’s survived a similar challenge before. Then I describe him as a kid who perseveres, or who can laugh off embarrassing situations. Suddenly this new narrative creates a shift in his view of himself. Those are the parenting moments which keep me going.

In my own life narratives often make a deep, long-lasting impression. They are more likely to stick, or at least get filed into a folder in my mind I’ll be able to find again. Psychologist and writer Mary Pipher reminds us that storytelling engages all of the senses, and that because stories elicit such whole brain/whole body responses, people attend to, remember, and are transformed by them.

## The Green Triangle, a Useful Motivator

Another motivation for seeking the place of enough in our own lives is Ernest Callenbach’s concept of the Green Triangle. According to Green Triangle theory, if you make a positive change in one area of your life, it also affects other areas positively. The three points of the Green Triangle

are Money, Environment, and Health. The classic example Callenbach uses is a person choosing to commute to work by bicycle. Perhaps she made this change in order to save on gasoline and car wear and tear. In this case the behavior was initially begun in order to save money. However, riding one's bike to work also helps the environment by reducing pollution and carbon emissions. And thirdly, riding a bicycle to and from work daily improves a person's health. Each point on the triangle is connected to the other two.

In my reading about the Green Triangle, I came across the suggestion that instead it be a Green Diamond with the fourth angle labeled Community. I agree this would make Callenbach's concept more complete.

My initial motivating factor for cultivating an attitude of enough in myself and my family would fall under the category of health, more specifically mental health. An attitude of enough would reduce my stress levels on many fronts. But stopping at enough would also likely save my family money. We would buy less of everything from cars to vacations to office supplies. Buying and traveling less, and researching the items we do purchase more, would in turn support the environment. Finally, having an attitude of enough would leave us with more energy for relationships. Getting to know our neighbors. Being available to lend a hand to someone in need. Supporting those hardworking teachers at the kids' school a little more. I'm feeling more energized already!

The Green Triangle concept reminds me of one of the messages in Juliet Schor's book, *Plenitude*. "The less you buy the less you need to earn." An attitude of enough could unhook us from the exhausting work-spend-work-spend-work cycle. Or at least it would allow us to step back from this energy-draining existence enough to consider our true priorities. As I contemplate how

my life would change if I focused on stopping at enough, I envision more space and more breathing room for my family. It seems that more breathing room almost always leads to a clearer vision of our true passions, a worthwhile destination any day.

## I Have Enough Stuff: Helping Your Kids Stop Craving More and More Things

Stopping at the sweet spot of enough, be it with dessert portions or downloading music onto one's iPod, isn't easy. If it's a struggle for us as adults, it's only going to be more challenging for children who have less experience saying no. Certain mental skills such as self-discipline can give our kids the upper hand when it comes to stopping at their point of enough.

**Setting:** Our family computer a while back

**Stephen:** "I want to show you something awesome Ben taught me to do on Google Earth!"

**Daniel:** "I got here first! I want to watch that YouTube video Colin sent me!"

**Annie:** "Well, I need to check the weather!" *(This is the only thing we allow young Annie to do by herself on our computer.)*

Waiting. Self-control. Patience. Delaying gratification. Mastering these challenging skills is a work in progress at our house. I was reminded recently of the famous Marshmallow Experiment, and re-read it with interest (and a little desperation) because it suggests there are particular mental strategies that kids (and the rest of us) can learn to increase self-control significantly.

In the late 1960s, a now well-known psychologist named Walter Mischel brought four year-olds to a small office within their preschool. The windowless room didn't have much going for it from a four year-old's standpoint - no bright-colored toys or books. However, in the center of the barren room was a desk with a tray of goodies of approximately equal size and desirability. The treats included marshmallows, oreos, and pretzels, but over time this study has been referred to as the Marshmallow Study.

Mischel told each child that he or she could pick ONE treat to eat right then, or wait while he (Mischel) left the room for a time, and receive TWO treats when he returned. Then Mischel departed, and the four year-olds were left to their own devices, while being filmed by a hidden camera. Mischel didn't return for fifteen minutes! An eternity for a four year-old.

Before you read on, think back to yourself as a young child and envision what you would have done. Now consider your children. If you're like me you came up with perhaps one candidate who might have pulled this off.

All in all, 653 four year-olds participated in the Marshmallow Study. Mischel certainly had patience! The majority of the children waited less than three minutes before giving in and eating the object of their desire. Only thirty percent of the kids held out the entire fifteen minutes and received two marshmallows at the end of their wait.

Mischel was able to collect further data on most of these children much later in their lives. Who would have guessed that four year-olds who delayed gratification would get higher SAT scores years later? Mischel's results showed that the children who could wait the whole fifteen minutes as four year-olds had SAT scores on average 210 points higher than children who could



only wait 30 seconds. Wow. Not that high SAT scores tell it all, but that's a noteworthy result.

Basically the Marshmallow Study highlighted the importance of self-control or willpower as a component of intelligence, at least the type of intelligence measured by aptitude tests.

Mischel explained that the vital skill in the patient kids was the “strategic allocation of attention.” Turns out they'd found ways to distract themselves from the “hot stimulus” or marshmallow. This view of willpower explains why the marshmallow test has relatively high predictability for future success. If you can distract yourself from “hot emotions, then you can study for the SAT instead of watching television, and you can save money for retirement” rather than spending it now, Mischel explains. According to recent research by Angela Duckworth and Martin Seligman, self-discipline is very predictive of a child's grade point average in school as well.

Of course I asked my kids to pretend they were in this Marshmallow study situation. Here's what I got:

**Annie (age 7 at the time):** “I'd put a piece of paper between me and the marshmallow.” After thinking about it some more, she then said, “No, I'd stare at it as hard as I could.”

**Daniel (age 10):** “I'd play hand games. Then I'd look out the window, and then I'd make up some more games to pass the time.”

**Stephen (age 12):** “Mama, I'm so not in the mood to answer this.”

Thus, I have one child who would have likely scored with the majority, and another child who might have pulled off the wait, except that being his mother I know how much he likes sweets. I'm going to have to stick him into the majority group as well. Then I've got yet another kid who

likely could have met the challenge, but is now in middle school and therefore is completely uninterested in this sort of thing.

But there's hope.

Mischel found that if he showed the children a few mental games, their ability to delay gratification shot way up. For example, he suggested the kids “pretend the treat [was] only a picture surrounded by a frame” in addition to teaching other techniques which helped them keep some distance from their desired object.

Mischel recommends that parents establish “rituals of delay” at home such as “not snacking before dinner, saving allowance, and holding out until Christmas morning.” However, it's also essential to discuss with your kids what tricks they find helpful for waiting, as a way of making these mental processes more visible. This way kids will remember later that they already know some techniques to help them wait.

I need to find a gentle way to inform Annie that her idea to “stare at the marshmallow until the guy came back” is likely not an optimal choice when it comes to postponing the intake of life's future marshmallows.

## Rituals of Delay: What Have Other Parents Done to Instill Waiting?

Mischel's “rituals of delay” proposition brought to mind my friend Maureen Wagner. She and her husband Joe have devised a set of family rules which structure delay into their family life. I called her to confirm the exact details.

Wagner family rules:

1. Age a child needs to be before first downhill skiing lesson: 8 years  
(They're from Colorado.)
2. Age a child can first see a movie in the theater: 9 years
3. Age a child can first go to a big kid amusement park (not including kiddie rides): 9 years
4. Age a child can first spend the night at a friend's house or attend a slumber party: 10 years
5. Age a child can first run a 10K: 10 years (Okay, they're from hyper-athletic Boulder.)

While Maureen and Joe have had these rules firmly in place, the rest of us have been drifting all over the map deciding when our kids can do what. I'm sure their kids gave them a hard time about the Wagner Rules. But in the meantime, their children were also learning how to wait. When kids have no choice but to wait, they learn how to distract themselves and practice focusing on the things they can do now. Kids who are rarely required to wait for anything never get to practice sitting with the discomfort of waiting.

Not having a similar set of family rules in place, Todd and I were never quite sure when our little ones were old enough to, for example, see a movie in the theater. Judging by the number of nightmares my young kids experienced after what were described as "totally rated G" movies, I think the Wagner family rules are worth considering. By the way, Maureen and Joe live on a farm with horses which their kids learned to ride as mere preschoolers. Go figure. To each family their own, I guess.

# Teaching Kids to Delay Gratification in Our Consumer Culture

A while back Todd took our daughter Annie to the nearby hardware store. This locally-owned place is stocked with just about every basic item you could want. Todd needed drywall anchors and screws. Annie asked to stay by the Japanese eraser display while her dad went to find the fasteners section.

I can't recall when the first Japanese eraser toy made its way into our home. I think it was probably given to Annie as a party favor. I'd never seen one. Basically they're small toys made of soft rubbery material, so your kids can add the phrase "and they're erasers!" to their purchasing pleas. They come in numerous forms, from farm animals to random food products.

On the day of the store run, Annie owned maybe five of these toys. As she stood admiring the prolific display of erasers, a salesperson handed her "The Japanese Eraser Official Guidebook". Annie returned home ecstatic. "Look what this lady gave me for free!" You guessed it - Annie's prized possession was basically a marketing catalog of Japanese erasers. The thing was eight pages long and must have included 500 different erasers. She excitedly showed me the next ten erasers she hoped to buy.

Annie poured over her catalog and later brought it to our local playground where we met our neighbor Jill and her daughter, Sophie. Sophie was only five, but seemed already to know how cool



and life-altering these Japanese erasers were. Now she and Annie were both scanning the pages with focused intensity. Soon Sophie too carried a list of the ten erasers she wanted most. I'm so sorry Jill!

The salesperson had given Annie the Japanese eraser catalog and hooked her in. Then Annie reeled in Sophie. Ah, modern marketing. As I've read more about how corporations are marketing to children these days, I've discovered one of the methods they use most is having kids convince other kids to buy their products, just as I'd watched Annie do with Sophie.

I guess I pretty much knew that big business marketing campaigns were behind Americans' increasing consumerism. I buy therefore I am. And I was also aware that the secret weapon of advertising is the message that we lack something and won't feel complete until we buy what we're missing. Now that I have kids, though, I hate that mass media tells them they are lacking in some way. Won't they get that message daily in middle school? It's awful that advertising takes advantage of kids' more fragile self-images, telling them there's something wrong with them when five minutes before they were sitting on the sofa feeling fine.

As I've learned more about the tools marketers use today, I've been most saddened by these background messages suggesting we are incomplete. I want my kids to embody the attitude of "I am enough" and "I have enough". Instead the sneaky ads tap them on the shoulder and whisper, "Remember, you are what you wear." "Everyone notices what kind of school supplies you have." "You're only as good as what you own."

While reading *Tips for Parenting in a Commercial Culture* from The Center for a New American Dream, I came across a concept about which I was previously unaware. The booklet



(which you can download free) pointed out that another common marketing message is: Life should always be easy, and there's something wrong if it isn't. The ads then suggest you buy their product or pill when you struggle with something, and magically everything will improve. I know this view is prevalent in Western culture these days, but I guess I thought it evolved on its own, not in some secret marketing meeting.

The “life should be easy” mindset is one I regularly challenge in my kids. “Why would you think everything would be easy? You should be proud of yourself for working hard to master something. People become best at what they practice most.” When I realized corporate media campaigns are working at cross-purposes with my parenting focus, I was initially shocked, then angry.

Looking for ways to combat the ever-present media messages in my kids' lives, I read *Living Simply with Children* by Marie Sherlock. I learned what I'd known intuitively, that advertisers purposely separate children from their parents then aim their messages at the kids one-on-one. The same businesses who declare family-friendliness are finding ways to influence our kids outside our earshot. At my house, this direct-to-kid advertising has been happening over the computer. However, it's harder than you'd think to fight it. Here's a recent example.

We've placed our computer in a central location. You practically trip over it when passing by. Our son Daniel is allowed to play online educational games with our permission. Of course, he always asks at chaotic times. First I quickly assess the game he's about to play (usually one a friend has shown him). The games tend to look fairly harmless, even a little boring. Then I give Daniel my consent and return to the four other things I'm juggling. I now realize that these online

educational games have numerous ads intertwined within them, often only popping up toward the end of play.

## Five Actions to Help Immunize Our Kids Against Advertising:

### 1. Reduce TV time.

According to numerous sources, the most significant action we can take to reduce our kids' exposure to advertising is setting limits on television watching.

### 2. Read books with your kids about how marketing works.

*Made You Look: How Advertising Works and Why You Should Know* by Shari Graydon explains various secrets of advertising to older kids and teens. It touches on numerous marketing techniques from airbrushing magazine photos to product placement on film and TV, to Internet advertising.

### 3. Play games to deconstruct commercials.

My friend Margaret has her five and eight year-old kids mute the TV during commercials and try to guess the product being sold. She says her kids really enjoy this game. Margaret notes that muting the commercial allows one to pay closer attention to certain details such as the body language and emotions actors use to sell a product. *Made You Look* additionally suggests leaving the TV's audio on and but turning away from the screen as a means of understanding a commercial's use of language, music, pace, and sound.

**4. Listen to the message underneath your child's nagging and pleading.**

In *Living Simply with Children*, Marie Sherlock reminds parents to listen to the messages beneath kids' nagging for material things. Perhaps they feel left out of an opportunity. Or maybe asking for certain things is a way of saying they think they don't fit in at school. Although we parents still might not spring for the wanted item, our kids will feel heard by us when we listen fully to their wishes.

**5. Share your own struggles with "wanting" with your child.**

We parents are just as susceptible to keeping up with the Joneses as our children are to wanting what the Joneses' kids have. We might tell our kids how we handle our wants, on good as well as bad days. We can also admit to things we've bought and later regretted, or share childhood stories of how badly we wanted that Barbie camping van, or the shoes all the cool kids wore.

It's been months since Annie got the Japanese eraser catalog, and although she hasn't bought any new erasers for a while, I still can't extract this treasured item from her room without fierce opposition. However, she will play the guessing game about commercials that my friend Margaret uses.

Another friend Janice has an eight year-old son and six year-old twin daughters. She told me that recently, after her son Jacob finished watching a TV show, he came to her and suggested, "You should buy some of that stretch mark cream they sell on TV so you could get rid of those marks on your stomach." After Janice recovered from the personal affront, she and Jacob discussed the purpose of commercials, and the fact that they are not always honest about their merchandise.

Janice knew that even if she felt the need to rid herself of her twin-pregnancy stretch marks, the cream on TV wasn't going to do the trick. Notice the advertisers of the stretch mark cream aired their commercial during a children's television show. They were taking advantage of the fact that our children often influence the purchases we make, as Jacob unwittingly attempted to do with Janice.

I find the ubiquity of advertising daunting. How can I possibly be in so many places at once to counteract mass media's pull on my surprisingly-unaware-that-they-are-being-manipulated kids? Basically my parental game plan for handling advertising issues changes regularly. I end up using whichever tactic I have the most energy for in the moment. Therefore I seem to get to each strategy eventually, but admittedly I'm rarely utilizing all of them at once.

## How to Chase Away the “I Want” Monster in Kids

According to Robert Emmons, a gratitude researcher and author of *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier*, practicing grateful thinking can lead to greater



happiness because we learn to “want what we have.” Emmons found that those who practice gratitude consistently by keeping a gratitude journal (or now one can download various gratitude apps), also tend to exercise more regularly, get sick less, feel better about their lives as a whole, and express more optimism about the future. He notes that grateful people are less likely to base their

happiness on material possessions, less envious of others, and less likely to measure success in terms of material gains. I'm thinking these side effects of gratitude could be extremely helpful at my house, especially around the holidays.

Jeffrey Froh, a psychology professor at Hofstra University who has conducted gratitude research with children writes that kids who feel and act with more gratitude also tend to be less materialistic, get better grades, set higher goals, complain of fewer head and stomach aches, and feel more satisfied with their friends, families, and schools than those who don't.

As we've experimented with gratitude in our home we've found feelings of gratitude always trump feelings of deprivation. These two emotions can't seem to coexist. A few years back, my friend Lisa mentioned that she routinely asks her kids three things they're grateful for as she puts them to bed each night. Because the "unofficial parent advice network" is where I get some of my best ideas, I decided to test this at our house.

When my son Stephen, then age seven, responded to the gratitude question with, "trees, animals that are wild, and Daddy's fried catfish" on one of the first nights, a window opened into his young mind. I love that these words of gratitude are the last spoken of the day and float gently through the kids' heads as they fall asleep. (At least on the nights when I'm awake enough to remember this gratitude exercise at tuck-in time.)

Lisa additionally mentioned that reading autobiographical series such as the *Little House* books by Laura Ingalls Wilder, and the *Little Britches* books by Ralph Moody about some childrens' endurance and courage a century ago, has also given her kids more perspective on their young lives and fostered a sense of gratitude.



Gratitude researcher Emmons writes that in realizing all we have to be grateful for, we invariably become aware that there are others truly in need. Teaching gratitude skills to our children is therefore an ideal time to offer family volunteering and other giving-back activities. After listing things they are grateful for in their lives, children are primed to reach out to others.

## Helping Children Learn What Too Much Feels Like

Lately when I can't get a good handle on my place of enough, I start with what too much feels like. For me too much feels: rushed, noisy, distracting, all filled up. It also helps to be aware of how too much feels physically: stressed, tight, headachey.

Recently I asked my daughter Annie to describe how she felt when she stood within her overflowing, messy room. Annie has a very tiny bedroom. I use words like cozy and snug to describe it, but someone else would probably call it undersized. Because of this, it's easy for Annie's room to become cluttered. All she has to do is leave three things on the floor and it's challenging to walk to her bed. Small rooms require constant decluttering which is perhaps a good thing. We think carefully before we add anything new to Annie's abode. She is, therefore, surrounded by the items she loves and uses regularly, as any others haven't made the cut.

After a recent play date, Annie stood up to her ankles in dress-up paraphernalia. She said she felt overwhelmed, sad (because she knew it would take her a while to clean up) and frustrated. Her description of too much wasn't terribly different from mine. When I conjure up these feelings of "more than enough", I become more motivated to get myself back to that comfortable place of enough sooner.

## Kids with an Attitude of Enough

Children who know they have enough still ask for things – a skateboard, a hamster, a karaoke machine. But when these kids ask, their requests aren't pressured or desperate. Children who know they have enough are clearer about what's a want and what's a need. There is less urgency



in their voices because they know deep down their needs are being met.

Kids who know they have enough aren't trying to fill an empty place inside by purchasing new things. They also don't use merchandise to distract themselves from something hard or upsetting. Instead when something painful happens, as it inevitably does, they tend to face it more head on and thus are likely to pass through it a little more

quickly. Kids who know they have enough are less focused on material things, leaving more energy for life's nonmaterial experiences and relationships. They're less focused on what others have, and as Emmons notes more likely to want what they have.

This eBook is a preview of a longer book I'm writing.

Check my blog, [playfightrepeat.com](http://playfightrepeat.com) for updates.