One of the central premises of marketing is that buying things will make us happy. There is a growing body of evidence, however, that the opposite is true: that the pressure to spend and consume actually makes people less happy.¹ “Psychologically healthy children will be made worse off if they become more enmeshed in the culture of getting and spending. Children with emotional problems will be helped if they disengage from the worlds that corporations are constructing for them.”² Exposure to media and marketing promotes materialistic values in children and is stressful for families.

Children Are Awash in Materialistic Values

- This generation of children is the most brand conscious ever.³ Teenagers today have 145 conversations about brands per week. Adults invoke brand names about half as often.⁴

- 44% of 4th through 8th graders report daydreaming “a lot” about being rich.⁵

- Over half of children say they would be happier if they had more money to buy things for themselves. Nearly that many say the only kind of job they want when they grow up is one that pays a lot.⁶

- A survey of parents found that 63% believed that their children define their self-worth in terms of what they own.⁷

Children Who Are More Materialistic:

- Are less happy, more depressed, have lower self-esteem, and report more symptoms of anxiety.⁸

- Engage in fewer positive environmental behaviors such as reusing paper, and using less water while showering.⁹

- Report less generosity and allocate less money to charity when they imagine receiving a windfall.¹⁰

Exposure to Media and Marketing Contributes to Children’s Materialism

- Children’s materialistic values are linked to their media use.¹¹

- Materialistic values are correlated to exposure to marketing for children as young as preschoolers.¹²

- Children attending schools with the commercial TV news program Channel One are more materialistic than students from schools without it.¹³

The “Nag Factor” and Family Stress

- In 1998, a landmark market research report identified ways to help retailers exploit children’s nagging to boost sales.¹⁴ It identified nagging as responsible for 40% of trips to entertainment establishments like Chuck E. Cheese, one out of three trips to a fast-food restaurant, and about 30% of home video sales.¹⁵ Today, encouraging children to use “the nag factor” to get their parents to buy things is a tried and proven marketing technique.¹⁶
A number of studies have demonstrated a link between children’s exposure to advertising and their purchase requests. Reducing TV viewing reduces children’s requests for toys.

There is a relationship between children’s purchase requests and parent-child discord. Family conflict is also directly correlated with children’s exposure to advertising.

On average, young people aged 12-17 report asking nine times for products they’ve seen advertised before their parents give in and let them have what they want. More than 10% admitted to asking their parents more than fifty times.

For more information visit www.commercialfreechildhood.org.

Other Resources

The Center for a New American Dream helps Americans change the way they consume to improve quality of life, protect the environment, and promote social justice. (www.newdream.org)

Share, Save, Spend helps families understand the relationship of money, values and habits in today’s hyper-consumer culture and, in turn, provide resources/tools to assist them in achieving financial sanity. (www.sharesavespend.com)

7 Center for a New American Dream. (1999, July). New poll shows marketing to kids taking its toll on parents, families. Takoma Park, MD.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
20 Center for a New American Dream. (2002, May) Thanks to Ads, Kids Won’t Take No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No, No for an Answer. Tacoma Park, MD.