

## Asking the Question: What Is the Relationship of Materialism, Commercialism and Children?

An understanding of materialism, commercialism and children provides a useful benchmark for the consumer educator who sets out to teach consumer skills.

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The decision making process that we tout as rational consumerism, requires that an initial decision be made about priorities, needs and wants. Underlying the choices of a rational consumer are the values and goals he or she develop which form the structure for current and future utility-for measuring the value of trading money, services and goods. The desire to acquire something you do not yet own, e.g. the degree of materialism and commercialism that is pushing or pulling personal preferences, has implications for the individual and society at large.

These implications, a materialistic lifestyle, affect the United States and other countries. Shabad (1994) reported in *World Press Review* that "In a poll of 102 children aged eight to 16 in the Ural city of Yekaterinburg, researchers Sergei Moshkin and Viktor Rudenko found that 'wealth and sex, in the opinion of teenagers, are what add up to the meaning of life for the modern Russian.'" The Russian survey found 16% of the children said "theft, robbery, and extortion," and an additional 3%, said prostitution was their preferred way to make their money.

Does materialism as a life goal pose a threat to our society? Should we be concerned when our children value "things" more than family life, their own personal self fulfillment, or public interest? What is the relationship between materialism, commercialism, and children? Fundamental to the economics of the marketplace is the desire to acquire something you do not yet own. The desire to own things, to consume, has led to a life style of materialism.

Easterlin and Crimmins (1991) define private materialism "to mean the pursuit of one's own material well being.." They build an economic model of preferences and view the goal of private materialism as in competition with family life goals, personal self-fulfillment goals and public interest goals. If a person puts time, energy, money and talents towards one goal, there is less available for the accomplishment of other secondary goals. Resources are limited and choices

(based in preferences) must be made as to their allotment. Webster (1993) defines materialism as "a doctrine that only the highest values or objectives lie in material well being and in the furtherance of material progress." Competitive individualism requires one stand out in a group. This results in focus on things and/or occupations which provide evidence of money, power, and stature. A social welfare focus reduces (not eliminate) competitiveness and individualism and values "other regarding behavior" and "cooperation" as a public good.

Materialism, then, is the preoccupation of the individual with his economic sphere, what he can produce and consume, without the balancing influence of the social sphere which is concerned for the intellectual, spiritual, and emotional well being of the individual and his/her society.

Do young people appear to be pursuing their own material well being? Easterlin and Crimmins (1991) compared college freshman and high school seniors and found evidence of a "sharp shift toward private materialism from the seventies through 1986-87, with important effects on (future) plans and attitudes." Not everyone agrees, however. Levine (1981) and Yankelovich (1981) reached diametrically opposite conclusions. Yankelovich thought personal self-fulfillment was increasingly more common but Levine saw "a return to private materialism."

The communication vehicle called commercialism is the mechanism that creates consumer awareness and induces product desirability. Commercialism is partially a production response to consumer demand. Commercialism could not grow without consumer support and public policies which endorse it. The goal of commercialism, to get people to buy more, creates a cycle of earn-spend with the focus on consuming. American public policies often support an agenda which encourages the valuation of economics and production over social welfare. These public policies shape public values and norms and are in turn a reflection of public sentiment in an almost circular fashion.

Do we have more commercialism than in the past? George Comstock (1991) finds "...as the 1990s begin, there are many more commercials directed at children than in past decades."

Van Evra (1990) writes there are at least three schools of thought on how children respond to mass media exposures, particularly television: social learning theory, cultivation, and uses and gratifications theory. Social learning theory says that children learn by observation, modeling behaviors, and practicing behavioral scripts based on previous observational learning. Thus the media presents models and behaviors to be imitated. The cultivation theory asserts that "the more time spent viewing television, the more likely the viewer is to accept television's version of things, especially in areas where the viewer has little direct experience...When it provides information in an environment where there is no primary socializing agent, it can have a direct impact on values, beliefs, and behavior, or it may reinforce peer values." The uses and gratifications theory attempts to identify motivations of viewers based on needs: to obtain information, for entertainment and relaxation, for social connectedness, and as a barrier to avoid other situations. All three theories support the effect mass media has on children who are in the value development stage.

Consumer educators and parents can make a difference in shifting materialistic values and goals. Commercialism will continue to press materialistic values to consume. Policy will not change until adults shift to other non monetary values. The first assault on materialism begins at home and in educational institutions. The second, is development of a common agenda collectively with those of like views and concerns to change public policies.

### References

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### Endnotes

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