

Hard Economic Times May Not Be All Bad for Kids

by Nancy Carlsson-Paige and Diane E. Levin

Today's economic downturn is already taking a toll on the nation's children and is likely to do so for a long time to come. When parents lose jobs, homes, and health insurance, when they have to cut back on childcare or quality nutrition, children's physical wellbeing is threatened, as is their sense of safety and security.

But there may actually be one way, amidst the hardship, that children could reap some benefit from the financial slowdown. As the recession forces families to cut back, there will be less money to spend on consumer items for kids. This might actually help kids reclaim some of what they've lost in our commercialized culture.

There's been a staggering increase in the dollars spent marketing to children over the last two decades. Today, corporations spend an estimated \$17 billion on marketing aimed at children whose lives are saturated with ads, logos, and toys and products linked to media that all serve as ads for one another. From a young age, kids learn to want and to buy; the marketing aimed at them teaches that happiness comes from having and getting. The marketing campaigns have been successful: While the United States constitutes 4.5 percent of the world's population, we buy 45 percent of the global toy production. Our kids receive an average of seventy new toys a year.

Manufacturers begin touting the often unfounded benefits of their products to parents of infants. They tell parents that videos for babies have educational value even though there is no research to support this claim and, moreover, after the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended no screen time for children under 2-years old. Toy companies seduce parents into buying unproven electronic "learning" toys with the promise they will "teach" letters and sounds. But hooking kids on push buttons and screens presents a serious threat to their healthy development. Children need active exploration and direct, hands-on experiences for healthy growth and optimal brain development.

As children get older, marketers try to bypass parents and sell directly to kids. Children think they need certain toys to play with, wear certain clothes or logos to look okay, and a host of other consumer items like Star Wars sneakers, GameBoys, and iPods in order to be happy. Toy store shelves brim with media-linked toys that encourage children to imitate the scripts they see on the screen, many of them violent and gender stereotyped, instead of making up their own. This insidious influence has had a damaging effect on children whose capacities for original thinking, imagination, and problem solving are undermined by media-driven, scripted play.

As children are told to buy more, they get hooked on the high that comes from the "quick fix" of the next purchase—they focus on "what I can get," and not on "what I can do or create." It's like a drug addiction that quickly wears off, requiring the next purchase in order to maintain a sense of wellbeing. What's more, commercialized childhood teaches children to judge themselves and each other by "what they have," not by "who they are."

As one kindergartner said to her teacher as a few first grade girls in highly stylish clothes walked by, “Those are the popular girls. They have the clothes with the fancy labels.”

Decades of child development theory and research tell us that for optimal development, young children need rich, hands-on play with materials that encourage creativity, imagination, and problem solving. Kids need open-ended toys—blocks, building materials, playdoh and markers--that they can control, can use in many ways, and which grow and change as children do. Today’s popular electronic and highly structured toys do exactly the opposite. They have a single-purpose; to tell children what to do, and are used just about the same way by all children. These toys undermine creative play and encourage repetition.

Many parents suspected the rampant consumerism of recent years was not all good for their children. But, when financial resources permitted, it was often easy to get trapped on the buy, buy, buy treadmill. The promise that buying something new would make their children happier, smarter, or prettier was often just too hard to resist. Now, many parents don’t have a choice but to tighten their purse strings. They are buying fewer toys, fancy outfits or electronic devices for their kids.

If done right, making do with less can help parents and children discover the value of playing with inexpensive open-ended toys and play materials or using the same toy for a long time in new and ever-changing ways. This will encourage children to become more creative in their play, develop ingenuity and persistence, and reach inside to tell their own stories. In addition, the diminished focus on materialism will help children discover the deeper capacities that lie within their own being and the satisfactions that come from relationships not based on material objects.

The shift won’t be easy. It may be hard for children to understand their parents’ changing consumer habits, the more frequent “no’s”, the less jam-packed toy shelves and closets. But children may also discover the rewards that come from breaking the addiction to buying. And we parents will find satisfaction too, as we see our children thrive in rediscovering what was stolen from them in a commercialized childhood.

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