

Ads May Spur Unhappy Kids to Embrace Materialism

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About the Author

Amy Norton has been a journalist in the medical field since 1999. She has worked as both a staff writer and an editor for *Physician's Weekly*, *Medical Tribune*, and *Reuters Health*. Norton has also written articles on health and medicine for MSNBC, *Prevention*, *The Atlantic*, and the online publication *HealthDay*. Many of her articles focus on children's health issues.

BACKGROUND

Materialism is the tendency to consider possessions and physical comfort more important than spiritual values. According to a 2010 study, the popular notion that greater income leads to greater happiness is true only to an extent. High earners do not necessarily feel happier. And yet, we continue to live in a society dominated by materialism and greatly influenced by advertising.

- 1 **U**nhappy kids who watch a lot of TV ads may come to believe that material¹ possessions are the key to feeling better, new research hints.
- 2 A number of studies in adults have suggested that unhappiness and materialism can create a vicious circle: People who are dissatisfied with their lives may think material possessions will make them happy; and when that fails, they become even more discontent.
- 3 Since we're living in a material world, there is concern about what that mindset could mean for kids' life satisfaction.
- 4 In the new study, researchers found that, unlike adults, materialistic 8-to 11-year-olds did not become less happy over time.

NOTES

1. **material** *adj.* physical.

- 5 On the other hand, unhappy kids did become more consumed by material possessions—but only if they watched a lot of TV.
- 6 The findings, which appear in the journal *Pediatrics*, point to links among unhappiness, TV, and materialism, though they cannot prove that TV is the villain.
- 7 The results do suggest, however, that the ads might “teach children that possessions are a way to increase happiness,” study leader Suzanna J. Oprea, a research associate at the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands, said in an email.
- 8 To help guard against that possibility, she suggested that parents help kids adopt a healthy skepticism toward consumer² ads.
- 9 The findings are based on 466 Dutch children between the ages of eight and 11, who took an online survey two times, one year apart. On both occasions the kids answered questions about life satisfaction—how happy they were at home, at school, in their relationships and with themselves.
- 10 They also rated the importance of material possessions in their life, and the degree to which they thought those things could bring happiness or win them friends.
- 11 Overall, Oprea’s team found no evidence that materialistic kids became less happy by the second survey.
- 12 However, kids who were relatively unhappy in the first survey tended to become more materialistic over the next year—but only if they regularly watched TV shows popular with the preteen crowd.
- 13 The study points only to general patterns. And there are limitations; the researchers used kids’ TV show viewing as a proxy³ for their exposure to ads, for example.
- 14 And in the big picture, according to Oprea, TV ads would be just one factor that could affect a child’s level of materialism. The same is true of life dissatisfaction, she said.
- 15 “Children’s social environment—that is, family and peers—plays an important role,” Oprea said. “Values held by family members and peers are more likely to be adopted by the child.”
- 16 No studies have been done to show whether parents’ values win out over TV ads when it comes to kids’ materialism.
- 17 But, Oprea said, “what we do know is that parents can counteract advertising’s influence.”
- 18 Parents can help, she noted, by teaching kids to view ads with a critical eye, and to be skeptical of images that imply a product can make life better. Encouraging kids to see other sources of happiness—like “love, friendship, and play”—might also help, according to Oprea’s team.
- 19 And why should parents worry about keeping kids off the path toward materialism?

2. **consumer** *adj.* related to products available for purchase.

3. **proxy** (PROK see) *n.* substitute that can act the same as the original.

- 20 It's true that in this study, kids' materialism did not seem to lead to unhappiness, Oprea noted. But that was only the short-term outlook, she said.
- 21 "Previous studies conducted among adults suggest that it is very likely that children's materialism will lead to decreased life satisfaction later in life," Oprea said.
- 22 Whether or not TV ads do affect some kids' materialism, experts already recommend that parents limit children's TV viewing and help them become savvy about advertising in general.
- 23 The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests that kids get no more than two hours of noneducational "screen time"—TV and computers—each day. The group also advises parents to keep TVs and computers out of their kids' bedrooms. 🐾