

Researcher finds materialism in children and adolescents linked to self-esteem

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Peer pressure, targeted marketing campaigns and bad parenting have all been blamed for increasing materialism in children. Until now, there has been little evidence showing when this drive for material goods emerges in kids and what really causes it. In one of the first studies to focus on the development of materialism among children, Deborah Roedder John, a professor of marketing at the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management, reveals that a young person's level of materialism is directly connected to their self-esteem.

In her recent paper "Growing up in a Material World: Age Differences in Materialism in Children and Adolescents," in the December 2007 issue of the Journal of Consumer Research, John and co-author Lan Nguyen Chaplin, assistant professor of marketing at the University of Illinois and Carlson alum, report the results of two studies conducted with children in three age groups. In the first study, they found that materialism increases from middle childhood (8 and 9 years old) to early adolescence (12 and 13 years old) but then declines by the end of high school (16 to 18 years old). This mirrors patterns in self-esteem, which instead decreases in early adolescence but increases in late adolescence.

"The level of materialism in teens is directly driven by self-esteem," said John. "When self-esteem drops as children enter adolescence, materialism peaks. Then by late adolescence, when self-esteem rebounds, their materialism drops."

In a second study, John and Chaplin boosted self-esteem by giving

children positive information about peer acceptance. Children were given paper plates with positive descriptors about them, such as smart and fun, which were provided by their peers in a summer camp setting. This seemingly small gesture drastically reduced the high levels of materialism found among 12 to 13 year-olds and the moderate levels of materialism found among 16 to 18 year-olds.

“Particularly relevant,” said John, “is the fact that by simply increasing self-esteem in teens, we see a decreased focus on material goods that parallels that of young children. While peers and marketing can certainly influence teens, materialism is directly connected to self-esteem.”

For parents interested in instilling positive values in their children and teens, the message is clear: encouraging a sense of self-worth among young people can reduce the emphasis on material goods. In other words, more self-esteem, fewer \$150 athletic shoes and \$250 purses.

Source: University of Minnesota

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