

Unhappy kids are more materialistic, study finds

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Research with children ages 8 to 10 says TV ads play big part in 'spoiling' those who aren't content.

(HealthDay) -- Unhappy kids are more likely to become materialistic than children who are happy with their lives, a new study from the Netherlands suggests.

And TV advertising is an important instigator, the study found.

"[Children](#) who were less satisfied with their lives do become more materialistic over time, but only when they are frequently exposed to advertising," said study lead author Suzanna Oprea. "Advertising seems to teach children that [possessions](#) are a way to increase [happiness](#)."

It's a significant finding because research with adults suggests that

materialistic children may become less happy later in life, said Oprea, a research associate at the University of Amsterdam School of [Communication Research](#).

The study, which appears online Aug. 20 and in the September print issue of *Pediatrics*, involved 466 children who participated in online surveys both in October 2006 and October 2007.

What exactly is [materialism](#)? The study describes it as "having a preoccupation with possessions and believing that products bring happiness and success."

In the survey, the children responded to items measuring materialism -- for example, self-rating how much they like other children based on whether they have more possessions. Kids also rated how happy they were with their life, home, parents, friends, school and themselves and as a whole.

Ad exposure was gauged by how frequently kids watched nine ad-packed TV shows, including "[SpongeBob SquarePants](#)" and "Skating With Celebrities," a Dutch family show.

Kids in general are bombarded with a lot of ads, the researchers said.

"Estimates on the numbers of [TV ads](#) children are annually exposed to vary from 10,000 in Britain (from a 2007 study) to 40,000 in the U.S. (from a 2001 study)," Oprea said.

It's not a case of dissatisfied children watching more TV, she said.

"Unhappy children are not more frequently exposed to advertising than [happy children](#)," Oprea said. "They just seem to be more susceptible to its effects."

Marta Flaum, a child psychologist in Chappaqua, N.Y., who is familiar with the study, said that the "authors make the excellent point of teaching our children to be wise and critical consumers.

"So when [children] do watch TV, go over the ads with them and talk about them afterwards," she added. "Have them pretend, 'You're the ad executive. How would you critique this ad? What do you think they're trying to get you to do? Do you think it was effective?'"

The researchers also advise parents to help kids focus on other sources of happiness, such as love, friendship and play, and de-emphasize the role of possessions.

"The key is to do so very early, when children are flexible and open to new activities and pastimes and experiences," Flaum said. "By the time a child is 8 or 10 years old, it may be too late to expect them to suddenly want to turn off the TV and get off the couch and take up tennis."

Materialism and whether kids are spoiled is a frequent topic of discussion in Westchester County, N.Y., where she practices, Flaum said.

"The time to address this is when they're toddlers, to get them into the habit of helping out, for example, of contributing to the household," Flaum said. "Young children love to help -- they don't know that it's work. For them, at that point, it's just an opportunity to spend time with parents. And I find that when children have the privilege and experience of working to earn something, it builds a sense of self-confidence and mastery."

Intervening early might prevent a cycle of unhappiness and materialism in adulthood, study author Oprea said.

"Previous studies among adults indicate not only that people with lower life satisfaction become more materialistic, but also that more materialistic people become less satisfied with their lives," Oprea said. "Hence, although we do not find any short-term effects -- after one year -- it is likely that children's materialism will lead to decreased life satisfaction later in life."

More information: The Nemours Foundation has more on [television's impact on children](#).

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