

Defined by your possessions? How loving parents unintentionally foster materialism in their children

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Can loving and supportive parents unintentionally encourage their children to define their self-worth through possessions? According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, children who receive more material rewards from their parents grow up to be more materialistic as adults.

"Using material possessions to express love or reward children for their achievements can backfire. Loving and supportive parents can unintentionally foster materialism in their children despite their best efforts to steer them away from relying on material possessions to find happiness or to judge others," write authors Marsha L. Richins (University of Missouri) and Lan Nguyen Chaplin (University of Illinois at Chicago).

The authors surveyed 701 [adults](#) to measure the long-term impact of material parenting. Study participants described their current life situation and values, and also reported on a variety of childhood circumstances, their relationship with their parents, and the rewards and punishments they received during three critical ages of childhood (at grades 3, 7, and 10). Adults who had received more material rewards and punishments as children were more likely than others to use possessions to define and express who they are.

Parents should be cautious about using [material goods](#) to express their

love and reward their children for good behavior. An overemphasis on [material possessions](#) during childhood can have long-lasting effects. Adults who received many material rewards as children are likely to continue rewarding themselves with material goods and defining themselves through their possessions.

"Parents don't want their children to use possessions to define their self-worth or judge others, yet loving and supportive parents can also use material goods to express their love, paving the way for their [children](#) to grow up to be more likely than others to admire people with expensive possessions and judge success by the kinds of things people own," the authors conclude.

More information: Marsha L. Richins and Lan Nguyen Chaplin. "Material Parenting: How the Use of Goods in Parenting Fosters Materialism in the Next Generation." *Journal of Consumer Research*: April 2015.

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