



For Release: October - December 2005

What Do Kids Want?

As the holidays approach, parents may be hearing the refrain “I want, I want, I want...” from their kids more often. Today’s kids are the most consumer-oriented in the world. It’s no wonder there are multi-billion dollar marketing efforts aimed at children of all ages, trying to convince them to spend their own and their parents’ dollars on the newest products. They are bombarded with ads all day long at home, at school and on the street. The average American child is exposed to 40 hours of commercial messages every week and the average 8-13-year-old makes 3,000 requests for products or services a year. Parents and child experts worry that children are being taught that they can’t be happy unless they constantly acquire more goods and services. They also worry that children are becoming too materialistic and that this is affecting kids’ values. Other examples of how the consumer culture may be undermining our children’s well-being include childhood weight problems, the prevalence of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, electronic addictions, anxiety, substance abuse, increased teasing and bullying, and diminished parent-child relationships.

Amid all this discouraging news, there is a bright note regarding what is important to kids. The Center for a New American Dream recently sponsored a national art and essay

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Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) program staff at MSU Extension can answer questions or help you learn more about money management, parent, food, nutrition and health issues. MSU Extension educators integrate university and community resources to provide tools that help families succeed. For more information on FCS programs in Michigan, call your county MSU Extension office. Check the government pages of your phone book for contact information.

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contest in which they asked kids to respond to the question, “What do you really want that money can’t buy?” Over 2,000 essays and pieces of artwork were received. The answers may surprise you.

- They want **you**. They want your time and attention. It’s not the quantity that counts; it’s the priority that you place on being together so that it can be depended upon.
- They want **family**. Kids expressed a strong appreciation for the ties of kinship, including extended family such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers and sisters.
- They want more **free time**. Kids wrote that their lives seemed to be too hectic and exhausting and that they needed more time to just be kids. Many complained of not getting enough sleep and having too much homework.
- They want **real friends**. Having a connection with a true friend, as distinguished from just being popular, was very important to many of these kids.
- They want more experience of **nature**. Many fondly expressed their love of animals, trees and spending time in the natural world doing things such as hiking or picnicking.
- They want to experience **spirituality**. Kids want to find meaning in their world and long for inner peace. They want to know the answers to the “big questions.”
- They want to **make the world a better place**. Many kids expressed a willingness and desire to take on the world’s problems such as poverty, war and racism. They want to know how to make a difference.
- They want **acceptance and respect**. They want to be valued for who they are, not what they look like or what they wear.
- They want to **be safe and healthy**. Some were concerned about substance abuse, serious illnesses, being fat and violence in their communities.

The list of what’s important to kids is truly an awesome and timeless list of what we value in our society. The message really seems to be that *things* are not nearly as important to our kids as we are led to believe. When we hear the slogans “more is better” or “he who dies with the most

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toys wins,” we might better listen to “more fun, less stuff”! And it’s clear from these kids’ responses that family and friends are really the source of most of what’s fun – and important – in their lives.

For more information on parenting, money management, food, nutrition or health issues, contact the MSU Extension office. MSU Extension Family and Consumer Science educators are located in all 83 Michigan counties to integrate university and community resources to help families succeed.

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Submitted by Jo Bush-Glenn, extension educator, Montmorency and Presque Isle counties, Family & Consumer Sciences, Michigan State University Extension.

Sources:

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Taylor, Betsy. *What Kids Really Want that Money Can’t Buy: Tips for Parenting in a Commercial World*. New York: Warner, 2003.