

WHAT DO CHILDREN REALLY WANT?



By Lena Rotenberg

What are your warmest and most positive memories of your childhood? Please take a moment to ponder this question.

A Surprising Answer

My own answer doesn't include many material things. I was fortunate to have received hundreds of gifts as a child and a teen, but images of only a few cherished objects remain. A large green felt frog I hugged upon falling asleep. The

sole pair of Barbie and Ken dolls I owned. The smell of new books, always my favorite gift. The wristwatch my parents gave me when I turned eight, ownership of which, they told me, made me a responsible grown-up person.

At age 50 it is surprising to me that although my family wasn't particularly functional or supportive, the most positive memories of my first 15 years are centered around my family and the outdoors.

I looked forward to the ritual of Sunday lunch with my



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grandparents, uncles and cousins every week. I loved the smell of wood shavings and play-doh during winter afternoons in a cozy shop at the back of our house, while my mom read, my dad built things with wood and I played on the rug. I remember spending long hours in the family sedan—singing songs together, playing word games, making bad puns, or fighting with my sister—all the way to our vacation destination.

I enjoyed playing ball in the yard and frisbee on the playground. Picking wild strawberries at my grandmother's house. Riding my bike.

Eventually as a grown-up I resented having to wear a wristwatch. I no longer had time to read for pleasure. I couldn't find time to start a garden and plant fresh strawberries for my future grandkids to pick. For too many years I worked too many hours, to the extent that my memories of those years are a blur.

Time and Attention

According to Betsy Taylor in her 2003 book *What Do Kids Really Want That Money Can't Buy?*, if kids were granted one wish that would change their parents' job, 63% of children 9-14 would want their mom or dad to have a job that gave them more time to do fun things together. Yes, you read correctly—*more* time with their parents.

Many of us work long hours because we believe that we need to buy stuff for our children. According to Betsy Taylor's research, however, 90% of the kids she interviewed said that friends and family are way more important than material things. Only 13% wished that their parents made more money.

Stuff

The idea that kids need stuff—specifically certain brands of stuff—is continually fed to both children and adults through non-stop advertising everywhere we look.

In 2004 the average American child was exposed to 40,000 television commercials per year, more than 100 per day (not counting ads on the internet and billboards). If we include implicit advertising, in which products are "accidentally" included in shows and movies, we can start to understand where children get the idea that they *need* a certain product in order to be cool, attractive, or

even acceptable to their peers.

Marketing to adults is not much different. The ads we are exposed to everywhere tell us that if we don't clean our homes with certain products, feed certain processed foods to our kids, buy them certain electronics, or provide them with certain (usually costly—think Disneyworld) experiences, we are shortchanging our kids or perhaps even harming them. Thus we comply and buy the stuff, even when we can't afford it.

What For?

In 2007, credit card debt in America totaled \$947 billion, up from \$238 billion in 1989. We overspend to buy stuff that our kids don't really need nor truly want, and work very long hours to pay for it.

Much of what we buy in America isn't even benefitting American workers. Examine the labels of the products you consider buying, and you'll notice that far too many are imported from China. Shipping them literally from across the Earth produces carbon dioxide emissions, which lead to global warming. Consuming as much as we do isn't good for our children or for the environment.

Going Against the Tide

Most children don't really *need* more stuff, nor do they truly *want* more stuff. What they want and need is that their parents be relaxed and present while spending quality time with them.

Mindful consumption—buying only what truly improves the quality of your family's life, buying only what will be cherished and not forgotten in a closet together with more stuff—makes a lot of sense. It is time to reclaim the best memories of our childhoods and pass them on to our kids. Here are some suggestions you may want to consider:

- Figure out what goods and services are really important to your family, and which ones you're consuming only because of habit. Stop buying the latter.
- Establish family rituals.
- Be aware of advertising and how it shapes your and your children's worldview. Teach your children to be aware of advertising. (www.newdream.org/kids/facts.php has excellent information.)
- At least once a week, unplug your

family from all things electronic and enjoy the outdoors together, year-round. (www.greenhour.org can help inspire you.)

It's easier to figure out how to make these kinds of lifestyle improvements in the company of others who are on a similar journey. Being in a discussion circle—in your home, at your work or at your place of worship—enables you to explore options together with 8-12 adults.

In particular, reading and discussing the selected excerpts in the Northwest Earth Institute's discussion guide, *Healthy Children—Healthy Planet*, is an excellent way for parents and all those who cherish children to begin this exploration.

Being in a circle may offer you surprising discoveries, including more fulfilling relationships with your environment, your family, and yourself. ☺

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