

Can't Buy Me Love

Raising happy, healthy kids

BY CRAIG AND MARC KIELBURGER

As kids we often pestered our parents for the latest toys, gadgets and jeans. We wanted these things as soon as we saw them on television. What kid didn't? If you're a parent, this is probably not news to you. It's even more difficult today for kids to resist the allure of marketing messages. Indeed, TV ads drive

the purchases of four out of five children aged nine to 14, according to the latest YTV Tween Report.

So what did our wise parents do when we pleaded for the latest great things? We had to earn our own money to buy what we wanted by doing volunteer work. We helped out at a local homeless shelter and a soup kitchen in suburban Toronto, which taught us about the far more profound needs of

others. When we were finished, our parents handed over the money. They also let us decide what to do with it. And more often than not, we would forfeit the items we had longed for and donate the money to charity. This gave us a sense of happiness that lasted longer than a new video game.



We realize now that happiness was the key to our parents' approach. Along with clothes and electronic devices, marketers are selling the belief that if kids have certain things they will be more popular, which, in turn, will make them happier. And psychologists agree that being socially accepted is a driving force behind much of what kids do and desire.

Our job as adults is to help kids withstand the pressures to conform; to explain the importance of being true to their own values and interests. Once kids experience for themselves that feeling good really comes from living with integrity and doing good in the world, they will become more savvy at sizing up marketing messages.

➤ Kids aged nine to 14 have spending power of about \$2.9 billion a year (yep, that's of their own money) and influence \$20 billion in household purchases.

Source: 2005 YTV Tween Report

While kids can learn a lot from ads, they learn more from you, their parents. That's why it's valuable – as well as a good time of year – to reassess your own wants and show that material wealth and keeping up with the Joneses isn't on your priority list.

This may all sound simplistic, but through our work we have seen that the happiest people in the world aren't those with the coolest gizmos and gadgets. We've had the pleasure of playing soccer with street kids who had nothing more than stones to kick around, and have danced joyously with children who have no shoes. They taught us what we want all children to know: It's who you are, not what you have, that makes you truly happy.

Get in the Act: Next Steps

- 1 The next time your children ask for a brand name, ask them why they want it. Will having this item make them happier? If yes, ask how? Get them to think about what they think is "cool" about their friends. Is it the clothes they wear, or is it the kind of people they are?
- 2 Ask your kids to track their spending habits for one month. Then ask, "Are these necessary purchases?" If the same amount were given to a charity of their choice, how would the money be used differently? Would they be happy knowing their money is helping someone less fortunate? Your goal is to get them thinking.
- 3 As a family, establish a monthly "buy nothing day." Talk about how it affects your kids and the whole family.

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