

Marlyn Glen

Creating Kids as Consumers Piles Pressures on Parents

22 September 2011

It was President Franklin Delano Roosevelt who declared that there were four freedoms - freedom of speech and expression, freedom to worship, freedom from fear, and freedom from want.

Today in more affluent times, a less laudable one might be added - the freedom to shop till you drop.

Neal Lawson, Chair of Compass, the Left-of-centre pressure group, noted an article in the "Times" Style magazine earlier this year on young girls' preferences in handbags with the sub-heading "If you want to belong in the playground, you got to have the right arm candy".

Girls as young as 8 are being targeted.

If children were driven by markets rather than raised by parents, childhood would be as short as possible, so that children and youths become young consumers

This month UNICEF reported on the comparative states of contentment of children in the UK, Spain and Sweden.

All parents surveyed were deeply committed to their children, but the unhappy grip that pervasive consumerism has on the lives of some parents in this country was in evidence. ([link](#))

Research in each of the countries discovered that the children surveyed regarded "happiness" as having a stable family and plenty of things to do, especially outdoors, rather than owning the latest piece of electronic technology or the latest brand in clothes.

By contrast, some of the UK parents surveyed were "continually buy new things both for themselves and their children.

"Boxes and boxes of toys, broken presents and unused electronics were witness to this drive to acquire new possessions, which in reality were not really wanted or treasured.

"Most parents realised that what they were doing was often 'pointless' but seemed pressurised and compelled to continue.

"UK parents were often buying their children status brands believing that they were protecting them from the kind of bullying they experienced in their own childhood.

"This compulsive acquisition and protective, symbolic brand purchase was largely absent in Spain and Sweden where parents were clearly under much less pressure to consume and displayed greater resilience."

UNICEF looked at the effects of inequality.

The Gini coefficient is a standard statistical measurement of inequality of income in a country. Its values range between perfect equality -0 per cent - to complete inequality -100 per cent.

Sweden is a much more equal country than Britain, and had a Gini coefficient of around 23 per cent .

Scotland is a much more unequal society than Sweden with Scotland's Gini coefficient rising over the past three years from 33 to 35 per cent (In the UK overall, it has remained the same at 36 over the same period.)

Spain's Gini coefficient is around 35.

The research found that sensitivities about differences in possessions emerge by secondary school .

"At this stage material goods and brands began to play an important part in identifying and categorising people. ...Inevitably, expensive brands symbolised wealth with the rich and the poor marked out clearly by their possessions..."

Being a "have" or a "have-not" of the latest products of turbo-charged consumerism created unease amongst children in all three countries to some extent, but the UK parents seemed far more of a "consumer generation" than parents from Sweden and Spain.

UNICEF reported,

" We find children's growing awareness of inequality as they approach secondary school and the role of consumer goods in identifying and creating status groups within peer groups. Children have a very ambivalent attitude to those who appear to be able to afford all the latest status goods.

"Whilst many UK parents are complicit in purchasing status goods to hide social insecurities this behaviour is almost totally absent in Spain and Sweden. "

"Deprivation for Swedish parents was understood as living in an area where personal safety was threatened, whilst for Spanish mothers not being able to spend time with your children was seen to confer disadvantage relative to others."

" In the UK inequality was also seen in access to outdoor, sporting and creative activities, with poorer children spending more sedentary time in front of screens whilst the more affluent had access to a wide range of sports and other pursuits."

What makes the contents of the report especially troubling is that it is low-income parents already struggling to make ends meet who feel most pressurised and can least afford to buy new consumer goods for their children.

They are also some of the ones who work some of the longest hours.

Tired-out parents who are trying to balance family budgets daily on the edge of unremitting insecurity, will find it very difficult to provide theirs and their children's priority - more time together as a family.

UNICEF have called upon the UK Government to introduce a Living Wage for all its employees and sub-contracted workers to help establish a better work life balance for parents to work less and so spend more time with their families.

A Living Wage , as determined by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, is the minimum income required by a family or individual to maintain an acceptable standard of living.

Currently the minimum hourly wage rate stands at £7.20p an hour but this leaves part-time workers, mainly women, earning less than the accepted Living wage.

At the same time as UNICEF, Save the Children and the Daycare Trust have been highlighting the rocketing cost of childcare in Scotland, one of the highest world-wide, as low-income families find that its cost leaves comparatively little left for living costs, putting affordable work beyond their reach.

The Daycare Trust established that in Scotland the cost for 25 hours of nursery care was over £420 a month

By comparison in Sweden a maximum rate is set at just over £100 per month for full-time care. Families pay less for further children, around 1 per cent of the family's income.

As a consequence of the high cost of care in Scotland, many parents inevitably have to cut back on spending as a result.

An estimated half of those in deep poverty cut back on food.

Save the Children are calling on the Scottish Government to increase the numbers entitled to free childcare and nursery education.

It says that just a handful of Scottish councils are providing 15 hours of free nursery education for three and four-year-olds, which is a statutory obligation in England. (petition) <http://e-activist.com/ea-action/action?ea.client.id=7&ea.campaign.id=11866>

What is worrying is that as society overall has become more affluent, markets have trespassed into childhood just when children are developing ideas about who a child is, what a child should have, and how he or she is regarded by other children.

Fearful that their child will be the odd one out in the class without the latest transient favourite toy, gadget or clothes now on sale, some parents relent.

Children grow up to become parents themselves and have children who will be subject to the same influences of consumerism that they were, such as television.

Children are one of TV's most captive audiences.

The viewing habits of children under 5 in Scotland were revealed in the 2009 report "Growing Up in Scotland" with over a third watching more than an hour and a half of TV a day, and one child in ten watching more than two and a half hours of TV every day....and advertisers know that children can wield great power over adults to purchase for them.

That's why, since 1993, in Sweden television adverts aimed at the under 12 are banned before, during and after main time TV programmes because children in that age group cannot distinguish between a programme and an advert which is essentially a biased statement.

In Britain, the Bailey Report on the commercialisation and sexualisation of children has just been issued, and amongst its recommendations is the banning the employment of children under 16 as brand ambassadors and in peer-to-peer marketing

The culture of consumerism may bring instant status, but it doesn't bring long-term well-being nor long-term satisfaction.

It sharpens inequalities between those whose parents can afford and those who cannot, and there is a wealth of evidence showing that children who live in relative poverty or experience

the effects of income inequality will continue to feel their effects beyond childhood and throughout the whole of their lives.

Being caring and tolerant towards others are more important than the defining people by what they possess as market-based economies generally do.

"What's good for business" and the "freedom of individual choice" are not what's best for families.