

Study buys into kids' self-worth

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Experts say to raise a child's self-esteem, key in on an interest, interact with him and give him positive, supportive messages.

My 3-year-old recently lost it in a toy store because I didn't buy Max and Monty, an overpriced pair of dump trucks from the Thomas the Tank Engine series.

"Sweetie, you don't need Max and Monty," I said. "You have lots of Thomas trains."

I began to worry when he threw himself on the floor and began screaming, "But I want it! I want it!" Yes, it was fairly typical -- albeit ugly -- behavior for a U.S. preschooler, but was I also witnessing a sign of things to come?

Social scientists -- and plenty of parents -- have labeled the nation's 'tweens and teens "the most brand-oriented and materialistic generation in history."

Parents who hope to teach their children how to live simply have tried turning off the TV or muting the ads. They've joined groups such as Commercial Alert, Commercial-Free Childhood or Center for a New American Dream that advocate reducing U.S. commercialization. And they've modeled the behavior they want to see.

But because it's impossible to shield a child from his everyday environment and the influence of friends and peers, researchers who study materialism are suggesting an additional antidote: raising your child's self-worth and sense of accomplishment.

Low self-esteem can create materialistic tendencies in children, says Lan Nguyen Chaplin, an assistant marketing professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the co-author of a new study that looked at how materialism develops in youngsters.

Chaplin and a colleague found that from ages 8 to 13, a child's level of self-esteem drops, in part because of physical changes. The self-conscious 'tweens turn to material goods to make themselves feel better. Then, surprisingly, as self-esteem rebounds by the end of high school, roughly between ages 16 and 18, the need for consumer goods goes down, says the work published in the December issue of the Journal of Consumer Research.

If a child has a stronger sense of self during these downswings, the researchers believe, he's less likely to see material goods as the key to happiness and popularity.

"It's the strongest evidence to date that self-esteem is actually a cause of materialism; all past evidence has been correlational and thus has left open the possibility that

materialism causes low self-esteem, or there's some third variable," said Tim Kasser, a psychology professor at Knox College in Galesburg, Ill., who has studied materialism and values for 20 years but was not involved in Chaplin's study. What's important, he said, is that the study's finding "opens the possibility of future interventions designed to focus on low-self-esteem children and help them resist the problematic influences of consumer culture."

Experts say to raise a child's self-esteem, key in on an interest, whether it be drawing, music, sports or fantasy play; interact with him; and give him positive, supportive messages. But don't overdo it. "Don't drown him in praise, and make sure your words are genuine and honest," said Stanley Greenspan, a clinical professor of psychiatry and pediatrics at George Washington University Medical School and author of "Great Kids" (De Capo, \$22.95).

"It should not be empty praise," he added. "And you don't have to say a word. It can be the smile on your face, the gleam in your eyes."

Focusing on family activities rather than material things can also help, said Beth Casarjian, a mother of three and co-author of "Mommy Mantras" (Broadway, \$16.95). "Kids will remember the time you made a snowman for them a lot longer than the plastic toy that gets broken or lost shortly after it's opened," she said.

Also, give your child the opportunity to serve others in need. "Focusing on those with less gives a sense of perspective that can become part of a larger family dialogue of gratitude," Casarjian said. "Most important, helping others contributes to a child's genuine sense of well-being and self-worth."