

Raising Socially Responsible Children

Curbing the Demands: Creating Givers in a Consumer-Driven Culture

Allowing children to develop a sense of entitlement isn't good for them - or us. However, both adults and children are bombarded daily, with messages that we need more, more, more. These messages can come from television advertisements, magazines, peers, and even our own family. Knowing how to counter them can seem daunting, but it can be done.

Below, you'll find tips for helping you to teach your children how to live a life of gratitude and giving.

1. Set the example

Children learn more from our actions than our words, so it's important to think about what values we unconsciously teach. If every weekend is spent shopping, children quickly learn that "stuff" matters. Talk as a family about what your values really are. Try to articulate those values in one or two brief sentences, such as, "As a family we care about all people" or "As a family we want to help people who aren't as lucky as we are". Now think about how much time and money you spend on fostering those values. If the answer is "very little," think about what more you can do. The more your habits align with your values, the greater the learning for your children.

2. De-emphasise 'stuff'

A 2006 study from the Lego™ Learning Institute found that half of parents in France and Japan characterised shopping as a play activity. Our children are forgetting how to play and how to entertain themselves. Change this trend in your home by offering plenty of non-commercial, at-home activities. Play board games, go for a walk, garden, build with blocks, have a tea party, bake together, or teach your children a handicraft. These types of activities build competence and creativity. They also create a slower, more peaceful pace for children.

3. Create a climate of giving

Giving isn't something we do just during festivals or during a food drive or other charity event. Giving is a way of life and it starts at home. Encourage your children to look for ways to help, such as making a sibling's bed or helping with homework. On busy mornings, an older child can brush a younger child's hair or get breakfast ready. Consciously share



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the value that “we are a family and families help each other.”

Get to know your neighbours and be aware of their needs. Take a meal to a neighbour’s after surgery, illness, or the arrival of a new baby. Rake leaves or cut the grass in an elderly neighbour’s garden. Periodically ask your children to give away books and toys they no longer use to less fortunate children.

4. Manage technology wisely

Children are targets for advertisers. Many advertisements come directly into your home via television and the Internet, and they have a profound effect on your child’s susceptibility to consumer culture. It’s important to have conversations early about how advertising works.

Children need to understand that advertisers intentionally make products seem appealing and desirable, whether we need them or not. Help children learn to critically analyse a advertiser’s message and a product’s value. At the same time, limit your children’s exposure to media messages. Limit television viewing and/or opt for digital services that don’t include advertisements.

5. Provide role models

The media sometimes seems to encourage a culture of narcissistic, frenzied living. Children need to understand that, in fact, most people do not choose to live this way, now or in the past. Share stories about friends, family members, and influential people that exemplify a lifestyle of gratitude and giving back.

Read children’s books that broaden perspective while teaching character. For example, in *Little House in the Big Woods*, Laura Ingalls Wilder depicts a Christmas in which the children receive nothing but a pair of mittens and sweets, yet are wholly grateful. Younger children will enjoy *Boxes for Katje*, by Candace Fleming (2003). Based on a true story, a young American girl sends boxes of soap, chocolate, and socks to a family in Holland after World War II.

Children are often naturally somewhat egocentric. Helping them learn to think about others and avoid the traps of consumerism is an ongoing process that takes many years. Be patient, set the example, and be intentional as you plan activities and spend money; these are the behaviours that will help you raise socially responsible and compassionate children.

