

# Materialism in Children: A Single Case Analysis

**Abstract**

This poster summarizes current research regarding materialism in children and introduces a conceptual framework model. The model is applied to an individual case family with children displaying materialistic behaviors. Interventions for materialism as well as future research considerations are discussed.

**Introduction**

It has been decades since the American public has put so much thought and care into budgeting and spending. Due to the current state of the economy, people are rethinking their spending habits and becoming more conscious of where their money goes and rethinking what is "needed" to survive. This current state of mind is one positive that can be taken from the economic downturn in that this new awareness may help reshape some of the messages that children are currently learning about material goods.

Materialism among children has been a growing problem since the 1980's (Brunell, 1992). According to Belk (1985) materialism is defined as the "importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions". Marketing schemes have been promoting materialism for years and we are now seeing the impact that the media has had on families and children. Research has shown that there are many different negative outcomes for materialistic children such as unhappiness and dissatisfaction with life (Peterson, 2006), low self-esteem and self-worth (Chaplin & John, 2007), poorer psychological functioning (Kasser, 2003) and emotional and behavioral problems (Flouri, 2004).

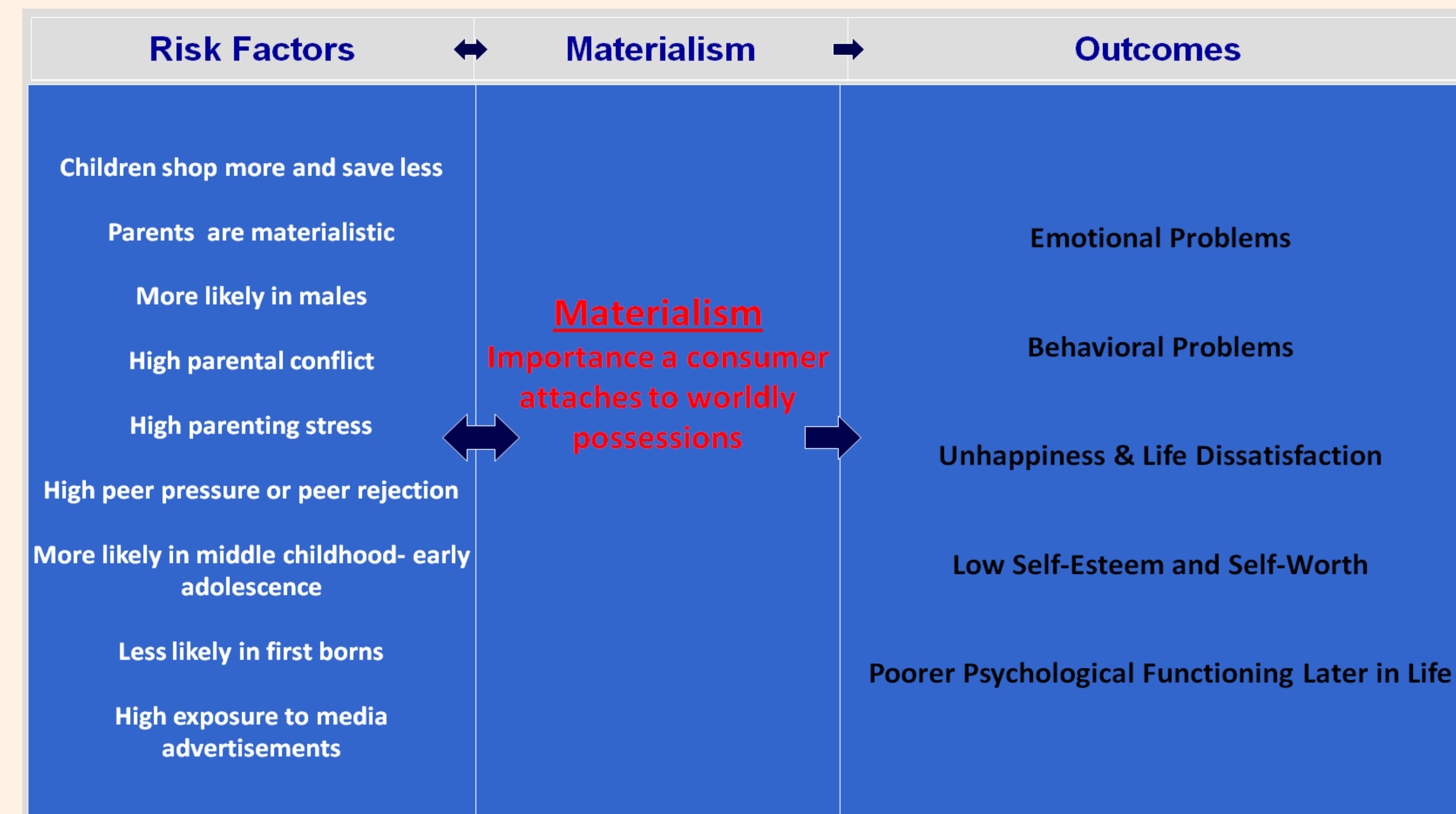
Because of these negative outcomes associated with materialism it is the premise of this poster to review the research and evaluate and identify risk-factors shown to correlate with materialism and test the validity of these factors with a family that currently has two children displaying many discouraging behaviors that indicate that materialism may be negatively impacting their lives and behaviors. This poster also addresses potential treatments as well as individuals who may best be able to implement and reverse course on the materialistic thinking of America's youth.

**Family Data**

The case family consists of four children, three males (8, 6 & 5), one female (3), a biological mother four foster families. The children currently live within an individual foster home due to previous abuse and neglect coming from their biological home. The children of concern in this poster are the middle male children. This is consistent with research that found that materialism occurs less in first borns (Zemanek et al., 2000) and is more likely to occur in males (Flouri, 2004). While there is varied research on the impact of social class this family would be considered to be low SES and according to Goldberg et al. (2003) this lends the children to be more susceptible to negative impacts of materialism.

According to research the history of high parental conflict and stress could be contributors to the problems and concerns that these children display due to the correlation found between high parental conflict and stress and materialism in children (Flouri, 2004; Flouri, 2007). Other contributing factors are the biological mother's tendencies to use material possessions and gifts as expressions of love. The message being sent to these children is that love and affection are displayed through materials and gifts. Given this message, if the children were to express a need to feel loved from their mother it may take form of them begging or asking for gifts. Goldberg et al. (2003) found that children with materialistic parents tend to score higher on materialism than children with less materialistic parents. The children's lack of concern or knowledge of the value of money (Goldberg et al., 2003), emotional and behavioral problems (Flouri, 2004) and peer pressure and rejection (Banerjee & Dittmar, 2008) are all indicators of risk-factors for these children to develop materialistic views that can potentially lead to negative outcomes as they age.

The first chart lists the risk-factors that research has denoted as correlating highly with materialism in children. It also gives a list of outcomes that research has shown occur for people that score high on levels of materialism. The second chart gives a look at the same risk-factors as applied to the indicated case family children. It also lists specific behaviors that have been noted in therapy, both individual and family, that demonstrates the negative impact of materialism for the indicated boys.



Risk Factors	Materialism	Evidence Toward Outcomes	Treatments
<p><b>Children</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Males</li> <li>•Middle children (2<sup>nd</sup> &amp; 3<sup>rd</sup>)</li> <li>•Similar in age (5 &amp; 6)</li> </ul> <p><b>Parental conflict and stress</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Reasons for removal from biological home</li> <li>•Foster care system</li> </ul> <p><b>Parental Materialism</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Mom displays her love through material possessions</li> </ul> <p><b>Peer pressure</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Competition by biological brothers and foster siblings</li> </ul> <p><b>Exposure to media</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Fascination with "Jordan's"</li> </ul> <p><b>Low concept of money</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•No understanding or care about Mom's lack of job or money</li> </ul>	<p><b>Materialism</b></p> <p>Importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions</p>	<p>Boys search Mom's purse immediately when she arrived for family counseling</p> <p>Ask for new things (shoes, game systems, clothes, etc.)</p> <p>Fight over hand-me-down shoes that appeared in worse condition than each child's current pair</p> <p>Compare possessions to each other and brag about who's is newer</p> <p>Tantrums when not getting something new and the other one does</p> <p>Refusing to go to anymore visits if Mom did not get him a birthday gift</p> <p>Constant interest in therapists' iPod because their older brother has one</p> <p>Comments about visits with biological mom involve toys or video games</p> <p>Fascinated with shoes and "Jordan's"</p>	<p><b>Parents</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Teach/model responsible money management</li> <li>•Limit and monitor children's exposure to media advertisements and improve media literacy</li> <li>•Refrain from modeling materialism</li> </ul> <p><b>School Personnel</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Identify children at-risk</li> <li>•Group or individual self-esteem interventions</li> <li>•Create non-materialistic school environment</li> <li>•Peer interventions targeting pressure and rejection</li> </ul> <p><b>Therapist</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Improve child's self-esteem</li> <li>•Develop self-concept not defined by material possessions</li> <li>•Help parents understand forces driving materialistic views and become more preventative</li> <li>•Alter children's comparison group for determining life's worth</li> </ul>

**Treatment Options**

Literature on the negative impact that materialism has on children's physical and psychological health raises many questions about the best people and ways to treat this growing concern (Kramer,2006). Although this poster does not exhaust all options and more research is needed to determine the most efficacious treatments, this poster has targeted three separate influences – parents, school personnel and therapists - that can help decrease a child's levels of materialism.

The research showing that children with materialistic parents correlates with materialistic children (Goldberg et al., 2003) helps demonstrate the importance of the parenting role in the development and maintenance of materialism in children and offers a spot for intervention as well. Some suggestions for interventions include: limiting children's exposure to media full of advertisements, being less materialistic as a parent, teaching children delayed gratification and money saving skills and limit children's decision-making role while shopping.

Schools are a viable and practical option for intervention due to the fact that children spend much of their childhood in schools and with school personnel. Also given the research implicating peer pressure and peer rejection as risk factors for materialism (Banerjee & Dittmar, 2008) school serves as a place to address these issues. Some suggestions for interventions include: identifying at-risk students, creating a non-materialistic school environment, interventions to improve self-esteem in children either individuals or groups.

Therapists can have a lasting impact through exploration of driving factors in child materialism. Through both further research and practice, therapists can help uncover and treat children that are growing up with materialistic views. Kramer (2006) believes it is an ethical responsibility for counselors, therapists and psychologists alike to respond to the dangers of materialism and youth consumerism. Some suggestions for practicing therapists include: helping parents understand reinforcers of materialism, working to build children's self-esteem and improve acceptance and recognition of self-worth in personal statements and achievements that reflect life, not particular goals or materials, change children's comparison groups and helping children recognize that material possessions cannot provide continued sense of self-worth that other relationships can (family, peers, partners).

**Future Research Considerations**

As noted throughout, materialism in children is a potentially damaging indicator of future problems and given the economic strife that is currently facing our nation, this is even more important. There have been a large number of research articles and studies done in order to better understand how materialism works in children; unfortunately, there has not been enough research indicating the influence that materialism has on children and ways to decrease the negative impacts. Because materialism has not been linked to issues such as school performance or attitude, the negative impacts have been overlooked by the American public (Goldberg et al., 2003). While intervening with children that are growing up in materialistic worlds is important, of greater importance is taking a preventative approach to addressing the negative impacts of materialism. Discovering the driving forces behind materialistic values and addressing them with a preventative, systems framework can benefit a larger number of children than individual work.

Ideas for future research should include: developing and testing evidence-based interventions, finding alternate and appropriate forms of advertisement for children, the impact that family values have on reinforcing materialism. Another area for future research involves the impact of SES and social class on materialism. Research has indicated that there are risk factors for both children from affluent families as well as those children living in poverty stricken families. This research may indicate that materialism does not discriminate based on social and economic lines; however, this would need to be tested further before conclusions can be drawn.

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