

Materialism Wearing Away at Our Kids

by Ted Slavin

I'll start with a warning up front. I have a heavily biased point of view on the topic of this column—the importance of children.

For starters, I am a teacher. No one is probably more surprised than I am to have found myself in a profession that I firmly decided against pursuing about 15 years ago. Still, here I am today, working with kids and enjoying it. I can only explain the change in my thinking through retrospect, remembering small opportunities to work with children and youth over time. Helping an Arctic youth art program, leading a youth group in Quebec, serving as a director with my wife for a summer camp — it all reads like ... well ... my resume. It also reads like a subtle plot, nudging me closer to the teaching profession by helping me understand that kids can be mind-blowing to work with.

I'm also heavily biased about children because I share two fantastic daughters with my wonderful wife, Lindsay. Thus completes the notice of bias for what follows.

There's no shortage of messages stating the importance of children. The expressions we can summon could be considered clichés but their truth is no less apparent: children are the future, they are treasures to be nurtured, they are the wonders of our world. And yet, in many cases, not just in countries we may label as 'developing' but even here in Canada, many children suffer unspeakable cruelties and abuse, poverty and misery.

The physical suffering experienced by certain populations of children such as child labour, domestic abuse, etc., is in the sights of several agencies that stand for the children's protection. That being the case, however, there is another pervasive force at work that wears away on the hearts and minds of our children — the force of materialism.

In December of 2010, the governing council of the international Bahá'í community wrote, "It must be realized that the isolation and despair from which so many suffer are products of an environment ruled by an all-pervasive materialism."

Perhaps most shocking for me, however, was the following sentence that calls parents to reflect on how they, however unintentionally, have moved their children towards materialism through the choices they have made for themselves. The world's "...admiration for power, its adoration of status, its love of luxuries, its attachment to frivolous pursuits, its glorification of violence, and its obsession with self-gratification," have assaulted children through media and society. These words have been a wake-up call for me as a parent to consider what kind of example I've been setting for my children, and they're words that Bahá'ís are now contemplating around the world.

Fortunately, there are groups, both religious and not, that help children and youth recognize their worth in contrast to the dollar value placed on them as consumers with purchasing power. The Bahá'í community, too, is learning to support neighbourhood children's classes and youth groups that teach them that they are noble with the ability to serve the common good. But we still have a long way to go. For those lessons of service to be effective, I have come to the realization that I, as a parent, must set an example for my daughters and show them that I am willing to step out of the alluring, illusive comforts materialism claims to offer.

For sake of our children and the future world we want our children to lead, I extend a humble invitation to all parents to think about what message we are giving our children in the way we live. Also, consider and come together in our neighbourhoods to address the important matter of raising children who will contribute to the transformation of society through service to others.

As lofty and laborious these objectives for a better future may be, I think we can agree that our children are worth it.