

Welcome to the Science of Parenting a podcast dedicated to sharing scientific information with parents. I am Lori Hayungs, Family Life Program Specialist for Iowa State University Extension and Outreach.

If you've been paying attention to the evening news...you've likely heard about the young man whose mother arranged his escape from law enforcement and his trial attorney who cited a defense of "affluenza". Affluenza?? What's that? It sounds like an illness, or disease? What is affluenza? How does it affect our children and what are experts telling us about overindulgence, or what some describe as the epidemic of overconsumption. Other experts have described affluenza as the inability to understand consequences of one's actions because of financial privilege. Whatever way you look at it—it's about having too much stuff...and maybe not enough positive adult interactions. But it all begs the question...How much is too much? And how can I protect my child from the negative effects of too much consumerism?

We mistakenly assume that children who are fortunate enough to come from families with money and higher socioeconomic status would be at low risk for mental illness and behavioral problems. But surprisingly, recent studies have suggested several negative consequences that children of affluence exhibit at rates higher than their lower income peers. Suniya Luthar, Developmental Psychologist with Columbia University has discovered that among affluent youth--depression, anxiety and substance use rates are higher than their lower income peers. She sites two causes—pressure to achieve and isolation from parents as contributing factors. Highly stressful, competitive lifestyles, and unavailable parents create an increased vulnerability to mental health problems and compromised wellbeing.

Is it better for a child to be rich than to be poor? Money has the ability to enhance the quality and quantity of basic daily living needs. It's only when families become too invested in extrinsic rewards, while at the same time neglecting intrinsic needs such as closeness in relationship that the negative mental health outcomes result. The excessive pressure to achieve and physical and emotional isolation and neglect from parents, regardless of financial resources has extreme negative effects on children.

What conditions spell risk for children? Certainly—no child is immune from stressors from the home environment. Extremes of any environment have their own unique set of problem. Children of affluence are not exempt from severity of mental health problems. To protect your child from affluence, remember it is truly a balance that puts more emphasis on love than on money.

Join us this month on the Science of Parenting blog as we discuss overindulgence and its impact on a child's happiness. We will discuss how to make conscious decisions on money spent on our children. We will discuss happiness and how to encourage life satisfaction at an early age. We will explore consumerism and how to determine childhood needs vs. wants. We will encourage you to blog on ways that you have rewarded your children intrinsically and how you have reduced their need for extrinsic rewards. We will discuss ways to help your child redirect their energy and desires from material goals to other rewards such as friendship, nature, art, and literature. As always we will look forward to hearing you and your own ideas on the importance of spending more time than money on your child.