

Chapter 7 Manage Their Environment

“That’s so sad. That kid just wasted about five bucks on that grab-claw machine. I don’t get why he would put any money in that machine any way. What if he actually won one of those big, cheap bears?” Any one of my four boys could have shared this comment with me. Time and life have blurred the exact details of this memory, but the quote is crystal clear. My child saw the grab-claw machine in a way that its creators never intended. Despite the allure of lights and the multi-colored stuffed animals and its convenient placement in the waiting area in Denny’s, this machine did not seduce my child into playing it or even asking to play it. Instead, he was saddened by loss of resources of the other child.

As parents, one of our most powerful tools in combating materialism in our children is the ability to manage their environment. In their very early years of life, we have almost complete control over where our children go, what they see, and what they do. It will be well over a decade before they will have actually have enough resources and mobility to buy anything that we do not approve of or participate in any activity that we don’t feel is beneficial to them. How we introduce them to new experiences is critical.

Unpacking the Grab-Claw Machine

As every new experience presents itself, we also have the ability to share with them a perspective in which to view the experience. For years, it is easy enough to ignore the grab-claw machine and others like it. It easily fades into the background of life. If we don’t draw attention to it or give it power, a child will be four or five years old before they begin to get curious about it. Once they notice it, we can then guide them to an understanding that:

- 1) The machine is specifically designed to rarely grab a prize.
- 2) The prizes are worth very little and often times not much more than the cost of playing.
- 3) We don’t have any use or need for the item in the machine.

- 4) The machine is quite similar to gambling in that the player often ends up spending more just trying to “win” something for “free.”
- 5) If they actually wanted what was in the machine, it makes more sense to save the money and go buy it.

The reverse is also true. If we hold up the 18-month-old to the machine and point out all the cool goodies inside, we are nurturing an interest and then very quickly a desire to play the game. If we give the two or three-year-old quarters each time we come across the machine, we quickly train them to ask for money each time they see it. Subconsciously, we also train them to have a desire for the stuff inside the machine and a new awareness of the possibility of getting something for nothing.

The Power of Conditioning

Physiologist Ivan Pavlov was able to demonstrate the power of classical conditioning in his famous experiments with his dog. Over a period of time, he would ring a bell immediately before feeding his dog. Very quickly, after only a few repetitions, the dog would anticipate the food and would begin to salivate at the sound of the bell alone. Likewise, we must recognize that **we** condition the habits and desires of our children.

I will never forget the reality of this a few days after one of our trips to Florida when the boys were still little. To make the time pass more quickly and with more love and joy, we let them go into the gas station and pick out a treat each time we stopped for gas in a new state. The thrill of the anticipation of the stop and the extended periods of time enjoying their suckers or pretzels after the stop, caused my husband and me to revel at the genius of this plan.

Once home for a few days, I stopped to get gas. All three boys came bounding out of the car and dashed into the gas station, excitedly picking out their treat. A reality check quickly followed as they sulked back to the car empty-handed. How quickly they assumed that a gas station meant a treat!

In what ways have you conditioned a response to a given situation? Does your child expect you to buy him:

- a treat at the store?
- a replacement toy when one breaks?
- some books from the school book order?
- a toy from a gift shop or toy store?
- popcorn at the movies?
- a gumball at the gumball machine?
- all new clothes every September?
- the latest, greatest trendy “*thing?*”

Does your child expect:

- a vacation every spring break?
- an extravagant birthday party with fifteen of his closest friends?
- \$20 at the arcade?
- a trip to McDonald’s if they’re hungry?
- a trip to the latest movie at the theater each weekend?

Until we recognize the incredible influence that we have to manage a child’s environment, we are missing out on a powerful tool in minimizing their pursuit of the stuff.

Because of conditioning away from the culture of stuff and towards the joy of family and friends, we can walk peacefully by gumball and super ball machines. We can shop for other kids’ birthday presents at toy stores without incident and when we’re hungry, we drive past the McDonalds as we eat Cheerio’s out of the bag in the car. No one is overly concerned with the latest, greatest *thing*. We celebrate birthdays with a few close friends and we watch the latest movies from Red Box.

Defining: ENOUGH

If we are truly seeking to raise children who are grateful for all that they have been given, we must help them determine what *enough* is. Authors Clark,

Dawson, and Bredehoff present a useful continuum to consider when teaching kids in their book, *How Much Is Enough?*

SCARCITY—ENOUGH—ABUNDANCE—TOO MUCH

Parents receive the most joy by giving their children abundance. But if the child does not understand what is *enough*, then he is unable to be grateful for abundance. If a child is conditioned to expect a trip to the movies every weekend and popcorn and a drink at every movie, then this simply becomes part of *enough* for them. It is more difficult for them to be grateful for the experience because they have been conditioned to expect it as a part of daily life.

How can you help your child define enough? Use the word at every possible opportunity. That's *enough* ice cream. You've done *enough* things today. You have *enough* books already. How many Star Wars guys will be *enough*? It is *enough* to be at the movie tonight.

When you are at the zoo or the children's museum and your child asks for a toy from the gift shop, you can explain, "Visiting the _____ is *enough* for us. We did not come to buy anything today." I have also used the less honest but equally effective, "Those toys are for kids who didn't get to come today because they are at home sick."

If you do take a child to Disney World and he asks for a \$10 balloon in the shape of Mickey Mouse's head that lights up, you can respond, "It is *enough* that we have come to Disney on vacation...and no one actually needs a \$10 balloon shaped like Mickey that is going to pop or deflate within hours and make you cry." OK, at least get the first part of that one in.

When people are asked, "How much money do you need to have enough," the answer is almost always 10% more than they have currently. No matter what the salary, people always need "just a little bit more."

According to the book, *The Millionaire Next Door*, the profession that has the highest percentage of millionaires is not doctors, lawyers, or professional sports players. It is actually auctioneers. That's right. The guy that

is selling stuff for, “Ten dollars, ten dollars. Who’ll give me ten dollars?” is actually more likely to be a millionaire than the doctor next door.

This is because these individuals understand the concept of enough. Their job is to go from business to business and estate to estate selling things for one tenth or less of their original value because someone else didn’t understand the concept of enough. Auctioneers usually own their own companies and choose to live differently than other businessmen because they witness daily the brevity and the worthlessness of the stuff. They keep their overhead low and conduct business differently than many. They understand enough.

If we raise children who have an understanding of *enough*, we can be confident that they will be able to manage their own finances one day, no matter what their salary is. By managing their experiences in the early, formative years, we can minimize the insidious draw of culture for a yearning of more, more, more.

Recognizing the power that we as parents possess in creating and managing the environments of our children is critical. We can use this power proactively to shape their experiences and teach them the concept of enough, or we can relinquish this opportunity and allow the culture of consumerism and materialism to speak into their hearts. The choice is yours.