

Chapter 8 Don't Let the STUFF Have Power Over You

Disney World. Potentially an entire chapter in itself. It is also the backdrop for one of the infamous “Michael Stories” that lives on in Miller Family Lore. He was about five years old at the time and every bit the strong willed pre-schooler that God had designed him to be. Early in the day, he noticed a spinning Buzz Lightyear light-up *thing*. The word *thing* is the only word that can be used since the object held no true purpose. When you pressed a button on the side, it would light up and Buzz, along with a few multi-colored plastic things, would spin around and make a whirling noise. It seemed as though every fifth child in the park had already conned their parents into the need for one of these *things*. “Wow, those are cool,” was the beginning of the love affair. “Hey, there’s another one,” continued their clandestine meetings. By the end of the day, despite our comments about price (\$13.95) and need (none), he sat with the coveted toy cradled in his arms on the floor of the Disney gift shop. (Not sure why we went inside—you got me there.) He looked up at me with tear -stained eyes and presented his final request to consummate the relationship, “Please, can I get this?”

I bent down and tipped his chin away from Buzz and toward my eyes, “Do you see this toy? This toy has power over you. We are in the middle of Walt Disney World and you are sad and crying. All day we rode rides and saw cool stuff, but you were distracted and frustrated every time you saw this toy. You let this toy control you. You let it ruin your day.” That was it. Michael, the strong-willed child, did not like when any one or any thing had power over him. He put Buzz back on the shelf and walked out of the store a free man.

Pointing out to your children when they are letting a toy “have power over them” is not fool-proof, but helping them understand this concept is a strong first step in breaking free from the bondage of *stuff*. Yet before we teach this idea to our kids, we must first completely understand it ourselves.

In financial counseling, we noticed a common trait among many of our couples that had difficulties controlling their spending. They received a lot of joy in pursuing the stuff. Many were collectors of some kind. One lawyer collected

pens. He was always buying, selling, and trading special pens. My husband and I wondered if he ever accidentally bought his own pen back. A rheumatologist collected humidors—one in walnut with oak inlays, another in oak with walnut inlays. These were families who found themselves drowning in debt, yet were unable to release the very things that were causing them to sink.

I am reminded of the story of trapping raccoons by placing shiny paper in a bored hole with nails driven into the sides. The nails trap the raccoon because his fist is too tightly balled up while holding the paper. If he would simply drop the treasure, he would be free. Yet the hunter is usually the wise one in this match-up.

If you find yourself in a continual cycle of pursuing the next thing that you need, you may be unable to teach this lesson on the power of stuff to your children until you have mastered it yourself. Consider how much time you spend researching items on the Internet, wandering through Goodwill in hopes of finding treasure, or trolling neighborhood garage sales in search of The Fisher Price Barn for \$1. If the pursuit of stuff brings you an inordinate amount of pleasure, you may be letting stuff have power over *you*.

When you recognize that your child is fixating on something, ask them if they are allowing this thing to have power over them. Wanting things is OK, but obsessing over them and putting much of your energy into obtaining them is unhealthy.

Beware of Collections

Teach your kids that companies exploit this desire by offering collections of things. Why would you be satisfied with a Polar Bear Web Kin that allows you to play online with your friends, when you can have the Web Kin Frog and Cat to play with as well? What? They now have clothes for your pet and you can buy a trampoline for their virtual room? Well, you gotta do that! Back in the day when Beanie Babies were the rage and my mother-in-law was trading them out of the back of her car, the Ty Company had over 30,000 different Beanie Babies on the

market, if you included the same bears but in different styles with different smiles or hair bows.

When I taught middle school in the late nineties, I witnessed a classroom of 6th grade girls with Beanie Babies lined up on their desks as they worked. As soon as the first girl brought her Beanies in, they seemed to multiply exponentially. Quickly, before the teachers had time to put the “No Beanie Babies in School” rule in place, the toys became a status symbol of coolness. Girls without Beanies or with only one were openly asked, “How come you don’t have more Beanies?”

Help your child understand why companies do this and how it tricks them into buying more than they really want. It tricks them into never being satisfied with what they have. Kids don’t like to be tricked.

At seven, Matthew became a collector of Bakugons. These are small balls that are somehow magnetized to pop open when you roll them. Of course there are hundreds of different shapes, sizes, and the very clever point values. Despite my attempting to immunize him against the Bakugon bug, he was stricken. He examined them at the store, used his allowance to buy more, and asked for them on all gift-giving occasions.

I cannot say with certainty that we triumphed over Bakugons, because he still has 38 in a special container in his closet. But he did stop collecting them. He did finally say with certainty, “I’m done buying Bakugons, Mom. I have enough.”

In Gloria DeGaetano’s novel, *Parenting Well in a Media Age*, the author writes of an experiment done with rats. With electrodes attached to the pleasure sensor areas of their brain, the rats were able to either choose a button that produced food or a button that stimulated the pleasure sensors in their brain. Most of the rats in the study ended up starving themselves to death by consistently choosing pleasure over food.

The acquisition of stuff can be a powerful motivator to pursue even more stuff. With many kids and adults alike, buying things produces good feelings. Jane Velez-Mitchell, in her novel *Addict Nation: An Intervention for America*, parallels compulsive shopping with any other addiction. She writes that like all addicts, the shopper needs to increase his or her purchases to get the same “high” that they got at the beginning. Also, not shopping actually produces symptoms of withdrawal from those who are addicted.

In order to effectively minimize the influence that *stuff* has over our children and ourselves we must acknowledge this power. We must realize that companies have spent huge sums of money to train us to think that our stuff is not only valuable but also that our stuff reflects our own value to others.

In *The High Price of Materialism*, Tim Hasser explains that the number one factor that is common in children who are not materialistic is that they had a nurturing parent. It seems that if a child is raised in a home where they are loved and supported unconditionally for who they are, they are much less likely to turn to *stuff* to determine their innate value. By definition, nurture means to encourage something to flourish. Can we as parents foster a sense of acceptance and love for their very being that will be enough to keep them from looking to *stuff* to fill that void?

A parent with very young children has the power to never allow the love affair with *stuff* to begin, but it is important to recognize the enemy working against our best efforts.

ADVERTISING TARGETS

One of the reasons that the *stuff* can wield so much power over adults and children is that marketers have delegated billions of dollars to achieve just that. In Juliet Schor’s book, *Born to Buy*, she exposes the methodical measures that marketers go to in order to ensnare children’s brand loyalties. One method is for some companies to donate their products to kids who are deemed popular, or trendsetters, to get their products to catch on in entire school systems. A child or

two are selected and are given the merchandise to wear or bring to school. Because of the social influence these particular children wield, an entire classroom, grade, and ultimately an entire school is infected with the desire for the latest and greatest thing.

PLENTY OF STUFF

According to The Toy Research Institute, the number of toys sold annually rose 20 percent between 1995 and 2000. The United States now consumes 45% of the worldwide toy production, yet it only has 4.5 % of the total population.

One reason for this may be that over the years, the cost of many of these toys for kids has actually fallen sharply making it even easier to obtain more and more *stuff*. Garage sales, resale shops, and E-bay also have contributed to some parents excusing their prolific acquisition of *stuff* with the proverbial, "I got a great deal on this so..." Just because we "can afford" it, doesn't mean that it adds any value what-so-ever to a families' quality of life.

When the boys were really young, I would take them to a garage sale or two with their allowances tightly grasped in their fists. I figured their meager allowances would go a long way at a garage sale. Unfortunately, I was all too right. What actually occurred was that we were now the owners of someone else's useless stuff like a giant pair of boxing gloves, plastic roller blades that were capable of causing permanent brain damage at a moment's notice, and an elaborate Habitrail for a gerbil who had been perfectly happy to live in a spacious aquarium.

Realizing where this train was heading, we disembarked as a family and decided that if we truly wanted something, we would know what it was and we would save up for it or put it on a birthday or Christmas list. Desperately searching other people's garages for a hidden treasure was simply training young children in the pursuit of the *stuff*. The pursuit of the *stuff* often has even more power over our behavior than the *stuff* itself.

From the floor of the Disney World gift shop, Michael has progressed to become a young man who can research an item when necessary and wait patiently until he is sure that he wants something. He still is a spender. He still finds great joy in the things that he spends his money on, but he no longer is captivated by the allure of “the next thing.”

One evening when he was about 14, I walked into the room where he was on the computer. He very quickly shut it off with a look of guilt and fled the room. Uh oh, I thought. What inappropriate site had he been on? A quick check of the history showed that he had been... shopping for airsoft guns. Twelve different sites with hundreds of different guns. Obviously he thought we would be upset if we caught him shopping online.

The next day my husband and I sat down with him to discuss his progress from the days of Buzz Lightyear. Shopping around for competitive pricing and researching an item were valuable tools for making wise financial decisions. We praised him for going a year being happy with the gun he had. We reviewed his financial filter that he used to decide that he needed another gun because, “a P-9 pistol is one you can use in a battle that is easy to get to for close shots. It’s good in night battles because you don’t want to slam your bigger gun into a tree in the dark. I found a great deal on the Airsoft GI web site...” O.K., Michael, you had us at hello.

Helping him understand himself and the very real power of *stuff*, enabled him to curb his once insatiable appetite for more. Over time his need to spend has diminished and his financial filter has become more developed. He also now has a keen sense of when things might have power over one of his brothers or even one of his parents. As his dad updated the family on the arrival of the new I-Phone 4.0, Michael commented, “Are you sure this phone is not having power over you, Dad?” It’s good to have accountability.