

Avoiding 'affluenza'

Today's youth face the perils of over-privilege.

By Melonie Magruder
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The perils that today's adolescents face are many: exposure to violence through media and in real life, drugs, premature sex, bullying and the list goes on. However, child development specialists and family therapists in the Malibu community say the phenomenon, affluenza, presents a looming psychic and developmental danger to our adolescents as well.

Word Spy gives this definition for affluenza: "An extreme form of materialism in which consumers overwork and accumulate high levels of debt to purchase more goods."

A term coined by Dr. John Levy, former director of the C.G. Jung Institute in San Francisco, affluenza grips the younger generation from all sectors of society.

"Affluenza is epidemic and it is not just a problem for the rich," said Betsy Brown Braun, a child development specialist with a practice in Pacific Palisades. "It can hit children of parents with modest means as well as kids coming from the gated communities of the rich and famous."

An obsessive concern for "more" and "bigger" characterizes affluenza, Braun explained, "and comes from a society that promotes consumerism and materialism. The message our children hear is 'Gimme, gimme, gimme.' And parents become incapable of distinguishing 'I want' from 'I need.'"

Braun, who will speak on the subject, "Affluenza: The Perils of Over-Privilege," Monday at Webster Elementary School, says her practice aims to help parents negotiate the treacherous ground of adolescence in an age when a bombardment of outside media competes with the performance of

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normal parental duties.

"I see people with solid values come to me," Braun said. "They are struggling to withstand tremendous societal pressures and affluenza is a creeping parental problem."

"Kids take their behavioral clues from their parents and people are using acquisition of things to replace their need for personal contact," Braun continued. "Almost as people will use food to pad themselves from real feelings, people will buy stuff. And the greater ability you have to buy stuff, the 'better off' you are."

Braun said she believes that much of this phenomenon is due to lack of family interaction and parents who promote "one-upmanship" in their community.

"Look at birthday parties for kids today," Braun said. "When I was young, it was pin the tail on the donkey. Today, you must have a giant, inflatable 'Moon Bounce' on the lawn and hired entertainers and huge goodie bags, and if you don't have that, you are seen as lacking. The kid learns that value is in having more and better."

She cited the case of a client recently, whose child invited a school friend for a play date. The family was of modest means and, when the school friend showed up, he asked where the pool and tennis courts were. Learning that none of these were available, the youngster said he wanted to go home, as "there was nothing to do."

Annie Thiel, a practicing family therapist in Malibu, said the phenomenon is an addiction.

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addiction to wealth," she said. "These days, wealthy parents feel they should pay for 'experts' to train their kids so they abdicate their own authority. Then you have nannies and tennis coaches and all sorts of other care-givers, and you end up with kids lacking identity."

Thiel said this issue can be particularly difficult for children of famous people. "They hear all the time, 'Oh, that's so and so's kid.' Children of the rich and famous must work doubly hard to forge a self-identity and, if their care and nurturing is left to someone other than the parent, it is terribly confusing for the child."

The result, she said, is that lonely kids in McMansions find

friends because of their play toys, not because of their own company.

"It is the heavy price of privilege," Thiel said.

But affluenza affects children at all consumer levels. Tom Sanchez is a teacher with the LAUSD and sees the acquisition frenzy in children of lower- to middle-income families.

"They see it on TV and have to buy it," he said. "Their single-mindedness is almost an autistic response."

Braun said the solution to affluenza lies with parental role models.

"It must be about *presence*, not *presents*," she said. "Media is always going to be there, so it is up to parents. It's about consciousness raising. What kind of citizens are we creating? What are their values?"

"Remember that you are a parent. You are not a friend," Braun added. "So be comfortable that your child might not like you when you discipline."

Thiel agreed.

"There are simple solutions to avoiding affluenza," she said. "Spend more time with the kids. Don't delegate to caregivers. Every child should be responsible for chores and self-discipline. They should know how to budget themselves, so strict allowances are a great idea. And finally, point out the value of someone for who they are or what they've done, not how much money they make."

Braun's free lecture will take place Monday at 6:30 p.m. in the library of Webster Elementary School.