

Why depriving your kids of toys is a great idea

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Madeleine Somerville makes the case for having less, and enjoying life more

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My five siblings and I grew up in a cruel wasteland of deprivation that included whole-wheat cereals, secondhand clothing and shared rooms. To add insult to injury, we didn't even have a TV to distract us from our hardship.

My parents weren't poor, so as a child I simply assumed they had a sadistic streak. Looking back now, as a wise old 31-year-old, I get it. And not only do I get it, I've come to realize that depriving your children is wildly underrated.

The road to this realization was long. In my mid-20s, I realized that, although reusing and recycling had become popular, the concept of *reducing* was being left in the dust, largely because no one could figure out how to make money off of it. I began buying less, making more, and taking a critical look at how much I consumed. As I delved further and further into the bizarre world of bamboo-fibers and up-cycling, my austere childhood took on an entirely different slant. I realized with a shock that my parents were cool: they had been mindful about our planet and its resources since the 1970s.

It wasn't a great surprise then, that when I became pregnant with my daughter Olive, I vowed to carry on this family tradition of neglect.

The reasons, in my mind, were simple. Consuming for consumption's sake is an epidemic – especially when it comes to kids. The moment we see that second line on the pregnancy test, the shopping begins. This relentless pursuit is expensive, stressful, takes a devastating toll on the environment, and has become so commonplace that we barely blink when someone suggests a \$30 plastic teething toy as a “must-have” item.

I'm now a single mum and because I make most of the day-to-day decisions in my daughter's life, my demented ideas encounter virtually no opposition. I've become drunk with power. Yet, while focusing on experiences as opposed to material items has been a positive choice, I sometimes have doubts.

I see Olive delight over battery-operated guitars and plastic dolls at friends' houses, and I feel sharp pangs of guilt. I look at her room, all of her toys contained in one meagre basket, and I feel an uncomfortable nagging feeling settle into the pit of my stomach. I don't want her to miss out, I don't want to be the mean mom, and what's more, I don't want her to look back at her childhood and see lack, instead of love.

Some drown their mom-guilt with wine, I like to bury it under reams of cold, hard research. So I started digging, and what I discovered is great news not only for the piles of plastic toys slowly suffocating in our landfills, but for our kids, too. In a study designed to identify and prevent addictive patterns in adults, two German researchers (they would be German) somehow convinced a nursery school to remove all toys from the classroom for three months.

Remarkably, the scenario didn't devolve into Lord of the Flies acted out in miniature. Instead, teachers reported that while on the first day the children seemed bewildered and confused, by the

end of the third month they were engaged in wildly imaginative play, able to concentrate better and communicate more effectively.

Similarly, a study by American childhood developmental researchers reported that when children under five have too many toys, they can't concentrate on one thing long enough to actually learn from it, instead they feel compelled to rummage through and touch everything without ever fully immersing themselves in any one activity.

It's not just science that recommends you say yes to less; your wallet and the natural world outside your door agree. The average American household has over \$15,000 in credit card debt and Americans generate 254m tons of trash a year. Those in the UK don't fare much better, with an average household consumer debt of £6,454, and 100m tons of waste.

I don't think it's much of a stretch to infer that at least a small portion of that is from all of the paraphernalia we buy for our kids. It's tough on our pocketbooks and it's tragic for the landfills. This is especially pertinent now, when many of us are headed to the malls with back-to-school shopping lists in hand. If you're feeling ambitious, try to use this shopping hell to try out a new, scaled-back approach: as you shop, try to evaluate whether what you're buying is a want, or a need. Will it add to your child's life or distract from it?

It's time to rethink deprivation as a parenting strategy. Living with less, it turns out, means more. More money in our savings account, more space on our shelves, and best of all, more communication, imagination and concentration from our kids.

If all else fails, I comfort myself with the idea of Olive on a therapist's couch in 15 years. "I wasn't allowed to have balloons at my birthday parties," she'll gasp, through thick sobs, "Because they were plastic."

Sadistic, indeed.