

# I want less choice not more

I grew up with precious little choice about anything. You ate what you were given, went to school where you were told, wore your sister's hand-me-downs (sometimes, to be honest, ate some pretty second-hand stuff too). And twice a year - birthday, Christmas - you got a present.

We weren't poor at all but that was entirely normal and I don't remember feeling remotely deprived. Today, as we can see all around us, children seem to have everything - designer clothes, computer games, fussy eating habits and the attention span of itchy gnats. A report yesterday from the Children's Society found that one in ten kids now has mental illness diagnosed and it concluded that materialistic consumer pressure may be partly to blame, with children from poor backgrounds the main victims.

Where is it coming from, this consumer pressure? First, from television, and the false dreams on offer there (we didn't watch much telly either). Children from poor backgrounds, as well as having less money to buy the latest clothes or electronic games, are more likely to have parents without time to spend with them, and homes without access to outside space, so are far more likely to end up spending hours in front of the telly soaking up adverts alongside the easy gratification offered by cartoon, fantasy or drama.

You cannot just blame the parents for this; many will be working hard, with no choice, just to put food on the table (some will be cleaning your house or looking after your children); after all, how many can afford a house with a garden in a city or suburb these days? On the *Today* programme yesterday, the chief executive of the Advertising Association, Baroness Buscombe, argued that advertising to children could be a social good, among other things contributing to healthier lifestyles. I profoundly disagree. I think it is overwhelmingly damaging. It exists to sell things - toys, dreams, promises. That's all.

Of course parents can correct bouts of consumerism in their children by teaching them what is and is not affordable, but why subject them to the clever traps of marketing people in the first place? Pressure is bad enough as it is, from schoolfriends and celebrity excess, without allowing some of the cleverest adult minds in the sharpest advertising agencies in the world to manipulate them as well.



'We want to turn this on its head in a sense and talk about how we can empower parents and children', Lady Buscombe added. 'I mean, have they asked parents, do they want children's programmes, because of course commercial broadcasters rely on advertising to fund children's programmes? Well, do we want commercial children's television? Couldn't we live without it? Her comment betrayed an interesting assumption: that children have a right as consumers to as wide a choice of programmes as possible.

But why is it in a child's interests to be treated like a consumer? It has yet to be proven that giving even adults a wide range of choices improves their lives. In many instances, from too many yoghurts in the supermarket all the way up to a supposed choice of doctor or school, it is just confusing and stressful. I think the fewer, carefully selected, choices we can give young children, the more we help them. Watch the exhausted face of a six-year-old confronted by all this year's Christmas presents, without the time to play with any of them for more than a few minutes, and see what I mean.

But choice is the buzzword of the moment, and we are all supposed to be in favour of it, even when, as in choice of school for instance, it translates into that panicking six-year-old, now a worried 11, being made to pay for the gap between a political rhetoric of choice and the reality of a stressed-out parent obsessing over league tables.

What are we teaching here? What is everyone, from the politician who parrots choice in public services to parents squeezing their children through tortuous entrance criteria to Lady Buscombe, teaching those kids? That they have a right to a wide choice, in everything. It isn't true. There is no automatic right.

We are spoilt, and we are spoiling our children. They need to be taught to look down as well as up; to choose to feel fortunate, and not envious - and to recognise that gratification isn't as easy as buying a new toy or switching on a dream. And, as my mother would have been delighted to hear, it will not cost a thing.

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## 5. POST-READING

### Discuss.

- In your opinion is having a wide range of choices more confusing and stressful than beneficial?
- To what extent do you agree with the writer that society today is not teaching children the right values?

## Reading comprehension: I want less choice, not more

Reading for details: Read the text and choose the best answer for questions 1-7.

1. What does the writer say about her early years?
  - a. She had to put up with a life of necessity.
  - b. She resented the way she was brought up.
  - c. She was used to her way of life.
  - d. She disliked having to share things with her sister.
2. Why are children from poor backgrounds more likely to suffer from consumer pressure?
  - a. Their parents are victims themselves.
  - b. Their daily habits will differ from the habits of children who are well-off.
  - c. Their parents aren't doing enough to overcome their poverty.
  - d. Marketing agencies target them specifically.
3. How does the writer feel about Baroness Buscombe's argument that advertising to children can be a social good?
  - a. She agrees but under certain circumstances.
  - b. She is opposed but concedes that Buscombe has a point.
  - c. She feels it is somewhat misleading.
  - d. She is completely opposed.
4. What point does the writer want to make about children and advertising in the 5<sup>th</sup> paragraph?
  - a. Children can do without it.
  - b. Parents need to be more vigilant.
  - c. Children should not be exposed to celebrities so much.
  - d. School friends can influence children more than advertising agencies.
5. In the 7<sup>th</sup> paragraph the writer argues that
  - a. having too much choice is more stressful for children than adults.
  - b. children shouldn't be given so many presents at Christmas.
  - c. having fewer choices would be to everyone's benefit.
  - d. children need to be given more time to enjoy their presents.
6. The writer's point in the 9<sup>th</sup> paragraph is that
  - a. children should not be given any choice.
  - b. children should not be taught that they have a choice in all matters.
  - c. children have a right to be informed of all their choices.
  - d. children should be taught how to make the right choices.
7. The writer concludes that
  - a. we need to be thrifty.
  - b. it is inevitable that parents will continue to spoil their children.
  - c. it is not easy to achieve gratification.
  - d. we need to reassess what gives a sense of fulfilment.

## VOCABULARY: Guessing the meaning of unknown words.

Look at the words highlighted in the text and choose the correct meaning a,b or c.

### 1. **hand-me-downs**

- a. objects that belong to a family and are given from one generation to another
- b. clothes that have been used before they have been given to someone else to use
- c. items that have been borrowed from another family member

### 2. **remotely**

- a. in a very slight way
- b. at a long distance from a place
- c. to a great extent

### 3. **soaking up**

- a. absorbing a liquid
- b. using up the whole amount of something
- c. being exposed to

### 4. **bouts**

- a. annoying habits that are hard to stop
- b. short periods of time when something unpleasant occurs
- c. brief periods of a recurring illness

### 5. **buzzword**

- a. a word or phrase used by advertisers
- b. a word that makes one feel happy and excited
- c. a fashionable word or expression

### 6. **parrots**

- a. speaks in a nasal tone of voice
- b. repeats something often without understanding it
- c. speaks using colourful language

↓ SCROLL DOWN FOR ANSWERS ↓

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**Reading for details:**

1. c
2. a
3. d
4. a
5. c
6. b
7. d

**Vocabulary:**

1. b
2. a
3. c
4. b
5. c
6. b