

Cycle of 'compulsive consumerism' leaves British family life in crisis, Unicef study finds

British parents are trapping their children in a cycle of "compulsive consumerism" by showering them with toys and designer labels instead of spending quality time with them, a UN report has found.



Children themselves said spending time with their families made them happier Photo: ALAMY



By [John Bingham \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/john-bingham/\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/john-bingham/)

12:01AM BST 14 Sep 2011

The [\(http://www.unicef.org.uk/Latest/News/Research-shows-UK-children-caught-in-materialistic-trap/\)](http://www.unicef.org.uk/Latest/News/Research-shows-UK-children-caught-in-materialistic-trap/) report by **Unicef** (<http://www.unicef.org.uk/Latest/News/Research-shows-UK-children-caught-in-materialistic-trap/>), the UN children's agency, warns that materialism has come to dominate family life in Britain as parents "pointlessly" amass goods for their children to compensate for their long working hours.

While parents said they felt compelled into buying more, the children themselves said spending time with their families made them happier.

Unicef UK said the obsession was one of the underlying causes of the riots and widespread looting which gripped the UK last month, as teenagers targeted shops for the designer clothes and goods.

The study, which was jointly funded by the Department for Education, was commissioned after an earlier Unicef report ranked Britain as the worst country in the industrialised world to be a child.

It prompted David Cameron to coin the expression "broken Britain" and fuelled calls for a raft of new family

friendly policies.

In its latest study Unicef commissioned researchers from Ipsos Mori interviewed hundreds of children in Britain, Sweden and Spain, asking them about their ideas of happiness and success.

Researchers found that consumerism was less deeply embedded in Sweden and Spain, which rank significantly higher for the wellbeing of children.

British parents work longer hours and are simply “too tired” to play with their children whom in turn they can no longer control.

Families across the country, irrespective of social class or race, are less likely to spend time, eat or play games together, with children often left to their own devices.

In British households television is increasingly used as a “babysitter”, while children's bedrooms have become “media bedsits” with computers, games consoles and widescreen TVs taking the place of dolls houses or model aeroplanes.

The report found that children from poorer families were also less likely to take part in outdoor activities than those in the other countries, opting for a “sedentary” lifestyle in front of the television or computer games. The trend was more marked in teenagers.

Among the more startling examples of obsessive consumerism uncovered by the report was a mother fretting over whether to buy a Nintendo DS games system for her three- year-old son convinced that he would be bullied if she did not get him one.

In Sweden family time was embedded into the “natural rhythm” of daily life with parents sharing mealtimes, fishing trips, sporting events or evenings in with their children.

While in Spain fathers tended to work long hours, children enjoyed more attention from their mothers and wider family circle.

But in Britain, some parents spoke of having “given up” on taking their children to organised activities.

The report, authored by Dr Agnes Nairn, an academic and marketing expert, said: “Parents in the UK almost seemed to be locked into a system of consumption which they knew was pointless but they found hard to resist.”

She concluded that there was an “enormous difference” between Britain and other countries.

She said: “While children would prefer time with their parents to heaps of consumer goods, [their] parents seem to find themselves under tremendous pressure to purchase a surfeit of material goods for their children. This compulsive consumption was almost completely absent in both Spain and Sweden.”

Last night Unicef called for the Government to ban advertising aimed at children under the age of 12 and encourage parents to work fewer hours and spend more time at home. It also warned councils against cutting children's playgrounds and other facilities.

David Bull, Unicef's UK director, said: "Right now politicians are grappling with the aftermath of the riots and what they say about our society, culture and families.

"The research findings provide important insights into the pressures children and their families are facing and may speak to some of the underlying issues relating to the disturbances.

"It is vital that those in power listen to what children and their families are saying about life in the UK. The government needs to make sure parents earn enough to spend fewer hours in work and more time with their children, protect children's play facilities from spending cuts and consider reforming the laws controlling advertising to children."

It comes just six weeks after a landmark Government review into childhood by Reg Bailey, the chief executive of the Mothers' Union, which found that parents are often complicit in the sexualisation and commercialisation of children.

Last night Mr Bailey said the Unicef findings echoed his own experiences.

"I think it is an issue with the nature of our society, that so often we've placed a dependence on things rather than being," he said.

Sarah Teather, the Children's Minister, said: "We share Unicef's concerns about the rise of consumerism among children, and it's worrying to see that in some cases parents are under the same pressures.

"We are clear this needs to be tackled and are currently working with businesses and regulators to implement the recommendations from Reg Bailey's review on commercialisation and sexualisation of children."

The original Unicef report, which published in 2007, ranked Britain bottom out of 21 developed country for child welfare. It was third from bottom for educational standards, bottom for self esteem and second from bottom for the number of teenage pregnancies.

British children were twice as likely as the average to have been drunk by the age of 15, and significantly less likely to be in two parent families than those elsewhere, were more likely to have tried drugs and had one of the worst diets in the developed world.

Sue Palmer, author of the book Toxic Childhood, said: "We are teaching our children, practically from the moment they are born, that the one thing that matters is getting more stuff.

"We are probably the most secular society in the world, we do not have the counterbalance of religion but at the same time we are a very driven society very into progress and making money."

[Read the full report commissioned by Unicef](http://www.unicef.org.uk/Documents/Publications/UNICEFIpsosMori_childwellbeing_reportsummary.pdf)

[\(\[http://www.unicef.org.uk/Documents/Publications/UNICEFIpsosMori_childwellbeing_reportsummary.pdf\]\(http://www.unicef.org.uk/Documents/Publications/UNICEFIpsosMori_childwellbeing_reportsummary.pdf\)\)](http://www.unicef.org.uk/Documents/Publications/UNICEFIpsosMori_childwellbeing_reportsummary.pdf)

[OECD: primary class sizes 'among biggest in the world'](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/8759743/OECD-primary-class-sizes-among-biggest-in-)

[\(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/8759743/OECD-primary-class-sizes-among-biggest-in->\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/8759743/OECD-primary-class-sizes-among-biggest-in-)

[the-world.html](#))

[UK student tuition fees 'third highest in the world'](#)

(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/8759436/OECD-UK-student-tuition-fees-third-highest-in-the-world.html>)

[UK has more jobless teenagers than Slovenia](#)

(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/8759320/OECD-UK-has-more-jobless-teenagers-than-Slovenia.html>)

[British youngsters get worst deal in the West, says UN](#)

(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1542649/British-youngsters-get-worst-deal-says-UN.html>)