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UK children stuck in 'materialistic trap'

The Guardian, September 14th 2011

British children are caught in a “materialistic trap” in which they are unable to spend enough time with their families and instead are bought off with “branded goods” by their parents, the United Nations children's agency Unicef warns.

Three years ago, Unicef ranked the UK at the bottom of a league table for child well-being across 21 industrialised countries, by looking at poverty, family relationships, and health. It attempted to discover why children fared better in nations that were both more equal to the UK - Sweden - and more unequal, such as Spain.

The results were startling. Children in all three countries told researchers that their happiness is dependent on having time with family and friends and having “plenty to do outdoors”. Despite that, parents in the UK, especially those in low-income families, said they felt “tremendous pressure from society to buy material goods for their children”.

To help alleviate such pressures, Unicef calls for a series of measures. It says the government should follow the example of Sweden by banning television advertising aimed at children younger than 12.

The UN also calls for government to pay all employees and subcontracted workers the living wage, the minimum pay rate required for a worker to provide their family with the essentials of life, which in London is £8.30 per hour.

Anita Tiessen, deputy director of Unicef UK, said that much of the problem was the “long working hours of British families. Parents have a much greater pressure in fulfilling the commitment to their children. They try to make up for this by buying their children branded clothes, trainers, technology.”

By comparison, this “consumer culture” does not exist in Sweden or Spain. In Scandinavia, child care duties are more equally shared and family time is prioritised. In Spain, where women tend to stay at home there is a great reliance on the extended family with grandparents and uncles and aunts helping out with children.

The children's agency also says that, in an age of austerity and in the aftermath of the riots, local authorities need to be honest about the impact of spending cuts on children - so that “funding is protected for play facilities and free leisure activities for children”.

Kate Mulley, head of policy development and research at the charity Action for Children, said that the report showed “some families are facing growing pressures that undermine family life. These are the families we need to focus on to help them overcome multiple and complex problems.”

She said that “substantial cuts are reducing activities and support available for children, young people and families who are often already at breaking point. These services are critical in developing the social and emotional skills needed to maximise children and young people's potential. The government needs to stop just hearing young people and actually listen to them.”

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