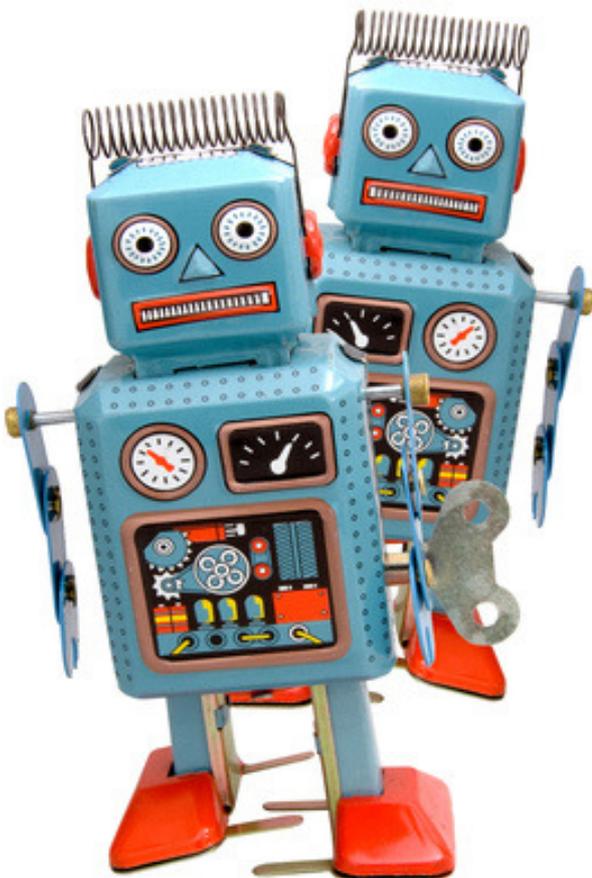


# resistance is futile?

helping kids learn generosity



## to boldly go...

In the hit TV series Star Trek, we meet the Borg: an aggressive alien race, half humanoid, half robotic. Their sinister task is to assimilate all other species into soldier drones, thinking as one and sharing a single consciousness.

Their message: we are Borg; resistance is futile.

The world in which our children and young people live is light years away from the experience of many parents and it is changing all the time. A recent report<sup>1</sup> found that 89% of adults believed that children were more materialistic than earlier generations.

Kids have high expectations and sophisticated tastes! Relentless advertising, the power of TV and greater spending power will surely assimilate our kids into materialist, consumer drones. Therefore, so the argument goes, resistance is futile!

This Stewardship information paper sketches some of pressures children and their parents face and suggests some practical ways in which the values of generosity and gratitude can be nurtured and help shape godly attitudes that will last a lifetime.

## tell me the story of Jesus

In a wonderfully honest poem<sup>2</sup> Stephen Dunn's young daughter attends a church holiday club.

To his surprise and discomfort she is joyfully captivated by the story of Jesus, in sharp contrast to his own unbelief.

**Soon it became clear to us:  
you can't teach disbelief to a child,  
only wonderful stories,  
and we hadn't a story nearly as good.**

Children love stories, imagination, life and the story of Jesus is the best there is.

But it is not the only story that our children hear today.

*"Soon it became clear to us: you can't  
teach disbelief to a child,  
only wonderful stories,  
and we hadn't a story nearly as good.*

*I can't remember ever feeling so  
uncertain about what's comic, what's  
serious. Evolution is magical but  
devoid of heroes.*

*You can't say to your child  
"Evolution loves you." The story stinks  
of extinction and nothing  
exciting happens for centuries.*

*I didn't have a wonderful story for my  
child and she was beaming."*

**Extract from  
Smithville Methodist Church  
by Stephen Dunn**

<sup>1</sup> Children's Society Reflections on Childhood: Lifestyle 2007

<sup>2</sup> Smithville Methodist Church by Stephen Dunn. The poem is freely available in the web.

## just buy it!

Today kids have more disposable income, more opportunities to spend and more people telling them how to spend it.

Young people in the UK are a commercial market place worth over £30 billion. Research<sup>3</sup> found that children as young as ten were being primed to be shopaholics and developing a passion for conspicuous consumption. 78% of 10-12 year olds say they enjoy shopping. The average ten year old has internalised 300-400 brands and brand awareness seems to peak in early teens. In another study<sup>4</sup> half of the young people surveyed said they liked buying things their friends had and over half believed that they would be happier with more money to buy things.

**"The selling of lifestyles to children creates a culture of material competitiveness and promotes acquisitive individualism at the expense of the principles of community and co-operation."**

**Rowan Williams**  
Archbishop of Canterbury

TV is still the primary way the modern story of 'just buy it!' is told.

90% of households with kids have digital TV with up to 25 children's channels (in 2007). 70% of kids have a TV in the bedroom. But although kids do watch and enjoy children's TV less than half of 12 to 13 year-olds list any specifically children's programme in their 'top three' compared with three quarters of younger children, aged 9-11. Over 60% of tweens watch music channels, half watch soaps and sport, 40% watch horror and a third watch reality TV.<sup>5</sup>

But while we worry about TV their world is moving on!

A notable feature of teen life is 'media stacking'. Kids will watch TV while looking at My Space or Facebook, chatting on MSN or Twitter, listening to their MP3 player – and answering the mobile phone! 90% of kids (5-16yrs) homes have a computer and just under 40% of children have their own computer with 20% having online access in their bedrooms.



<sup>3</sup> National Consumer Council report Shopping Generation 2005

<sup>4</sup> Watching, Wanting, Wellbeing: exploring the links National Consumer Council - URL

<sup>5</sup> We should be aware of significant variations. In more disadvantaged areas children aged 9-13 watch more commercial and adult-themed TV and are six times more likely to watch TV at mealtimes. 97% have a TV in their bedroom compared to 48% in affluent areas. There are also gender differences. Girls are more likely to watch children's programmes, music channels, soaps and reality TV while boys watch more sports, horror and comedy.



Apart from the stranger danger and exposure to porn there is advertising pressure. Favourite internet sites for young people can have up to one quarter of their adverts designed for adults. In addition, around one quarter of adverts are integrated into content and three quarters of these are not labelled as adverts. Children can sometimes find it hard to know where content ends and advertising begins.<sup>6</sup>

Watching TV seems to cultivate more materialistic values in us<sup>7</sup>. The more time children spend in front of the TV and computer, the more materialistic they tend to be. The NCC research *Watching, Wanting and Wellbeing* indicated that materialistic values tend to disrupt family dynamics, with children having both a lower opinion of their parents and also of their own self-esteem.

One dynamic is that watching TV tends to distort our perceptions of the real world. We believe there is more affluence (and more crime) than is actually the case and this must shape our attitudes and aspirations. Another concern is that advertising takes the kids' side and drives a wedge between parents and kids. The verdict of the National Consumer Council is withering:

**'A new generation of young people aged 10 to 19 are now avid shoppers. They have more pocket money, more influence over family spending and more sway over social trends. Yet they are reported to be the least happy generation of the post-war era. They are relentlessly targeted by companies and advertisers, on television, on the internet, in magazines, in music videos, in films, and research shows that they are not always able to distinguish ads from 'real' content. They also say that they feel ripped off by providers ranging from mobile phone companies to newsagents. "**

**So how can we help our kids navigate a complex consumer world, find their own identity and develop their own values of generosity, gratitude and giving?**

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<sup>6</sup> National Consumer Council report Fair Game December 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Television's Cultivation of Material Values: Shrum, Burroughs and Rindfleisch Journal of Consumer Research 2005. See also *Watching, Wanting and Wellbeing*.

## 1. managing TV

TV is strongly linked to materialistic values and there is certainly a place for watching less. But far from being a negative thing we should be confident of the positive values that flow from reducing TV, computer and games console time. In 2007, the BBC programme Panorama aired a remarkable social experiment. Children in year three of a Manchester primary school and their parents agreed to have their TV and computer games taken away for two weeks. During the fortnight the children's school work improved and their ability to engage with their families also improved. Parents realised how TV was used as a way to control the children and used it as a form of child care. Susan, one of the mums said:

**"It was just there was a lot more laughter in the house. We were having a good laugh and we kind of, you know, we were more of a family."**



When the screens were returned usage returned to normal – but a week later viewing had dropped by 50% from before the experiment. <sup>8</sup>

But we can do more than just turn off the TV. We need to build children's media awareness by spending time with them watching what they watch and helping them to become more savvy about messages and advertising. Many programmes, and very often American ones, carry strong moral messages which can be explored. We can also encourage kids to interpret the adverts and be critically aware of the messages that programmes are communicating.

## 2. growing up generous

Building resistance to a consumer culture and promoting the value of generosity is a challenge but it's not all an uphill struggle. Children know what makes them happy. The recent report from the Children's Society stressed the primary importance for kids of love, family and friends. They also know how to be generous. A 2002 poll found that three quarters of secondary school children are involved in fundraising and think that charities use money wisely while over half want to do more charity work through school.

Sheila and Mark have long had a small whiteboard in the loo at home which is used for communicating all sorts of family stuff, serious and silly. Mark found that the kids had decided this was the time and the place to start their '*What we want for Christmas*' list! Helpful, but Mark wanted them to be thinking also of what they could give, not just what they would receive. Without further prompting the 12 year old had renamed the whiteboard '*Presents to give to others*'. She used her own money to buy most of them.

<sup>8</sup> See the summary at [www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/panorama/6748119.stm](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/panorama/6748119.stm). The full programme can be viewed at [video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-2815291822556009866#](http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-2815291822556009866#)

The simple but important point is that you don't need to do much to get kids thinking and acting differently and practicing generosity. What is needed is not a violent 180 degree handbrake turn but a gentle adjustment on the tiller as they learn to navigate the waters of money and possessions.

## 3. the importance of gratitude

We can be really encouraged also by the findings of research conducted by Harris in the States in 2009. As you might expect, the research found that both tweens and teens would rather spend time buying things than doing anything else. Teens especially value technology and both teens and tweens enjoy receiving money. But the research also found that the negative effects of materialism and consumer culture can be significantly reduced if young people are *grateful* for their material possessions. Those who were grateful for what they had, even if they highly valued them were more generous towards others.

A lovely French proverb says that 'gratitude is the heart's memory'. When we are grateful we remember what we have and are more able to appreciate the needs of others. When we are grateful we are able to savour what we have, to enjoy what God has given to us (1 Tim 6:17). Gratitude anchors our hearts and our minds to what we have been given rather than being swept along with the desire for more.

In short, our task is not simply to reduce exposure to materialistic messages but to encourage our children and young people to appreciate what they have, to practice gratitude and generosity.

## 4. learn to fly before leaving the nest

Although learning to read the media and practice gratitude happens at school, among friends and in church, the primary place in which kids learn is of course the home. But this is not easy with demands on parental time and so many competing opportunities. The challenge is to be as creative as we can be in our homes and our congregations at modelling and nurturing gratitude and generosity. We need simple, fun ways to remember that what we have is a gift and to practice gratitude.

But we also need help. Interestingly, an American study of congregational life found that less than a quarter of people thought that the church was good at supporting parents and families in building family rituals, traditions and practices which helped nurture values.<sup>9</sup>



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<sup>9</sup> Search Institute Building Assets, Strengthening Faith 2003.



## start early

While there are no easy answers and no guarantees of success there are things that adults can do to nurture giving in children. Here are some starters for ten.<sup>10</sup>

### They are for parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, godparents, friends ....you!

- **Model generous giving:**  
children learn from what they see so never be afraid to explain to children about your own giving. If you give by envelope to the church let your children see you do it or watch as you write out a cheque to church or charity. If you give by standing order explain in case they think you give nothing. If you are embarrassed about your giving, do something about it!
- **Avoid negative giving messages:**  
don't send the wrong message by slipping them 10p as the offering plate comes around. The amount is meaningless and kids will know that; they also know it was not from them. Resist the urge to reward any expression of generosity with material things; warm appreciation and thanks is all that is needed.
- **Give, save, spend:**  
children learn from what they do not just what they hear so encourage children to both give and save from their own income, whatever it is. They learn (sometimes painfully!) how to spend within their means. Don't step in too quickly when kids make financial mistakes. Kerry's dad was a financial adviser. She learned early about money and this Christian family gladly sponsored a child overseas. But Kerry was never asked to contribute from her own money. Thirty years later with kids of her own Kerry knows this was a missed opportunity.
- **Child sponsorship:**  
this is a great way to open kids' eyes to another culture, to other people's needs and to make their giving personal. Write – internet messaging is sometimes possible; keep a photo available if you have one and work at keeping the relationship alive.
- **Family planning:**  
let children be part of the family decisions about where to give and encourage discussions. Children can also play a part in determining some spending decisions where appropriate. One family experiencing a recent redundancy put a much smaller than usual amount of money in a box for holidays and invited the children to share in the decision about how to spend it. They happily settled on a series of days away from home with the highlight being a day trip to a major theme park.
- **Christmas unwrapped:**  
Christmas is the obvious time for teaching children to give to others. Christmas shoeboxes are ideal because they are teaching aids about what is *needed* by others, not just toys.<sup>11</sup> What about giving to a children's home or a charity in your community? Supermarkets often have collection points for local charities at Christmas. Don't forget your sponsored child.

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<sup>10</sup> We'd love to hear your stories; what works, what did not work! Visit our blog and let us know what has worked for you or see the appendix for some real life stories.

<sup>11</sup> Visit <http://www.operationchristmaschild.org.uk/> for more details

- **Celebrate the seasons:**  
Harvest is a good opportunity to flag up generosity but don't limit it to tins at the harvest service. Churches often have special harvest collections so make a point of joining in with the kids. Giving at Easter and Pentecost can make an important theological point about God's giving to us as well as raising the profile of these festivals.
- **Celebration giving:**  
think about birthdays and family holidays or special family celebrations as opportunities to give as the family is celebrating together. Think of the powerful message to a child of giving a special gift to the sponsor child on a child's birthday or to a charity when the family is going on holiday.
- **Giving accounts:**  
why not set up a special giving account for your kids? At birthdays and Christmas alongside a gift to the child give them also a monetary gift into the giving account so they can be generous to others. Older teens who are earning often want to give but may lack a specific focus and so the giving impulse is lost. A charitable giving account from Stewardship is a great way to facilitate regular giving even if the young person does not know exactly where to give. Occasional or spontaneous gifts can be made as needs arise, on TV, at school or in church and of course regular focused giving can grow naturally from this.
- **Let them see the need:**  
don't be over-sensitive about exposing kids to need. Watch Comic Relief with them, discuss charity adverts on TV; take them to a soup kitchen with you. A friend took his (old enough) kids to Kenya to see first hand the development work the family was supporting.

## 5. flying alongside

Churches can and should nurture giving and service amongst young people. One study<sup>12</sup> identifies 8 key points:

- Commit to the well-being of others as a core value of the congregation: the family, the church must have as a shared, articulated value a concern for others.
- Cherish children and youth, value them so that they learn to value and care for others: the congregation must actively value children and be seen and felt to do so.
- Connect to faith and tradition by teaching the biblical principles of sharing: at home and in the congregation a young person must be taught to make the natural connection between faith, generosity and service to others.
- Establish norms and expectations so that generosity becomes natural: giving and serving must become 'just what we do', 'just who we are'. Generosity must be embedded into the fabric of the church or home.

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<sup>12</sup> *Growing Up Generous: Engaging Youth in Giving and Serving*: Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, Elanah Delyah Naftali and Laura Musegades

- Provide opportunities for youth to practice giving within the broader context of managing money well: concrete opportunities and ways in which young people can actually give of and manage their money. Perhaps there is a particular challenge and opportunity for older teens preparing to be students.
- Provide opportunities for youth to practice serving by engaging in projects: some churches are already excellent at encouraging young people to seize opportunities for short term service.
- Support families because kids learn from what they know from their homes and parent(s).
- Connect generations so that kids learn from congregations: this involves a challenge to adults to release time to be invested in kids so that they learn to grow up generous.

