



Wants Versus Needs

To live is to consume. The first definition of consume is “to eat, drink or ingest.” Consumption is about taking care of hunger and thirst. The second definition is “to buy.” The third is “to use up.”

Modern consuming is more about buying than eating or using things up. Advertising is a business to get us to purchase good and services, and advertising to children is big business, with estimates of over \$15 billion used yearly to advertise to children. The psychology of advertising plays into our core emotional systems and can make it difficult for us to differentiate between needs and wants.

The novelty of advertised items along with the subtle social attachment communicated make certain commercials irresistible. Realizing that our wants are about satisfying emotional needs can help us navigate the rough and tumble waters of “I want.”

Think. Get your children thinking about needs and wants by asking questions. Many of the advertised items targeted to our children are foods or perhaps foodstuff is a better description. Ask what kinds of food do we need to stay healthy and have good energy. What kinds of foods should we avoid? Read aloud the labels of your child’s “gotta-have” cereals, sodas, or candy bars. Ask your child if each ingredient is something that we would want to put into our bodies to stay healthy and have high energy.

Compare. For children over age six, money talks. A \$5.00 box of cereal or use the \$5.00 for other kinds of food? Two boxes of cereal per week for a year. Is it how you want to spend \$520? How much oatmeal can you buy for that much money? What do you want to put in your body for optimum health?

Watch. Spend time watching television and screen time to be aware of all the kinds of consumer messages your child is receiving. The average American child today is exposed to an estimated 40,000 television commercials a year—over 100 a day, according to an American Psychological Association Task force report from 2004. This same report recommended restrictions on advertising that targets children under the age of eight, based on research showing that children under this age are unable to critically comprehend televised advertising messages and are prone to accept advertiser messages as truthful, accurate and unbiased.

Help your children think, compare, and watch out for messages that create want. Help your children discover the difference between a want and a need, and you’ll get through the rough waters of “I wanna.”

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