

CONSUMER SOCIALIZATION OF CHILDREN

Consider these episodes:

- A single parent is clipping coupons on a Sunday afternoon. His 10 year old daughter is nearby, helping her dad organize them—by product category and by date of expiration. She makes a mental note: next time she sees a coupon in the newspaper, she will clip it and place it in these sorted envelopes.
- A mother is window shopping in a department store with her eight-year-old son. Suddenly, she begins to examine gym bags. She looks at one, puts it aside noticing its high price, loudly speaking her thought (as people generally do when they are with a “shopping pal”). The son points to another. “No, I am looking for one in black only,” she says. Then she looks at another. The son scoops out yet another black bag. The mother looks at it briefly and rejects it, saying, “It has no pocket.” “It does,” says the son, pointing at the zippered pocket. “No, I mean a mesh pocket (i.e., the one made of net fabric)—like this other one does,” says the mother. Then the dialogue proceeds as follows:

Son: Why is it made of a net?
Mother: To put your wet swimming suit in it.
Son: You can put it in the other kinds of pockets too.
Mother: Then it won't dry off.
Son: Why can't we dry it off at home?
Mother: We can. But if it is left in the bag for too long, the bag will smell musty.
Son: It will?
Mother: Yes.



Children's socialization begins early in life

How do children learn to become consumers? By this we do not mean merely how they learn to consume. Rather, we mean how they learn to shop, to value things, and to save money. How do they, in other words, become socialized to engage in marketplace exchanges? Socialized they do become, to an amazing degree. In one study, children 7 to 12 years old were found to possess strong brand preferences. And children who cannot yet read have been found to be able to recognize brand symbols, such as McDonald's arches and the Tony the Tiger mascot for Kellogg's Frosted Flakes.⁴⁵ Some observers believe that school and kindergarten children have had more experience with the marketplace than with arithmetic or writing!

Consumer socialization refers to the “acquisition of knowledge, preferences, and skills to function in the marketplace.”⁴⁶ That is, consumer socialization occurs when one or more of the following are learned or acquired by children:

- **Awareness of various products and of their role in solving their personal problems**
- **Knowledge about the marketplace (e.g., what is available where) and about various product features**
- **Skills in judging the utility of various product features**
- **Preferences among alternative brands and products**
- **Skills in making “smart decisions,” such as making price and product comparisons, discounting advertising and salesperson claims, and evaluating trade-offs across options (including the option “to buy or not to buy”)**

That is, children learn about desirable product features, alternative products, brands, stores, and other market options, and make this information a part of their stock of marketplace knowledge. And, they can acquire the knowledge and skills to make “smart choices.” They can learn to clip coupons, do comparison-shopping, and look for deals on their mobiles.

Learning and socialization are lifelong processes, continuing through a person's mature years. We focus here on childhood socialization, since that is when the first wave of socialization occurs and that is when the family has the greatest opportunity to influence the socialization process. Two factors play a role in consumer socialization of children: (1) cognitive, and (2) environmental.

Cognitive factors refer to a person's mental abilities. Very young children, for example, are unable to discriminate between a TV program and a commercial and do not understand the persuasive intent of advertisers.⁴⁷

They are also driven by the immediate perceptual features of the stimulus rather than by its substantive meaning. For example, a smaller glass filled to the top is judged to contain more juice than a larger but half-full glass.⁴⁸ Cognitive development proceeds with age, and so does children's consumer socialization.

Environmental factors refer to sources of information and influence surrounding the growing child. These sources include mass media, peers, and family. Family exercises the first and strongest influence on children's socialization.⁴⁹ As the child becomes older, peer influence grows, and the influence of the family likely declines. In our experience, weakening of family influence with advancing years is less in Asian and third-world countries than in the more industrialized Western countries.



LEARNING MECHANISMS

How Children Learn to be Consumers

The socialization influence from parents to children occurs basically through the learning mechanisms described in Chapter 4: instrumental conditioning, modeling, and cognitive learning. These three mechanisms correspond to the three bases of reference-group influence (a topic covered in Chapter 10): normative, value-expressive, and informational, respectively.

1. Instrumental conditioning This refers to learning to do those things that are rewarded. In a child's early years, parents control most resources and inculcate values by rewarding what they consider "good" behavior. Children learn those behaviors and the underlying values that result in rewards from their parents.

2. Modeling Here children look up to their parents as role models and try to internalize and adopt their values, roles, aptitudes, and so on. Thus, for example, a child who watches a father dressing up in the morning in office clothes is quietly making plans to wear similar clothes one day.

3. Cognitive learning This third mechanism is at work when parents become the source of information about a product. In low involvement cognitive learning, children notice the products parents are using and in later life adopt them without much thought (e.g., Crisco oil or Morton salt). This is not modeling because the product choice is not driven by a desire to be "like them." High involvement cognitive learning occurs when parents communicate and educate about various brands or buying strategies. A mother might "educate" a daughter, for example, about what hygienic products are good, or when to use which of the several cough medicines she has in the family medicine chest.

Learning from the media can occur through cognitive and/or modeling processes. Learning from peers is predominantly via modeling. Occasionally it can be cognitive—i.e., peers can provide information. At times, peers even use instrumental conditioning, rewarding by offering approval.



Modeling at work