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## 48.1 Introduction

As commercialization has come to dominate new areas of life, children's well-being is increasingly being drawn into the expanding markets. An analysis of the complex interplay of well-being and consumption requires an understanding of the dimensions of well-being, as well as of various markets. This chapter is organized in sections focusing different perspectives of well-being, relating these perspectives to the relevant markets and discussing the different aspects of consumption in relation to children's well-being. The last section seeks to sum up the interplay between the aspects of children's well-being and the variety of markets and cultural and economic contexts.

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## 48.2 Understanding Well-Being

### 48.2.1 Well-Being, Consumption, and Consumerism

Modern societies have undergone commercialization processes in which the lives of children increasingly are subjugated to markets (Kline 1995; Pecora 1998; Schor 2004; Beder et al. 2009), both directly, as active consumers, and indirectly, when parents seek to fulfill their children's needs. Children in today's postindustrial societies increasingly spend their time in commercialized arenas where participation

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and products carry a price tag. Participation in organized activities has a cost, and indoor activities often imply consumer goods like computer games and toys. The childhood in which middle-class children spent their free time in unsupervised play in public spaces is mostly a dream of the past. Nobody lives outside the market; increased commercialization often has the strongest consequences for those who consume less (Chin 2001).

The child consumer is often associated with the market for specific childhood products (Cook 2004), but understanding children's well-being as consumers cannot be restricted to what they buy themselves or to their "pester power." Apart from the basic needs for food, clothes, and protection, children's consumption includes their access to good-quality housing as well as to health care, education and educational materials, family holidays, sports equipment, theater tickets, parental transport, and so on. Modern children's consumption is also anchored in the symbolic value of products as well as in their functions.

We consume to be able to do things, we consume to belong, we consume to impress; consumption displays hedonism and egoism as well as altruism. Consumption may make us happy as well as obese, stimulate our development as well as harm it. Most aspects of life, be it housing, leisure activities, media use, or choice of meals, imply consumption, which is at the core of our modern lifestyles and socialization. Miles (1998) distinguishes between "consumption" – purchasing something – and "consumerism" – consumption as part of the very fabric of life. Well-being is not influenced by consumption; it is interwoven with it. The markets are increasingly offering not just tangible products but symbolic values; the value of the product is based on its position in symbolic hierarchies.

In relation to modern childhood, the term "commercial" is both an economic and a cultural category: economic refers to the price tag attached to the product and cultural to the symbolic meaning of the product. The cultural and normative differentiation of products, in which upscale products often escape the label "commercial," illustrates the complex interplay of economic and cultural capital within the framework of consumerism. The consumption of products and services often represents a prerequisite for access to the many activities and social settings that facilitate the well-being of children.

In this chapter we define consumption not as what we consume but as what we pay privately to consume; the consumption of free public goods is not part of this analysis.

### **48.2.2 Perspectives on Well-Being**

The frameworks defining material well-being vary with historical and social contexts and with political regimes, and the perspectives of various disciplines frame the concepts in the vocabularies of the social sciences. Objective indicators on well-being will in general refer to material conditions and financial security. Subjective well-being is often understood as equivalent to happiness and satisfaction.

Quality of life represents a much broader scope, involving income, wealth, and employment but also environmental factors and health, access to education, recreation and leisure time, and social integration and social belonging. The *capability approach* of Amartya Sen (1999) sees well-being as related to the capacity to access and use a variety of goods for one's own purposes (in Sen's vocabulary, the alternative combinations of functioning one can achieve). Well-being is not related to subjective experiences of happiness but to rights, opportunities, and development of capacities.

Childhood can be understood as a social and cultural framework influencing the well-being of children. Well-being refers to the life and happiness of the age category "children" but also to how childhood experiences influence their future. This is illustrated by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, referring both to children's right to happiness in the present and to their rights to develop and realize their potential. Opportunities to realize one's potential involve the development of capacities, which requires an opportunity structure that makes this development possible as well as the opportunity of freedom of choice.

From an analytical perspective, it is important to grasp the relevant dimensions of well-being related to children and consumption. The material and welfare dimensions are relevant both to the experiences of the present and to development. The experience of happiness and pleasure relates primarily to the present, while opportunity structures and freedom of choice are fundamentally related to development and the unfolding of potentials. Social belonging refers both to happiness in the present and to the social capital required for the future. Here, well-being related to basic material conditions and services will be referred to as *well-being as welfare*; well-being related to mental and psychical health will be referred to as *well-being as health*. Well-being as inspired by the capability approach, the opportunity to realize one's potential and to access resources corresponding with preferences, will be referred to as *well-being as participation and development*. The experiences of pleasures, satisfaction, and happiness in the present will be referred to as *well-being as satisfaction and happiness*. Social integration and belonging will be termed *well-being as belonging*.

Children's total well-being is provided by a set of institutions, services, and products provided by the state, by local communities, by the market, and by families. Well-being as welfare is traditionally measured by material conditions, housing, safety, and welfare services (e.g., OECD 2009; UNICEF 2007). Well-being as health refers to both health in the present and to the influence of childhood lifestyles on future health. Well-being as participation and development is primarily shown through opportunity structures, while well-being as satisfaction and happiness in general is indicated by surveys on subjective experiences. Well-being as belonging is indicated as social and cultural integration and as development of identity.

A variety of studies illustrate that all aspects of well-being have to be related to the intersection of gender, class, cultural patterns, and household position; an analysis of the part consumption plays in the many dimensions of well-being has to be related to these intersections (Phoenix 2005).

## 48.3 Well-Being as Welfare

### 48.3.1 Private Consumption and Private Priorities

We define consumption as private consumption, and do not include the consumption of public services. Services and goods that are fully covered by public agencies are outside the market; in some countries preschools are free of charge (e.g., in France), while in most countries preschools are at least partly paid for by the parents. However, the amount of support or subsidy influences the price on the market, and subsidies are also likely to ensure a certain universal standard.

Services that are paid for by private means are subject to private budgets and private choices related to the options available on various markets. The family is the fundamental consumer unit; from the start children are exposed to different consumption patterns rooted in the resources and priorities of the parents. The fact that children whose families live below the poverty line are more likely than children from higher income families not to be involved in out-of-school-time activities (Ridge 2002) is likely to be rooted in scarce economic resources as well as in lack of relevant social and cultural capital. When, for instance, expenditures on kindergarten are privately funded, it implies that parents' possible spending on early education has to compete with other attractive products on the market. With scarce material resources and/or little public support, families have to make a choice between options that are attractive at the moment, like fashion and status products, and products and services that will pay off in the long run, such as educational services.

Several studies indicate how ethnic and social differences are related to how consumption is used as an indication of collective identity (Lamont and Molnar 2001) and how parents from different ethnic and social groups invest in educational products or fashion and conspicuous consumption (Charles et al. 2009). This is primarily related to different reference groups in the local culture, but the dilemma of choosing between investments in long-term educational products or in short-term fashions is accentuated when both products are only available on the market. Public financing of preschool, as in France, partly eliminates this dilemma. When welfare takes educational participation off the market, this removes educational products not only from the budget and the economy of the parents but from the parents' priority.

### 48.3.2 The Increasing Dependency on the Market

Miles's (1998) characterization of our time as a culture of "consumerism" is related to the increasing entanglement of the market and general well-being, as illustrated by the need for a personal computer for educational purposes or sports equipment for participation in athletics. In the educational society, a desk and a quiet place to do homework are part of children's well-being (UNICEF 2007), implying that this aspect of housing is directly related to educational purposes and well-being. The decline of informal leisure and the rise of organized leisure activities raise the "entrance fees" as well as the need for equipment and commuting costs. Participation and the

development of social capital are increasingly dependent on consumption. Deprived children miss out on a broad range of essential items and activities enjoyed by their wealthier peers (Middleton et al. 1997; Mayer 1997; Pugh 2009) and often lack products that generate important educational and even social capital. The increasing time children spend in organized activities, and the expanding markets for activities and “edutainment,” implies that even the accumulation of the social capital of peers increasingly requires money and parental support.

Free access to playgrounds, activities, friends, and so on is an essential part of children’s well-being. But even the access to goods that are free of charge is correlated with other factors that have to be bought, like residential location. A safe environment is not bought on a specific market, but access to that environment is controlled by other factors that are market based. Schools are generally free of charge, but the quality of local schools influences the price of housing, as does the availability of space and safety and the local level of social and cultural capital. Profiles of housing prices illustrate that the well-being of children is an important aspect of residential markets – parents are moving to communities they consider suitable for their children and their development. The pressure to get into an excellent school by buying homes in the nearby district has in some cases lead to “admission lotteries,” to stop parents from buying extremely expensive houses close to the school. The well-being of children, as exemplified by good schools and child-friendly environments, is not traded directly but is one of the most important aspects of the housing market.

### **48.3.3 The Importance of Family Resources for Well-Being**

In general parents will give their children’s well-being high priority, as illustrated by a study that showed that British single parents receiving government income support spent almost as much as other parents on Christmas presents for their children (Middleton et al. 1997). In the period between 1990 and 1999 in China, children’s share of family consumption increased with the general increase in affluence (Ying 2003).

Consumption may influence participation, as in the tangible products required for specific activities such as sports equipment or musical instruments. Social participation may also require commercial products that signal style and identity, and economic resources may be necessary for participating in the social rituals of young people. Studies on poverty indicate that one possible consequence of lack of economic resources is loss of relevant social participation; poverty often entails lack of access more than lack of things. Lack of economic capital also forces families to make choices that well-off parents do not have to make. The poor mother who gives priority to new sneakers makes her child happy at the moment and disguises their visible poverty, but she is less likely to invest in the accumulation of cultural and educational capital ensuring the child’s future. Children of poor immigrant families that intensively support their children’s educational efforts, emphasizing future well-being and not the needs and wants of today, often lack the material items that are available to well-off children.

Townsend (1979) pinpointed that children in low-income families may be hindered from fully participating in society. Increased commercialization is likely to reinforce this trend.

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## 48.4 Well-Being as Health

### 48.4.1 Health, Safety, and Risk

The relation today between consumption and well-being is vividly illustrated by the increased frequency of overweight. Obesity is often understood as a modern epidemic, affecting up to one-third of children in Europe and even more in the United States. Obese children recognize significantly more of the food advertisements they see; being sensitive to these ads is significantly correlated with the amount of food eaten after exposure to them (Halford et al. 2004). Parents who blame their children's poor eating habits on advertising of unhealthy products may have a point (Hastings et al. 2003).

Children who are not eating the recommended number of fruits and vegetables do not do so just because their families cannot afford to buy these products; eating habits are related to cultural preferences as well as to household budgets. Overweight is related to lifestyle in general, and children's environments provide a wide range of opportunities to consume food, soft drinks, and snacks that are energy dense. These are readily consumed, relatively cheap and accessible, and may inadvertently lead to overconsumption and overweight (WHO 2007). These products often contribute to the consumption of low-nutrient food and to an increase in soft drink intake at the expense of milk. This means not only more calories but may lead, for example, to teenage girls not getting enough calcium in their diet.

The challenge of obesity illustrates that while starvation and malnutrition still affect a majority of the world's child population, affluence can create new health issues. Health problems are not produced by affluence as such but by its interaction with cultural capital and the market. In low-income countries, obesity increases as wealth increases; in high-income countries, obesity increases with decreasing income and with decreasing educational level.

Zelizer (1985) describes how children have become the core of family life; and the possible risks to the lives of these priceless children have become a basic threat to the family. Today's parents are concerned with children's safety – with safe surroundings, safe objects to play with, and protective equipment related to their activities. Responsibility is important in modern parenting and not without reason; unintentional injuries are the leading cause of death in children and a major cause of disability. Life outside the home is understood as risky even if the parents increasingly control it; participation in sports and organized play, which is encouraged and paid for by the parents, carries the potential for injuries. To prevent this it is important that the child have proper equipment and safety gear, which has provided a fertile ground for expansion of the markets for these products. Safety products

proliferate and get more differentiated; every sport and activity requires specific equipment to provide maximum safety. The markets contribute to better and more differentiated products but also to more expensive and specialized ones (Watson et al. 2005).

The application of the term “risk society” (Beck 1992) to modern developed countries is paradoxical in the sense that people in these societies are generally safer than ever before in human history. In Western countries accidents among children have decreased in the last few decades (UNICEF 2001). The risk societies can be understood as risk-oriented cultures rather than societies filled with risks; children are precious and more vulnerable than grown-ups and are subsequently at the center of modern risk cultures. The parents’ experiences of risks in consumer societies may stem from their children’s possible lack of the right consumer goods or the quality of the consumer goods, as well as from the possible unhealthy effects of overconsumption.

The discourses on advertising and cultural pressures, health, and products directed toward children also bring up complex issues of well-being, such as cognitive development and self-esteem. The symbolic aspects of some products may affect children’s development; for instance the styling pressures felt by “tween” girls have been termed “sexualization” by the [American Psychological Association](#) (APA). The industry marketing sexualized clothes and other accessories to preteens produces a forced maturation that takes “childhood” away from young girls (Rysst 2010). The APA argues that this may negatively affect well-being, illustrated by eating disorders, low self-esteem, negative mood, and depressive symptoms.

Studies indicate that children under a certain age level and cognitive level will in general not be able to discriminate between advertisement and information or entertainment (Oates et al. 2002). These children do not comprehend that commercial transactions make them an attractive group of possible customers, as well as a vulnerable group (Bakan 2011). In countries like Norway, Sweden, and Greece, advertisements directed toward small children are prohibited; Greece also has a ban on advertising children’s toys between 7 am and 10 pm. The fact that television advertisements seem to have an impact on children’s health and eating behavior illustrate that the debate on protection versus children’s right to make their own decisions is related to a well-known aspect of upbringing: the relationship between short-term and long-term consequences.

#### **48.4.2 The Moment and the Long Term: The Tensions of Well-Being**

Children and adolescents who are obese are at risk for health and psychological problems, but the most severe risks are related to their future; obese youth are likely to become overweight adults and might suffer from heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. Well-being related to health illustrates the tension between the moment and the future; the immediate pleasure of eating sweets can have unfortunate long-term consequences. The paradox of public

agencies campaigning against heavily advertised products lead in some cases to banning some products from the market, as happened with tobacco in many countries. The risk products, from sweets to tobacco or alcohol, are generally characterized by the sense of well-being in the moment but lead to a decrease in well-being in the long run. Today's children might be the first generation born after World War II whose life span will actually decrease due to their lifestyle.

New products enter the market every day. Some of them are seen to benefit the child, others are thought to harm the child, and some have effects that are not known yet. Cell phones illustrate one of the dilemmas of the risk society: should parents fear them or embrace them? Cell phones help parents and children to organize their day and keep children in touch with their friends; for children over a certain age, a cell phone is necessary for social belonging simply because without it they are not able to communicate and participate socially. But cell phones also give children access to gaming and virtual worlds as well as to social networks that may imply risks, and research cannot guarantee that cell phones do not contribute to brain tumors or other future health problems.

Good upbringing is often defined as teaching children to refrain from the pleasure of the moment for the benefit of the future. This is a critical issue in the relationship between well-being and consumption, and illustrative of the discourses on children's right to autonomy versus their right to protection. The markets illustrate the dilemmas of protection and agency; while the sociology of childhood in general has underscored children's competence and agency, analyses of the relationship between children and commercial corporations depict children as being under assault by forces seeking to exploit their vulnerabilities (Bakan 2011).

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## 48.5 Well-Being as Participation and Development

### 48.5.1 The Educational Markets

Sen's capability approach understands well-being as related to the freedom to use one's resources in correspondence with individual preferences; for children, development of these capacities to choose is at the core of well-being. Middle-class upbringing that seeks to develop children's capacities and to accumulate cultural and social capital has been termed "concerted cultivation" (Lareau 2003), whereas the child rearing of working-class families is referred to as "natural growth" – if you give your children love, food, and safety, they will grow and thrive. Seiter (1993) argues that middle-class parents are in particular concerned with educational measures, as they seek to ensure the child's social and academic advancement. Vincent and Ball (2007) conclude that stimulating and enriching activities are a response to the concern and the responsibility that these parents experience. The child is a project to be cultivated. Modern parents are more oriented toward expert advice than were their mothers, especially educated middle-class



mothers (Beck and Beck-Gernshein 1995), and middle-class parents see their children as unique individuals who have the right to develop their potential (Gillies 2005). Styles of consumption seem to be rooted in styles of parenting, which again are anchored in class position, in economic as well as cultural capital (Theokas and Bloch 2006; Stasz and Bloch 2007).

The term “concerted cultivation” refers both to a culture of parenting and to an extensive use of products and services provided by the markets that cater to this parental culture. The focus on educational achievements and skills influences not only patterns and ideologies of upbringing but also the expansion of the markets for educational products directed toward the children and their parents. The sociological understanding of social and cultural resources as *capitals* is part of modern parenting culture; cultivating various capitals is based not only on the value of the capitals as such but on the fact that they are convertible; the accumulation of cultural and social capitals through the socialization process will later be converted into economic capital and greater well-being.

“Edutainment” (also infotainment or entertainment education) refers to forms of entertainment designed to educate as well as to amuse” (Wikipedia 24.8.2011). Edutainment also implies learning and active participation, as illustrated by edutainment centers and educational toys. Playful learning edutainment pointing toward adult activities has always existed, as play or as fairy tales and fables that promoted moral development and cultural understanding. Modern forms include television productions, film, museum exhibits, and computer software incorporating educational content and/or involving children in playful educational activities. As the cultivation of social and cognitive development is increasingly related to the market, as illustrated by sales figures, children’s participation in different activities requires greater economic resources.

The organized childhood and “concerted cultivation” moved participation off the street corner and into a variety of market-related arenas (Jacobson 2004) and increasingly based children’s capacities for participation and their access to educational requisites on the market. The varieties of organized activities, the growing number of edutainment centers, the after-school activities, and the educational kindergartens are all increasingly becoming the meeting places of peers. Participation and social capital develop social and cultural competencies, which are at the center of modern middle-class upbringing. Social participation may also require certain products because of their symbolic functions, as illustrated by the power of brands and styles. The need for these consumer goods expands the influence of the markets, and their lack may marginalize some children and adolescents relative to activities and social participation. Lack of participation hinders the development of competencies and delimits the development of social and cultural capital (Chin 2001).

Thus, the markets can help create well-being if one has the economic and cultural resources to acquire the right products. The educational markets require cultural capital and produce cultural capital. The market can as well hinder the development of competence, both through lack of resources and the acquisition of products that do not contribute to development.

## 48.5.2 The Hierarchy of Needs and the Development of Capacities

The hierarchy of needs implies that fulfilling “lower” needs leads to increasingly more complex ones that have to be met – moving from basic material needs to the need for self-realization (Maslow 1968). Well-being is related to this hierarchy; self-realization has to be matched by opportunity structures and individual capacities. In affluent societies the challenge of achieving well-being is not only to be able to realize one’s preferences but the continuous evolution of individual as well as collective capacities and preferences.

The fulfillment of material needs is a prerequisite of the development of “higher” needs; the challenge is the development of capabilities matching the needs at the top of the hierarchy. The concept of commodification indicates that the market and the culture of marketing may exploit human needs instead of fulfilling them, representing an obstacle to the attainment of the “higher needs.” The idea of commodity fetishism and false needs, emphasized by the Frankfurter School (see, e.g., Marcuse 1964), implies needs defined by the profit motive. For vulnerable customers like children, “higher” needs, such as self-realization, requiring the development of relevant capacities, will easily be targeted by products promising to secure these needs by their symbolic values. The frustration that follows when the products fail may in fact be positive for profit. The economic dynamics of symbolic markets is partly driven by the inability of the products to fulfill the needs addressed, in this way producing the need for new products.

The markets produce products that open up the development of higher needs, but the markets produce commodification and reification as well as products catering to self-realization. Well-being as self-realization is dependent on the capacity for self-reflexivity related to social and cultural contexts and values. This puts children in a vulnerable position; children’s well-being requires markets that support the development of the capacities for critical reflection.

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## 48.6 Well-Being as Satisfaction and Happiness

### 48.6.1 Well-Being and Happiness as Market Products

In economics, if the preference for product A over product B represents an increase in marginal utility, the product increases well-being. Studies of the general levels of satisfaction and happiness approach well-being not as a relationship to products or events but as subjective happiness. Satisfaction and happiness are in general understood not as peak moments that are the positive affects one may feel at a single point in time but as a more general state of mind. Understanding the dynamics of modern consumerism requires understanding both the utility functions of various products and the relationship between the products and the general experience of well-being.

Although well-being often is associated with the pleasure generated by the acquisition of material products, well-being as such has itself become a product

on modern markets. Products that especially address young children often focus on the immediate affective experiences. When spending their own money, young children are often in a world of pleasure experiencing what Campbell (1987) calls the spirit of consumerism. The marketing of affective happiness to children can therefore be extremely profitable; television advertisements aimed at the youngest children will in general emphasize the bliss and the excitement of the buyer's experience. Although parents may enjoy the children's momentary happiness, they are often critical of the long-term effects of many products. The quest for the peak moment also creates market fads and fashion dynamics: yesterday's dolls do not provide happiness today.

The focus on the pleasures of the present illustrates another parental concern: consumerism often seems to offer a set of superficial, shallow values, contrary to the deeper values stressed in a good upbringing. The dilemma of the emotional pleasures of shopping versus the long-term quest for self-realization is the critical epicenter of consumerism, also illustrating the possible tension between well-being as individual hedonism and well-being as the well-being of all. This conflict of values is becoming accentuated in relation to childhood and socialization.

### **48.6.2 The Pleasures of Consumption**

The child is an emotional and affective asset, and one of the joys of parents (and others) is to give the child pleasure (Zelizer 1985). Younger mothers take greater pleasure in shopping for their children than do older mothers, indicating that the cohorts that grew up with the pleasure of shopping may transfer this to their children (Miller 1998). Modern consumerism is an expression of the quest for experience and adventure (Campbell 1987), and new consumer goods and the activity of buying them can be an antidote to boredom. Both can be attractive to the young, especially in certain age phases. However, shopping is not always just a selfish ego-trip; it can also be an expression of love, care, and relationship. Gifts are signs of affection; their intention is the well-being of the receiver. The pleasure of shopping may be even more intense when buying for others (Miller 1998) and vice versa; receiving gifts and consumer goods might give the child the feeling of being loved and taken care of. Children's intense emotional excitement or "bliss" over a new toy underscores the authentic affection for and the ties to the giver, as well as the authentic well-being of the child.

The consumer culture emphasizes immediate gratification, and nothing illustrates this better than shopping, which is often associated with the culture of young people. This aspect of consumerism represents a quest for the experience of well-being, and since immediate affective well-being does not last, the act has to be repeated. The growth of children's consumer culture has made many things inexpensive; children's consumption is filled with many small items adapted to the culture of immediate gratification, interwoven with the fads and crazes of the children's culture. The crazes and the related small items coming and

going in the child culture illustrate the tight relationship between the industry, media, and child culture. Langer (2004) stresses that for children it is not just brands that become intimately associated with culture and identity; toys and media characters also connect children to products through emotional identification. Disney educates children in the Disney universe, bridging products, brands, and values. Spin-off products marketed through movies and television are an enormous industry. For children these objects might not only give affective pleasure in themselves but also access to their peer culture.

This entertainment consumption fits well with Campbell's (1987) description of the new hedonistic consumer as a person consuming experiences. This generates "being bored" as a theme in everyday life, producing a continual search for well-being and new experiences. The commercialization of the fads and crazes of the child culture increases the speed of the turnover of the products and produces the fads as well as utilizing their existence. The small pleasure items illustrate how modern child culture is tightly interwoven with commercial markets and the media.

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## 48.7 Well-Being as Belonging

### 48.7.1 Well-Being and Social Integration

Modern individuals stage themselves with the help of consumer goods through the signals sent out by material or immaterial carriers (Veblen 1953; Bourdieu 1984). Staging is not only about standing out as an individual; to own and to do as other people of the same age group or social category also make it possible to experience a common basis of beliefs and ideas. Understood in this way, consumer goods are used to maintain a common culture and ensure social belonging (Douglas and Isherwood 1979). Consumer goods also ensure social integration, as when cell phones are required for communication with peers. Some young children often do not turn off their phones at night: the cell phone is the precious channel to well-being – to friends, peers, and social events (Katz and Aakhus 2002).

Studies describe how children become part of communities or groups by possessing certain products, and parents often express understanding of the fact that having certain things is necessary or at least desirable (Seiter 1993; Chin 2001; Pugh 2009). The reasoning behind this parental stance refers to participation: consumer goods are necessary in order to participate in certain activities, and certain consumer goods exemplify belonging to specific social groups; symbolic consumption is an important part of belonging. Douglas and Isherwood (1979) argue that certain luxury goods are not superfluous; they are social necessities for the maintenance of networks and social cohesion. Consumption represents entering and belonging to social and cultural worlds. For children this logic is obvious: toys or clothes provide cues for either standing out as an individual or fitting in with peers, as well as cues for social distinction and social class (Ridge 2002; Elliot and Leonard 2004). Consumerism is not a world of goods and things, but a world of

symbols available on the market. In the multiethnic class society, the world of goods more than ever becomes a world of distinctions, indicating belonging and integration, crucial for well-being.

### 48.7.2 Well-Being as Identity

Pugh (2009) calls consumption in the cultural context of families and children an “economy of dignity,” illustrating that consumption is embedded in the moral and symbolic economy of the family. Different symbolic strategies are rooted in the parents’ place on the socioeconomic ladder. Well-off parents practice something she calls “symbolic deprivation,” referring to refraining from buying certain costly or significant consumer goods, which signals moral identity by not consuming certain visibly expensive goods. Parents at the other end of the social ladder practice “symbolic indulgence,” buying goods that have the most significant value in the children’s social world. Consumption represents highly visual indications not only of style and position but also of care and dignity.

Identities are staged with the help of consumer goods and practices, and brands have come to function as banners of social identity. Social identity is intensely related to well-being; Douglas’s (1996) expression “I’d rather be dead than...” illustrates the terrible situation of being assigned a social identity contrary to the self-image. The consumption of style and fashion among young people is often understood as an exemplary illustration of this relationship between identity and consumption.

Style and fashion products vary but their functions are stable; they represent social well-being by representing social identities. In the last decades, branded identity products have moved into the markets for younger age groups. Young children’s understanding of fashion and symbolic status is likely related to simple cues and brands represent just those kinds of cues. Wearing this special brand is cool while wearing that one is out – not by taste but by definition. Children learn brand names and their status as early as age two (Seiter 1993); it is much easier to identify brands than to acquire taste. Brands are not foreign to children’s social logic; the use of simple cues for fitting in suits them well. The symbolic positions among children, and by this their well-being, are increasingly related to the market, that is, to the interaction between the market and the symbolic language of peer groups.

Among older children and teens, the relationship between brands, taste, and position is more complex, and the identity arenas are diversified and partly constructed by the actors and subcultures. The modern young individual, seeking to achieve well-being by seeking and signaling uniqueness as well as social position and belonging, is a perfect match for expanding identity markets.

Mass media targeting children have shortened the period of exclusively parental influence over their children’s symbolic universe. A distinctive, peer-oriented consumer culture now intervenes in the relationship between parents and children, and that intervention begins for many children before they are able to talk.

Modern media are not only channels for the presenting and advertising of “products” but of symbolic worlds and chains of interrelated products. The products themselves also function as media, drawing children into extensive symbolic universes based on markets.

### 48.7.3 Symbols of Well-Being: The Purchase of Moral Signifiers

The commercial products displayed by children represent a visible indication of parental care and competence in the knowledge society, with its emphasis on educational products, development, and safety (Dedeoglu 2006). The well-being of children is translated into the symbolic values of tangible products; the right products for safety, education, and care indicate the position of the parents. This position is not only illustrated by what the children wear, use, or carry but also by what they do *not* wear or use; the display of cheap products with little or no educational value indicates lack of parental concern and knowledge. Class-related upbringing expresses itself through different commercial products, indicating the well-being of children within different ideologies of socialization. Commercial products not only show class positions, they put the parents’ position in the moral economy of different class cultures and contexts on display (Brusdal and Frønes 2012).

Specific products signify not only economic and cultural capital but are signifiers of parental efforts to secure their children’s well-being. The fact that specific products signify this concern creates extremely profitable markets. The expansion of commercial markets in knowledge societies is partly based in the ideologies of stimulation and educational support and the corresponding expansion of educational products; the markets grow through the expansion of moral concern for children’s well-being.

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## 48.8 The Complex Pattern: Consumption and Well-Being

We have argued that children’s consumption and children’s well-being are closely and increasingly interwoven. Well-being is understood as a multidimensional phenomenon, as a material standard of living, as health and safety, as development and opportunity structures, as satisfaction and happiness, and as identity and belonging.

The power of modern markets involves both blessings and curses. If well-being is related to material standards as such, then lack of well-being will be rooted in *poverty or lack of material resources*. Well-being as health and safety is related to both economic and cultural capital and illustrates that the *pleasure of today might be the curse of tomorrow*. Some consumer goods, such as sweets and soft drinks and junk food, are related to the pleasures of the moment but may produce obesity and bad health in the near as well as in the distant future.

Resources for development are increasingly available on the market, as illustrated by educational products. The growing differentiation into educational and

noneducational products, with preschooling, kindergartens, and edutainment centers available on the market, illustrates that the commercialization of childhood in the knowledge society requires both cultural and economic capital to utilize the available products. The educational parts of the markets are expansive, and the available products are expensive; from this perspective the challenge related to children's well-being is the *increasing social inequality* that is likely to follow from the market expansion.

The expanding markets are also understood as a moral and pedagogical challenge; children are shown as growing up in intensive media streams that emphasize shallow values and superficial materialism. Small children are especially vulnerable to market pressure, and they are also easy targets as a channel into the family purse. From this perspective *protection* from the market is an essential part of children's well-being.

Some products, like educational products, seek to secure the future; others focus on the pleasure of the moment. The market accentuates the dilemma between indulging in the pleasures of the present and investment in the future, illustrating both children's need for protection from market forces and the need for parental monitoring and guidance. Studies indicate that the style of consumption among children varies with the economic and cultural capital of the parents; high total capital indicates increased focus on the future. From this perspective the markets underscore the *need for active parenting*.

The markets provide the visible cues for belonging to groups or communities, as well as for personal identity. The term symbolic deprivation illustrates the power of the market related to belonging as well as to the construction of identity. In this regard the critical resources are the *economic as well as the relevant cultural capitals*.

Increased material wealth is not necessarily followed by increased happiness (Easterlin 1974). This can be based in the dynamics of reference groups – increased wealth entails new reference groups related to lifestyles, and in the hierarchy of needs – fulfilling needs at the lower level leads to higher levels that must be satisfied. The complexity of *self-realization* illustrates the multidimensional character of the market; it may provide tools for social and personal development and experiences, or it may draw the consumer into the shallowness often associated with modern mass production. Increased commercialization transforms even antimarket attitudes into exclusive submarkets of symbolic products (Brusdal and Frønes 2012).

Market forces permeate the core of the socialization process, the shaping of individuals and their cultures. Related to the well-being of children, the political challenge is not primarily protection – there is no place to hide from the forces of the markets – but *the development of the children's capacity for critical reflection*. From a purely economic perspective, markets are the most efficient way to produce and distribute goods. The power of markets, especially related to children's well-being, is entangled with social and cultural processes. Understanding the relationship between well-being and consumption has to be related to the multidimensional social, cultural, and developmental effects of a highly differentiated set of markets and products, distributing positive and negative consequences for children's well-being in complex ways.



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