

# THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids:  
A Letter for Parents by the  
NYU Child Study Center

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## **AFFLUENZA: IS THE WEALTHY KID A HEALTHY KID?**

**Wealth and health don't automatically go together.**

**Affluent suburban adolescents are experiencing psychological distress at rates higher than their urban counterparts and exceeding any other socioeconomic group.**

Across the nation, clinicians, educators, and research scientists uphold findings that privileged adolescents show growing rates of school failure, depression, anxiety, and substance use. Most research and intervention strategies have focused on low socio-economic status (SES), disadvantaged, urban, and minority youth, with significantly less emphasis on the unique life experiences of affluent, suburban children. As a nation we are faced with an unfortunate reality. Americans earn three times as much as they did 30 years ago, technology has opened a world of resources to children, and parents are working in excess to provide opportunities exposing our children to the "good life." Yet a generation has emerged where adolescent psychological problems are escalating and teen suicides have doubled.

**It seems that children and families are falling victim to the epidemic of *Affluenza*.**

Affluenza can be defined as the dysfunctional relationship between the acquisition of wealth and other sources of self-esteem. This disorder is constantly reinforcing itself at individual and social levels, forcing us to derive our identities and sense of place in the world through our consumption and materialistic gains. Affluenza yields debt, overwork, waste, and harm to the environment, leading to psychological disorders, alienation, and distress.

**Despite its name, Affluenza is not only a disorder of the wealthy and privileged.**

Market researchers have defined affluence to range from \$75,000 to \$160,000, which is relevant to slightly over 1 in 4 households. Thus affluence becomes a relative term and includes many hardworking American households. Although still counting, the most current market research predicts that American youth, with their parents' money, had an estimated spending power of \$153 billion in 2006, with electronic goods and apparel topping the list of expenditures.

**Indisputably, money is good and allows us to rear our children in comfort. Paradoxically, money and comfort can yield problems for our children.**

Jon and Eileen Gallo, experts in psychological issues related to money and family wealth, collaborated in *Silver Spoon Kids* to identify adolescent struggles related to higher socio-economic status. They find that financial security can lead to lack of motivation in youth. Excessive freedom to learn and explore may lead to apathy, laziness, or failure to commit to and achieve goals. Providing too many interesting opportunities may lead to overscheduling and activity overload. Over-exposure to finer things in life can lead to overindulgence and attitudes of entitlement. Friendships with other affluent children may support insularity and snobbery and ultimately children may lose the appreciation for hard work and ambition.

**Signs of Affluenza manifest in many ways, such as:**

- Drop in grades
- Inability to delay gratification
- Low self confidence and insecurity
- Internalized behaviors such as tension, nervousness, or anxiety
- Indecisiveness, moodiness, and irritability without provocation

**Common factors facilitate the cycle of affluenza**

- *Substance Use*

Psychologist Madeline Levine writes in *The Price of Privilege* that one of the most detrimental aspects of affluence on children is self-medication, which they use to ease their stresses. She finds that suburban youth report significantly higher levels of anxiety symptoms, cigarette, alcohol, marijuana, and hard drug use. Prominent researchers of adolescent stress, Luthar and Becker, found that a group of affluent northeastern middle school girls reported distress consistent with

significant clinical depression. In the same study, middle school boys and girls who reported symptoms of anxiety were also the most prone to substance use.

- *Academic Pressure*

Hardworking, high-achieving parents want their children to earn academic honors. However, children in environments, which emphasize admission to stellar colleges, feel highly driven to excel not only at academics, but also in extracurricular activities. This can lead to overly perfectionistic strivings, and children feel that their self worth and their value as a person are linked to achievement rewards, rather than to who they are. As youngsters begin to rely on their accomplishments for a sense of worth, this perfectionism becomes highly correlated with indices of stress, such as depression and anxiety.

- *Lack of Parental Contact*

A recent study of 1,000 American teens reveals the higher the parents SES, the lower the parental contact per week. Luthar finds that there is a link between participating in multiple extracurricular activities and a decline in parental supervision. Children begin to be shuffled from activity to activity spending more time with peers, coaches, tutors, and adults who know them only on a cursory level. Unfortunately, distressed teens are particularly drawn to their peers with problems, which may result in poor decision-making and dangerous at-risk behaviors. Overall, the lack of parent contact leads to a demise of old fashion family togetherness, and kids miss stabilizing character shaping experiences. Children's problems can go unnoticed until school failure, legal issues, and significant distress make parental involvement unavoidable, and the intervention of a clinical professional is required.

### **How can parents stop the cycle of affluenza?**

A wealthy kid does not necessarily mean a mentally healthy kid. It is never too early or too late for parents to take a proactive role in preventing the epidemic of affluenza in the family. It is important to remember that money and gifts do not make up for parental absence. Children benefit from having their parents' time and attention, even in the most simplistic, uneventful setting. Parents who listen, welcome dialogue, and demonstrate warmth and understanding help their children develop better problem solving abilities and conflict resolution strategies. Children appreciate structure and clear expectations when these guidelines are fostered with love and flexibility. Parents are their child's primary models and must take the lead in helping them learn to distinguish between their wants and needs. Parents who teach that there is a connection between effort and reward will raise healthier well-rounded children.

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**Written by Kimberly Williams, Psy.D. of the NYU Child Study Center. For a consultation, please call (212) 263-6622.**

### **ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER**

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the research, prevention, and treatment of child and adolescent psychiatric disorders. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with various disorders including anxiety, depression, ADHD, learning or attention difficulties, Autism, eating disorders, and trauma and stress-related symptoms.

We offer a number of treatment studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212) 263-8916 or visit [www.aboutourkids.org/research/studies.html](http://www.aboutourkids.org/research/studies.html).

The NYU Child Study Center also offers workshops and lectures for parents, educators, and mental health professionals on a variety of mental health and parenting topics. The Family Education Series consists of 13 informative workshops focused on child behavioral and attentional difficulties. To learn more or to request a speaker, please call (212) 263-8861.

For further information, guidelines, and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center's website, [AboutOurKids.org](http://AboutOurKids.org).

**AboutOurKids.org**

**Giving Children Back Their Childhood  
NYU Child Study Center**

577 First Avenue  
New York, NY 10016  
(212) 263-6622

1981 Marcus Avenue, Suite C102  
Lake Success, NY 11042  
(516) 358-1808

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