

# One News Page

## Family Health

### Overcoming Affluenza: Recognizing the Price Families Pay for Wealth

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#### ***Specialist Josh Glawe with Morris Psychological Group Offers Tips for Raising Well-grounded Children***



**(HealthNewsDigest.com) - Parsippany, NJ, May 2014** - Affluenza isn't a joke. Although the term is often used sarcastically, vast wealth and a single-minded focus on the pursuit of money, status and material possessions cause real problems and dysfunction in many American families.

"It's easy to mock the problems of the well-to-do," says Josh Glawe, a licensed clinical social worker and specialist in adolescent disorders with Morris Psychological Group, "but studies have shown that teens from wealthy families are more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs than their less affluent peers and they have disturbingly high rates of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, self-injury, cheating and stealing."

The term affluenza came to public prominence as the result of a trial in Texas in 2013, in which the defense argued for leniency for the sixteen-year-old who struck and killed four pedestrians while driving drunk on the grounds that his wealthy background impaired his understanding of the consequences of his behavior. The boy was sentenced to ten years probation and therapy at his parents' expense and the apparent success of the "affluenza defense" sparked outrage.

#### **What is affluenza?**

Affluenza can be defined as the psychological dysfunction caused by the obsessive and competitive pursuit of more - more money and the material things money can buy as well as the intangibles that wealth confers like status, respect and power. It is characterized by a sense of entitlement, an inability to delay gratification, an exaggerated belief in the ability to control one's life, and a diminished capacity for empathy and compassion.

"Affluenza is caused by the myth that money can buy happiness," says Mr. Glawe. "In fact, there is no direct link between income and contentment. Beyond a level that provides for basic needs and relieves anxiety, greater wealth contributes little or nothing to overall well-being. And while having a great deal of money may not itself cause unhappiness, the relentless quest for more and a value system focused on materialism can and do cause dissatisfaction and broken relationships and are particularly damaging for children."

#### **How are children affected by affluenza?**

Children from affluent homes do not typically show higher rates of problems than the general population until around seventh grade, as they are about to turn thirteen. The teen years, for all children, are a time of experimentation, of separating from their parents and testing limits. Affluent adolescents whose parents are preoccupied with career and social obligations are often unsupervised and have plenty of money at

their disposal - a dangerous combination. And the teen years are when all the pressures of unrealistically high expectations are brought to bear on these children. They are expected to excel academically and at sports and to build a resume that will appeal to the most selective colleges. They are to carry on the success of the high-achieving family with little regard for each child's individuality and unique interests.

"All parents want their children to do their best and all children want to please their parents." says Mr. Glawe. "But when children sense that their parents value their accomplishments more than personal qualities like integrity and kindness, they start to exhibit signs of depression, anxiety and rule-breaking behavior."

### **How can affluenza be treated? Tips for Parents.**

Guarding against the escalating effects of a single-minded pursuit of wealth is a challenge for the entire family. A therapist with experience treating the affluent can help re-frame the definition of success for both parents and children. The most important step is to recognize the problem and to work toward a more balanced view of the role of money in the family. Mr. Glawe says that countering the influence of the community may not be easy but there are steps parents can take to keep their children grounded in values that emphasize personal qualities rather than material possessions:

- Hold children accountable for their actions. Set clear limits and make sure they know the consequences of exceeding them.
- Don't smooth over every rough spot children encounter. Let them learn from their mistakes.
- Avoid giving them "too much, too soon." Pace the acquisition of possessions and experiences so children learn to accept delayed gratification.
- Don't fall into the trap of "keeping up with the Joneses." Stick to your guns and be prepared for difficult conversations.

It is generally accepted that children growing up in poverty are at risk for a wide range of problems. It has now become increasingly clear that the high-pressure aspirations and expectations of wealthy families are taking a toll on children of privilege. "It is said that money changes everything," Mr. Glawe concludes. "Parents must ensure that its influence on their children isn't destructive. 'Having it all' - and especially always wanting more - pose a threat to the realization of the American dream."

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*Morris Psychological Group, P.A. offers a wide range of therapy and evaluation services to adults, children and [adolescents](http://www.morrispsych.com).*

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