Consumer Culture Harms Children and Teens
Madeline Levine

A practicing clinical psychologist for more than twenty-five years, Madeline Levine, author of the book *The Price of Privilege*, has witnessed firsthand the effects of consumer culture on teens. Here, in an essay for *Tikkun* magazine, a bimonthly publication of the Network of Spiritual Progressives, she explains the crises of privileged youth, citing that depression among girls from affluent families is three times the national norm and providing examples of teens in consumer-driven families who, despite their monetary advantages, struggle with emptiness. She analyzes the negative effects of materialism on families and provides alternatives to consumer culture that will build stronger children.

Our country has a new group of “at-risk” kids. They don’t belong to the group traditionally considered “at-risk”—inner city kids growing up in harsh economic circumstances. Surprisingly, they belong to the upper middle class, to parents who have comfortable incomes and high levels of education. Current research tells us that it is children of privilege, children long assumed to be protected from elevated rates of emotional

problems that are, in fact, evidencing the highest rates of emotional problems of any group of kids in this country.

These numbers remind us that there are myths at both ends of the socio-economic spectrum. Many of us assume that the economic and social challenges of poverty are so severe that parenting skills and child development are compromised. Alternately, many assume that in families where parents are financially secure and highly educated, both parenting skills and child development are enhanced. Research tells us that neither assumption is correct. In fact, pre-teens and teens from affluent homes have the highest rates of depression, anxiety disorders and substance abuse of any group of children in this country.

There is something unsettling and paradoxical about this fact. After all, these same youngsters are the recipients of both high levels of parental involvement as well as extensive educational, extra-curricular, and recreational opportunities. Is it possible that some combination of money, opportunity, and involvement is having a toxic rather than a protective effect on kids? And if so, what can parents do to make sure that being privileged works toward healthy emotional development rather than against it?

**Troubled Kids**

Adolescence has long been thought of as a period of heightened confusion and unhappiness. In fact, adolescents are no more likely to be clinically depressed (as opposed to normally conflicted) than any other age group. So when researchers find that 22 percent of girls from affluent families are clinically depressed—that’s three times the national rate—and that somewhere between 30 and 40 percent of teens from privileged backgrounds have significant psychological symptoms, we have, according to the definition used by the CDC (Centers for Disease Control) in Atlanta, reached an “epidemic.”

This epidemic should disturb all of us, no matter our background. Kids from affluent homes, because of the educational and financial opportunities available to them often grow into positions of leadership and authority. Our future doctors, lawyers,