

Who's Raising Our Kids: Parents or Corporate America?

There is a war going on between parents trying to raise children and corporate America trying to raise customers. As a parent of three children, I think I am losing, or at least losing my mind. I have tried to educate my children about our materialistic society and how our family values differ from those of a culture of consumption. My kids, however, view so many ads targeted to them that as a result they want more, buy more, and throw away more.

I have decided that advertising is my biggest enemy. Thanks to ads, my kids won't take no, no, no for an answer and instead nag, nag, nag. Do you ever feel like your kids are the biggest nags in the world? That if there were a TV game show called *Nag That Parent*, your kids would reign supreme? Well, you are not alone! According to a national survey commissioned by the Center for a New American Dream:

- American children aged twelve to seventeen will ask their parents for products they have seen advertised an average of nine times until the parents finally give in.
- More than 10 percent of twelve- to thirteen-year-olds admitted to asking their parents more than fifty times for products they have seen advertised.
- The nagging strategy is paying dividends for kids and marketers alike: 55 percent of kids surveyed said they are usually successful in getting their parents to give in.

Advertising targeted to children is estimated at nearly \$17 billion annually, about 2.5 times that of 1992 and 170 times the amount since 1983. U.S. kids sixteen and under influence the spending of just slightly over \$1 trillion (2006). Advertisers have particularly focused on the tween and teenager markets because they can easily capitalize on their insecurities and their need to fit in, be cool and sophisti-

cated. What adds fuel to the parenting fire is that ads frequently denigrate grown-ups by portraying them as bumbling idiots. This is a marketer's effort to exploit teenagers' desire to rebel against authority as a selling point for their products.

BY LEAH DOBKIN

My kids, who are now twelve, fifteen, and seventeen, represent the tween and teenager market. However, advertisers also market to children two and younger, and my kids were no exception. They've been exposed to "cradle to grave" market-

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ing strategies to ensure their brand loyalty. In our family that means from the time they could point – not even speak – my kids have demanded certain consumer products.

One of the first words my daughter spoke was "McDonald's." Whenever we would pass those golden arches, she would want to stop. She didn't care about the hamburgers. What she wanted was the tiny toy that was given out with the hamburger that marketed the new Disney movie.

According to psychologist James McNeal, at six months of age babies are forming mental images of corporate logos and mascots. As a consumer, I have difficulty finding baby and kids' clothing and toys that don't have co-branding or are not product licensed. If I see another SpongeBob SquarePants on candy, cereal, toys, clothing, or box of macaroni and cheese, I will scream.

My kids had the distinction of seeing *Teletubbies*, the first TV program especially created for babies, on

PBS in 1998. Luckily, being preschoolers they were too old and weren't interested in baby programming. Since the advent of *Teletubbies*, there has been an increase in TV programming for infants and toddlers. I guess I shouldn't be surprised to find out that 26 percent of children two and younger have TVs in their room.

Babies and toddlers are also targets for computer software derived from television programs and movies. According to child experts, computer play may be harmful to babies and toddlers because it takes them away from the active, multisensory exploration of the world, which is essential to their healthy development.

In Harm's Way

Intrusive, aggressive, and subversive marketing and advertising strategies are targeted to my kids, and I can't stop the onslaught. It's everywhere: schools, doctors' offices, movie theaters, the Internet, and countless other places. When I go out to eat with my family, the last thing I need is a blaring TV taking over our family conversation.

Nothing is sacred. I feel commercially assaulted, whereas my kids feel like it's just entertainment. These assaults intensify every day as ad budgets skyrocket and advertising techniques become more invasive and coercive. Companies are engaged in a relentless war to claim every waking moment of my children's lives. Ad executives call this "mind share," and I mind because I don't want to share my children's minds with corporate America.

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This "mind share" has created many problems for children, parents, and our society. According to the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, marketing directly to children is a factor in the childhood obesity and diabetes epidemic. Marketing also encourages other eating disorders, hyperactivity, attention deficit disorder, addictive behavior, precocious sexuality, and youth violence.

Author and sociology professor Juliet Schor finds links between immersion in our consumer culture and childhood depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, parental conflicts, and stress. Diane Levin, an education professor at Wheelock College, sees correlations between sexual imagery in children's ads and increases in eating disorders among girls.

"Children struggle to make sense of mature sexual content, they are robbed of valuable time for age-appropriate developmental tasks, and they may begin to engage in precocious sexual behavior," Levin says. I have seen many of these problems played out in my own household.

I am most frustrated with the sexually offensive products targeted directly to my daughter. She covertly buys thongs with the wording on the front, "Do I know you?" Like many parents, I couldn't find a Halloween costume these past few years for my daughter that didn't make her look like a prostitute. Unfortunately, she was seeking that "lady of the night" look. Nowadays, cool is looking slutty and grungy. I never thought feminist me would say it, but I miss that "little princess" look.

My daughter thinks she is a victim of the "most overly protective mother in the world." I believe she is a victim of over-sexualized media. Marketers have used aspirational advertising to exploit my daughter's natural tendency to idealize older teenagers and adults. Her hero is Paris Hilton. Enough said.

My friends with younger children have to contend with unbelievably offensive products targeted to their kids like Bratz Dolls, which are little dolls that look like hookers wearing heavy make-up and skimpy clothes. An article in *USA Today* in 2007 described cosmetic companies like Bonne Bell luring even preschoolers, whom marketers are calling – get this – "pre-tweens," to buy lip gloss spiked with M&Ms and Dr. Pepper. Saks Fifth Avenue offers day spa treatments and makeovers for girls as young as two.

Males are not immune to manipulative marketing practices. My older son wants – no, insists on – an expensive cell phone with every bell and whistle because everyone else has one. He is a walking advertisement for Joe Boxer underwear (which is never under) and Puma sneakers. My younger son organizes backpack sales so he can sell his six-month-old, outdated CDs, DVDs, and software. He uses the proceeds to buy the latest, coolest stuff. It's become an obsession and a vicious cycle. When my son grabs the Sunday paper, you would think he would grab the comics. NO! He grabs the electronics ads.

Bend Over

The tobacco industry has blown smoke up our arses. After the 1998 settlement between the American tobacco industry and forty states to stop marketing cigarettes to our kids, tobacco companies continue to market to our children. The tobacco companies spent \$59.6 million in 2000 advertising in the most popular youth magazines. Magazines my children read. Research in *The Journal of the National Cancer Institute* found that

teens are more likely to be influenced to smoke a cigarette by cigarette advertising than by their peers.

Our family has talked about the hazards of smoking at many spontaneous "learning moments." Everyone seemed to get it, but my daughter recently got pulled over by a police officer for smoking a cigarette last week. Despite our best efforts, tobacco marketing often trumps good parenting. I am thankful they banned R. J. Reynolds' flavored cigarettes such as "Twista Lime" and "Mocha Taboo." I wonder what they could possibly be selling next. Violence?

Marketing violence to both genders is a problem. But let's face it: it affects males more than females. "After reviewing more than 1,000 studies based on over thirty years of research, six major public health organizations, including the American Medical Association, found that viewing entertainment violence can lead to increase in aggressive attitudes, values, and behaviors, particularly in children," noted a Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood fact sheet. I am sure this is not a shocker, but the question is how to deal with it, especially because, despite the rating system, violent media content is frequently marketed to our children.

My Temporary Solution

I have dealt with these intrusions by becoming the media police in our home. I put parental controls on my children's computer, but my daughter maneuvered around this system and designated herself the administrator, changed my password, and obtained complete access to the Internet.

I programmed parental controls on our TV, which limited viewing to PG- or G-rated programs and blocked TV access during the school week. My younger son figured out the password and shut off the parental controls. My older son kept it easy. He just went to his friends' houses to watch violent movies on their TVs and steal cars and mutilate people on their computers, or so I thought.

We have a rule that no M-rated (containing mature content) software is allowed in the house. Yet despite this ban, my older son continued to sneak in M-rated software. The most offensive was *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, the top-selling video game where players can kill a prostitute after having sex with her. This game is so popular there are now four versions of the software.

When I first discovered this M-rated software in the house I reasonably reminded my son of our house rule and told him to give it back to whomever gave it to him. He got caught sneaking in M-rated software three times. By the fourth time I started throwing the software in the garbage. To my sur-

prise, it took a long time of throwing away expensive software until my son stopped bringing it in the house (or perhaps he just hid it better). My son still loves paint ball and violent TV, movies, and software. And I violently object! We haven't agreed to disagree. He is immune to the backdrop of a real war and real violence around him. I worry that in one year he will be eighteen and eligible for the draft, should there be one. I don't want him to have to discover first hand that war is no fun.

My other strategies to confront marketing assaults directed at my children were to give them the skills to identify and evaluate advertising and teach them about consumer advocacy and financial literacy. I was somewhat successful with the first two, but I have to confess, my children have very little financial self-control. Money burns through their hip belts faster than a three-alarm fire.

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National surveys reveal that kids are leaving high school without a basic understanding of issues about savings and credit-card debt. It's no surprise that over the past decade, credit-card debt among eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds more than doubled. Today I took a credit card solicitation sent to my fifteen-year-old daughter and mailed an empty application in their prepaid self-addressed envelope back to the company. I figure if more parents would do that, companies might take a second look at these wasteful marketing practices.

I Kid You Not

Marketing to kids is big business, so I made it my business to protect them as best I could from the onslaught. I discovered assaults from every direction and from unsuspecting locations, so here is a heads-up on some of the most repulsively overt and covert ways corporate America is trying to influence your children.

There are a growing number of product placements in TV shows, movies, children's books, even textbooks. For example, M&Ms' parent company has produced a counting book for young children. There are products integrated in computer games like Kraft's candystand.com and neopets.com.

Even nonprofit organizations have been co-opted by corporate America. The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry said the science is "not clear" that soft drinks contribute to cavities after accepting

a \$1 million grant from Coca-Cola.

The American Beverage Association (formerly National Soft Drink Association) estimated that nearly two-thirds of schools nationwide had exclusive “pouring rights” contracts with soda companies like Coke and Pepsi. The more the students drink, the more money the school receives from the companies. This creates an incentive to encourage children to consume more soft drinks.

In May 2008 PepsiCo and Coca-Cola announced new voluntary guidelines to reduce their marketing of unhealthy foods to children aged twelve and

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under. According to the advocacy organization Corporate Accountability International, these companies are attempting to circumvent mandatory health policies promoted at the World Health Assembly (WHA) in Geneva. “These corporations are blatantly attempting to preempt policy initiatives at the international level to curb junk food marketing to children,” said T. J. Faircloth, research director of Corporate Accountability International, who participated in the Geneva talks. “When these corporations police themselves, it’s the classic scenario of the fox guarding the henhouse.”

Are our schools for sale? My kids’ schools have become commercialized because of budget cuts. There are an ever-increasing number of corporate-sponsored school events and commercialized lunches. When I was in school, I ate cardboard generic pizza, but now the pizza is from Rocky Rococo; the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches (without crust) are from Smuckers. My kids eat designer lunches.

Corporations not only sell products in schools but also create curricula. For example, an environmental curriculum produced by Exxon emphasized the planet’s resilience in responding to oil spills. Nabisco created a math curriculum where children estimate how many chocolate chips are in a bag of Chips Ahoy!

To fill funding gaps, my kids are recruited to become salespeople for gift wrap and candy products. Some book fairs sell toys, video games, posters, and fashion accessories with media tie-ins. School is supposed to be a commercial-free haven for children, but ad-creep has gotten out of control. For

example, McDonald’s was allowed to put its logo on report cards of elementary school students in Seminole County, Florida, but parents’ uproar persuaded the school and McDonald’s to remove its logo. I particularly resent when my children’s teachers insist I buy an ever-growing list of expensive school supplies made by designated companies.

Channel One, a controversial in-school marketing company, has delivered televised content to nearly 12,000 schools throughout the nation in exchange for video equipment. The company presented two minutes of advertising and ten minutes of “news,” banter,

and fluff to a captive audience of about 7.7 million students. These schools spent one full school week each year watching television, including one full school day just for the ads, according to the Center for a New American Dream. A survey of Channel One advertisers found that 27 percent of the ads were for junk food. The next-

highest category, at 10 percent, was military recruitment. Channel One advertised movies, TV shows, and video games featuring violence, strong sexual content, and alcohol and tobacco use.

The good news is that parents and activists groups can successfully fight these companies. For example, last fall the New American Dream partnered with Commercial Alert, Obligation, Inc., and parents across the U.S. to encourage leading national corporations not to buy advertising on Channel One or BusRadio. As a result of this initiative, one major international toy company chose not to renew its contract with Channel One. Channel One’s parent company, Primedia, officially declared the educational unit a “discontinued operation” last winter because of junk-food advertising restrictions that resulted in lost revenue.

The Real Spy Kids

The decline in effectiveness of the thirty-second spot is driving corporate marketers to a technique called “buzz marketing,” which is purposely creating word-of-mouth “buzz” for commercial profit. Buzz Marketing Group, a market research company, describes buzz marketing as “Lifestyle or Street Marketing”:

Smart marketers have realized that it’s important to reach their consumer where they spend most of their time, whether it’s in school, at the movies, at the mall, or sports arena. Because Buzz MG understands the young consumer, we know where they go, and where they’d like to interact with your brand.

One example of this strategy is Tremor, a marketing service powered by Procter & Gamble that develops teen word-of-mouth marketing programs. Its website boasts that it has more than a quarter of a million influential teens who act like marketing spies to create a buzz for new products. The teens receive free samples and discounts for their services.

The Girls Intelligence Agency (GIA) offers "Slumber Party in a Box," involving a proprietary network of over 40,000 girls or "secret agent influencers" who are recruited to host slumber parties and conduct market research or sell products to their friends.

Brand Nation, another marketing firm, lures people, especially college students, to talk up products in public or private for cash and free goods. Companies actually scan public places where kids hang out, like arcades and playgrounds, in order to identify the most popular kids. They then recruit these "alpha kids" to become their marketeers. I wonder whether back in the 1950s, Disney's Mouseketeers were the first teenage marketeers?

Buzz marketing is growing. A study by PQ Media, which collects econometric data and researches alternative media, estimates companies paid outside agencies \$1.4 billion for word-of-mouth marketing in 2007, up from less than \$100 million in 2001.

Not only is every corner of American life saturated with pitches and product placements, but also your friends and family are becoming corporate shills. I don't mean to sound paranoid, but watch out: When your children convince you to buy something for them, they may be getting a kickback. I guess this is one way to finance an expensive college education.

My Final Strategy

I have important advice for people thinking about having children, and who will likely fight these battles as well—birth control.

But all kidding aside, how do I protect and raise my children to become healthy, caring, and well-balanced people in what seems to be an off-balanced world? I decided media policing was a losing game. I know when I'm outsmarted. I decided on another tactic. My husband and I bought property in northern Wisconsin to give my children an antidote to the commercialized-techy world. The land has 100-foot pine trees, a quiet lake, and creatures galore to explore. The natural assets were augmented with a canoe, a kayak, floats, tubes, fishing gear, badminton and archery sets, even a fifteen-foot water trampoline. Hey, I'm not completely immune to consumerism.

The only three rules were: have fun, swim with a

buddy, and NO ELECTRONICS once we arrive at the lake. The last was problematic. You'd think we asked them to cut off their arms. We allowed their cell phones and CD and MP3 players while we were in the car traveling to and from our property. However, once we got there, we insisted that everyone unplug and encouraged our children to listen to the magic of the natural world, to slow down, look around, ponder, sleep, play instruments, sing, smell, eat s'mores around a campfire, and bring friends to share this special place with us. This is the gift we want to give our children. In fact, from the time they were born we took them camping. The attributes of the outdoors were not unknown to our children.

Our youngest seems to appreciate our little piece of heaven, but the two older kids hate the place. I will never forget passing my older son's tent late one night and seeing that eerie blue light spill out into the forest. I peeked in and there he was, zoned out while plugged into his smuggled cell

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phone, playing a video game. My daughter spends most of her time putting makeup on and vegetates in the car or in our camper.

Our biggest battles with our children are to get them to the lake. But we won't give up the good fight, for I know we are planting seeds of change. My twelve-year-old son whispered to me last summer, "Mom, do you think when I get older I could have my wedding up here?" I whispered back, "Yes, honey. I would really love that." 🏡

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