

MARKETING TO CHILDREN IN THE 21ST CENTURY:

A REVIEW OF ITS DEPTH, BREADTH AND IMPACT AND A CALL TO ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN TO TAKE ACTION

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Children have long been targets for marketing – from peddlers at medieval street fairs through to radio and the early days of television. But the marketing experienced by kids today is vastly different from that experienced by previous generations. In a trend that began escalating over three decades ago, marketing to children in the 21st century is big business, made possible by the unprecedented convergence of ubiquitous, portable, and sophisticated screen media and sophisticated, largely unregulated commercialism. No families in history have ever had to cope with such a multi-pronged, large scale, well-financed, incessant, assault on the hearts and minds of children.

Today, children in industrialized nations around the world are bombarded with marketing from the moment they wake up in the morning to the time they go to bed at night. They are inundated with messages ingeniously designed to convince them that their happiness is tied directly with what they buy. In addition to seeing thousands of overt advertisements and commercials each year, they are subjected to a raft of more covert marketing as well. Advertisements are embedded in movies and video games. The clothes they wear, the food they eat, their bed sheets, their toys, the TV programs, apps, videos and video games they consume, and even their toothpaste are de facto advertisements for mega-brands like Spiderman, SpongeBob Squarepants, or the Disney princesses.

Today, corporations whose primary interest is raising healthy profits rather than raising healthy children, influence just about every aspect of their lives – at a cost. To make matters worse, children are more readily influenced by advertising than adults and research shows that commercialism is a factor in so many childhood public health and social problems today – from the erosion of creative play to obesity to the exacerbation of family stress and the glorification of violence as a legitimate strategy for conflict resolution.

This chapter describes the depth and breadth of commercialism in the lives of children, the roots of the problem, the techniques marketers use, the ways children are vulnerable and the potential harms.

MARKETING TO CHILDREN IS BIG BUSINESS

Marketers first identified children as a lucrative and virtually untapped market in the 1980s, and marketing to children has been escalating ever since. To put the escalation in perspective, in 1983, U.S. marketers spent some \$100 million targeting children,¹ a paltry sum compared to the \$17 billion they are spending today.² And the monetary value of immersing children in marketing has also increased. In 1992, James McNeal, often cited as the “father” of the modern child-market, stated that children in the U.S. influence \$137 billion in family spending.³ Today he estimates that they influence \$1.2 trillion.⁴ While much of the impetus for marketing to children originates in the United States, the trend is promulgated world-

¹ Schor J. *Born to buy: The commercialized child and the new consumer culture*. New York: Scribner; 2004.

² Horovitz B. Six strategies marketers use to get kids to want stuff bad. *USA Today*. 2006;B1. Available from: www.usatoday.com/money/advertising/2006-11-21-toy-strategies-usat_x.htm

³ McNeal J. The littlest shoppers. *American Demographics*. 1992;14(2):48-53.

⁴ Horovitz B. Marketers target kids with tech; ads come in tricky, fun-loving new forms. *USA Today*. August 15, 2011;B1. Available from: www.indystar.com/article/20110815/BUSINESS/108150350/Marketers-target-kids-tech. Accessed December 20, 2011.

wide by multinational corporations. Food companies alone spend about \$1.9 billion annually marketing directly to children around the world.⁵

THE ESCALATION OF MARKETING TO CHILDREN: ROOT CAUSES

Today's unprecedented pervasiveness of child-targeted marketing has its roots in the fervor for government deregulation that began in the United States in the 1980s, coupled with the proliferation of miniaturized screen media.

In the late 1970s, the American Federal Trade Commission (FTC) proposed a plan to prohibit television advertising to children under 8 and junk food marketing to children under the age of 12. Two years later, after heavy lobbying from the corporate world, including the media, marketing, food, and toy industries, Congress severely curtailed the ability of the FTC to regulate marketing to children.⁶ And by 1985, the United States Congress deregulated children's television, making it possible to create children's programming for the sole purpose of selling toys – the program-length commercial. Within a year, all of the ten best-selling toys in the U.S. had ties to media.⁷

After the research leading to the Federal Trade Commission's proposed ban was made public, however, other countries instituted more stringent regulations. Today, Sweden and Norway ban television advertising to children under the age of 12,⁸ and Canada's Province of Quebec bans advertising to children under the age of 13.⁹ Greece prohibits advertisements for toys on television between 7 a.m. and 10 p.m.; ads for toy guns and tanks are not allowed at any time.¹⁰ In the Flemish speaking areas of Belgium, no advertising is allowed within five minutes of a children's television program shown on a local station.¹¹ Finland bans advertisements that are delivered by children or by familiar cartoon characters.¹² The French government recently prohibited all vending machines in middle and secondary schools,¹³ and recently banned television programming that targets children under 3.¹⁴ In Britain, the BBC stopped using its beloved cartoon characters to market unhealthy packaged foods to children in 2004.¹⁵ A few years later, Ofcom, the British regulatory agency, banned television junk food advertising on children's shows and on adult

5 Burke R. Food giants serve up a €1.2bn dish to children. *The Independent*. June 14, 2009. Available from: www.independent.ie/business/irish/food-giants-serve-up-a-12bn-dish-to-children-1773255.html Accessed February 15, 2013.

6 Westen T. Government regulation of food marketing to children: The federal trade commission and the kid-vid controversy. *Loyola of Los Angeles Law Review*. 2006;19(1):79-91.

7 Denison D.C. The year of playing dangerously. *Boston Globe Magazine*. 1965:14-16, 99-107, 110.

8 Briggs B. Wallace hints at ban on junk food averts as the best way to fight obesity among young. *The Herald*. February 1, 2003: A1.

9 Rivard N, LeBlanc P. Advertising to kids in Quebec no picnic. *Strategy*. May 8, 2000:B10. Available from: ads.strategyonline.ca/articles/magazine/20000508/youth-quebeckids.html Accessed February 15, 2013.

10 Rowan D. Hard sell, soft targets. *The London Times*. October 18, 2002:2-6. Available from: www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/life/article1717951.ece . Accessed February 15, 2013.

11 Rowan D. 2002.

12 Hawkes C. *Marketing food to children: The global regulatory environment*. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2003.

13 Taylor P. Liberty, equality, fraternity... obesity? *The Globe and Mail*. August 6, 2004:A11.

14 Ollivier C. France bans broadcast of TV shows for babies. *Associated Press*. August 20, 2008. Available from: www.commercialfreechildhood.org/news/2008/08/france_bans_babytv.htm . Accessed November 21, 2008.

15 Anonymous. BBC to limit ties to junk food. *Wall Street Journal*. April 5, 2004:D5.

programs popular with children.¹⁶ More recently, South Korea banned the marketing of junk food between 5 and 7 p.m. and during any children's programming.¹⁷ It is significant to note that a recent study of 12 wealthy countries shows that those allowing the most advertising to children score lowest on UNICEF rankings of child well-being.¹⁸

Children's escalating exposure to child-targeted marketing around the world is also rooted in their increasing exposure to screen media – most of which is commercially driven. For the first time in history, television, rather than active and creative play, is the most common leisure activity for children around the world.¹⁹ And the amount of time even very young children are spending on computers, video games, and smartphones is escalating. As new screen technologies become popular, they don't replace the old technologies; for children of all income levels, time spent with new media is added to time spent with older media. Video games and tablets, for instance, have not replaced television time – they have increased the amount of time children spend with screens.²⁰

For many children, media use begins in infancy. On any given day in the U.S., 29% of babies under the age of 1 are watching TV and videos for an average of about 90 minutes. Twenty-three percent have a television in their bedroom.²¹ Time with screens increases rapidly in the early years. Between their first and second birthday, on any given day, 64% of babies and toddlers are watching TV and videos, averaging slightly over 2 hours. Thirty-six percent have a television in their bedroom.²² Little is known about the amount of time children under 2 currently spend with smartphones and tablets, but in 2011 there were three million downloads just of Fisher Price apps for infants and toddlers.²³

Data vary on screen time for preschoolers. But even the most conservative findings show that children between the ages of 2 and 5 average 2.2 hours per day.²⁴ Other studies show that preschoolers spend as much as 4.1²⁵ to 4.6 hours²⁶ per day using screen media. As children grow older, screen time increases. Including when they're multitasking, 8- to 18-year-olds

- ¹⁶ Sweeny M. Total ban for junk food ads around kids' shows. *The Guardian*. November 16, 2006. Available from: www.guardian.co.uk/society/2006/nov/17/health.food. Accessed November 26, 2008.
- ¹⁷ Agence France-Presse. South Korea restricts TV ads for junk. *The Telegraph*. January 19, 2010. Available from: www.telegraph.co.uk/expat/expatnews/7025149/South-Korea-restricts-TV-ads-for-junk.html. Accessed February 15, 2013.
- ¹⁸ Kasser T. Cultural values and the well-being of future consumers: A cross-national study. *Journal of Cross-cultural Psychology*. 2011(42):206-215.
- ¹⁹ Singer D, Singer J, D'Agostino H, Delong R. Children's pastimes and play in 16 nations: Is free play declining? *American Journal of Play*. 2009;1(3):283-312.
- ²⁰ Rideout V. *Zero to eight: Children's media use in America*. San Francisco, CA: Commonsense Media. 2011: 44; Rideout V, Foehr U, Roberts D. Generation M2: Media in the lives of 8- to 18-year-olds. Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation. 2010: 2.
- ²¹ Rideout V. 2011. Further analysis of original data published by Commonsense Media was conducted on October 4, 2012 by Melissa Saphir and Vicky Rideout at the request of this publication.
- ²² Rideout V. 2001. Further analysis of original data published by Commonsense Media was conducted on October 4, 2012 by Melissa Saphir and Vicky Rideout at the request of this publication.
- ²³ LaPorte N. Where apps become child's play. *New York Times*. July 7, 2012:BU3. Available from: www.nytimes.com/2012/07/08/technology/in-a-fisher-price-lab-apps-are-childs-play-prototype.html. Accessed February 15, 2013.
- ²⁴ Rideout V. 2011: 18.
- ²⁵ Tandon P, Zhou C, Lozano P, Christakis D. Preschoolers' total daily screen time at home and by type of child care. *Journal of Pediatrics*. 2011;158(2):297-300.
- ²⁶ McDonough P. TV viewing among kids at an eight-year high. Nielsen web site. October 26, 2009. Available from: blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/media_entertainment/tv-viewing-among-kids-at-an-eight-year-high/. Accessed March 1, 2013.

consume an average of 7 hours and 11 minutes of screen media per day – an increase of 2.5 hours in just 10 years.²⁷

Television is still the primary venue for advertising to children, but internet marketing through computers and hand-held devices like mp3 players is escalating, as are apps and text-message marketing on cell phones. Nick.com, the website belonging to the internationally popular children's cable station, Nickelodeon, took in \$9.6 million between July, 2004 and July, 2005 – more advertising revenue than any other site.²⁸ According to a report by the Joan Ganz Cooney Center, at age 3, about one-quarter of children go online daily, increasing to about half by age 5. And by age 8, more than two-thirds use the Internet on any given weekday. Children ages 5 to 9 average about 28 minutes online daily. In 2009, children 8 to 10 spent about 46 minutes on a computer every day, more than double the amount of time 8 to 10 year olds spent online in 2006 (19 minutes).²⁹ The marketing industry is still creating TV commercials aimed at children, but companies are expanding their reach through a variety of other techniques. In the United States, children ages 2 to 11 see 25,000 commercials each year on television alone.³⁰ In Brazil, children see about 35,000 each year.³¹ Although children see thousands of commercials each year on television, modern marketing methods extend well beyond the traditional 30-second advert.

BEYOND COMMERCIALS: BRAND LICENSING, PRODUCT PLACEMENT, AND OTHER BRANDING STRATEGIES THAT TARGET CHILDREN

Brand licensing

Children see tens of thousands of commercials each year, but their exposure to marketing extends well beyond the 15- or 30-second advert. Probably the most popular method for marketing to young children is brand licensing, when a media image is sold to other companies in order to market toys, food, clothing and accessories.

Brand licensing is incredibly lucrative. For this reason, most children's media characters have become tools for marketing other products. For example, in 2010, the Disney Princess licensing alone brought in \$4 billion.³² About 97% of children under 6 in the United States own something – such as a doll, stuffed animal, action figure, bedding, or clothing – that features the image of a character from the media.³³ It is increasingly difficult to find any products for children – from food to toys – that are unadorned by media characters and logos. And toy companies

²⁷ Rideout V, Foehr U, Roberts D. 2010: 2.

²⁸ Shields M. Web-based marketing to kids on the rise. *MediaWeek*. July 25, 2005. www.mediaweek.com/mw/news/interactive/article_display.jsp?vnu_contentId=1000990382. Accessed August 15, 2005.

²⁹ Gutnick A, Robb M, Takeuchi L, Kotler J. Always connected: The new digital media habits of young children. New York: The Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop; 2010.

³⁰ Holt D, Ippolito P, Desrochers D, Kelley C. Children's exposure to TV advertising in 1977 and 2004. Federal Trade Commission Bureau of Economics. June 1, 2007: 9.

³¹ Fiates G, Amboni R, Teixeira E. Television use and food choices of children: Qualitative approach. *Appetite*. 2008;50(1):12-18.

³² Barnes B. For Disney, a younger princess. *New York Times Online*. December 11, 2011. Available from: mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/12/11/for-disney-a-younger-princess Accessed December 13, 2011.

³³ Rideout V, Vandewater E, Wartella E. Electronic media in the lives of infants, toddlers and preschoolers. Menlo Park, CA: The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. 2003: 28.

are now in the business of television. In 2010, the mega toy company Hasbro launched its own television station to promote its products and brands.³⁴ Today, even children's books are often media linked. As a result, children's play, reading, art and music are primarily shaped by pre-created characters, plots, and themes. What were once tools for self-expression are now designed to remind children constantly of media programs and their products, teaching them to value that which can be bought over their own creations.

Product placement

Product placement and integration, the insertion of products into the content of media programs, as props, backgrounds, or even as plot points, has increased exponentially in the past decade.³⁵ Research shows that these practices are effective and demonstrates that product placement and integration can affect the brand choices of younger children and tweens.³⁶ Around the globe, spending on product placement in television, film, online and mobile platforms, video games, music, and other media rose to \$7.39 billion in 2011. Product placement in children's television programs is technically illegal in the United States.³⁷ However, it is prominent in programs that they like to watch. For instance, *American Idol*, which is often rated among the top ten most popular programs for 2 to 11 year olds is rife with Coca-Cola product placement.^{38 39} It is also prominent in films and video games consumed by children. In 2011, the film *The Smurfs* was released incorporating promotions for a variety of Sony products.⁴⁰ A few years earlier, the family film *Sky Kids 2* incorporated McDonald's as a plot point.⁴¹ And *Scooby Doo 2* featured Burger King product placement.⁴²

Products are also routinely inserted into the content of web sites, songs, books, video games and other media for children. The popular children's website Neopets, now owned by Nickelodeon, trademarked the term "Immersive Advertising," a description of the way that brands such as McDonald's, General Mills, Disney, and others were incorporated into children's use of the site.⁴³ As part of the game, for instance, children have been encouraged to send their friends a Reese's Puffs Cereal screen saver and to watch commercials for sugary cereals.⁴⁴ After placing EZ squirt ketchup in the Neopets website, a Heinz executive commented

- 34 Adegoke Y. Discovery, toymaker Hasbro plan a cable network for kids. *Washington Post*. September 9, 2010:C10. Available from: www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-25818737.html Accessed December 20, 2011.
- 35 Business Wire. Research and markets: Global product placement spending forecast 2012-2016. *Business Wire*. Dec 20, 2012. Available from: www.businesswire.com/news/home/20121220005950/en/Research-Markets-Global-Product-Placement-Spending-Forecast . Accessed March 1, 2013.
- 36 Aurty S, Lewis C. Exploring children's choice: The reminder effect of product placement. *Psychology and Marketing*. 2004;21(9).
- 37 Federal Trade Commission. Children's television programs: Report and policy statement. *Federal Register* 39. 974: 396-409.
- 38 Synopsis Kids! email newsletter. Nielsen Media Research cited. January 2-June 2, 2005.
- 39 Foust D, Grow B. Coke: Wooing the TiVo generation. *BusinessWeek*. March 1, 2004:77.
- 40 Bowles S. Fans of old "smurfs" may feel a little blue; adaptation is for the uninitiated. *USA Today*. July 29 2011:3D.
- 41 Greydanus S. Spy kids. Decent Films Guide web site. 2001. Available from: www.decentfilms.com/sections/reviews/1732 . Accessed March 9, 2006.
- 42 Common Sense Media. Scooby doo 2: Monsters unleashed. Common Sense Media web site. September 12, 2004. Available from: www.common SenseMedia.org/movie-reviews/scooby-doo-2-monsters-unleashed . Accessed March 1, 2013.
- 43 Winding E. Immersed in child's play: A website that offers virtual pets has found a successful way of advertising to children. *Financial Times*. June 10, 2002:17.
- 44 General Mills cereal adventure. Neopets.com web site. www.neopets.com/cereal/ Accessed February 28, 2013.

that product awareness “just went through the roof... Trials of the product increased by 18 percent.”⁴⁵ Children can gain points by collecting Cheetos in Frito-Lay’s “The Legend of Cheetocorn”⁴⁶ and then “help Buzz defend the honey” at General Mills’ Honey Nut Cheerios site.⁴⁷

Children’s entertainment today is routinely branded and released on multiple media platforms: the video game reappears as a movie, a TV show, a cell phone app, and a book (or “talking” book), so that all of the content on various platforms essentially markets the brand. In addition, media companies lease beloved media characters as icons for food, toys, clothing, and accessories. Thanks to cell phones and the advent of wearable screen accessories, many kids are never more than a click away from their favorite media characters.⁴⁸

360° branding strategies

Today, huge corporate conglomerates own television and radio stations, web businesses and film studios, and successfully insert screen time and marketing into the lives of an increasingly younger audience. Companies that target children are forming partnerships and using multiple media platforms to surround children with marketing. A good example is the franchise based on the *Toy Story* films, which has generated three movies, video games for all the major systems, apps for smartphones, *Toy Story* versions of Etch-A-Sketch and Mr. Potato Head, and a vast bazaar of action figures, plush toys, costumes, hats, t-shirts, mugs, and dolls. For themed birthday parties, there are *Toy Story* cups, plates, napkins, tablecloths, balloons, stickers, tattoos, cake decorations, and pre-packed party bags.⁴⁹

Of course, *Toy Story* is not the only example of 360 degree branding. In the fall of 2008, LEGO partnered with McDonald’s, Sony, and Warner Brothers to market a violent video game and fast food to young children by promoting the LEGO Batman video game through Happy Meal toy giveaways.⁵⁰ McDonald’s also used cell phones to market McFlurries by having 600 of their California franchises urge kids to text message in order to receive a cyber-coupon for a free McFlurry. They were urged to download free ringtones and cell phone wallpaper and to pass on information about the promotion to their friends. McDonald’s advertised the text message instructions through advertisements on buses and billboards through a guerrilla marketing technique called “wild posting,” which involves plastering print ads on structures such as bus kiosks or construction site barriers. The company even used skywriting to promote “Text McFlurry, 73260.”⁵¹

⁴⁵ Winding E. 2002.

⁴⁶ Legend of the cheetocorn. Cheetos.com - Chester’s Feed Web site. www.cheetos.com/view/game/the-legend-of-cheetocorn/ Published 2008. Accessed February 6, 2013.

⁴⁷ Honey defender. Honey Nut Cheerios Web site. www.honeydefender.com/ Published 2010. Accessed February 6, 2013.

⁴⁸ ATP Electronics. Flash memory summit 2010 award for ATP sesame street video USB. www.atpinc.com/about1-2.php . Accessed October 20, 2011.

⁴⁹ Toy story read-along for iPad. itunes.apple.com/us/app/toy-story-read-along/id364376920?mt=8 Updated 2013. Accessed January 3, 2013.

⁵⁰ Grasser M. WB gives big push to ‘lego batman’. *Variety*. 2008.

⁵¹ Chester J, Montgomery K. No escape: Marketing to kids in the digital age. *Multinational Monitor*. 2008(July/August):11-16.

THE INCREASED SOPHISTICATION OF MARKET RESEARCH: NEUROMARKETING AND BEHAVIORAL TARGETING

Companies that market to children have long worked with psychologists using their knowledge of child development and children's vulnerabilities to devise successful marketing strategies.⁵² New technologies are now available to help marketers be even more precise in their targeting through neuromarketing. Today, companies – including companies that market to children such as Nestle and General Mills – have access to new brain-imaging technologies to conduct tests to determine exactly what areas of the brain respond to specific kinds of marketing and marketing images.⁵³ With pinpoint accuracy, neuromarketers can identify brain activity in response to products or images that is associated with emotions such as fear or pleasure.⁵⁴ In 2007, a study with adults even showed that brain imaging can predict when someone is going to purchase a product.⁵⁵

In addition, as digital technology becomes more sophisticated, TV and the Internet are merging to become a whole new interactive media and marketing experience for children. As children spend increasing amounts of time accessing the Internet on computers and mobile devices, and playing digital games, their vulnerability to marketers is increasing. For one thing, they will be exposed to more marketing. For another, they are vulnerable to insidious market research. Their personal information may be collected and used for behavioral targeting – which means that advertisements will be designed particularly for their age, interests, gender, and vulnerability. In other words, they may unwittingly be giving up personal, identifiable information about themselves which can be sold to other companies or exploited in other ways.

In the United States, the Federal Trade Commission has just strengthened the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act to include more protections for children under the age of 12.⁵⁶ To date, there are no laws protecting children from being subjects in neural marketing experiments.

HOW VULNERABLE ARE CHILDREN TO ADVERTISING AND MARKETING?

Research tells us that children are more vulnerable to marketing than adults and that they only develop the cognitive abilities necessary to

- 52 Linn S. *Consuming kids: The hostile takeover of childhood*. New York: The New Press; 2004:23-36; Frazier A. Market research ages 6 and up. Savvy gen Y-ers: Challenge, involve them. *Selling to Kids*. 1999;4(4); Acuff D, with Reiher R. *What kids buy: The psychology of marketing to kids*. New York, New York: Free Press; 1997; McNeal JU. *Kids as customers: A handbook of marketing to children*, New York: Lexington Books; 1992:12.
- 53 Kelly M. The science of shopping. *CBC Marketplace*. December 2, 2002. Available from: www.commercialalert.org/issues/culture/neuromarketing/the-science-of-shopping Accessed February 20, 2013.
- 54 Goddard J. This is your brain on advertising - neuro-marketing lets marketers get inside your head. *The Toronto Star*. January 18, 2012. Available from: www.thestar.com/business/small_business/marketing_sales/2012/01/18/this_is_your_brain_on_advertising_neuromarketing_lets_marketers_get_inside_your_head.html . Accessed February 20, 2013.
- 55 Knutson B, Rick S, Wimmer E, Prelec D, Loewenstein G. Neural predictors of purchases. *Neuron*. 2007;53(1):147-156.
- 56 Federal Trade Commission. FTC strengthens kids' privacy, gives parents greater control over their information by amending Children's online privacy protection rule. December 19, 2012. Available from: www.ftc.gov/opa/2012/12/coppa.shtm . Accessed March 1, 2013.

critically evaluate marketing messages over a period of many years.⁵⁷ The youngest children can't even distinguish between commercials and programming.⁵⁸ By preschool, many children recognize that commercials are different from programming, but believe that they exist merely to provide breaks in programming.⁵⁹ Slightly older children can make the distinction, but they are concrete thinkers, tending to believe what they see in a 15-second commercial for cookies or a toy,⁶⁰ and that the purpose of advertising is merely to provide information about those products and is therefore trustworthy. By the age of about 8 children begin to understand that the purpose of advertising is to sell something.⁶¹ However, while they may be able to describe the intent of a commercial as "selling," they frequently retain the belief that the commercial is trustworthy.⁶²

Understanding "intent to sell" has often been confused in the literature as understanding "persuasive intent," but researchers now believe that they are different. Understanding persuasive intent means understanding that an advertiser is trying not just to provide information about a product – but to make it seem more attractive in order to persuade consumers to buy something they might not ordinarily buy.⁶³ Recent research suggests that even by the age of 10 or 11 many children do not have a grasp of persuasive intent.⁶⁴ And even when children are mature enough to understand persuasive intent that does not seem to have an impact on whether or not children want the product being advertised.⁶⁵ Older kids and teens might be more cynical about advertising, but their skepticism doesn't seem to affect the tendency of young people to desire and buy the products they see advertised.⁶⁶

THE IMPACT OF MARKETING ON CHILDREN

Studies around the world suggest that advertising and marketing is a factor in many of the public health and social problems facing children

⁵⁷ Carter O, Patterson L, Donovan R, Ewing M, Roberts C. Children's understanding of the selling versus persuasive intent of junk food advertising: Implications for regulation. *Soc Sci Med*. 2011;72(6):962-968.

⁵⁸ Pearl D, Bouthilet L, Lazar J. Television advertising and socialization consumer roles. In: *Television and behavior: Ten years of scientific progress and implications for the eighties*. Rockland, MD: National Institute of Mental Health; 1982:191-200.

⁵⁹ John D. Consumer socialization of children: A retrospective look at twenty-five years of research. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 1999;26(3):183-213.

⁶⁰ Levin D, Linn S. The commercialization of childhood: Understanding the problem and finding solutions. In: Kasser T, Kanner A, eds. *The psychology of consumerism*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association; 2004:213-232.

⁶¹ Wilcox B, Kunkel D, Cantor J, Dowrick P, Linn S, Palmer E. Report of the APA task force on advertising and children: Psychological issues in the increasing commercialization of childhood. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association; 2004.

⁶² Oates C, Blades M, Gunter B, Don J. Children's understanding of television advertising: A qualitative approach. *Journal of Marketing Communications*. 2003;9(2):59-71.

⁶³ Roberts, D. Issues, evidence, interventions. In: Sprafkin J, Swift C, Hess R., eds. *Rx television: Enhancing the preventive impact of TV*. Philadelphia, PA: Haworth Press; 1983:19-36.

⁶⁴ Carter O, Patterson L, Donovan R, Ewing M, Roberts C. Children's understanding of the selling versus persuasive intent of junk food advertising: Implications for regulation. *Soc Sci Med*. 2011;72(6):962-968.

⁶⁵ Christenson P. Children's perception of TV commercials and products: The effects of PSAs. *Communication Research*. 1982;9(4):491-524.

⁶⁶ Ross R, Campbell T, Wright J, Huston A, Rice M, Turk P. When celebrities talk, children listen: An experimental analysis of children's responses to TV ads with celebrity endorsement. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*. 1984;5(3):185-202.

today.⁶⁷ Childhood obesity,⁶⁸ discontent about body image⁶⁹ and eating disorders,⁷⁰ sexualization,⁷¹ youth violence,⁷² family stress,⁷³ underage drinking⁷⁴ and underage tobacco use⁷⁵ are all linked to advertising and marketing. So is the erosion of creative play,⁷⁶ which is the foundation of learning, creativity, and the capacity to wrestle with life to make it meaningful.⁷⁷ The underlying message of commercial marketing – that the things we buy will make us happy – is a major factor in the acquisition of materialistic values which have been found to be linked to depression and low self-esteem in children.⁷⁸

Childhood obesity

Due to concerns about escalating rates of childhood obesity around the world, much of the recent research conducted on the impact of advertising on children has been focused on food marketing. Such august bodies as the World Health Organization, the Institute of Medicine, and the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity all link child-targeted marketing to the childhood obesity epidemic. Research shows that children's food preferences, brand preferences, food choices and consumption are influenced by marketing⁷⁹ and suggests a link between exposure to junk food advertising and being overweight.⁸⁰

Collaboration among research groups in Australia, Asia, Western Europe, and North and South America found that when children are most likely to be watching television and on the channels they are most likely to be watching, advertisements for food comprised between 11% and 29% of advertisements. There were more food adverts than adverts for any other product – and most were for junk food.⁸¹

Just one 30-second commercial can influence the food preferences of children as young as 2.⁸² Commercialism even trumps children's senses. Given the choice between two offerings of exactly the same food,

- ⁶⁷ Linn S. 2004.
⁶⁸ Institute of Medicine of the National Academies. *Food Marketing to Children and Youth: Threat or Opportunity?* Washington, DC: The National Academies Press; 2006.
⁶⁹ Hargreaves D, Tiggemann M. The effect of television commercials on mood and body dissatisfaction: The role of appearance-schema activation. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*. 2002;21(3):287-308.
⁷⁰ Becker A, Burwell R, Herzog D, Hamburg P. Eating behaviors and attitudes following prolonged exposure to television among ethnic Fijian adolescent girls. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*. 2002;(180):509-514.
⁷¹ Zurbriggen E, Collins R, Lamb S, et al. *Report of the APA task force on the sexualization of girls*. www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.html. Published 2007. Accessed March 25, 2008.
⁷² Cook D, Kestenbaum C, Honaker M, Anderson ER. *Joint statement on the impact of entertainment violence on children*. www.aap.org/advocacy/releases/jstmtevc.htm. Published July 26, 2000. Accessed February 9, 2008.
⁷³ Buijzen M, Valkenburg PM. The effects of television advertising on materialism, parent-child conflict, and unhappiness: A review of research. *Applied Developmental Psychology*. 2003(24):437-456.
⁷⁴ Evans J, Richard K. Self-regulation in the alcohol industry: a review of industry efforts to avoid promoting alcohol to underage consumers. Washington, DC: Federal Trade Commission. 1999: 4.
⁷⁵ Burns D, Amacher R. *Changing Adolescent Smoking Prevalence*. National Cancer Institute. 2001.
⁷⁶ Greenfield PM, et al. The program-length commercial. In: Beery G, Asamen, J, eds. *Children and Television: Images in a Changing Sociocultural World*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage; 1993: 53-72.
⁷⁷ Linn S. *The case for make believe: Saving play in a commercialized world*. New York: The New Press; 2008.
⁷⁸ Schor J. 2004.
⁷⁹ Horgen K, Choate M, Brownell K. Television food advertising: Targeting children in a toxic environment. In: Singer D, Singer J, eds. *Handbook of children and the media*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE; 2001:447-461.
⁸⁰ Lobstein T, Dibb S. Evidence of a possible link between obesogenic food advertising and child overweight. *Obesity Reviews*. 2005;6(3):203-208.
⁸¹ Kelly B, et al. Television food advertising to children: A global perspective. *Am J Public Health*. 2010;100(9):1730-1736.
⁸² Borzekowski D, Robinson T. The 30-second effect: An experiment revealing the impact of television commercials on food preferences of preschoolers. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*. 2001;101(1):42-46.

significant numbers of children said that food wrapped in a McDonald's wrapper tasted better than food wrapped in a plain wrapper.⁸³ Popular media characters such as Dora the Explorer also influence how children experience the taste of foods – particularly junk food.⁸⁴ A recent neuro-imaging study shows that exposure to brand logos, such as McDonald's golden arches, stimulates the appetite and pleasure centers of children's brains in a manner similar to when they are shown pictures of food, suggesting that children's brains can literally be “branded” by advertising.⁸⁵

It is clear that marketing junk food affects children's eating habits, and, therefore, their overall health. Yet, food marketers continue to target children. In 2009, in the United States, fast food restaurants alone spent more than \$4.2 billion on marketing to children, who now see more marketing for fast food than they did a few years ago. According to a recent study, preschoolers today see 21% more fast food ads on TV than they saw in 2003, and somewhat older children see 34% more.⁸⁶

As it does for all sorts of products, child-targeted marketing for food comes in many guises. Even as food companies continue their onslaught of commercials and traditional adverts, they seek to have children interact with brands through virtual worlds, games, competitions (including make-your-own-commercial contests), and the use of social networking sites to make online “friends” with characters from sugary cereals, like Kellogg's Frosted Flakes' Tony the Tiger.⁸⁷

Children are lured into fast food restaurants with promises of revolving toy promotions. In the U.S., more than 1.6 billion meals with toys were sold to children 12 and under in 2006.⁸⁸ Many, if not most, of the toys are licensed characters which are advertisements for children's media programs, such as Burger King's promotions featuring action figures like the Hulk, the Thing, and Spiderman.⁸⁹

A recent trend in fast food toy promotions provides an excellent example of how advances in technology offer new, sophisticated vehicles for targeting children by promoting discontent. Burger King, in a November, 2010 Kids Meal/Microsoft promotion, offered plush animal toys called “Kinnectimals” designed to be scanned into Kinnect, a new gizmo for the video game platform Microsoft Xbox 360, that allows what happens on the screen to be influenced by voice and body movements. Once scanned in, an image of the animal appears on the screen and will come when the

⁸³ Robinson TN, Saphir MN, Kraemer HC, Varady A, Haydel KF. Effects of reducing television viewing on children's requests for toys: A randomized controlled trial. *Journal of Developmental Behavioral Pediatrics*. 2001;22(179):179-184.

⁸⁴ Roberto C, Baik J, Harris J, Brownell K. Influence of licensed characters on children's taste and snack preferences. *Pediatrics*. 2010(126):88-93.

⁸⁵ Bruce A, Bruce J, Black W, et al. Branding and a child's brain: An fMRI study of neural responses to logos. *Soc Cogn Affect Neurosci*. 2012.

⁸⁶ Harris JL, Schwartz MB, Brownell KD. *Evaluating fast food nutrition and marketing to youth*. 2010.

⁸⁷ Kellogg's. Tony the tiger. Facebook. www.facebook.com/pages/TONY-THE-TIGER/69656741705. Accessed December 1, 2011.

⁸⁸ Kovacic W, Harbour P, Leibowitz J, Rosch JT. *Marketing food to children and adolescents: A review of industry expenditures, activities, and self-regulation*. Washington, DC: Federal Trade Commission. 2008: 22.

⁸⁹ Green S. Marvel's super heroes are showing up at McDonald's! July 23, 2010. www.comicbookmovie.com/fansites/StuartGreen/news/?a=20476. Accessed November 18, 2011.

child calls, and respond to commands like “jump” and “roll over.” With Kinectimals, Burger King and Microsoft turned a toy giveaway into a child-targeted sales pitch to get children to nag parents for a \$150 add-on to an Xbox. And families that don’t own an Xbox 360 were being pressured to spend an additional \$300 for the gaming system. Adding to the allure of this co-branded promotion was that kids were urged to go online and enter codes found on food wrappers or containers for a chance to win a Kinect.⁹⁰

Aggression and desensitization to violence

Research shows that, for children, heavy exposure to media violence is a risk factor for aggression, desensitization to violence, and lack of sympathy for victims. Children who view a lot of media violence are more likely to view violence as an effective way of settling conflicts, and viewing media violence can lead to emotional desensitization toward violence in real life. Children exposed to violent programming at a young age have a higher tendency for violent and aggressive behavior, including bullying, than children who are not so exposed.⁹¹

The association between media violence and real-life aggression is stronger than the link between condom nonuse and sexually transmitted HIV, and nearly as strong as the link between smoking and lung cancer.⁹² Yet violent television programs, movies, and video games are routinely marketed to children.⁹³

Even though violence does not increase a cartoon’s appeal to children,⁹⁴ children’s television shows feature more violence than adult programming, averaging 14 violent acts per hour.⁹⁵ Promotional spots for upcoming shows during children’s programming have an average of 3.46 violent acts per minute. The shows themselves have an average of 1.32 acts per minute.⁹⁶

In 1992, it was estimated that children, on average, would witness 200,000 acts of violence on television alone by the time they are 18.⁹⁷ Given that children’s television time has increased dramatically, it’s likely that those figures have also increased.

In the United States, movies that the film industry rates as suitable for teenagers (PG-13) and adults (R) have been routinely marketed to very young children through toys, adverts during kids’ programs, websites

⁹⁰ Slutsky I. Why you’re unlikely to see ads anytime soon in msft kinect. *Advertising Age*. January 31, 2011:2.

⁹¹ American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Communications and Media. Policy statement: Media violence. *Pediatrics*. 2009;124(5):1495-1503.

⁹² Bushman BJ, Huesmann LR. Effects of television violence on aggression. In: Singer D, Singer J, eds. *Handbook of children and the media*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE; 2000:223-254.

⁹³ Linn S. 2004:105-124.

⁹⁴ Weaver AJ, Jensen JD, Martins N, Hurley RS, Wilson BJ. Liking violence and action: An examination of gender differences in children’s processing of animated content. *Media Psychology*. 2011;14(1):49-70.

⁹⁵ Wilson BJ, Smith SL, Potter WJ, et al. Violence in children’s television programming assessing the risks. *Journal of Communication*. 2002;52(1):5-35.

⁹⁶ Shanahan K, Hermans C, Hyman M. Violent commercials in television programs for children. *Journal of current issues and research in advertising*. 2003; 23(1):61-69.

⁹⁷ Huston AC, Zuckerman D, Wilcox BL, et al. *Big world, small screen: The role of television in American society (child, youth, and family services)*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press; 1992.

aimed at young children, and fast food promotions.⁹⁸ In fact, market research on violent PG-13 movies is conducted with children as young as 7 years old.⁹⁹ In 2009, the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood identified over 5000 adverts on popular children's stations for just five violent PG-13 movies and their related merchandise.¹⁰⁰ In 2008, 75% of the highest-grossing R-rated movies were advertised on websites that are popular with children under 17. Of those, 35% were sites that are particularly popular with children aged 2 to 12.¹⁰¹

As children gravitate increasingly to new media, the impact of media violence may increase. The negative effects of violent "interactive" media, such as computer and video games, are even greater than those of traditional media, such as television and movies.¹⁰² A meta-analysis of studies conducted in both eastern and western countries shows that exposure to violent video games is a causal risk factor for increased aggressive behavior, aggressive thoughts and feelings, and for decreased empathy and prosocial behavior.¹⁰³

Sexualization and poor body image

In recent years, concern has been growing about how marketing and advertising contribute to the sexualization of little girls, leading to reports from the British and Australian governments and the American Psychological Association.¹⁰⁴ It has been noted that, in looking at the links between marketing and precocious, irresponsible sexuality, it is important to distinguish between sex education – imparting knowledge about sex and sexuality in the context of relationships – and sexualization, which sells sex, gender stereotypes, and the trapping of sexuality as a commodity, often to children too young to understand the ramifications of their behavior.¹⁰⁵

Sexualized messages are prevalent across a variety of mainstream media that target children including TV, the Internet, games, movies, music and magazines.¹⁰⁶ In 2005, in the United States, 70% of the episodes of the top 20 shows among teen viewers – many of which are exported internationally – contained some sexual content, including 8% with sexual intercourse.¹⁰⁷ On average, music videos contain 93 sexual situations

⁹⁸ Fentonmiller K, Rusk M, Quaresima R, Engle M. *Marketing violence entertainment to children: A sixth follow-up review of industry practices in the motion picture, music recording & electronic game industries*. Washington, DC: Federal Trade Commission. 2007: 6.

⁹⁹ Fentonmiller K, Rusk M, Quaresima R, Engle M. 2007: 5.

¹⁰⁰ Silverstein E. Parents to FTC: Don't surrender our children to G.I. Joe; thousands sign CCFC petition to stop the marketing of violent PG-13 movies to children. *Campaign for a Commercial-free Childhood*. 2009. Available from www.commercialfreechildhood.org/parents-ftc-don%E2%80%99t-surrender-our-children-gi-joe-thousands-sign-ccfc-petition-stop-marketing-violent. Accessed on March 1, 2013.

¹⁰¹ Fentonmiller K, Rusk M, Quaresima R, Engle M. 2007: 6.

¹⁰² Anderson C, Gentile D, Buckley K. *Violent video game effects on children and adolescents: Theory, research, and public policy*. New York: Oxford University Press; 2007:200.

¹⁰³ Anderson CA, Shibuya A, Ihori N, et al. Violent video game effects on aggression, empathy, and prosocial behavior in eastern and western countries: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*. 2010;136(2):151-173.

¹⁰⁴ Zurbriggen E, Collins R, Lamb S, et al. 2007; Senate Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts. *Inquiry into the sexualization of children in the contemporary media environment*. Australian Government. 2008. Available from: www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/jeca_ctte/sexualisation_of_children/tor.htm. Accessed March 25, 2008. Papadopoulos L. Sexualisation of young people review. *British Home Office Publication*. 2010.

¹⁰⁵ Linn S. Address to the 2005 conference on spiritual progressives. *Tikkun*. 2005;20(6):40.

¹⁰⁶ Pardun C, L'Engle K, Brown J. Linking exposure to outcomes: Early adolescents' consumption of sexual content in six media. *Mass Communication and Society*. 2005; 8(2):75-91.

¹⁰⁷ Kunkel D, Eyal K, Finnerty K, Biely E, Donnerstein E. Sex on TV 4. Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation. 2005: 4.

per hour, including 11 “hard core” scenes depicting behaviors such as intercourse and oral sex.¹⁰⁸

Research links sexualization with some of the most pressing and common mental health problems for girls including eating disorders, low self-esteem, depression and poor sexual health, as well as body dissatisfaction and appearance anxiety.¹⁰⁹ Sexualized media that is marketed to children has an impact on their behaviors and attitudes about sexuality. More than half of teens report getting some or most of their information about sex from television.¹¹⁰ Teens who watch more sexual content on television are more likely to initiate intercourse and progress to more advanced non-coital sexual activities during the subsequent year.¹¹¹ Teens who listen to explicit music are likely to have sexual intercourse sooner than those who do not.¹¹² Girls who watch more than 14 hours of rap music videos per week are more likely to have multiple sex partners and to be diagnosed with a sexually transmitted disease.¹¹³ And girls are not the only ones affected. Boys exposed to violent sex on television, including rape, are less likely to be sympathetic to female victims of sexual violence.¹¹⁴

Sexualized media and toys are routinely marketed to younger children and preteens, whom the marketing industry refers to as “tweens.”¹¹⁵ Marketers use aspirational advertising – exploiting young children’s natural tendency to idealize older kids and adults – to market child-sized sexualized clothing and accessories.¹¹⁶ Tight belly-baring shirts, tiny halter tops, and “low rider pants” are regularly marketed to pre-teens.¹¹⁷ Cosmetic companies like Bonne Bell lure preschoolers, whom marketers now refer to as “pre-tweens,” to makeup with lip gloss spiked with M&Ms, Dr. Pepper, and other flavors.¹¹⁸

In 2007, a report from the American Psychological Association on the sexualization of young girls stated:

Toy manufacturers produce dolls wearing black leather miniskirts, feather boas, and thigh-high boots and market them to 8- to 12-year-old girls. Clothing stores sell thongs sized for 7- to 10-year-old girls (some printed

¹⁰⁸ Lichter SR, et al. *Sexual imagery in popular culture*. Washington, DC: Center for Media and Popular Policy. 2000.

¹⁰⁹ Zurbriggen E, Collins R, Lamb S, et al. 2007.

¹¹⁰ Sutton M, Brown J, Wilson K, Klein J. Shaking the tree of knowledge for forbidden fruit: Where adolescents learn about sexuality and contraception. In: Brown J, Steele J, Walsh-Childers K, eds. *Sexual teens, sexual media: investigating the media's influence on adolescent sexuality*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 2002:25-55.

¹¹¹ Collins R, Elliot M, Berry S, et al. Watching sex on television predicts adolescent initiation of sexual behavior. *Pediatrics*. 2004;114(3):280-289.

¹¹² Martino S, Collins R, Elliot M, Strachman A, Kanouse D, Berry S. Exposure to degrading versus nondegrading music lyrics and sexual behavior among youth. *Pediatrics*. 2006;118(2):430-441.

¹¹³ Wingwood G, DiClemente R, Bernhardt J, et al. A prospective study of exposure to rap music videos and African American female adolescents' health. *American Journal of Public Health*. 2003; 93(3):437-439.

¹¹⁴ American Psychological Association Commission on Violence and Youth. Violence & youth: Psychology's response. *Volume I: Summary report of the American Psychological Association commission on violence and youth*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association; 1993.

¹¹⁵ Linn S. 2004: 130.

¹¹⁶ Linn S. 2004: 131-132.

¹¹⁷ Copeland L. Glamour babes. *Washington Post*. March 25, 2006. Arts and Living. Available from: www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/03/24/AR2006032402188.html Accessed March 25, 2008.

¹¹⁸ O'Donnell J. Marketers keep pace with 'tweens': Fashion-minded girls prove rich, but fast-moving target. *USA Today*. April 11, 2007:1B.

with slogans such as ‘eye candy’ or ‘wink’)...In the world of child beauty pageants, 5-year-old girls wear fake teeth, hair extensions, and makeup and are encouraged to “flirt” onstage by batting their long, false eyelashes. On primetime television, girls can watch fashion shows in which models made to resemble little girls wear sexy lingerie (e.g., the CBS broadcast of *Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show* on December 6, 2005).¹¹⁹

Children are gaining the trappings of maturity at a very young age – language, clothing, and accoutrements. Toy industry executives lament that children stop playing with toys by the age of 6, moving on to “grown up” products such as cell phones, video games and computers.¹²⁰ That they are growing up with technology means that they may grasp the “how to” component of computers, mp3 players, cell phones and hand-held electronic games. But, to date, there is no evidence that 6-year-old children who know better than we do how to use a video game controller, surf the web, or master a remote control, also know how to make sense of, and protect themselves against, the ubiquitous commercialism and its attendant cynicism, sexism, and violence – to say nothing of the pornography – they can encounter in virtual reality.

The erosion of creative play

Among the most troubling ramifications of allowing marketers unfettered access to children is the erosion of creative play, which is central to healthy development. Play is both culturally universal and fundamental to children’s well-being – factors that led the United Nations to list it as a guaranteed right in its 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child.¹²¹ Play is critical to healthy development, and ensuring children’s right to play is an essential building block toward a sustainable world.

The ability to play creatively is central to our capacity to experiment, to act rather than react, and to differentiate ourselves from our environment. It is how children wrestle with life and make it meaningful. Spirituality, and advances in science and art, are all rooted in play. Play promotes attributes essential to a democratic populace, such as curiosity, reasoning, empathy, sharing, cooperation, and a sense of competence – a belief that we can make a difference in the world. Constructive problem-solving, divergent thinking, and the capacity for self-regulation are all developed through creative play.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Zurbriggen E, Collins R, Lamb S, et al. 2007.

¹²⁰ O’Donnell J. 2007.

¹²¹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Convention on the rights of the child: General assembly resolution 44/25. United Nations; 1989. Available from: www.un.org/documents/ga/res/44/a44r025.htm. Accessed March 1, 2012.

¹²² Winnicott D. *Playing and reality*. New York: Basic Books; 1971:53-64; Linn S. 2008; Lillard A. Pretend play as twin earth: A social-cognitive analysis. *Developmental Review*. 2001;21(4):495-531; Burns S, Brainerd C. Effects of constructive and dramatic play on perspective taking in very young children. *Developmental Psychology*. 1979;15(5):512-521; Singer D. Team building in the classroom. *Early Childhood Today*. 2002;16:37-41; Wyver S, Spence S. Play and divergent problem solving: Evidence supporting a reciprocal relationship. *Early Education and Development*. 1999;10(4):419-444; Russ S, Robins A, Christiano B. Pretend play: Longitudinal prediction of creativity and affect in fantasy in children. *Creativity Research Journal*. 1999;12(2):129-139; Bodrova E, Leong D. Self-regulation as a key to school readiness: How early childhood teachers can promote this critical competency. In: Zaslow M, Martinez-Beck I, eds. *Critical issues in early childhood professional development*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Pub. Co.; 2006:203-224.

Children at play may enthusiastically conjure cookies out of thin air or talk with creatures no one else can see, yet they still remain grounded in the “real” world. Once children develop the capacity for simultaneously recognizing an object for what it is and what it could be, they are able to alter the world around them to further their dreams and hopes, and to conquer their fears. When children are given the time and opportunity, they turn spontaneously to “pretend play” to make sense of their experience, to cope with adversity, and to try out and rehearse new roles. They also develop the capacity to use pretend play as a tool for healing, self-knowledge, and growth.

We have traditionally assumed that when children have leisure time, they are engaged in some kind of self-directed, or “free,” play, the motivation for which generates from within, rather than from external forces. But for the first time in history, the most common activity for children around the world is watching television.¹²³ In Vietnam, 91 percent of mothers report that their children watch television often, as do more than 80 percent of mothers in Argentina, Brazil, India, and Indonesia.¹²⁴

Research tells us that the more young children engage with screens, the less time they spend in creative play.¹²⁵ There is some evidence that some screen media can encourage children to play creatively.¹²⁶ But when screens dominate children’s lives – regardless of content – they are a threat, not an enhancement, to creativity, play, and make-believe.¹²⁷ The more time children have to nurture and develop their own interpretations of media content, the more likely they are to move beyond the electronic script they’ve viewed.¹²⁸ But as research shows, many children spend an inordinate amount of time with screens, which limits the amount of time they have to explore and develop any thoughts, feelings, and ideas that media content might engender.

When it comes to being a springboard for creativity, screen media is less effective than radio and books primarily because it requires less from us. Reading requires us to imagine both aural and visual images. Radio provides sound, but still necessitates that we imagine what the story looks like.¹²⁹ Screen media does all of that work for us and, in addition, seems to be an aid in remembering content,¹³⁰ which means they can simultaneously be helpful to certain kinds of learning and inhibit, rather than promote, imagination.

¹²³ Singer D, Singer J, D’Agostino H, DeLong R. 2009.

¹²⁴ Singer D, Singer J, D’Agostino H, DeLong R. 2009.

¹²⁵ Vanderwater E, Bickman D, Lee J. Time well spent? Relating television use to children’s free-time activities. *Pediatrics*. 2006;117(2):181-191.

¹²⁶ Singer D, Singer J. *The house of make-believe: Play and the developing imagination*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 1990:177-198.

¹²⁷ Valkenberg P. Television and the child’s developing imagination. In: Singer D, Singer J, eds. *Handbook of children and the media*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE; 2001:121-134.

¹²⁸ Gotz M, Lemish D, Moon H, Aidman A. *Media and the make-believe worlds of children: When Harry Potter meets Pokémon in Disneyland*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 2005.

¹²⁹ Vibbert M, Meringoff, L. *Technical Report #23: Children’s production and application of story imagery: A cross-medium investigation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Project Zero.1981; Valkenberg P. 2001.

¹³⁰ Anderson D. Educational television is not an oxymoron. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 1998;557:24-38.

The fact that it is now possible to view programs on DVDs, mp3 players, and cell phones, as well as on digital video recorders and other home recording devices that provide programming “on demand,” makes multiple viewings of the same program a new fact of children’s lives. Across platforms, electronic screens are the primary means for marketers to target children. Loveable media characters, cutting-edge technology, brightly colored packaging, and well-funded marketing strategies combine in coordinated campaigns to capture the hearts, minds, and imaginations of children – teaching them to value that which can be bought over their own make-believe creations.

The toys that nurture imagination – blocks, art supplies, dolls, and stuffed animals free of computer chips and links to media – can be used repeatedly and in a variety of ways, diminishing the need to spend money on new toys. The electronic wizardry characterizing today’s best-selling toys makes for great advertising campaigns. They *look* like fun. But they are created with a kind of planned obsolescence. They are not typically designed with the goal of engaging children for years, or even months. They are designed to sell. If interest wanes, so much the better – another version will soon be on the market. Toys that talk and chirp and do back flips all on their own take much of the creativity, and therefore the value, from play activities.

Brand-licensed toys are an especially lucrative business, bringing in an estimated \$6.2 billion in 2007 just in the United States.¹³¹ But children play less creatively with toys that represent familiar media characters whose voices, actions, and personalities are already in place.¹³²

Materialistic values

In addition to selling products, research shows that marketing messages also influence behaviors and values.¹³³ The fundamental message of most commercial marketing is that happiness or well-being depends on the acquisition of particular products or brands. Yet, research tells us that the things we buy don’t bring any kind of lasting happiness, which is found instead in such non-tangibles as relationships, job satisfaction, and experiences.¹³⁴ Children’s materialistic values, including those of children as young as preschoolers, are linked to their consumption of commercial media.¹³⁵ Studies across cultures show that children who are exposed to more commercial messages than their peers have more materialistic values.¹³⁶

¹³¹ Personal communication from Anita Frazier, Toy Industry Analyst, NPDI Group, New York. September 11, 2009.

¹³² Berry C, Asamen J. The program-length commercial. In: *Children and television: Images in a changing sociocultural world*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications; 1993:53-72.

¹³³ Kasser, T. *The high price of materialism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; 2002.

¹³⁴ Ahuvia A, Wong N. Personality and values based materialism: Their relationships and origins. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*. 2002;12(4):389-402.

¹³⁵ Nairn A, Ormond J, Bottomley P. Watching, wanting and well-being: Exploring the links: A study of 9 to 13-year-olds. 2007:5. Available from: www.ncc.org.uk/nccpdf/poldocs/NCC167r_watching_wanting_wellbeing.pdf. Accessed March 1, 2013; Goldberg M, Gorn G. Some unintended consequences of TV advertising to children. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 1978;5(1):22-29.

¹³⁶ Vega V, Roberts D. Linkages between materialism and young people’s television and advertising exposure in a US sample. *Journal of Children and Media*. 2011;5(2):81-103; Greenberg B., Brand J. Television news and advertising in schools: The “Channel One” controversy. *Journal of Communication*. 1993;43(1):143-151; Chan K, Cai X. Influence of television advertising on adolescents in china: An urban-rural comparison. *Young Consumers*. 2009;10(2):133-145.

Believing that happiness comes from the things we buy actually undermines children's well-being. Materialistic values in children are linked to feelings of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and psychosomatic problems.¹³⁷ In fact, research shows that psychologically healthy children will be made worse off if they become more enmeshed in the culture of getting and spending. At the same time children with emotional problems will be helped if they disengage from commercial culture.¹³⁸

The consequences of inculcating materialistic values in children extend beyond their mental health to their interactions with society. Kids who are more materialistic report less generosity and allocate less money to charity when they imagine receiving a windfall. They are also less engaged in environmentally responsible behavior. Children who are more materialistic report fewer positive environmental behaviors (e.g., reusing paper, using less water while showering).¹³⁹

Family stress

While one reason marketers target children is to instill lifelong brand loyalty,¹⁴⁰ another is to convince children to spend their own money. But because young children, especially, typically don't have their own money, the purpose is often to encourage them to convince their parents to buy whatever is advertised.¹⁴¹

A review of over 30 years of research suggests that advertising affects children's requests for products, and that these requests can be a source of tension and conflict for families.¹⁴² In 1998, market research in the United States found that children's nagging accounted for four out of ten trips to entertainment centers and one out of every three trips to a fast-food restaurant.¹⁴³ More recent studies have found links between advertising and children's product requests, including for food¹⁴⁴ and toys.¹⁴⁵ One study shows children's familiarity with cartoon characters used in marketing increases their nagging for the products.¹⁴⁶ A survey of children in the United States found that, on average, 12 to 17 year olds made about nine requests for a particular purchase. More than 10% of 12 to 13 year olds asked up to 50 times for one product.¹⁴⁷

¹³⁷ Schor J. 2004.

¹³⁸ Kasser T. Psychometric development of brief measures of frugality, generosity, and materialism for use in children and adolescents. In: Moore K, Lippmann L, eds. *What do children need to flourish: Conceptualizing and measuring indicators of positive development*. New York: Springer; 2010:357-474.

¹³⁹ Schor J. 2004: 160-170.

¹⁴⁰ Linn S. 2004: 41-60.

¹⁴¹ Linn S. 2004: 31-40.

¹⁴² Buijzen M, Valkenburg P. 2003.

¹⁴³ Western media international, "The fine art of whining: why nagging is a kid's best friend." *Business Wire*. August 11, 1998.

¹⁴⁴ Briesch R, Bridge E. The 'nag factor' and children's product categories. *International Journal of Advertising*. 2006;25(2):157-186.

¹⁴⁵ Pine KJ, Nash A. Dear santa: The effects of television advertising on young children. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*. 2002;26(6):529-539; Robinson TN, Saphir MN, Kraemer HC, Varady A, Haydel KF. Effects of reducing television viewing on children's requests for toys: A randomized controlled trial. *Journal of Developmental Behavioral Pediatrics*. 2001;22(179):179-184.

¹⁴⁶ Henry H., Borzekowski D. The nag factor: How do children convince their parents to buy unhealthy foods? *Journal of Children and Media*. 2011;5(3):298-317.

¹⁴⁷ Lambert, E., Plunkett, L., & Wotowicz, T. *Just the facts about advertising and marketing to children*. Takoma Park, MD: Center for a New American Dream. 2002.

CONCLUSION

The convergence of ubiquitous, miniaturized screen media and inadequate regulation has increased children's exposure to advertising and marketing around the world. In addition, advances in brain research and marketers' access to new technologies make marketing to children in the 21st century more sophisticated and insidious than ever. At the same time, evidence is mounting that marketing is a factor in many public health and social problems facing children today.

Marketing to children is so pervasive, and children are so vulnerable, that it is clear that individual families cannot provide adequate protection. Nor have attempts to rely on industry self-regulation been successful. For these reasons, advocates for children need to address this pernicious problem. While it's easy to be overwhelmed by the money and power behind the commercialism of childhood, there are things we can do both to hold corporations accountable and to help parents make informed decisions.

We can raise awareness about the extent to which children are targeted. We can lobby for stricter regulations in our own countries. We can work together for stronger recommendations from international bodies such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization. We can help parents set limits on screen time and to choose unbranded toys for children that encourage rather than discourage creative play. We can help educators and caretakers create commercial-free environments for children that promote active and creative play.

What we can't do, is pretend that the commercialization of childhood isn't happening. Nor can we pretend it's benign. Children have the right to grow up, and parents have the right to raise them, without being undermined by commercial interests. It's up to us to protect that right.

BIOGRAPHY

Susan Linn, EdD., is Director of Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, Research Associate at Boston Children's Hospital, and Instructor in Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. A psychologist, she has written extensively about the effects of media and commercial marketing on children. Her books, *Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood* and *The Case for Make Believe: Saving Play in a Commercialized World* helped launch the global movement to reclaim childhood from corporate marketers. Dr. Linn is an award winning ventriloquist and children's entertainer, and is internationally known for her innovative work using puppets in child psychotherapy. She has lectured about the importance of creative play, the impact of media and marketing on children, and about puppets as a therapeutic tool, throughout North America and in South America, Europe, and Asia. Among other honors, Dr. Linn received a Presidential Citation from the American Psychological Association for her work on behalf of children.