
tips for
parenting
in a
commercial
culture
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With a single-minded competitiveness reminiscent of the California gold rush, corporations are racing to stake their claim on the consumer group formerly known as children. What was once the purview of a few entertainment and toy companies has escalated into a gargantuan, multi-tentacled enterprise with a combined marketing budget estimated at over $15 billion annually — about 2.5 times more than what was spent in 1992. Children are the darlings of corporate America. They're targets for marketers of everything from hamburgers to minivans. And it's not good for them.

–Susan Linn, *Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood*[1]

We have become a nation that places a lower priority on teaching its children how to thrive socially, intellectually, even spiritually, than it does on training them to consume. The long-term consequences of this development are ominous.

–Juliet Schor, *Born to Buy*[2]

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This booklet was written and published by **New American Dream**. We help Americans consume wisely for a better world. In a society often fixated on "more," we focus on more of what matters — a cleaner environment, a higher quality of life, and a greater commitment to justice. A key part of that focus is helping parents and caregivers raise healthy, happy children — children with strong values, a sense of community, and meaningful connections to the natural world. Visit us online at **www.newdream.org** to learn more about our programs and see the back page for an offer to receive a great parenting book when you support our work.

Protecting Our Children

Our children remind us that the world is full of wonder and possibility. They make us laugh, exhaust us with their endless questions, and evoke indescribable feelings of love. We dedicate ourselves to meeting their needs, while endeavoring to foster wholesome values, independent thinking, respect for self and others, and a dedication to the common good.

It goes without saying that raising kids in today's noisy, fast-paced culture can be difficult. For good or ill, modern kids are exposed to a wider world. The voices of home and community have been joined by a chorus of voices from around the globe clamoring for their attention. Unfortunately, an increasing number of those voices view your child not as a young citizen to be nurtured and encouraged, but as a target — a unit in an underdeveloped market to be exploited for gain.

Over the past two decades, the degree to which marketers have scaled up efforts to reach children is staggering. In 1983, they spent $100 million on television advertising to kids. Today, they pour roughly 150 times that amount into a variety of mediums that seek to infiltrate every corner of children's worlds.[3]

The results of this onslaught are striking. New research suggests that aggressive marketing to kids contributes not only to excessive materialism, but also to a host of psychological and behavioral problems, including depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, childhood obesity, eating disorders, increased violence, and family stress.[4]

The purpose of this booklet is to give adults a greater understanding of what children face today, and to offer resources to help parents and caregivers band together to protect children from intrusive and harmful advertising.

We believe it's important to help children reclaim valuable noncommercial space in their lives — space to be children, not merely consumers.

Children as Targets

You've got to reach kids throughout the day — in school, as they're shopping at the mall, or at the movies. You've got to become part of the fabric of their lives.
– Carol Herman, a senior vice president at Grey Advertising[5]

A 19th Century baseball player famously quipped that his key to success was to "hit 'em where they ain't." The newest strategy in advertising to kids is to hit 'em where they are… everywhere they are. Modern children are inundated with a dizzying array of sales pitches in a variety of settings, hawking everything from electronics, to apparel, to cosmetics and more.

With each passing year, marketers strive to reach younger and younger audiences. In recent years, much of their attention has been focused on "tweens" between the ages of 8 and 12. According to a leading expert on branding, 80 percent of all global brands now deploy a "tween strategy."[6] But advertisers are not stopping at tweens. In a more than figurative sense, they are stooping ever lower, making their pitches to budding consumers not yet out of diapers. According to child psychologist Allen Kanner: "The age of the children targeted is dropping rapidly. It's about two years old now."[7]

"It's one more medium that allows us to be everywhere kids are."

–a Nickelodeon VP describing a plan to send branded ring tones, text messaging, and content to young children's cell phones[8]

"The competition for kids' mind share is intense… Everything from *Disney Princess* to *That's So Raven* to *Pirates of the Caribbean* we position as a lifestyle brand, and we are able to drive that lifestyle message through product."

— Jim Fielding, executive vice president of global retail, sales, and marketing, Disney Consumer Products[9]

Research shows that children under the age of eight are unable to critically comprehend televised advertising messages and are prone to accept advertiser messages as truthful, accurate and unbiased. This can lead to unhealthy eating habits as evidenced by today's youth obesity epidemic. For these reasons, a task force of the American Psychological Association (APA) is recommending that advertising targeting children under the age of eight be restricted.

– From a February, 2004 American Psychological Association press release[10]

Commercial Television

Television commercials have long been the most popular method for marketers to reach children. The average American child today is exposed to an estimated 40,000 television commercials a year — over 100 a day.[11] But the pitches don't stop when the commercial breaks end. Ads bleed into the shows themselves via product placements, which also seep into movies, video games, even children's books. Licensing has become big business. Movies and children's shows spin off toys based on popular characters and cross promote with fast-food chains in an effort to ensure that all forms of entertainment are tied up neatly in a coordinated commercial package. Small wonder, then, that kids so conditioned to anticipate the assault might actually express confusion when tie-ins mysteriously fail to materialize:

One of my friends explained to me that her son, a five-year-old with sophisticated musical tastes, was baffled by the fact that there was no "Talking Heads" stuff — no shows, no toys, no logo, no nothing. What was going on, he wondered, with this band he liked so much?

– Juliet Schor, *Born to Buy*[12]

Laura Pavlides of Glenwood, Maryland, credits most of her success in protecting her two sons from the effects of commercialism to one factor: not having cable. It's a strategy that works because no one in the family really enjoys network television! "If you make the TV boring, they don't think it's that great," Laura says. Because the parents don't watch much, neither do the kids.

J.T., Laura, Matt, and Chris Pavlides.

In fact, she says, the family doesn't have many rules about the television because they don't need them. The kids do get to watch movies, mostly from the library, and always parent-approved. Certain television shows are off-limits, however — the ones where characters consistently are mean to each other. That actually rules out a number of children's shows.

When asked the kinds of things her kids do to pass the time, Laura rattled off a long list: reading, playing with toy animals and action figures, drawing, playing at swordfighting, using their mini-trampoline…

The boys — J.T., 7, and Chris, 6 — may not watch much television, but they already realize some of the tricks that advertisers play and don't want many of the things other kids their age ask for. When other kids point out a toy in a TV ad, the boys frequently dismiss it and say, "Oh, they just want your money." This is a lesson the boys have learned the hard way: "They've been disappointed by toys before, so they understand," explains Laura. It also helps that both parents have been very pointed in their conversations about advertising. Laura thinks it's especially important to teach kids about commercialism when they are young and still eager to emulate and please their parents.

Laura sees definite benefits in the way she has chosen to raise her children. She feels her children are less physically aggressive and more mature than their peers. Still, Laura admits that the time may come when it's more difficult for them. She thinks that the other kids at school are "tougher" than hers, and that sometimes the things their friends say can shock them. She worries that other kids sometimes make fun of her boys for being "uncool," but feels that they'll be fine because their parents are instilling them, above all, with a good sense of themselves.

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, youth are multitasking their way through a wide variety of electronic media daily, juggling iPods and instant messaging with TV and cell phones. In fact, they pack 8.5 hours of media exposure into 6.5 hours each day, seven days a week — which means that they spend more time plugged in than they do in the classroom.[13]

Beyond the Tube

Marketing approaches have become multi-faceted and sophisticated, moving far beyond television advertising to include the Internet, advergames, strategic product placement across media, and much more.
– National Academy of Sciences fact sheet[14]

While television advertising remains popular, new forms of advertising are rising up to fill the space after the screen goes blank. By the mid 1990s, direct marketing, promotions, and sponsorships actually accounted for 80 percent of marketing dollars.[15]

One of the primary new ad conduits, though, involves even more screen time. Kids are adding more and more hours in front of the computer to the already extensive time in front of the TV. Marketers are too happy to meet them there. Thousands of child-oriented websites, rife with advertising, have appeared in the past few years.[16] For advertisers, though, the real breakthrough of the Internet is not the ubiquitous banner ad but the chance to engage kids directly, weaving commercial messages into the content itself.

Neopets is one such site, with 11 million viewers, 39 percent of whom are 12 and under. The company that created the site works with corporate sponsors to integrate products into "advergames" with titles such as "Lucky Charms Super Search." Kids try to earn Neopoints in order to nourish virtual pets on the site. Points can be earned by watching toy or cereal ads, or viewing movie trailers in the Disney theater. Once you get points, you can buy food for the pets. Choices might include Oreo cookies, Sweetarts, or other sponsored junk food. Kids can also stock up on points by participating in marketing surveys.[17] The site's creators tout this "immersive advertising" to potential sponsors as an excellent way to hook kids on particular brands.[18] A company press kit quotes one satisfied sponsor: "It becomes addictive... It has tremendous stickiness, and that helps us gain the exposure we need."[19]

Prying Open Inter-Child Relationships

Bombarding children with advertisements is bad. Turning them into ads is worse. Not content merely to transform kids into walking billboards via conspicuous logos on clothes, marketers now embrace stealthier "buzz" (or "guerrilla") marketing techniques to worm their way into children's private interactions with each other.

To entice kids into shilling products to their peers, marketers dangle cash rewards, product samples, or the opportunity to be part of an undercover, trendsetting club. They pitch it as a form of empowerment, telling children "You have a voice that will be heard," and, "You get cool information before your friends receive it."[20]

Secret agent kids are provided pointers and sales kits and are unleashed everywhere kids go — on the Internet, on playgrounds, at school, even at home. One firm, Girls Intelligence Agency (GIA), whose client list includes Sony, Hasbro, and Disney, provides its cadre of clandestine saleskids with "Slumber-Party-In-A-Box" kits to help them sell products and mine their friends for marketing info.[21]

The child agents are not required to inform their peers—indeed, they are often discouraged from doing so—of the relationship to a sponsor.[22] In most cases, the desired illusion is that the saleskid is just a friend or disinterested party passing on useful info, not a hired gun paid to pitch a product. In essence, these children are being taught to view peers as potential dupes. (GIA instructs its network of 40,000 girls that they "gotta be sneaky" in their efforts to push products.[23]) The lesson these kids learn is fairly clear: deceiving friends and exploiting trust can be fun and rewarding.

Procter & Gamble's Tremor ad agency tells potential clients it has a 200,000+ "Tremor Crew" of "the most influential teen connectors — your gateway to the total teen population."[24]

[C]ompanies scour public places where kids congregate, such as playgrounds, malls, coffee shops, and arcades. They study kids' behavior and conduct interviews with them, their teachers, and parents to identify the coolest kids. Companies then recruit those alpha kids to tout products among their peers by word-of-mouth.

– Michelle Stockwell, *Childhood for Sale: Consumer Culture's Bid for Our Kids*[25]

One woman who has worked to build a national movement around positive parenting is **Enola Aird**, director and founder of the **Motherhood Project**. Enola launched the group in the late 1990s after leaving the workforce to stay home with her first child. She was troubled by the devaluing of mothers. She was also concerned that the national conversation about mothering was dominated by media-fueled "mommy wars" — mothers pointing fingers at each other about whether or not to be in the workforce. She wanted to move the conversation forward to help all mothers overcome many other obstacles that make raising children in America today so difficult.

Convinced that our society's failure to value mothers and the work of mothering is tied to the fact that every aspect of our culture is dominated by "bottom line" thinking or what have been called the values of the "money world," Enola set out to help build a mothers' movement to change our culture and what it values. She wanted to help make this a society with a much healthier balance between the values of the money world and the values necessary for raising healthy, caring children, or what Enola calls values of the "mother world."

The goal of the Motherhood Project is to help mothers meet the unprecedented challenges of raising children in an age driven by the values of commerce and technology. The Project quickly identified advertising as one of the major forces making mothers' work so challenging.

"I still remember the day when my then-teenage daughter told me that my husband and I were 'raising her and her brother for a world that did not exist anymore,'" Aird recalls. "That bit of child's wisdom got me to thinking about how my attempts to raise my children to be non-consumerist in their attitudes had actually made them odd — made them not fit in. That led me to look at the influence of advertising and marketing in shaping the values and behavior of children today. I started talking to other mothers — and fathers — and realized that I was not alone — that there was a movement waiting to be built." This led to the first Motherhood Project report: *Watch Out for Children: A Mothers' Statement to Advertisers*, which challenged corporate leaders to end their aggressive and damaging campaigns aimed at children.

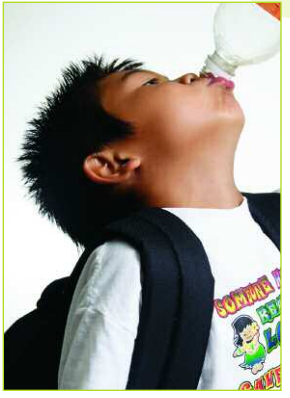
When her children were growing up, Enola and her husband strictly limited their television watching and strongly resisted their nagging for advertised products. "We talked to them about our family's values — faith in God, concern for others, self-control and self-discipline — and tried to show how commercial values were diametrically opposed to the values our family holds dear." These efforts helped her teach her children to resist advertising.

Enola acknowledges that raising non-materialistic children is tough. She urges parents to join together to stop corporations from exploiting children's vulnerabilities. "As a start," she says, "parents can support the effort to re-authorize the Federal Trade Commission to regulate advertising to children. It is shameful that in our country today advertising to children is less regulated than advertising to adults."

Breaching the School's Walls

In an environment cluttered with advertising, it is a great advantage for an advertiser to appear in a location where attendance is mandatory and where there are fewer commercials competing for attention. And because children go to school every day, advertising in schools usually entails repeated exposure, which research shows is more effective than a single viewing.

– American Psychological Association report[26]



Parents battling to limit excessive commercialism in the home are understandably frustrated when marketers invade parent-free venues. The classroom is a particularly troublesome battleground of late. A report from an American Psychological Association Task Force on Advertising and Children (quoted above) warns that psychologists should be especially concerned with in-school commercialism, in that such advertising carries the tacit endorsement of school authorities, and students often aren't allowed to escape the pitch.

School advertising abounds in a variety of direct forms: in yearbooks, newsletters, team uniforms, school buses, vending machines, and fast food meals. It also creeps in the backdoor via sponsorships, as companies buy naming rights to school facilities and promise rewards for students and teachers who participate in corporate-crafted contests and programs.[27] A few of the more popular entry points include:

In 2005, California officially banned sales of soda and fast foods in public schools, including high schools. Advocates of the two measures passed by the legislature, one covering food and the other beverages, say they are the most sweeping rules of their kind in the United States and will have a measurable impact on the future health of Californians.[28]

In 2005, **Senator Tom Harkin** of Iowa received a Fred Rogers Integrity Award from the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood for introducing the HeLP (Healthy Lifestyles and Prevention) America Act, a bill that included several provisions to protect children from commercial exploitation. The bill (which to date has not passed Congress) would also help protect children from tobacco advertising and limit the marketing of unhealthy food in schools. In addition, Senator Harkin's amendment to the Child Nutrition Act would help schools address junk food consumption and obesity through the mandated creation of wellness policies.[29]

1. Peddling junk via the exclusive vending contract. Across the nation, soft drink and snack food companies pay handsomely for the right to place their products and ads in schools absent competition. The American Beverage Association (formerly National Soft Drink Association) at one point estimated that nearly two thirds of schools nationwide had exclusive "pouring rights" contracts with soda companies.[30]

One overzealous administrator in Colorado Springs, spurred by sales incentives included in the contract, urged teachers to push Coke products on students, and provided a calendar of promotional events to help them advertise Coke.[31]

Nevertheless, a growing concern over the effects of junk food on children's health have prompted some school districts to resist. (See box on page 11.)

2. Exchanging equipment for access to a "captive audience." Providing (often badly needed) equipment or funds in exchange for mandatory viewing of commercial messages represents another way marketers gain access to students. One company, Zapme!, provided free computers programmed to deliver online ads and collect marketing data on kids' surfing habits.[32] Concerns over privacy and intrusive ads prompted the non-profit group Commercial Alert and others to protest and eventually derail Zapme!'s marketing plan, but other companies with similar business models still exist.

The most prominent is Channel One. Channel One is a network that provides schools with video equipment if they agree to carve out class time to watch a daily news broadcast with embedded commercials. In promotional materials to potential sponsors, the network boasted that it delivers into sponsors' hands a

"captive audience" of students.[33] An informal survey of Channel One advertisers from a few years ago found that 27 percent of the ads were for junk food. The next highest category, at 10 percent, was military recruitment.[34] Channel One also advertises movies, TV shows, and video games featuring violence, strong sexual content, and alcohol and tobacco use.[35]

3. Corrupting the curriculum. Perhaps the most troubling way commercialism creeps into schools is by way of corporate incursion into academic content.[36] In the 1980s, corporations began stepping up efforts to provide free curriculum and other educational packets to schools. Unfortunately, the materials are often self-serving — laced with promos for company products, or worse, with propaganda designed to slant the educational content to support the company's stance on controversial issues.

In the mid-1990s, Consumers Union — publisher of *Consumer Reports* magazine — examined the nature and quality of 77 corporate-sponsored classroom packets. It found blatant biases, commercial pitches, significant inaccuracies, or all of the above in nearly 80 percent of the materials.[37] To cite a few examples from the report:

- Procter & Gamble['s] *Decision: Earth* taught that clear-cut logging is good for the environment…
- The American Coal Foundation dismisses the greenhouse effect, saying that "the earth could benefit rather than be harmed from increased carbon dioxide…"
- The Exxon Energy Cube program… implies that fossil fuels in general pose few environmental problems… [and] suggests that worries about oil spills and strip mining are unfounded…[38]

An American Psychological Association task force estimated more than a decade ago that the average child sees 8,000 murders and 100,000 other violent acts on television by the end of elementary school.[39]

Harming Children's Well-Being

As tens of thousands of those flickering images melt together into a constant, nagging whisper in children's ears, specific harmful effects can run the gamut from increased parent-child conflicts to strained family budgets, distorted value systems, and both physical and emotional health problems.

–Michelle Stockwell, *Childhood for Sale: Consumer Culture's Bid for Our Kids*[40]

Dr. Allen Kanner, child psychologist at the Wright Institute in Berkeley, California, has been asking kids over the past two decades what they wanted to do when they grew up. Their answers used to include such noble job titles as "nurse" and "astronaut." Kanner says now he is more likely to hear "make money."[41] He adds: "In my practice I see kids becoming incredibly consumerist… When they talk about their friends, they talk about the clothes they wear, the designer labels they wear, not the person's human qualities."[42] Kanner sees advertising as a prime culprit: "Advertising is a massive, multi-million dollar project that's having an enormous impact on child development." The result is not only an epidemic of materialistic values among children, but also a "narcissistic wounding" whereby children have become convinced that they're inferior if they don't have an endless array of new products.[43]

Relentless advertising harms children in a variety of ways. Author and Boston College Sociology Professor Juliet Schor finds links between immersion in consumer culture and depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and conflicts with parents.[44] The American Academy of Pediatrics sees a causal connection

between increased displays of aggressive behavior and ads aimed at kids for movies, games, and music rife with violent imagery.[45] Wheelock College Education Professor Diane Levin sees similar correlations with sexual imagery in children's ads and increases in eating disorders among girls, adding that as "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."[46] Not surprisingly, rising levels of childhood obesity also track an explosion of junk food ads in recent years.[47]

Each year since 1998, the Commercialism in Education Research Unit of Arizona State University has produced a report detailing trends in schoolhouse commercialism. To read the reports, visit www.asu.edu/educ/epsl/ceru.htm.

Most parents understand the "nag factor" all too well. They know that their kids are bombarded by ads telling them to buy certain products in order to be popular. Then comes the nagging. According to a national survey commissioned by the **Center for a New American Dream**, American children aged 12 to 17 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 12- to 13-year-olds admitted to asking their parents more than 50 times for products they have seen advertised. The poll also found:

- More than half of the children surveyed (53 percent) said that buying certain products makes them feel better about themselves. The number is even higher among 12- to 13-year-olds: 62 percent say that buying certain products makes them feel better about themselves.
- Nearly a third of those surveyed (32 percent) admitted to feeling pressure to buy certain products such as clothes and CDs because their friends have them. Over half of 12- to 13-year-olds (54 percent) admitted to feeling such pressure.
- 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.[48]

In 2005, the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies (IOM), at the request of Congress and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, undertook a comprehensive review of scientific evidence on the influence of food marketing on diets and diet-related health of children and youth. The resulting report concluded unequivocally that "current food and beverage marketing practices put children's long-term health at risk."[49] The Institute of Medicine stated that: "*Turning around the current trends will require broad private and public leadership — including the full participation of the food, beverage, and restaurant industries, food retailers, trade associations, advertising and marketing industry, entertainment industry and the media — in cooperation with parents, schools, and government agencies.*"[50]

Who's Responsible?

Marketers often argue that marketing is not to blame,[51] that parents should more carefully monitor their children's media exposure, and just say no when children beg for the things they see advertised. And indeed they should. It is undeniably true that parents bear primary responsibility for shepherding children through the commercial culture and must teach discernment and set limits if they wish to protect their children from the onslaught.

However, marketers go too far when they use the "parental responsibility" argument to imply that they themselves should not be held accountable for egregious intrusions into children's lives. Furthermore, marketers are increasingly going out of their way to circumvent parents, seeking out children in venues where parents aren't present. Overextended parents should not be forced to raise children in plastic bubbles while marketers enjoy free reign to accost kids who unwittingly venture into a commercial world by simply attending school or interacting with friends. The fact that parents hold primary responsibility for teaching children positive values does not imply that corporations should be allowed to undermine parents and saturate kids with harmful messages.

Creating TV-Free Family Rituals

By ritual-making expert **Meg Cox**

Meg Cox and her son, Max

In my household if there is a vacuum of time with nothing to do, my son Max will rush to fill it with TV or video games. It helps to have TV-free and game-free zones and times: no television during meals. No television during homework period, which happens right after Max gets home from school. Still, if there is nothing else going on, he will say to his dad, "Let's watch *The Simpsons*," and once the television is on, it's hard to get it off!

One of my solutions is to map out certain days of the week for certain activities. One night a week is "game night," during which we can choose from a wide range of games; one is a "reading night" in which we can read aloud or silently, but we all read. Another possibility is "sports night": play tag outside if the weather is mild, or invent an indoor game. We play indoor soccer with a small, soft ball in our front hallway.

Also, when possible, we plan outdoor family activities. My son really dislikes going for hikes and long walks, but we try to make the walks fun in several ways. One is to tell stories that are based on books or movies we love, but we add characters or go off on a tangent. A favorite is retelling *The Lord of the Rings*, but we each get to add three more characters. Frodo goes on his quest with the other hobbits and Aragorn and Gimli and all the rest, but they might have to interact with Homer Simpson, Harry Potter, Spiderman, or even made-up characters like Wyatt Burp. At other times, we do a version of *Toy Story* and talk about Max's toys having an adventure when we aren't there.

When making up rituals, start with the activities, foods, music, and places that your kids love. If they love sports, try making up a new sports ritual. If they love music, have a family dance party once a week. If they love to cook or bake, have a weekly family bake-a-thon. If they have a favorite park, go for a nature walk and take special treats; stop mid-way and throw a picnic blanket on the grass to eat your snack.

Another thing kids love is to turn the regular rules upside down for a change, so once a week or once a month, schedule an "indoor picnic" and eat finger foods while sitting on a blanket on the family room floor.

Meg Cox is the author of The Book of New Family Traditions *as well as a monthly email newsletter on creating family rituals. To join her email list, send a request to FamilyRituals@aol.com.*

What You Can Do

With hundreds of billions of dollars spent each year on advertising, it's difficult to escape commercialism. Nevertheless, there are things parents, caregivers, and concerned citizens can do in the home and the community to stem commercialism's reach into children's lives.

At Home

Limit your child's exposure to commercial influences via the…

Television. The obvious first step is to unplug from the television. Easy for some; for others, this involves breaking entrenched habits. Nevertheless, going TV-free, setting firm limits on the number of hours watched per day, or restricting viewing to commercial free programs or videos is a tremendously effective way to loosen the grip Madison Avenue has on your child. Author and Harvard Medical School Instructor in Psychiatry Susan Linn advises: "Setting limits on television is the single most effective thing we can do to reduce children's exposure to advertising. In the short run, it's easier to plop young kids in front of the tube. But it is a choice that comes at a cost."[52]

Computer. The Internet can be an amazing tool, but when kids while away hour after hour staring at a computer screen they are developing unhealthy habits and providing marketers with prime "face to screen" interactions. Set limits on total screen time. Know where your kids are surfing and block inappropriate sites. Avoid unmonitored computer time for young children. Consider keeping computers in well-trod family areas to avoid social isolation.

Mail slot. Avoid teen magazines that promote lifestyles and feature ads that you believe are harmful for your child. Set an example for your kids by getting off junkmail lists (see www.newdream.org/junkmail) and registering on the Do Not Call list at www.DoNotCall.gov to stop telephone solicitations.

Teach your children about…

Advertising. Poke holes in ad puffery and deconstruct marketing messages you encounter. Make a game out of it

✻ The I Buy Different website is a great resource for kids to get involved in combating commercialism and learn more about where stuff comes from and where it goes: www.ibuydifferent.org.

with your children—helping them discern what's being sold and how the advertiser is trying to manipulate their desires. For older kids, the book *Made You Look* by Shari Graydon offers a visually fun, lighthearted, but substantive look behind the curtain of advertising, and will help kids feel more savvy about marketing spin.

Stuff. Teach your kids to be conscious consumers. Talk about where things come from, who made them, what they are made of, and what happens when they are thrown away. Seek out products that are made in a more environmentally and socially responsible manner. Teach them that it is sometimes better not to buy. To learn more about being a conscious consumer, visit www.newdream.org/consumer.

Money. National surveys reveal that kids are leaving high school without a basic understanding of issues relating to savings and credit card debt. No surprise, then, that over the past decade, credit card debt among 18-24 year olds more than doubled.[53] It's important for parents to teach kids about where the money goes. In *Prodigal Sons and Material Girls*, author Nathan Dungan discusses ways to help children achieve financial literacy and become "savvy consumers who make decisions based on their values."

When you say no to another gizmo, say yes to something your child really wants — your time. In *What Kids Really Want that Money Can't Buy*, author Betsy Taylor points to surveys and self-reports that indicate what children really want more than stuff is time — with parents, friends, and extended family. According to a 2003 New American Dream poll, 57 percent of children age 9-14 would rather do something fun with their mom or dad than go to the mall to go shopping.[54] Kids yearn to get off the treadmill with their families and simply have unstructured fun. Whether it's playing games, cooking, reading together, or just sharing space with the TV off, remember that the best thing you can give your kids is you.

Rediscover nature. Richard Louv writes in *Last Child in the Woods* that children today are increasingly disconnected from the natural world, even as research shows that exposure of youngsters to nature can be a powerful form of therapy for attention-deficit disorder and other maladies. There is strong evidence, he reports, that independent play and exploration builds broad mental, physical, and spiritual health.[55] Fostering connections with and respect for nature can also encourage children to think more about their values and how personal behaviors affect the world we live in.

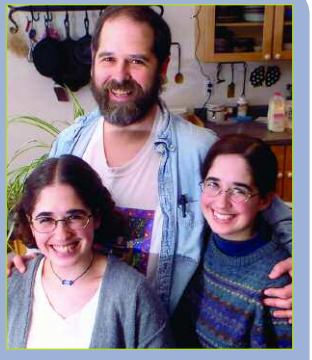
Joe Kelly's journey toward founding the nonprofit organization **Dads and Daughters** began back in 1998, when a man he had not yet met received an unexpected question. The man, Working Assets President Michael Kieschnick, was confronted by his teenage daughter. "Do I look fat?" she asked him.

As a result, Kieschnick sent a letter to *New Moon*, a noncommercial magazine for girls founded by Kelly's wife, Nancy Gruver. Kieschnick insisted that fathers needed an organization to help them become better role models for their daughters in a culture that devalued women. Kelly agreed, and the two men set out to create what had been missing.

"We [fathers] have an incredible place of leverage in the lives of our daughters," said Kelly. "We set the standard of what they expect from men and boys in the future." Since 1999 Kelly has been helping other fathers embody this role responsibly. Not surprisingly, counteracting the negative effects of commercialism is a major part of his work.

Kelly doesn't recommend banning commercial media because "it becomes forbidden fruit." Instead he encourages parents to make their opinions clear about what their kids are seeing and hearing, engaging them in conversations about commercial messages. Kelly also emphasizes the importance of offering alternatives, comparing the situation to food: "It's okay to have a Twinkie sometimes, but not all of the time. ... Offer carrots, too."

Kelly taught his own twin daughters responsible money management by opening checking accounts for them when they were 10 and allowing them to manage a set allowance. He believes this helped them approach commercialism more responsibly. "They quickly recognized the value of a thrift store," he recalls. "Now they are very frugal with their money."



Joe Kelly with his frugal twin daughters Mavis (left) and Nia (right)

Kelly also believes that children need opportunities to use their abilities constructively. Whether it's appealing to the town council to build a skate park or learning to plant a garden, by helping children achieve their larger goals, Kelly said, they learn, "'What I need to make a difference is myself and the help of other people — not stuff.'"

"The greatest challenge commercialism presents to parents is the success by which we have been marketed that things should be easy and we should never feel discomfort," Kelly said. "Parenting is not always simple, and that's the way it is. If I can't make peace with the discomfort and embrace it, I can't embrace the euphoria of parenting and give my kids everything they need from me."

Groups Doing Good Work

A number of organizations around the country work to fight against advertising aimed at children and commercialism in schools. These groups provide valuable information and resources for caregivers. Find out more by checking out some of these groups:

- Alliance for Childhood: www.allianceforchildhood.net
- American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Communication: www.aap.org/visit/cmte11.htm
- Campaign for Commercial Free Childhood: www.commercialexploitation.org
- Center for a New American Dream: www.newdream.org
- Citizens' Campaign for Commercial-Free Schools: www.scn.org/cccs (see page 24)
- Commercial Alert: www.commercialalert.org
- Commercialism in Education Research Unit: www.asu.edu/educ/epsl/ceru.htm
- Common Sense Media: www.commonsensemedia.org
- Dads and Daughters: www.dadsanddaughters.org (see page 20)
- I Buy Different campaign: www.ibuydifferent.org
- The Lion and Lamb project: www.lionlamb.org
- MediaWise: www.mediafamily.org
- The Motherhood Project: www.motherhoodproject.org (see page 10)
- Northwest Earth Institute: www.nwei.org (see page 25)
- Obligation, Inc.: www.obligation.org
- Parents Television Council: www.parentstv.org
- Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment (TRUCE): www.truceteachers.org
- TV-Turnoff Network: www.tvturnoff.org

The websites included in this list were current as of the date of publication. This list, including any changes or additions, is available at www.newdream.org/kids.

Laws Protecting Children

In the United States

Here in the US, few rules exist to regulate marketing to children. Concern over the effects of advertising on children grew in the 1970s, and a 1978 Federal Trade Commission report concluded that children under age seven "do not possess the cognitive ability to evaluate adequately child-oriented television advertising."[56] But just as the first tentative measures were proposed to reign in advertisers, the industry flexed its muscle and persuaded Congress to strip the FTC of oversight of children's advertising.[57] Since then, little has happened and today, only modest safeguards are in place, covering television advertising and online data collection. (There are rules that limit the amount of commercial material that can be aired during children's television programming, prohibit kids' show hosts from appearing in ads during the show, and prohibit online data collection of personal info from children under 13.)[58] Other arenas are largely unregulated.

In Other Countries

Other countries have taken more decisive steps to protect children from intrusive advertising. Twenty-five European countries do not allow children's television programs of less than 30 minutes duration to be interrupted by advertising.[59] Some take additional steps: Ads before and after children's programs are banned in Austria. Ads during TV cartoons are illegal in Italy. In Greece, no toy advertising is allowed between 7 am and 11 pm. Norway and Sweden have banned television advertising altogether to children under 12.[60]

Some laws also focus on content. Costa Rica and the UK restrict ads that might result in harm to children's physical, mental or social development.[61] Ireland and the UK do not allow ads to take unfair advantage of the natural credulity and sense of loyalty of children, or to exhort children to pester their parents to buy products.[62]

In Canada, advertisements aimed at kids must adhere to 10 specific rules. Among other things, the rules prohibit excessive advertising, exaggerations, and ads that imply that a child must have a certain product to fit in or be cool.[63] The province of Quebec, like Norway and Sweden, bans television advertising to pre-teens.[64]

Know Your Policy-Maker

Contact local, state, and federal officials to support legislation limiting not only commercialism in schools but also advertising towards children in general. Several states, including California, New York, Rhode Island, Wisconsin, and Washington, have successfully passed legislation affecting commercialism in schools. (For an overview of laws in other countries, see the opposite page.)

Tune out Channel One!

Campaign to rid your school district of Channel One (see page 12). Contracts between school districts and Channel One roll over each year and can be renewed or cancelled. Working together with other parents, teachers, and students, you can lobby the school board not to renew the contract. The Birmingham, Alabama-based nonprofit Obligation, Inc., has a "Removal Kit" to guide concerned citizens through the process of removing Channel One from their school district. Call (205) 822-0080 or visit www.obligation.org/removalkit.html.

We need desperately, I feel, a non-commercial alternative to what commercialism is trying to do to us. I'm not for censorship, but I'm certainly for self-censorship when it comes to producing or purveying products to America's children. I think that for people who make anything for children, their first thought should be: Would I want my child to see, hear, or touch this? And if the answer is no, just don't make it.

– ("Mister") Fred Rogers[65]

I believe that television commercials have got to go. Let us pay directly for what we enjoy on television rather than pass the spiritual cost on to our children and their children.

– author Norman Mailer[66]

Fighting Commercialism in the Schools

"We fought commercialism and Coca-Cola with the tools we all have — the telephone, email, and photocopiers. We won by shining a bright light on a fundamental wrong. We won by tapping into the conscience of all those in our community who do not believe in selling children to the highest bidders."

– Brita Butler-Wall[67]

In the late 1990s, parent, educator, and PTA leader **Brita Butler-Wall** grew alarmed when her Seattle Public School district decided to sell paid advertising in schools. She decided to fight back. Her first move was to alert other parents and organize a public forum that drew 140 people to hear Alex Molnar, author of *Giving Kids the Business*. When attempts to air their concerns before the Seattle School Board went nowhere, Butler-Wall formed the **Citizens' Campaign for Commercial-Free Schools (CCCS)**, a grassroots, non-profit organization to rally Seattle parents and concerned citizens to press the school board on this issue. As a result of their early efforts, the ad policy was rescinded.

Later, when the district signed an exclusive pouring contract with Coca-Cola, Butler-Wall took her activism to a new level. She quit teaching to become full-time volunteer executive director of CCCS. Three years of petitions, research, meetings, and appeals to the school district finally paid off in a big way. In 2001, the school board adopted a strong anti-commercialism policy significantly restricting commercial advertising on or within district-operated property, prohibiting advertising on vending machine facades, and phasing out commercial news and ad broadcasts from Channel One.[68]

Not content to stop there, Butler-Wall went one step further. She ran for a spot on the school board… and won. In September of 2004, the Seattle school board — with Butler-Wall serving as vice president — unanimously adopted a policy prohibiting junk food and sodas in all 100 schools, grades K-12 — one of the strongest policies in the country. They also terminated the Coke contract and prohibited future pouring rights contracts. As of 2006, Brita Butler-Wall continues to sit on the Seattle Public Schools board of directors and remains dedicated to protecting the right of Washington children and youth to a commercial-free education.

Talk in Class

Whether the issue is Channel One, exclusive vending contracts, or other forms of in-school advertising, there are several ways to let your school board know what you think about commercialism in schools and to gain community support. Get a group of concerned parents or members of the community and walk through your school. Look for examples of sponsored educational materials such as text books with company logos, banner ads on computers, soda machines, or Channel One. Record all the information and report this back to the local school board.

Another option is to write an editorial or letter to the editor in your local newspaper to bring attention to the issue. Once the issue has gained notice, start a petition to provide the school board with proof of public opposition to commercialism.

* The Portland, Oregon-based Northwest Earth Institute has designed a Citizen Action Kit to help citizens address commercial influences in local schools. Call (503) 227-2807 or visit www.nwei.org. The Seattle-based Citizen's Campaign for Commercial Free Schools also has advice on how to conduct walk-throughs of schools to assess commercial influences. See www.scn.org/cccs/action.html.

The **Northwest Earth Institute (NWEI)** is an organization dedicated to helping people live more simply and sustainably, with a greater sense of place. NWEI offers discussion courses designed for small groups meeting at home, centers of faith, at work over lunch, or any other place where people congregate. Of particular interest to parents and anyone involved in the life of a child is NWEI's "Healthy Children – Healthy Planet" course.

Healthy Children – Healthy Planet helps participants (1) discover ways to create meaningful family times and healthful environments for children; (2) understand how the pervasive effects of advertising, media, and our consumer culture can influence a child's view of the world; and (3) explore ways to develop a child's connection to nature, and to foster creativity.

The eight sessions are anchored by themes of Cultural Pressures, Family Rituals and Celebrations, Advertising, Food and Health, Time and Creativity, Technology and the Media, and Exploring Nature. Primary goals of the course include identifying pressures and finding antidotes to strengthen relationships with children. To learn more, call (503)-227-2807 or visit their website at www.nwei.org.

You Are Not Alone!

The task of conscientious parenting is always daunting, and there's a lot to be gained by reaching out to friends, family, and the community for support in your efforts to reduce the negative impact of commercialism on your children. Find parental support groups. Speak with your parents or other people who have already wrestled with these issues. Together, you'll find creative and innovative solutions that work for you, and we'd love it if you'd share some of your suggestions with us.

Share your best tips for noncommercial parenting on our web forums at **www.newdream.org/kids**. If we use your tip in a future edition of this booklet, we'll send you a free copy of Betsy Taylor's *What Kids Really Want That Money Can't Buy*.

What You Do Matters

Obviously, these tips alone won't single-handedly solve all the problems presented by our commercial world. But it's important to acknowledge that parents do have the power to promote a healthy understanding of the effects of commercialism on our quality of life, the environment, and a just society. This way, we help to raise a generation of young people who can lead happier and healthier lives as they build better and stronger communities. It's a tall order, but it's worth pursuing — for you, your children and future generations.

Resources

(Also see the "Groups Doing Good Work" section on page 21 for more information on organizations working to combat commercialism.)

For Adults

Hands-On Advice

- *The Book of New Family Traditions* by Meg Cox (Running Press, 2003)
- *EcoKids: Raising Children Who Care for the Earth* by Dan Chiras (New Society Publishers, 2005)
- *Family Fun* magazine, http://familyfun.go.com
- *Good Times Made Simple: The Lost Art of Fun*, www.newdream.org/kids/brochure.php
- *More Mudpies: 101 Alternatives to Television* by Nancy Blakey (Tricycle Press, 1994)
- *Prodigal Sons and Material Girls: How Not to Be Your Child's ATM* by Nathan Dungan (Wiley, 2003)
- *What Kids Really Want That Money Can't Buy: Tips for Parenting in a Commercial World* by Betsy Taylor (Time Warner, 2003)

Issue Awareness

- *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic* by John De Graaf et al. (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2002)
- *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture* by Juliet Schor (Scribner, 2004)

Several years ago, New American Dream held an art and essay contest, asking kids ranging in age from 5 to 17 years: "What do you really want that money can't buy?" We were flooded with entries. (Some of these creative, insightful responses can be viewed on our website at www.newdream.org/kids/contest.php.) The contest also inspired a book by New American Dream's founder and former president, **Betsy Taylor**: ***What Kids Really Want That Money Can't Buy***. In this book, Taylor offers advice from simple, everyday things parents can do to more sophisticated approaches, such as teaching media literacy and financial skills to children. Along the way, she enlists the voices and stories of parents and educators on the front lines in this battle against consumerism. She also promotes the philosophy of how to have more fun with less stuff by returning to simple and meaningful rituals like dinner conversation and nature outings. *What Kids Really Want That Money Can't Buy* serves as a navigation guide for families seeking more of what matters rather than the "more" of commercial culture. (To obtain a copy, see the back page of this booklet.)

- *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers* by Alissa Quart (Perseus Books, 2003)
- *Captive Audience* (video), www.mediaed.org/videos/CommercialismPoliticsAndMedia/CaptiveAudience
- *Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood* by Susan Linn (The New Press, 2004)
- *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* by Richard Louv (Algonquin Books, 2005)
- *More Fun, Less Stuff: The Challenges and Rewards of a New American Dream* (video), www.newdream.org/publications/video.php
- *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* by Mary Pipher (Ballantine Books 1995)

For Educators

- *Healthy Children – Healthy Planet*, www.nwei.org/pages/HealthyChildren2.html
- *Media Wizards: A Behind-the-Scenes Look at Media Manipulations* by Catherine Gourley (Lerner Publishing Group, 1999)
- *Smart Consumers: An Educatior's Guide to Exploring Consumer Issues and the Enviornment*, www.ibuydifferent.org/educators.asp

For Kids and Teens

Books and Magazines

- *The Gift of Nothing* by Patrick McDonnell (Little, Brown, & Company, 2005)
- *Henry Hikes to Fitchburg* by Donald B. Johnson (Houghton Mifflin, 2000)
- *The Lorax* by Dr. Seuss (Random House, 1971)
- *Made You Look* by Shari Graydon (Annick Press, 2003)
- *New Moon* magazine, edited by and for girls age 8 to 14 (www.newmoon.org)

Non-Commercial websites

- Consumption Gumption – a game that tests kids' awareness as consumers: www.web.mit.edu/civenv/K12Edu/game.html
- Don't Buy It! – on analyzing media messages: www.pbskids.org/dontbuyit
- The Great Green Web Game – A game to test kids' knowledge of how consumer choices affect the environment: http://go.ucsusa.org/game
- I Buy Different – A website sponsored by New Dream and World Wildlife Fund dedicated to helping kids be, live, and buy differently to make a difference: www.ibuydifferent.org

For an up-to-date list of resources, as well as forums to share your tips and ideas, visit us online at ww.newdream.org/kids.

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Support the New American Dream and you can receive an award-winning book on responsible parenting by our founder and former president, Betsy Taylor. Donate $25 or more and we'll send you a copy of ***What Kids Really Want That Money Can't Buy***, a "More Fun, Less Stuff" bumper sticker, and four issues of our quarterly newsletter, *In Balance*.

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