

*Multiple Year Winner of Parent's Choice Approval Award*

Volume 21, Number 4

An International Resource for Professionals and Parents

April 2006

## Selling (to) Kids

### Everyone's a "Consumer" These Days

I was lucky enough to be visiting a friend at the moment his seven month old daughter made an astounding discovery – her knees can bend. Squealing with glee she extended her arms to her father letting him know, in no uncertain terms, her desire to stand.

As her tiny fists gripped tightly to a finger she pushed up from her toes, and straightened to a standing position. After a few wobbly, upright moments she began to squat, bending her legs slowly. Then, like an inebriated ballet dancer rising from a plié, she teetered up once more. Beaming with pride she repeated the sequence again—and again and again and again.

Eventually she noticed a favorite stuffed kitten on the floor. Holding on with only one hand, wobbling even more ferociously, she began to reach for the kitten only to find that (a) it was too far away to grab and (b) it was at ground level. With great deliberation, she extended her free hand toward the cat. Tottering precariously, completely focused on her mission, she began the glorious

process of bending—and was saved from an undignified tumble by her father's protective arm. She allowed herself a brief rest on the floor and, with joyful determination, began the process anew.

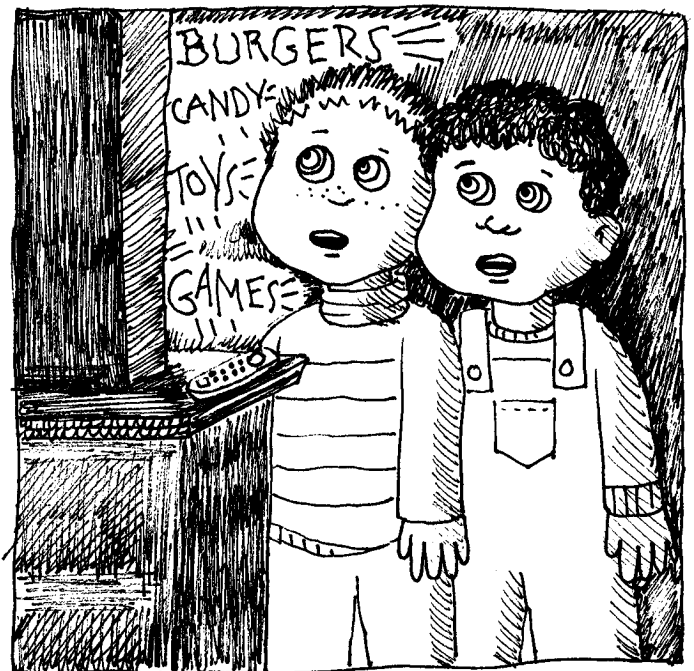
Babies are born with an innate drive to love, to learn, to actively engage in the world, and to move over time from total dependence toward independence. An impressive body of research has established that in the first months and years of life, optimal intellectual, social and emotional development requires direct engagement with the world.

However, children are spending more time with media than any activity other than sleeping. Today children between the ages of 2 and 18 years spend about 40 hours a week sitting with electronic screen media, most of which is commercially based. Yet the reach of the media is still increasing. Screens in the back seats of minivans, in cell phones, and on portable DVD players – to say nothing of restaurants and pediatricians' offices – mean that many children are exposed to screen

media, and the products they market, almost all of their waking hours. The time, space, and silence available for their own ideas and their own images, for unhurried interactions with people, for reading, or being read

#### Childhood?

In 1983, corporations spent \$100 million annually in direct advertising to children. Now they spend \$15 billion. Huge corporate conglomerates own television, radio stations,



to, shrinks with every blockbuster children's film or television program (inevitably accompanied by a flood of "tie-in" food, toys, books, videos, and clothing).

#### Are Commercialized Media Taking Over

web businesses and film studios. One of the outcomes of the consolidation of media ownership is that it has become even easier for marketers to sell products directly to children. For example, giant media companies partner with

giant food and toy companies to produce icons for children that become colossal money-making franchises. Kids not only watch the

It is increasingly difficult to find any products for children — from food to toys — that are unadorned by media characters and logos.

*Commercialism distorts our culture by turning every event into a reason to consume. Anthropologists say that holidays reflect a culture's values. In America, every holiday is a sales event.*

Source: Media Awareness Network [www.media-awareness.ca](http://www.media-awareness.ca)

program, they can purchase toys, clothing, and games with characters such as *Dora the Explorer* or *SpongeBob SquarePants*.

Franchises and tie-ins exist on public television as well as commercial stations. In response to public funding cuts -- both actual and threatened -- the public sector increasingly relies on the private sector for funding. Much of the children's programming on PBS is dependent on commercial sponsorship and product tie-ins for funding.

### Marketing to Children

It's so much a part of daily life, sometimes it's difficult to recognize how marketers are targeting our children.

#### • Brand Licensing

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. Most children's media characters have become tools for marketing other products. About 97% of American children 6 and under own something—such as a doll, stuffed animal, action figure, bedding, or clothing -- that features the image of character from the media.

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. We are raising children who only know branded toys, clothing,

*"Pester Power" refers to children's ability to nag their parents into purchasing items they may not otherwise buy. Marketing to children is all about creating pester power, because advertisers know what a powerful force it can be.*

Source: Media Awareness Network [www.media-awareness.ca](http://www.media-awareness.ca)

and more.

#### • Product Placement

Products inserted into the content of media programs—called “product placement”—is technically illegal in TV programs created specifically for children. However, it is prominent in programs that they like to watch. *American Idol*, for instance, which is often rated among the top ten most popular programs for 2- to 11-year-olds is rife with Coca-Cola product placement.

Products are also routinely (and legally) inserted into the content of web sites, movies, songs, books, video game and other media for children. At its most extreme, product placement has morphed

into “advergaming,” in which entire web-based games revolve around a product such as candy.

#### • Marketing in Schools and Day Care

Day care providers and preschool teachers frequently rely on movies and television to keep children engaged. In recent years, media companies have been aggressively targeting preschools with “educational” curricula based on media characters.

### The Baby Media Market

Further, the media penetration into our children's lives has reached down to their cribs. In recent years media have been designed and marketed explicitly for infants and toddlers. There

content on cell phones to hand to babies for soothing during travel—making cell phones the new baby rattle. (1)

In 2005, my colleagues and I identified more than 200 videos and DVDs aimed at babies, including newborns. The programs make dubious claims about their educational value, including alleged benefit for babies' brain development. At least one video series makes the patently false claim that it teaches babies to read. Meanwhile, parents are bombarded with messages that what they might normally do with their babies -- cuddle, play, sing, talk and read to them (exactly what babies do need) -- is not good enough. Instead, they are urged to prop them in front of the television.

As if this weren't hard enough for parents to contend with, children's computer software industry has also developed and marketed “lap ware,” that is, computer software designed for babies and toddlers who sit on their parents' laps in order to use the computer.

Whether it's spent with television, computers, DVDs, or cell phones, time with screens takes

is a \$1 billion dollar business aiming to convince parents that intellectual development is impossible -- even for babies -- without the intervention of screen media.

As a result, we have witnessed a floodgate of programs that target babies and toddlers.

And now, hand-held media devices, such as personaliz

ed DVD players for toddlers and even cell-phones, are becoming popular. In 2005 Sesame Workshop partnered with Verizon to announce a new plan for parents to download *Sesame Street*

young children away from play and the space and time for the active, multi-sensory exploration of the real three dimensional world so critical for their healthy development.

*The dominant focus of marketing to children and youth is on foods and beverages high in calories and low in nutrients and is sharply out of balance with healthful diets.*

Source: Overview of the Institute of Medicine Report on Food Marketing to Children and Youth: Threat or Opportunity

## Replacing Doing With Watching

In addition to serving as the foundation of intellectual exploration, creative play stimulates two uniquely human characteristics: imagination and the capacity to imbue our experiences with meaning. Through play, we are able to gain a sense of mastery over new information, design the future, grapple with the past and sort out powerful feelings. But, as media consumes more and more of children's leisure time, pretend play is disappearing.

## Parents Can Get Involved

Before we can help our children, we need to understand our own vulnerabilities to media and marketing. We can serve as positive role models by curbing our tendencies to purchase more 'stuff' and by curtailing our own media use. If we are constantly on the computer or in front of the television, how can we expect kids to curtail their media use?

We can limit the number of hours children are allowed to watch TV or use their computers in accordance with the American Academy of Pediatrics guidelines. We can significantly decrease the number of televisions and computers we have in our homes and keep our children's bedrooms free from electronic media.

As we limit exposure to commercial culture, we also need to encourage media-free, and commercial-free activities that promote pro-social values and combat rampant consumerism. We can spend more time playing with our children and encourage our

youngsters to listen to their own thoughts, to act on their own ideas, and to play creatively, helping them experience life's pleasures that can't be quantified, bought, or sold.

We can foster the development of children's spiritual life, which can encompass a range of experiences from organized religion, to reveling in the wonders of nature. Depending on our inclinations and opportunities, we can spend time with our children in nature, doing art projects, in community service, working for social causes, or in places of worship. We can read to read, play, cook and make music together.

But merely providing alternative experiences for children, limiting media use, and setting a good example isn't enough to prevent children from absorbing predominant societal norms like consumerism.

Media and marketing executives often point to parents as the sole gatekeepers for their commercial assault on children. But parents can not control societal influences. Marketing to children and the pervasive role that media play in their lives, are problems rooted in society. We need to work together for societal change.

There's no getting around the fact that government policies, or lack of them, have contributed to trying to raise children in the middle of a marketing maelstrom aimed directly at them.

Given what we know about its damaging effects, we should stop using media as a tool for marketing to children. In fact, we should stop



marketing to them at all. Short of that, there are policies that governments can—and have—put in place to significantly limit commercial access to children. When the financial incentive is gone, so will much of the time they spend in front of specially constructed programming aimed at selling.

We can let principals and school boards know that we want children's time in school to be free of commercialized media, we can let the media and marketing industries know that we want them to stop targeting children in school.

Taking into account where our children are in their social, emotional, and cognitive development, we also need to make a conscious effort to talk with them about commercial values.

Very young children can't distinguish between commercials and programming and until the age of about eight, children can't understand persuasive intent — the fundamental basis of advertising. Not only that, they tend to believe what they see, and are held sway to their emotions

more than older children.

While we certainly can't have the kind of in-depth, intellectual discussion with preschoolers that we can have with teenagers, young children are often quite sensitive to the nuances of feelings expressed by important adults in their lives. By talking with them about the media images and commercial messages they encounter, we can at least provide them with the important tradition of engaging in dialogue about the world around them rather than sitting silently as the commercial media spin their messages.

(1) A Way to Calm Fussy Baby: 'Sesame Street' by Cellphone by Doreen Cavajal published in the "New York Times" April 18, 2005.

**Susan Linn, Ed.D.** is Associate Director of the Media Center of Judge Baker Children's Center and Instructor in Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School. She has written extensively about the effects of media and commercial marketing on children. Her book, *Consuming Kids*, was praised in publications as diverse as *The Wall Street Journal* and *Mother Jones*. She is co-founder of the national coalition The Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood.