

Susan Linn

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Spiritual progressives need to make clear that although we can support sex education in the schools, that has nothing to do with the sexuality sold to our kids on television and in their corporate-sponsored music, movies, and video games. What they are learning from these media is not about real sex, but rather about a commodity we can call sex/violence and sex/power.

And yet, it is only the Religious Right that consistently speaks out against the way that corporations are using sex to reach kids through the media.

As far as I'm concerned, artists can create anything they want. I support the First Amendment. I fervently believe in it;

I just don't think they should market it to children. And I think we need to make that distinction. Around 6.6 million two-to-eleven year-olds and 7.3 million twelve-to-seventeen year-olds watched Justin Timberlake rip open Janet Jackson's blouse. A white man ripping off the blouse of a black woman—that was obscene for both its racist and its sexist connotations. And who responded? The Right Wing. Focus on the Family got 60,000 people to call the FCC. But where were we and other progressives? We should have been calling and complaining about that and the fact that the commercials run during the Super Bowl were obscene as well. That should have been *our* voice.

A Spiritual-Progressive vision of childhood should call for a commercial-free childhood. When the Religious Right was up in arms accusing Sponge Bob Square Pants of being gay, progressives all over the country leaped to the little yellow sponge's side. Sponge Bob Square Pants is innocent;

Sponge Bob Square Pants is wonderful; there is nothing wrong with Sponge Bob. So, as this argument was going on, there was the Right, and there was the Left. I was in my office with my head in my hands saying this is the wrong argument. There *is* something wrong with Sponge Bob Square Pants. Just as there was something wrong with Tinky Winky. But it's not their sexual orientation, or lack of it. It's the fact that they are corporate tools to sell junk to children. When childhood obesity is a major national problem, isn't it obscene to use Sponge Bob Square Pants to sell Kraft Macaroni & Cheese? We need to take back childhood from corporate America.

In 1998 a company called Western Media International did a study on children's nagging. This was not a study to help parents cope with nagging; it was a study to help children nag more effectively. They call it the "nag factor." Why are we giving a free pass to corporate America to undermine parental authority so that it can get children to push parents into buying stuff that parents don't want to buy? The study found that the parents who were more susceptible to nagging were the parents who were the most stressed: single parents, parents of young children.

The Kaiser Family Foundation, not a right-wing organization, commissioned a study which found that 60 percent of parents say they're concerned about sex on television. According to the same study, slightly fewer than that said

that they were concerned about violence. And it's not just television. It's also movies and video games. "Grand Theft Auto: Vice City" was the top selling video game for preteens last year. And that's the one where you can have sex with a prostitute and then kill her. Where is our voice about the sex and violence, to say nothing of the racism, in video games? Seventeen communities around the country, including the entire state of Illinois, are passing or have passed laws making it illegal to sell mature-rated video games like "Grand Theft Auto: Vice City" to minors. We should be supporting those laws. The video game industry is fighting them, and they've won in the courts. The video game industry says they are exercising First Amendment rights. But we're talking about corporations and corporate speech, not individual speech.

In 2003, 83 percent of the episodes in the top twenty shows among teens contain some sexual content. And 20 percent depicted intercourse. We have a country that is fighting honest sex education in the schools while supporting kids learning about some corporate version of sex from television and other media. The organization I work for, the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, works for the rights of children to grow up and the freedom for parents to raise them and to transmit their values without being undermined by corporate interests or greed. We are Spiritual Progressives, and we want you to work with us.