

From “I Want It!” to “I Can Do It!” Promoting Healthy Development in the Consumer Culture

by Diane E. Levin

One day Joel walked into kindergarten and held up an action figure (based on a popular movie). It was missing a leg. He indignantly told his friends that he had gotten it for his birthday; it was his favorite present. The second time he played with it the leg fell off. It wasn't fair!

Several other children heatedly jumped in to describe their own experiences with toys and other prized objects that had broken. The teacher saw that the children had a lot of intense feelings about their broken toys. She suggested they bring them in the next day to talk about at a class meeting.

Bringing marketing issues into our work with children

This teacher's decision to pick up on the children's distress and make it the focus of a formal class discussion may seem surprising. The situation is one many teachers might not notice. Children often share an experience from home with each other in group settings without it becoming something that enters into their interactions with adults. And when we do pay attention, experiences that involve acquiring coveted objects are sometimes viewed with discomfort or even disdain, but rarely as providing an opportunity to work with children on an issue central to their development and wellbeing.

Issues related to consumer culture are not addressed in early childhood curriculum programs or in teacher preparation. Yet, marketing efforts that focus on getting children to covet



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one new object after another are playing an increasingly central role in their early socialization and development. There is growing awareness that consumer culture influences the ideas children develop about what is good and bad and what constitutes success and failure. It influences their ideas about how to look, what to eat, and what to play and play with. It influences the job of parenting, for instance, setting up power struggles about what to buy and not to buy as well as struggles over values.

Parents need the help of professionals

Parents are told that it is their job to decide what is and is not appropriate for their children by corporate America as well as by the wider society. They are also told that if they could only learn to *just say no* there would be no problem with marketing to children. Yet my own experiences as a parent and what the many parents I have interviewed over many years tell me is that even when we do say *No* it does not solve the problem. There is always more to say *no* to; and even when we do say *no*, the coveted object often enters children's lives at a friend's house or as a birthday gift from another child or a grandparent. And in the midst of all the industry efforts that exploit children's developmental vulnerabilities in order to tempt them to *want* something new, saying *no* is not the easy process we are often led to believe it is. It's not just that many things marketed to children are inappropriate; there are also too many appropriate things that children are led to think they need. (See p. 135-136 in *Remote Control Childhood?* for a more detailed discussion of “Why ‘Just Saying No’ Isn't Enough.”)

Such a stance by the industry is supposed to absolve it of any responsibility for the harm caused by its marketing, but it does little to help parents with the difficult task of negotiating the marketing minefields as we try to promote healthy

development and values. Too much of the burden for counteracting the harm caused by marketing to children has fallen on parents, and there is much parents can do to protect their children. But there is also much professionals can do to help parents deal with the daily marketing onslaught that is part of their children's lives.

How children think makes them vulnerable to marketing

Children do not understand marketing the way an adult does. This makes them susceptible to being manipulated and exploited by marketing directed at them:

- Children pay attention to how things look, not the logic that underlies them. They tend to believe what they see. So when they see an ad which shows a child looking excited and happy with the product being advertised, they think they too will be happy if they have that product. They do not necessarily realize that the child in the ad is being paid to look happy! When an adult tries to tell them that they can't have the product and explains why, they may end up feeling the adult is depriving them of the kind of happiness and well being experienced by the child in the ad.
- Children focus on the most concrete and salient aspects of an item. If a toy or other product is different in one way from what they already have, they will focus on the one difference, not on all the ways they are the same.
- Children's thinking is more like a slide (where they look at one frame at a time), than like a movie. When children see a product that promises to do some exciting and specific thing, they do not ask how the item will do what is promised once they have it. They also do not ask if it will fall apart once it comes out of the box. This can help explain what happened with Joel who coveted the action figure as a birthday present, but was upset when it broke.

How marketing can undermine development and learning

Consuming can work like a drug, diverting children from working on their own internal needs. It teaches them to associate happiness and a sense of wellbeing with getting what they want, rather than with interacting meaningfully with objects and people and mastering and learning how to have an influence on their world. Consuming creates an agenda for children provided by someone else, rather than encouraging

them to work on their own internal interests and needs. This is why I often think of the process of acquiring objects as being like a child's first drug. When they get the sought after object it brings a quick fix. This high often quickly wears off without children working on the things they need to work on to develop and grow from within. And over time, they come to depend on their quick fixes rather than on their own devices to find fleeting happiness and meaning. In fact, the happiness is often so fleeting that I have seen children look at the other toys pictured on the back of the box of a new toy to choose which item they want next, before they even play with the new toy in the box.

Consuming is one factor that can undermine children's interest in finding and working on problems of their own making as well as the sense of personal empowerment that comes from solving their own problems. Related to the previous point, as children focus more on wanting rather than doing, their ability to believe that they can make a difference is undermined. Both of these factors can interfere with children engaging deeply in meaningful activities that promote optimal development and learning.

I have found it helpful to think of the difficulty many children have getting engaged in solving personally meaningful problems as "problem solving deficit disorder" or PSDD (Meltz, 2004). PSDD can help explain what many teachers describe as: children who say they are bored, flit from activity to activity, have trouble figuring out how to play when given open-ended activities, and have a sense of helplessness and few resources for solving problems they have with other children. It may also help explain why Joel and the other children were indignant about toys that broke *unfairly* but just seemed to accept the broken toys as a given. It also points us in the direction we need to think about if we are to counteract the harmful effects of consumer culture — helping children learn the attitude and skills they need to try to solve their problems. (Other factors that contribute to PSDD in children is their involvement with the media, which reduces the amount of time they have to play, and electronic and highly realistic media linked toys which take control of play away from children. [See Levin, 1999.])

What we can do to empower children in a consumer culture

Joel's broken birthday gift and the other children's similar experiences provide a perfect opportunity for an "age appro-

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priate" lesson in both consumerism and empowerment. Here is what happened the next day:

Several children excitedly arrived at school with broken toys. At morning meeting the children talked at length about their broken items. The teacher helped them explore such issues as how and why each toy broke, how they felt when it broke, what made it feel "unfair," and how to make the toy so it wouldn't break next time. This involved much problem solving where the teacher did not worry about helping children get *right answers*.

Then the teacher asked the children for ideas about what they could do about their broken toys. The children enthusiastically came up with interesting ideas, all of which the teacher accepted. She helped the children think about how each solution might be put into practice:

- "Have a funeral and bury them."
- "Don't get toys like those that broke any more."
- "Be gentle and don't fight with toys."
- "Make a toy hospital in the classroom where toys can go to get fixed."
- "Take the broken toys to the toy store where they came from, so the owner of the store knows which toys break too easily."
- "Write a letter to the toy factories to say they shouldn't make toys that 'look so good but break so easy'."

The teacher picked up on two of the ideas that seemed most popular and meaningful to the children: making a toy hospital in the class construction area (where the children could work on fixing their broken toys) and writing letters (with the teacher's help) to the toy companies that had made the toys that broke.

This scenario illustrates key areas we need to focus on to promote healthy development in the consumer culture. First, the teacher uses a problem that is personally meaningful to the children to help them learn that there is something they can do to solve their problem. They come up with ideas; the teacher helps them figure out how to put their ideas into

Suggestions to Help Guide Your Efforts

As children plan actions to take, do not expect them to plan the most effective or logical actions from the adult point of view. They cannot fully think through the logic of their ideas. When possible, children need to try them out to see how they work.

- Treat children's consumerism issues as opportunities to help them learn problem solving skills and feel empowered.
- Choose topics for discussion and action that are meaningful to the children and are likely to let children see some kind of direct effect from their efforts.
- Don't expect children to come up with *right answers* or learn things exactly as we try to teach them. The teacher above was very non-judgmental; she helped the children build on their own ideas. The goal is gradually to build their confidence and skill at finding and solving problems and to be able to apply that skill to consumerism.
- Ask open-ended questions and accept diverse responses. This can provide the safety children need to try out their own ideas about how to solve problems.
- Connect your efforts to other aspects of the curriculum as Joel's teacher did when she chose letter writing as a way to support the class's literacy program.
- Send letters home to parents and caregivers, telling them how you are working on consumer issues and problem solving in the classroom and providing suggestions about what they can do at home to build on your efforts (and how you can help them in theirs).

practice. Such an experience promotes both the attitude and skills of problem solving and empowers children as they realize that "We can make a difference."

This teacher's efforts also provide the children with lessons about consumerism. For instance, they are learning about how to evaluate the probable sturdiness of a toy, how to deal with toys that disappoint, and maybe even the beginnings of not just judging a product by *how it looks*.

Conclusion

The more we learn about the far reaching ways consumer culture influences not only what children want but also how they interact with their environment, the clearer it becomes that early childhood professionals and families need to join forces to counteract its harmful effects. As we strive to do this in our work with children, we also need to work together to create a society that better supports children's healthy development.

References and resources

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Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

Searching, searching . . . : Begin the search for teachable moments like the one shared in this article by asking teachers to look for opportunities in focused observation in their classrooms. After the observations, role play the strategies teachers think might work for the situations uncovered by watching. After teachers try out some of their ideas, discuss their success and consider new strategies for those that didn't turn out as well.

Resources and more: This article (and the one by Cantor) contains a good reference list. Consider purchasing books for teachers and parents to add to your resource library. Highlight the way teachers are using the books for children in your family newsletter. For children, consider adding the children's book on this topic written by Cantor.