



Commercializing Childhood

The Corporate Takeover of Kids' Lives

These days marketing is honed by child psychologists, made possible by incredible technology and brought to us by huge amounts of money.

An Interview with Susan Linn

Susan Linn is associate director of the Media Center at Judge Baker Children's Center and instructor in psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. She is also co-founder and director of the coalition Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (CCFC). She is the author of *The Case for Make Believe: Saving Play in a Commercialized World* (2008) and *Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood* (2004).

Multinational Monitor: *How much advertising and marketing is directed at kids in the United States? How has this changed over the last 20 years?*

Susan Linn: Comparing the marketing of yesterday to the marketing of today is like comparing a BB gun with a smart bomb. These days it's honed by child psychologists, made possible by incredible technology and brought to us by huge amounts of money. In 1983, companies were spending about \$100 million annually marketing to children, mostly on television. Today, they are spending about \$17 billion, and there are so many more ways for them to target children. Today, parents have to cope with marketing on the Internet, on computer games, on cell phones, MP3 players, on DVDs and even in books. Marketing in schools is escalating. And it's important to remember that it's not just commercials — commercials are so 20th century! These days there's product placement, brand

licensing, viral marketing and guerrilla marketing as well as cross promotions — like when Burger King sells kids meals promoting toys from the PG-13 rated movie "Iron Man."

MM: *Why has there been such a surge in child-targeted marketing?*

Linn: From my research for *Consuming Kids*, I discovered that it is really a confluence of several societal changes. For one thing, children's television was deregulated in the mid-1980s and so it became possible to create a television program for the sole purpose of marketing toys. Also, when the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) tried to ban marketing to children younger than eight on television in the late 1970s, there was so much corporate pressure on Congress that they severely restricted the power of the FTC to regulate marketing to children.

Also, changes in the American family made children more vulnerable to marketers — there were more single-parent families and more families where both parents were working. Suddenly there were lots of children home alone after school and parents didn't feel safe having them outside playing — so they were staying inside. There was a lot of concern among social service agencies about these "latchkey kids," but for the marketing industry they were a gold mine because they were home alone watching television.

The proliferation of electronic media means

that marketers have more ways than ever to bypass parents and target children directly. Also, the lack of public funding for parks, schools, museums and other public institutions means that corporations are more than willing to step into the breach — in exchange for advertising.

MM: *How important is television as the vehicle to deliver such advertising?*

Linn: It's still the primary medium for reaching children, but it's important to remember TV and the Internet are converging. It's all going to be the same thing.

MM: *To what extent are the Internet and video games displacing TV in kids' lives, and are these media relatively less commercialized?*

Linn: Video games and the Internet are playing an increasing role in children's lives. Children as young as preschoolers are being marketed social networking sites and virtual worlds like Webkinz, Club Penguin, Nickropolis and Barbiegirl.com. These sites are incredibly commercialized — they are all designed to market their own products and many also include third-party advertising. What's also insidious about these sites is that the primary activity is shopping — we're training children to shop online. Also, product placement in videogames is escalating — by 2007, companies were spending \$56 million on ads in videogames.

MM: *How commercialized are schools? What trends, good and bad, do you see in this area?*

Linn: Marketing in schools is terribly troubling. It carries more weight than other kinds of marketing because even if kids don't like school they know that it's supposed to be good for them. Everything marketed in a school implicitly carries that school's endorsement. That's one reason why companies love to market in schools. Another reason is that they get what's known in the advertising industry as "a captive audience." Kids in school can't escape the marketing they're subjected to in class or in the halls.

I wish we could be sure that Channel One [a TV channel aired in schools that shows two minutes of ads for every 10 minutes of content] was on the decline, but it actually seems to be reviving. Last year, it was bought for a song by a tween/teen marketing company called Alloy and recently received an infusion from NBC, which is going to be producing content for it.

These days marketing in schools takes lots of other forms as well, from Coke and Pepsi's

vending machines, to companies sponsoring athletic teams, to incentive programs like the Pizza Hut BookIt Program, fundraising schemes like the General Mills Boxtops for Education Program, to naming rights for gymnasiums, to corporate-sponsored teaching materials from companies like McDonald's, Revlon and Exxon, to name just a few. Ronald McDonald goes into schools to teach reading, health and values.

Also, Scholastic Inc., which many of us remember fondly from our in-school book buying days, is now marketing books based on media characters, toys or both, in their book fairs and book clubs — the "LiL Bratz Dancin' Divas" book, for instance. Or they are marketing items that aren't books at all, like an M&M video game or the Bratz Fashion Designer kit with markers, stickers and stencils. We get more complaints from parents about Scholastic than about any other company. They are coasting on a stellar reputation as an educational publisher that they really no longer deserve.

CCFC has been taking on BusRadio, which promotes commercialized radio broadcasts in school buses, and has been successful in helping communities across the country resist their efforts to infiltrate school systems. What's particularly insidious about BusRadio, aside from the advertising, is that the station is not regulated by the FTC and can therefore profit from being paid to broadcast certain music. It also drives children to the BusRadio website, which is filled with advertising.

The good news is that marketing in schools is a problem that responds to community pressure, and we've found that there are parents around the country who are taking a stand. We hear from parents all the time who are using CCFC's Guide to Commercial-Free Book Fairs as an alternative to Scholastic Book Fairs. Also, the national mandate for school wellness policies gives schools an opportunity to limit food marketing. In Massachusetts, a bill has been introduced that would actually prohibit marketing in schools, and a similar one has been introduced in Vermont as well.

MM: *Given chronic financial pressures, almost certain to worsen in the United States with the economic downturn, can schools realistically refuse commercial/advertising offers?*

Linn: We all need to work toward supporting public institutions or their integrity will become compromised as vehicles for marketing. However, the notion that schools are benefiting finan-

Marketing in schools is terribly troubling. It carries more weight than other kinds of marketing because even if kids don't like school they know that it's supposed to be good for them. Everything marketed in a school implicitly carries that school's endorsement.

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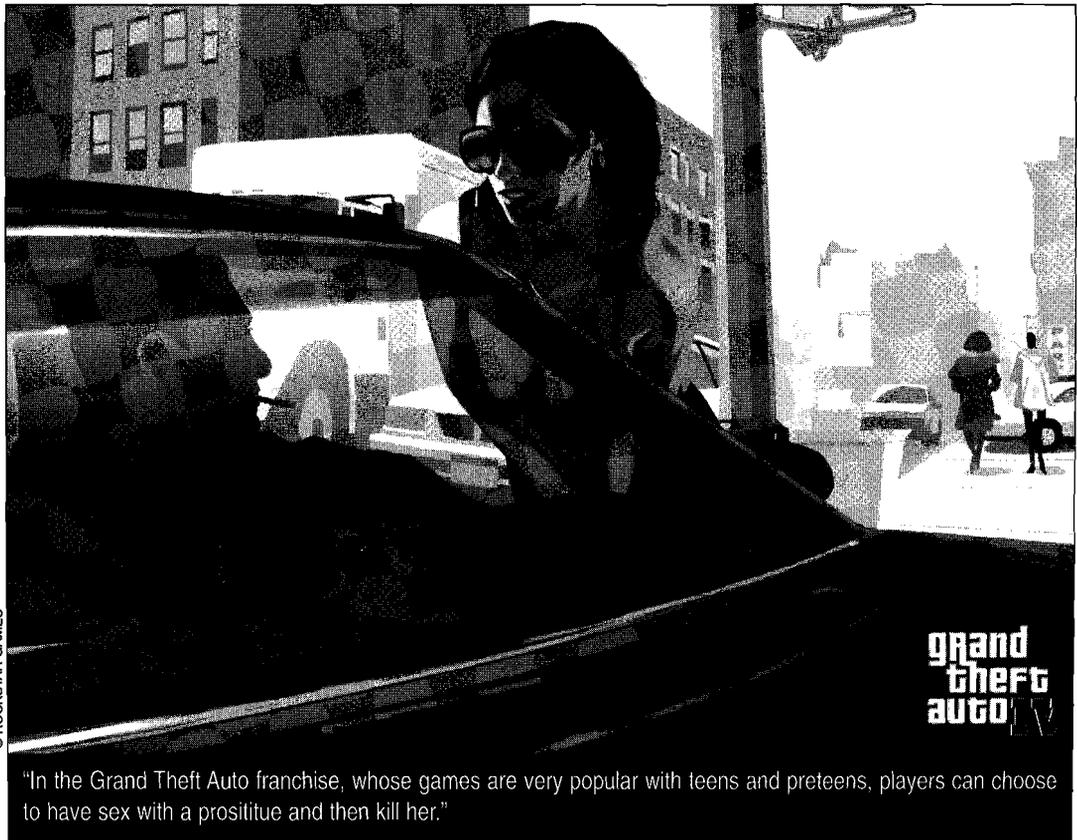
cially in any significant way from corporate marketing partnerships is seriously flawed. With General Mills Boxtops for Education, or a similar program from Campbell's soup, for instance, schools would have to buy \$100 worth of Cocoa Puffs just to get a stapler. To earn a \$300 digital camcorder, parents would have to buy 27,850 cans of Campbell's soup — about \$33,000 worth. It would take 22 labels, or \$26.40 worth of soup, to buy one colored pencil.

Actually, research suggests that, on average, schools don't make much money when they sell their students for advertising. A study out of the Commercialism in Education Research Unit (CERU) at Arizona State University shows that most schools turning for revenue to companies that market junk food or soda, for instance, get very little in return. According to CERU, 60.6 percent of school officials support increasing the regulation of advertising in schools. Among elementary school administrators, 87.5 percent report that their schools would not be forced to reduce programs if advertising were prohibited. It's also important to remember that corporate marketing in schools undermines education. How can teachers encourage students to think critically about a corporation's labor or environ-

mental practices, if their school is beholden to that corporation for support? Implicit in a school accepting advertising and marketing from a particular company is that school's endorsement of the company and its practices.

MM: *What do marketers mean in saying that "kids are getting older younger?"*

Linn: Marketers use that phrase as an excuse to market violence, sexualized clothing and electronic media to increasingly younger children — the term for that kind of advertising is "aspirational marketing." It's a cynical exploitation of the fact that younger children look up to and admire older children and want to be like them. What it really means is that children are getting the trappings of maturity at younger ages, but there is no evidence that their emotional development, or their judgment, is keeping pace. We see little girls in highly sexualized clothing these days, but they don't really understand the ramifications of wearing such clothing or their own sexuality. What's worrisome about this is that we are depriving children — especially girls — of middle childhood, which used to be a time when creativity and self-exploration flourished, and when girls and boys could be friends without being self-conscious about it. Instead,



"In the Grand Theft Auto franchise, whose games are very popular with teens and preteens, players can choose to have sex with a prostitute and then kill her."

because they are inundated with sexualized brands like the Bratz, and movies and TV programs like Disney's "High School Musical" and "Hannah Montana," girls are moving from being preschoolers to having the preoccupations of adolescence. They are worried about their weight and their appearance, and are immersed in thinking about boys as dates rather than as friends.

MM: Which are the leading industries marketing to kids?

Linn: The food, toy and media industries do the most marketing to children. But, these days, other industries that make products traditionally associated with adults market to children as well. They do it for two reasons. One is to get kids to nag their parents for particular brands, and the other is to gain what marketers call "cradle to grave brand loyalty." That's why Hummer toys get promoted in McDonald's Happy Meals, why Harley Davidson makes Onesies and why Beaches Resorts advertise on "Sesame Street" and promote Sesame-themed vacations.

MM: How has food marketing affected children's nutrition and state of health?

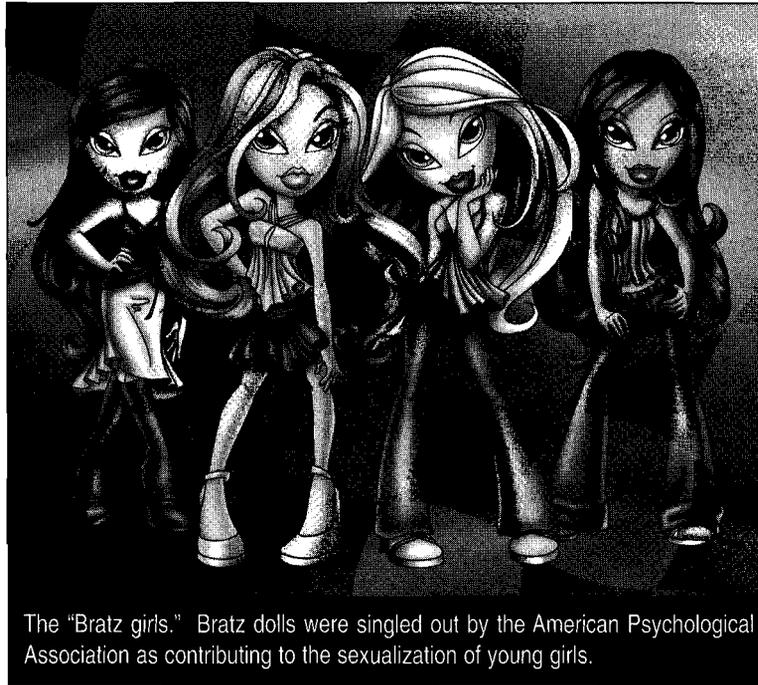
Linn: Reports from such august institutions as the World Health Organization and the Institute of Medicine document the impact of food marketing on children's food consumption, preferences and requests. There's no question that it has a negative impact on their diets. When it comes to the food industry, it's especially clear that self-regulation has failed. The escalation of childhood obesity mirrors the years that the food industry has been self-regulating. I think we need to stop all marketing to children and, according to a 2007 Wall Street Journal poll, 60 percent of U.S. adults believe that the government should play a role in limiting the food industry's ability to target children.

MM: The Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood's last conference focused on the "The

Sexualization of Children and Other Commercial Calamities." What do you mean by the sexualization of children, and how is this related to commercialism?

Linn: We use the term "sexualization" to describe the ways that children immersed in commercialized culture are taking on the accoutrements and behaviors associated with commercial depictions of sexuality that frequently present girls and women as objects to be con-

We've reached the bizarre point where nurturing creative play has actually become counter-cultural. The dominant culture dictates against it, in large part because it threatens corporate profits.



The "Bratz girls." Bratz dolls were singled out by the American Psychological Association as contributing to the sexualization of young girls.

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sumed by men. Children are sexualized when companies like Abercrombie and Fitch sell thong underpants to 8-year-olds with slogans like "wink wink" and "eye candy," or when Bonne Bell sells makeup to preschoolers, or when girls as young as three go to "spas" like Sax Fifth Avenue's Club Libby Lu to get "makeovers." It's important to remember that the sex that kids are sold in the media is not like sex-education in the schools. It's sex as violence, or sex as power, or sex as commodity. It's not about sex in the context of healthy relationships.

MM: What are some of the specific impacts on girls of commercialism in general and sexualization in particular?

Linn: Girls immersed in commercial culture are sold the message even in preschool that there are prescribed ways that they are supposed to look and behave. For instance, there were 40,000 Disney Princess brand items on the mar-

Of all of the problems that are fomented by marketing to children, I think the one that concerns me most is the push to get babies and toddlers in front of screens.

ket last year. If you strip away all of the talking teapots and singing animals from the most popular of Disney's stable of princess movies — "Cinderella," "The Little Mermaid" and "Sleeping Beauty," for instance — the primary message is that a girl's goal should be to become an ultra thin, glamorous, white girl who marries a wealthy prince, lives in a castle and has servants.

The Disney Princesses are huge, but there's also the Bratz Dolls — "the girlz with a passion for fashion" — and, of course, Barbie. In fact, if you go to Toys 'R' Us these days, the toys seem to be color coded — they're either blue or pink. The toys packaged in blue are for boys and seem to be dominated by toys promoting some kind of violence. The girls' toys are packaged in pink and are dominated by sexualized brands like Bratz, Barbie or the Disney Princesses, or make-up and hairstyling. And because these dolls are marketed to very young girls, what's happening is that even in preschool girls are acquiring the preoccupations of teenagers — becoming self-conscious about their looks, their weight and their relationships to boys. I once heard a 4-year-old say about a doll, "She's too fat to be a princess." They are being pressured to go from being 5-year-olds to being 15-year-olds, and they are skipping over middle childhood — a powerful and important time for girls' intellectual and creative development.

MM: *Your new book is called **The Case for Make Believe**. Why is there a need to argue this case? What forces are undermining make believe?*

Linn: Creative play is the foundation of so much of what's worthwhile about being human. It's the foundation of creativity, learning and constructive problem-solving. It's our first experience of intellectual freedom and divergent thinking. It's how children learn self control and the satisfactions of intrinsic motivation. Creative play is inherently healing and how children make meaning of their experiences. It's so fundamental to children's well-being that it is listed as one of the United Nation's guaranteed rights of the child. Yet as a society we seem to be doing everything we can to prevent children from playing. Play is being replaced by academics even in preschool. Recess, art, music and theater have been cut from schools.

But even more troubling is that — probably for the first time in history — when children have leisure time, we can no longer assume that

they're engaged in some kind of play. We've reached the bizarre point where nurturing creative play has actually become counter-cultural. The dominant culture dictates against it, in large part because it threatens corporate profits. Children who play creatively need less of the things that corporations sell. The best-selling toys — the toys that are most marketed to children — actually inhibit children's play. They are either based on media characters, embedded with computer chips, or both. Children play less creatively with toys based on media characters like Spiderman or Elmo, and if the toys move, sing, dance or chirp by themselves at a push of a button, they are even more useless as tools for creativity. A good toy is 90 percent child and only 10 percent toy — and that's not what dominates the market today.

MM: *Is there a difference for children between watching TV and playing video games or using the Internet? Why does it make sense to talk about "screen time" for kids?*

Linn: We need to talk about "screen time" instead of TV time or computer time because all of screen media is converging and eventually it's all going to be the same thing. As of now, TV shows drive kids to websites, websites promote TV programs and both encourage text messaging on cell phones. These days, children are targets for marketing through all kinds of screens. At this point, the main difference between video games and television is that video games are interactive. In many ways, that makes them even more compelling for kids. Forty-two percent of children ages 9-12 play video games at least one hour a day. Twenty-two percent report playing more than two hours.

Video games are powerful teaching tools for older kids — the problem is that many of the most successful, and intensely marketed, commercial games are intensely and graphically violent. And often, the violence is directed against women. In the Grand Theft Auto franchise, for instance, whose games are very popular with teens and preteens, players can choose to have sex with a prostitute and then kill her. At the 2006 Summit on Video Games, Youth and Public Policy, academic, medical and health experts signed a statement saying: "Behavioral science research demonstrates that playing violent video games can increase the likelihood of aggressive behavior in children and youth." The statement goes on to say that the neuroscience available supports the behavioral findings.

MM: *You've been very critical of Baby Einstein and similar brands. Can you explain the broader issues involved and the narrow issue you've raised with the FTC?*

Linn: Of all of the problems that are fomented by marketing to children, I think the one that concerns me most is the push to get babies and toddlers in front of screens. Forty percent of 3-month-old babies are regular television viewers. Ten percent of babies under 1 now have a television in their bedroom. And what studies of children's time use show, is that the more time babies and young children spend in front of screens, the less time they spend engaged in creative play or interacting with their parents, which are the two activities that we know are educational for them.

When parents are asked, "Why do you put babies in front of the screen?" their most common response is, "Because it's educational" or "Because it's good for my baby's brain development." But the reality is that the whole baby media business is a complete and utter scam. There's no credible evidence that screens are a good way to educate babies. There's not a lot of research on babies and screen time, but what exists suggests that it may even be harmful for them.

What the Campaign for Commercial-Free Childhood did two years ago was file an FTC complaint against Baby Einstein, Brainy Baby, and later we added BabyFirstTV, for false and deceptive marketing. These companies all made outright claims that their products were educational for babies, that they were good for language development, that they would help kids understand numbers — all sorts of claims that were patently false.

We have a Federal Trade Commission now that doesn't want to regulate anything and prefers to try to work through industry self-regulation. But I met with the Commissioners and I could tell that our complaint really troubled them because they knew that we were right. They ended up putting a lot of pressure on Disney and Brainy Baby to change their marketing. Disney significantly changed the way that it markets Baby Einstein. If you go to the Disney website, they're still making some ridiculous claims, but they've eliminated the word "educational."

So, CCFC actually got Disney to change their marketing and that's pretty impressive, I think. The problem is the FTC did nothing to make them acknowledge that they had been lying to parents. And so the message to corpo-

rations is, "It's OK to lie to parents and if you're caught, all you have to do is change the way you market, and there will be no consequences."

MM: *What do you say to the claim that, if parents are concerned about advertising, they can just turn off their kids' TVs, or keep TVs out of their bedrooms?*

Linn: I think it's either naïve or disingenuous to believe that one family in isolation can combat a \$17 billion industry working day and night to undermine parental authority, and to bypass parents and target children directly with messages that usually aren't good for them.

Parents do have a responsibility to work to protect their children from the onslaught of advertising and marketing, but they can't do it alone.

MM: *What can parents do about over-commercialism in children's lives?*

Linn: Before I talk about what parents can do in their individual families, I want to stress that marketing to children is a societal problem and we all need to be working for societal change. That's why my colleagues and I founded the Campaign for Commercial-Free Childhood — because children have a right to grow up and parents have a right to raise them without being undermined by commercial interests. In fact, CCFC now has over 20,000 people on its email list and we've been able to successfully pressure multinational corporations like McDonald's, Disney and Kellogg's to change some of their more egregious marketing practices.

In addition to working on commercialism directly, we also need to work to ensure safe outdoor spaces in which children can play, provide good day care and after-school care that's free of screen time, and we need to end advertising and marketing to kids, and advertising and marketing in schools.

That said, societal change takes time, and there are things that we can do with our own children. First of all, we need to come to terms with our own relationship with commercialism and to materialistic values. It's only when we know ourselves and where we stand, that we can help children cope. We need to set limits for screen time for older children and to keep babies and toddlers away from screens all together. We need to provide our children with time and space for unstructured creative play, and we need to get them outdoors. Nature is a good antidote for commercialism. So is altruism. We can get kids actively involved in com-

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munity service and help them embrace, from an early age, the value of working for the public good.

It's hard to do these things alone, so it's helpful if parents actively seek out other parents with similar values so that you can support each other. Getting involved in social, political, or spiritual networks can be helpful.

MM: *What should be the role of the government in protecting children from commercialism?*

Linn: We need a government that is willing and able to set limits on corporate power and that places the well-being of children over corporate profits. We need to prohibit marketing to children. Short of that, we could take more limited steps. We need to restore the Federal Trade Commission's ability to regulate marketing to children. That's really the first step. It was

to adults than it is to regulate marketing to children.

We could fully fund public media that would provide a real alternative to commercial media programs. The government could mandate that companies use profits from advertising on their adult programming to provide quality educational children's programming. The federal government gave away the airwaves to companies with the understanding that they were supposed to promote public good. And then they gave away the digital spectrum as well. The government could demand an exchange for that — that the companies provide educational, commercial-free children's programming.

We could stop marketing junk food to children. We could end marketing in schools. We could tax marketing to children instead of allowing it as a tax deduction. There are all sorts of steps we could take that would significantly limit the onslaught of commercial marketing in the lives of children.

MM: *How does the situation regarding commercialism and kids in the United States compare to the situation in other countries?*

Linn: The United States regulates marketing to children less than most industrialized democracies. In the Canadian province of Quebec, marketing to children under 13 is banned on television. And in Norway and Sweden, it's banned to children under the age of 12. In Greece, you can't advertise toys until after 10 p.m., and you can't advertise war toys at all. Britain is regulating junk food marketing on television to children. Many countries have laws around marketing in schools.

Regulations like these are antithetical to the values of our current administration and even to the values of administrations in the recent

past. But it is certainly something that's possible for us to do. But we need to foment to political will to do it.

We need to stop marketing to children. The convergence of ubiquitous, sophisticated, increasingly miniaturized screen technology and unfettered commercialism is just a disaster for their health and well-being. ■



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Baby Einstein and similar brands sell the idea that watching videos will help babies' brain development.

severely restricted in 1980 when Congress restricted the FTC's ability to regulate marketing to children based on its being unfair. Ironically, in this country at this time, marketing to adults can be regulated based on its being unfair and deceptive, but marketing to children can only be regulated based on its being deceptive. It's bizarre that it's easier to regulate marketing