

Turning Kids' Minds Off Consumerism

Americans Parents Must Stop Allowing The "Brand-ing" Of Our Children

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In the life of a child, family is the most important influence – but television is not far behind. And through television, and increasingly through other screen-based media, the minds of our children are being handed over to advertisers and corporations.

Our culture is plagued by rampant consumerism. The ultimate reason for human existence is now to have stuff, and to get more stuff. As corporations are placing greater emphasis on brands and icons, and on building brand loyalty for life, children are the easiest prey. By allowing an ever-increasing amount of screen time, American parents are unwittingly permitting the "brand-ing" of our children.

Americans are wired as never before. Almost all households own at least one television and one VCR. One-third of young children have a television in their bedroom, as do two-thirds of pre-teens and teens. Nearly 80 percent of households have cable or satellite television, as well as a computer. More families have Internet access than have newspaper subscriptions. More than 50 percent of households have a video game player, and video game sales now exceed \$10 billion annually!

Children spend more time sitting in front of screen-based media than any other activity besides sleeping. The average American child spends more than five hours in front of some kind of screen each day; nearly three hours of this time is television time! This is especially sad when you consider that the average child spends only 45 minutes reading a day, most of which is during school.

We're raising a generation of children wired but disconnected. Screen time is time usually spent alone. Even if other children are present, watching television together is no more than shared aloneness. Trust in others is built by having shared experiences; as our technology increases and our screen time increases, our trust in each other decreases.

Our children's window on the world is now largely through the eyes of advertisers and media corporations. Through television, they see a world of crime and violence and hatred. They see a world of fast-paced commercials with glamorous people convincing them that happiness comes from things they don't really need. They see a dizzying array of foods they shouldn't really have for good health. The average child sees over 20,000 commercials each year.

Of course, advertisers are not evil people with evil designs to corrupt our children. They just want to make children loyal to their brand for life. Tens of billions of dollars are spent annually by the food and drink industries on marketing aimed at children. Combined with all those hours of screen time, it's not surprising that the number of obese children has doubled in the past twenty years.

It's time for parents to take actions that will advertisers and corporations to "stay away from

our children". Parents should treat advertisers no differently than a stranger who knocks on their door. Limit children's exposure to commercials by encouraging them to watch public broadcasting. Take the television out of the child's bedroom. Limit the child's total screen time, including television, computers and video games to less than two hours daily.

Expose children to forms of entertainment media uninfluenced by advertising: art exhibits, dance and music performances, stage productions and poetry readings, for example. Encourage children to create and perform their own live "television" shows for a family audience. Develop a craft and hobby center in the home. Foster children as doers and creators rather than as shoppers and consumers.

Resist the emphasis on brands and icons by limiting the purchase of clothing and other items emblazoned with company logos. Unless children are paid to do so, they should not be advertising for corporations. Explain to children that ads and commercials are simply actors trying to persuade people to buy things they may not really need.

In our increasingly commercial culture, childhood innocence has become overmatched by corporate omnipresence. Unless parents take a stand against the repetitious bombardment of ads targeting children, our kids don't stand a chance.