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Minimizing the Impact of Childhood Media Use

Have you noticed signs of any of the following in your child's behavior?

- Depression

- Anxiety

- Eating Disorders

- Low Self-Esteem

- Obesity

- Increased Violent Behavior

- Precocious Sexual Activity

- High Levels of Parental Conflict

Did you know that **exposure to advertising** may be part of the problem?*

Marketers are targeting a growing share of advertising at America's 21 million "tweens" between the ages of 8 and 12, who spend some $30 billion annually themselves and influence another $150 billion of their parents' spending. And with each passing year, marketers strive to reach ever younger audiences. In 2011, *Ad Week* declared infants to three-year-olds to be "the next great American consumer."

This onslaught of kid-targeted advertising is having an enormous impact on child development. The result is not only an epidemic of materialistic values among children, but also a "narcissistic wounding," whereby children are convinced that they're inferior if they don't have an endless array of new products.

* If your child exhibits any of these signs, please be sure to seek professional help as these signs can be indicative of other serious problems.

The Prevalence of Advertising in Our Children's Lives

Today's 8-to-18 year-olds consume an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes of screen media per day—almost the amount of time most adults spend at work daily, except that young people use media seven days a week instead of five. In total, given that kids often interact with more than one medium at a time, today's youth pack a staggering 10 hours and 45 minutes worth of media content into those daily 7.5 hours.

Today's children are inundated with a dizzying array of sales pitches in a variety of settings. Historically, just a handful of multimedia conglomerates dominated the selling of popular culture to youth. But increasingly, even institutions traditionally considered "wholesome"— such as the Girl Scouts and Scholastic—have given in to more aggressive commercialization.
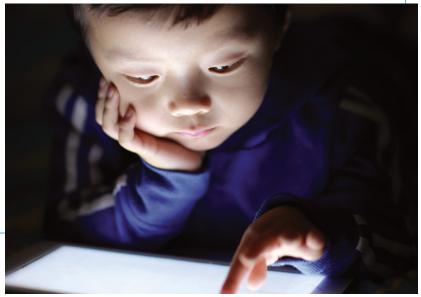
Marketing to children isn't limited solely to commercials. On television today, there is often very little separation between marketing and content. "Watching an ad is no longer the price you have to pay for watching the show. The ad is the show," says James P. Steyer, author of *The Other Parent* and founder of Common Sense Media.

And TV is just one small slice of the media pie. As kids add more hours in front of computers, tablets, and smart phones to their already extensive TV time, marketers are happy to meet them there. For advertisers, the real breakthrough of the Internet is not the ubiquitous banner ad, but the chance to engage children directly, weaving commercial messages into the content itself.

Barbara Kahn, director of the Jay H. Baker Retailing Center at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, says these types of marketing strategies are manipulative because "[k]ids can't differentiate between what's propaganda and what's not. And on the Internet, the regulations haven't caught up." Kahn notes that the biggest difference between the Internet and television commercials is the level of interaction: "TV is a passive medium. Kids get mesmerized by TV shows, but they're not engaged. When they are on the Internet playing a game, it's much more involving." Moreover, kids tend to use smaller, personal screens for Internet viewing, creating a private experience that makes parental oversight more difficult.
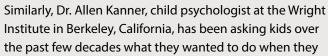
Marketers are also working hard to invade parent-free venues, particularly schools. From yearbooks to team uniforms, vending machines to school buses, we may be accustomed to advertising in our kids' schools. But the American Psychological Association warns parents to be especially vigilant about in-school commercialism because children have little freedom to avoid such content. Moreover, parents or students may be led to assume that in-school advertising has the "tacit endorsement of respected teachers and and school officials, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of the advertising."

Harming Children's Well-Being

Since 1965, the Higher Education Research Institute has surveyed college freshmen across America annually, documenting the changing nature of students' aspirations, values, attitudes, expectations, and behaviors. In 1976, when freshmen were asked for the first time to explain their reasons for attending college, only half (49.9%) considered being able "to make more money" as a very important reason for attending college. By 2006, however, that share had risen to 69%.

Similarly, Dr. Allen Kanner, child psychologist at the Wright Institute in Berkeley, California, has been asking kids over the past few decades what they wanted to do when they grew up. Their answers used to focus on specific jobs like "nurse" and "astronaut." Kanner says he is now more likely to hear "make money." He adds: "In my practice I see kids becoming incredibly consumerist…. When they talk about their friends, they talk about the clothes they wear, the designer labels they wear, not the person's human qualities." Kanner sees advertising as a prime culprit: " Advertising is a massive, multi-million dollar project that's having an enormous impact on child development."

Boston College sociology professor Juliet Schor reports links between kids' immersion in consumer culture and depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and conflicts with parents. Likewise, the violence depicted in advertising and the media can influence children's interactions with wider society. The American Academy of Pediatrics reports causal links between displays of aggressive behavior and child-oriented ads for movies, games, and music that are rife with violent imagery. According to the AAP, "Extensive research evidence indicates that media violence can contribute to aggressive behavior, desensitization to violence, nightmares, and fear of being harmed." Viewing repeated instances of violence increases the likelihood that children will see the world as a dark and sinister place.

Wheelock College professor Diane Levin, who is also a co-founder of the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood and TRUCE (Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment), sees similar correlations between sexual imagery in children's ads and increases in eating disorders among girls. She notes that as "children struggle to make sense of mature sexual content, they are robbed of valuable time for age-appropriate developmental tasks, and they may begin to engage in precocious sexual behavior." Given the scope of the problem, the American Psychological Association says schools should include information on the negative impacts of the sexualization of girls in media literacy and sex education programs.

Junk food advertising can also be harmful. An explosion of ads for unhealthy sugary and salty foods in recent years has paralleled higher levels of childhood obesity, with obesity affecting nearly a fifth of U.S. 6- to 19-year-olds in 2008. The trend is especially high among minority youth, with nearly 1 in 3 African American girls ages 12 to 19 obsese in 2008. This is perhaps unsurprising given that fast food billboards are more prevalent in predominantly African American neighborhoods, and that young African Americans see 80–90 percent more ads for sugary drinks than white children do.

What You Do Matters!

The task of conscientious parenting is always daunting, especially in light of all the problems presented by our commercial world. But it's important to acknowledge that we, as parents, do have the power to help our children lead happier, healthier lives.

1 Limit screen time.

An obvious first step is to limit the amount of time your child spends in front of screens. According to the AAP, children under two should have no screen time, and children over two should spend two or fewer hours a day using screens. If you find limiting screen time difficult, start by establishing "screen-free" zones in your home, restricting screen time during homework and meals, and/or limiting viewing to ad-free programs or games. A 2014 study found that children whose parents set more limits on the amount and content of media viewed got more sleep, gained less weight, got better grades, exhibited more cooperative social behaviors, and were less aggressive with their peers.

2 Say yes to quality time!

When you say no to a screen or gadget, say yes to something your child really wants: time with you. Encourage fun family activities like bike rides, board games, and walks around the neighborhood. Studies have found that exposure to natural settings may be effective in reducing symptoms of ADHD, and that children's stress levels fall within minutes of seeing green spaces. Try limiting your own screen time as well: research shows that parent TV time has a stronger relationship to child TV time than access to TV in the home or the child's bedroom, or even parental rules about TV viewing.

3 Encourage exposure to ads while in your presence.

No matter how much you try to reduce their exposure to advertising, your kids will still see ads, whether on buses, on buildings, or in the classroom. In fact, you may want to encourage a reasonable amount of exposure while in your presence. Dutch researchers found that "active mediation"—making deliberate comments and judgments about commercials and actively explaining their selling intent—was more effective than sheltering children from ads. Look for opportunities to help your kids understand what ads are and how to decode them; teach them the difference between a TV program and a commercial, showing them when a commercial begins and ends. Teach them to ask critical questions like: Who is responsible for the ad? What is it actually saying? Does it leave out any critical information? What does the ad want me to do?

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4   **Talk to your kids about protecting their online privacy.**

Explain that they may unknowingly give advertisers a lot of information just by downloading an app or clicking on a sweepstakes. Teach them to ask your permission before clicking on an ad, participating in an online quiz, or filling out a form. Get to know which games and apps your child is using, and have them show you how they are used, what kind of information they ask for, and what sorts of awards they provide. Invest the time to really understand this content, and if you don't approve of the marketing tactics, steer your kids toward games or apps that you find acceptable.

5   **Stock up on great reads.**

Stock your home with high-quality books, magazines, and articles for your kids to read. As Joe Kelly, a.k.a. The Dad Man, has noted, provide these materials even if your child hasn't asked for them: "It's like stocking the kitchen with healthy snacks, even if she begs only for chips and soda."

6   **Conduct a school walk-through.**

Gather other concerned parents or community members to do a walk-through of your school. Look for examples of sponsored materials such as textbooks, computer banner ads, vending machines, and cafeteria banners. Record the information and report it to the local school board with your concerns. For more information on how to conduct a walk-through, check out the Center for a New American Dream's step-by-step resource.

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Resources & References

For more information, tips, and inspiration, download a free copy of *Kids Unbranded: Tips for Parenting in a Commercial Culture* at **www.newdream.org**.

About this handout

This handout was created by The Center for a New American Dream (**www.newdream.org**) and Psychologists for Social Responsibility (**www.psysr.org**).

The Center for a New American Dream aims to improve well-being by inspiring and empowering individuals to shift the ways we consume.

Psychologists for Social Responsibility is an independent, non-profit organization that applies psychological knowledge and expertise to promote peace, social justice, human rights, and sustainability.

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