

# The Commercialisation of Childhood



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DEMOCRATIC LEFT

# Commercialisation of Childhood



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## Commercialisation of Childhood Executive Summary

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The child-oriented market in the UK is now worth £30 billion and has laid roots in every aspect of children's lives affecting how they learn, what they eat and how they play. Advertisements and marketing messages are also shaping the way children see themselves and the world and are impacting on their values, aspirations, health as well as the way they feel about themselves.

### **How childhood is being commercialised**

**Broadcast media:** The average child in the UK, US and Australia sees between 20,000 and 40,000 TV ads a year. The majority of films contain over 10 deliberately placed and often recurring references to brands. TV programmes are often commercially sponsored and spin-offs and products with endorsed by TV or film characters, like The Tweenies on St Ivel Yoghurt Pots, pack shop shelves.

**New media:** Log on to Kellogg's Frosties Earn Your Stripes website and you can win Frosties Earn Your Stripes stickers by getting high scores playing on Frosties Street Soccer. You'll have to practice a lot to get the hang of it. You can have competitions with your friends to see who can get the most stickers and you can earn more stickers by e-mailing in stories of the great things you've done with your stickers. Of course you can earn even more stickers in special packs of Frosties. Advertgames like these provide a hook to reel children in. It is nearly impossible to avoid getting tangled up in the marketing on the web.

**Non broadcast media:** Public services are being increasingly used as advertising spaces, with adverts on buses, trains, at sports grounds and attractions. Product placement is creeping into novels and in shops even the way products are laid out, like at child's eye height or by the checkout, are part of strategies to get children to buy, or pester their parents to buy.

**The cool factor:** Marketers offer children money and the chance to win prizes in return for promoting products amongst their friends and peer groups. The Dubit Insiders website calls on children to "Promote brands on the street for free stuff, prizes and cash" by flyering or stickering in their school or town, wearing the clothes and "telling everyone on the net about it". Marketers exploit children's emotional vulnerabilities and use "being cool" to sell.

**Pester power:** Marketers have cottoned on to children's influence on their parents spending and encourage children to nag their parents, deliberately causing conflict in families. Walmart's Toyland website even offers to help out nagging by e-mailing your Christmas wish list to your parents on your behalf!

## **The impacts of the commercialisation of childhood**

**Psychological impacts:** Bombarded with images of how they should look and what they should own, children struggle to keep up, suffering from stress; anxiety; increasingly lower satisfaction with themselves and their lives; and poorer relationships with others. Across the country there are record levels of mental health problems in children, with boys displaying symptoms of conduct disorders like bullying and fighting and girls suffering from eating and emotional disorders.

**Growing up too soon:** The boundaries between the child and adult worlds are disappearing. Girls are being sold lacy underwear even before they reach their teenage years and toys like the Bratz Secret Date Collection containing champagne glasses and "date night accessories" are marketed to six year olds. Clothes, toys and music alongside magazines and TV all reflect and promote the sexualisation of childhood, especially for girls.

**Stifling development:** 70% of three year olds recognise the McDonalds symbol but only half of them know their own surname. Research shows that commercially created toys encourage children to live sedentary lifestyles and are unlikely to stimulate their imaginations or ability, despite many boasting educational or developmental value.

**Interfering in education:** Supermarkets' vouchers for schools schemes ask parents to collect £250,000 worth of vouchers for a computer worth about £1000 and children are asked to eat 170 chocolate bars costing £71 to receive a basketball. Brands spend an estimated £300m every year on targeting the classroom.

**Poor health:** Research shows that junk food advertising has a pervasive influence on children's diet and health. £480million is spent every year advertising junk food on TV, despite the UK having the highest rate of obesity in Europe with 35% of boys and 45% of girls aged 11 to 15 being overweight or obese.

**Family conflict:** "I've lost count of the number of tantrums I have had in Asda because I won't let the girls have cereal just for the free gift" is typical of parent's comments on this. The commercial pressures on children make poverty bite harder, with extra pressure on parents to buy expensive brands.

So we're asking the question who is forming our children – parents, guardians, friends, families, teachers, community workers or an army of psychologists, branding gurus, marketing experts, advertisers who are spending billions of pounds to shape young minds in the name of profit. Can children be children before they are consumers? Compass is launching a campaign to explore this issue and look at what can be done. If you would like to get involved, sign up at <http://www.compassonline.org.uk/campaigns.asp>.

# Commercialisation of Childhood

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## Introduction

Research carried out by the National Consumer Council (NCC) led them to proclaim “A new shopping generation has emerged”<sup>[1]</sup>. Marketers are coming up with ever more ingenious methods to infuse children’s lives with advertising messages. And it’s working. More children than ever are hitting the high streets (by the age of ten 78% of children say they enjoy shopping) and children have well and truly been inducted to the world of brands and labels. NCC research showed that “the average ten year old has internalised 300 to 400 brands – perhaps twenty times the number of birds in the wild that they could name”<sup>[2]</sup>. 70 per cent of three year olds recognise the McDonalds symbol but only half of them know their own surname.

“The child-oriented market in the UK is now worth £30 billion and has laid roots in every aspect of children’s lives affecting how they learn, what they eat and how they play”.

Children’s own spending power is also at record highs. The latest figures from the Office of National Statistics show children aged seven to 15 spend on average £13 a week<sup>[3]</sup>. The child-oriented market in the UK is now worth £30 billion and has laid roots in every aspect of children’s lives affecting how they learn, what they eat and how they play. But advertisements and marketing messages are also shaping the way children see themselves and the world and it is impacting on children’s desires, values and aspirations, as well as the way they feel about themselves.

There are legal restrictions and voluntary codes of practice that govern what can and can’t go in an ad and how marketers operate, especially if they are targeting children. There is a Committee on Advertising Practice for broadcast media and another for non-broadcast media, both administered by the Advertising Standards Authority which has the power to pull ads it deems to be in breach of the code. In fact, marketers already feel over-regulated and restricted. In 2005 The Chartered Institute of Marketing complained “The current environment marketers face in their day-to-day work is one that is increasingly restricted by new laws. In the UK alone, twenty one new Acts, regulations or amendments affecting marketers have been passed in the last year, with another 10 Bills being put before Parliament in 2006.”<sup>[4]</sup>

But this report details the scope, intensity and effects of commercial pressures on children, demonstrating that the legal framework and marketers’ voluntary self-regulation is not protecting children, parents or families from the effects of all-encompassing marketing to children.

## Part I: How childhood is being commercialised

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### Broadcast media

Children are spending more and more time inside the house and in front of TV screens and computer monitors. Digital TV presents children with more channels than ever before, the vast majority of which are supported by advertising revenue. Ofcom figures show 72.8% of homes now have multichannel television.<sup>[5]</sup>

TV has been a defining factor in shaping children’s views of the world since the 1950’s. Much loved and respected programmes have been providing children with learning opportunities and increasingly have been dealing with difficult social issues like bullying, drugs and teenage pregnancy. But it is not all Blue Peter and the Really Wild Show. Anybody who has tuned into Saturday

morning terrestrial TV will not be surprised to learn that the average child in the UK, US and Australia sees between 20,000 and 40,000 TV ads a year.<sup>[6]</sup> Adults are generally able to pick out adverts and marketing messages, clock on to the methods that are being employed to sell them something and make decisions based on that knowledge. Children do not develop the capacity to understand marketing messages for what they are until the age of 11 or 12. Up to the age of eight, children are not at all aware of marketers intent.<sup>[7]</sup>

Marketers and advert creators are not just getting at children through adverts, which critics of restrictions on advertising to children say can be turned off or fast forwarded using Sky+ buttons<sup>[8]</sup>. Marketers in collaboration with psychologists working for them have developed several ways of camouflaging their messages to fall under the radar of older children, and even adults. Many TV programmes, films and games are engineered at least in part to advance a brand or to sell related products. As Sue Palmer explains “Most parents seem unaware – or in denial – that behind the TV programmes and computer games keeping their children entertained lurks an army of anonymous manipulators – marketing executives and child psychologists employed by big business to capture the hearts and minds of the next generation of consumers”<sup>[9]</sup>.

Product placement in films and TV programmes are a prime example of this. Marketers ensure that when a character in a film has a drink they are drinking a particular brand of drink, or when they talk on a mobile it is a particular type of phone. Marketing experts proclaim “product placements may get under the radar of even older children who have strategic information processing capabilities (13 years and up). Because product placement, when it is done well, looks as if it is part of the lives of the characters, it may lead to less counterarguing and “internal zapping” – tuning out mentally – even by adult consumers (D’Astous & Chartier, 2000)”<sup>[10]</sup> That’s why Jack Bauer drives a Nissan in 24 and the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles like Pizza Hut. Cameo appearances of branded products are now predictable features in most films. According to Brandchannel.com, a website that counts brand references in films, this year’s Pink Panther film (rated PG in the UK) alone featured over 30 brands: Adidas, Apple, Axe, Chanel, Citroën, Dell, Gretch, Holiday Inn, Kodak, Lion King, McDonald's, Montblanc, MSN, Newsweek, Nextel, Nikon, Perrier, Philips, Piaggio, Pilot, Post-It Notes, PPS Publications, Renault, Smart, Star Magazine, T.G.I. Friday's, Toyota, USA Today, Viagra, Virgin, Volkswagen, Waldorf-Astoria<sup>[11]</sup>.

Programme and film makers are all too ready to capitalise on the popularity of their shows and send characters out of the TV box into the real world to sell. Endorsements from TV characters are splattered all over anything that has packaging from snacks and sweets, stationery, toys and mobile phones. Even the BBC’s Tweenies have been recruited to sell St Ivel yoghurt pots<sup>[12]</sup>. Spin-offs from popular films or TV programmes are another money making enterprise – spin-offs from the BBC’s Dr Who (ranging from action figures to a remote controlled electronic tardis) will raise more than £5million for the BBC’s commercial arm.<sup>[13]</sup> At the end of every Pokemon cartoon is an advert for collectable playing cards in the form of the slogan “Gotta catch ‘em all”, banned in Sweden for being ‘stealth advertising’.

Adverts are of course a feature of commercial radio stations with a stream of ads often playing after every four or five songs. National commercial radio earns £270million from net advertising revenue<sup>[14]</sup> and in 2005 £579million pounds was spent on advertising on the radio<sup>[15]</sup>. Radio ads often mirror TV ads and are part of integrated strategies to make hits at children from many different angles. Take for example the Kellogg’s advert for Frosties currently being aired offering children five seconds of air time if they record themselves singing about how much they love Frosties. The ad also directs children to the Frosties website, where they can find out more about how delicious Frosties are.

## New media

98% of children and young people have used the internet, 92% of children have access to the internet at school and 75% of children have access at home.<sup>[16]</sup> Marketers have tapped into children's enthusiasm for the internet and its prolific reach.

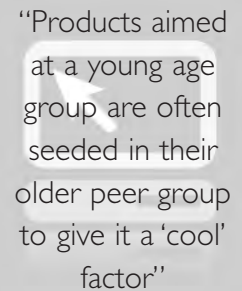
It is virtually impossible to spend time surfing the world wide web and not be interrupted by an advert that just appears on the screen and will not go away (pop-ups) or by scrolling ads on the periphery of web pages.

But marketers are not leaving anything to chance. Many brands have their own commercial websites offering children quizzes, games and entertainment. Kellogg's Frosties have a website called 'Earn Your Stripes'<sup>[17]</sup> which has a range of games where high scores earn stickers. Extra incentive to practice to get an even higher score is the chance of winning an Apple i-Pod Shuffle or a new Apple computer. Children are encouraged to e-mail in ideas on how they have used their stickers – like having competitions with your friends on who can earn the most stickers; sticking them on the wall to “see how much you've grown”; or sticking one to a paper plate and using it as a moving target. Of course you can earn even more stickers in special packs of Kellogg's Frosties.

Between January and March of 2005 alone more than 12.2million children visited commercial websites promoting food and drinks.<sup>[18]</sup>

Instant messaging and chatrooms are very popular with children. The Children Go Online survey found that 55% of 9 to 19 year olds go on line daily or weekly do so to send instant messages.<sup>[19]</sup> Marketers try to muscle in on this and disguise adverts as messages from strangers often interrupting on-going or starting new conversations. This has become so prolific it has been honoured with a term of its own – “spim”, the cousin of spam (unwanted e-mails)<sup>[20]</sup>. Some attempts have been less subtle, McDonalds teamed up with Microsoft to produce a branded version of MSN Messenger, on to which log 800,000 users under the age of 18.<sup>[21]</sup>

On average, children get their first mobile phone at 8 years old, despite the fact that the government's safety advisers suggest children under 12 should not use a mobile because of the potential damage from the technology. Ofcom figures show 49% of all 8 to 11 year olds have a mobile, rising to 82% of 12 to 15-year-olds.<sup>[22]</sup> A whole industry has sprung up around mobile phone accessories for children, with themed covers and lanyards, ringtones, wallpapers and icons. Children receive adverts by text message in exactly the same way as spam e-mails. Brands, especially food and drink manufacturers use text-to-win competitions where by children are encouraged to buy a snack or drink and text the 'lucky number' on the packaging to enter a prize draw. Cadburys and Fanta have both done this several times.<sup>[23]</sup>



“Products aimed at a young age group are often seeded in their older peer group to give it a ‘cool’ factor”

## Non-broadcast media

In corner shops and newsagents there are always plenty of publications enticing children. There are tailor-made magazines for children as young as four. Disney's Princess invites girls aged 4 to 8 to 'enter the world of their favourite Disney heroines'. Pre-teens have their own selection too - Bratz magazine is the perfect accompaniment to Bratz dolls, or for boys 7 to 12 Toxic offers 'fun, cool competitions, cheats, posters, sport, gags and massive monster mayhem'. Books too are beginning to fall victim to product placement, with commercial sponsors teaming up with publishers spawning product ads hidden in the text of novels like a heroine wearing “a killer coat of Lipslicks in ‘Daring’”<sup>[24]</sup>.



Public services are increasingly being used as advertising spaces with posters advertising products, toys and films glaring at children from roadsides; bus stops; inside tubes and buses; the side of buses and taxis; and at tube and train stations. Similarly, cinemas; swimming baths; sports grounds; museums and visitor attractions; theme parks all boast advertising bill boards and commercial sponsorship.

Marketers have also tapped into children's enjoyment of collecting things. More than two in three 10 to 12 year olds like collecting the latest things that others are collecting<sup>[25]</sup> and marketers are more than happy to oblige, and encourage. Collectable toys, stickers or cards are common place, not only do they encourage a purchase of a particular product but they demand repeat purchases. Cereal packets are the favourite hiding place for collectables, though they have found a varied range of homes from magazines to fast food outlets and washing powder.

### The cool factor

“Go Girl magazine calls itself a “lifestyle magazine containing articles on fashion, beauty, reader stories, celebrities, songwords... everything that is important in the life of girls aged 7 to 11”

Being ‘cool’ is a major part of strategies in selling things to children. Nancy Shalek, president of Shalek Agency once described as LA’s hottest ad agency has said “advertising at its best is making people feel that without their product, you’re a loser. Kids are very sensitive to that. If you tell them to buy something they are resistant. But if you tell them that they’ll be a dork if they don’t, you’ve got their attention. You open up emotional vulnerabilities and it’s very easy to do with kids because they are the most emotionally vulnerable”.<sup>[26]</sup>

Marketers pile huge resources into both making cool and selling cool. We know that children look up to pop stars, celebrities and top sportspeople, especially footballers, posters of whom adorn millions of children’s bedroom walls. Research by academics at the University of Leicester’s

Sociology Department as part of the Cultures of Consumption programme demonstrates that “Influences from popular culture, especially pop stars and footballers, function as an important reference for children”.<sup>[27]</sup> Marketers articulate what is ‘cool’ and sell it to children who hope to emulate their heroes. Children as young as six have a conception of what is cool and what is not.<sup>[28]</sup> Marketers play on children’s fears of not fitting in by promoting images of how they should be and what they should own.

Campaigners have fought long and hard against the body images that are portrayed as cool in the media. Very slim, leggy, clear complexioned women continue to be venerated by marketers and swamp TV, films, magazines, billboards and posters. Children are inducted into this world at a young age and encouraged to buy into it. For example, Go Girl magazine calls itself a “lifestyle magazine containing articles on fashion, beauty, reader stories, celebrities, songwords... everything that is important in the life of girls aged 7 to 11”<sup>[29]</sup>.

Sue Palmer in her book *Toxic Childhood* writes “To begin with, they aspire to be Disney heroines – all billowing ball gowns and fairy palaces – so there are, of course plenty of dolls and accessories to feed this dream... but the KAGOY [Kids Are Getting Older Younger] strategy leads them rapidly on to an appreciation of contemporary fashion and ‘style’. Girly magazines, website and TV programmes nurture this interest, and the possibilities for consumption become limitless.”<sup>[30]</sup> The images beamed into children from TV and films and in magazines are brought to life for them by the clothes retail industry which offers to kit kids out for the right look. Having the ‘right look’ plays an important part in children’s lives and has come to define how they relate to each other. Leicester University research found that “Access to the latest fashions which carried high status



labels and logos could be significant in respect of a children's experience of social inclusion or exclusion".<sup>[31]</sup>

Marketers have exploited this to sell all sorts of things from clothes to gadgets, games and sweets. One tactic adopted by marketers is to use panels of 'cool kids' to advise them on products or services that they are thinking of putting on the market. But they also go a step further and use gangs of 'cool' children to push products in their peer groups and communities, exploiting the power of peer pressure and children's fears of not fitting in for profit-making. The Dubit website is a prime example of this. You can apply to become a 'Dubit Informer' and get paid between 50p and £2 for completing online surveys, or a 'Dubit Insider' - the tag line reads "Promote brands on the street for free stuff, prizes and cash".

The Bratz & Bratz Boyz Secret Date Collection pairs each Bratz character with a mystery Bratz Boy, two champagne glasses, and "tons of date night accessories". It is marketed at six year olds".

Children are asked to sign up and "represent their brands on the street". Suggested ways they can do this are: 'Just talking to your mates about it'; 'wearing or using the gear at certain public events such as concerts which are paid for'; 'flyering or sticking your town or school'; 'telling everyone on the net about it'. For their troubles, the Dubit Insiders get: 'the latest gear to show off to your mates'; 'access to exclusive, inside information and events'; 'freebies, chances to win prizes and some serious cash' and 'free access to concerts and gigs for the best insiders'<sup>[32]</sup>

Aspirational marketing plays on young children's admiration for their older siblings and peers. Products aimed at a young age group are often seeded in their older peer group to give it a 'cool' factor.

## **Pester Power**

Marketers have cottoned on to the fact that children are not just valuable to them for their own spending power but also for their influence over their parents' wallets. Food Standards Agency research concluded that "The influence of nagging throughout a shopping trip to the supermarket was perceived as powerful. Mothers reported that not only did their children nag them for different kinds of products (i.e. crisps, chocolates, fizzy drinks), they also pestered them for particular products within categories (i.e. branded rather than non-branded versions). It was strongly felt that supermarket shopping could be a stressful experience, with mothers trying to shop whilst also trying to resist 'giving in' to their children's demands".<sup>[33]</sup>

Marketers exploit not only children's desire to fit in but also parent's concern for their children in this regard.

Many brands and retailers go into over-drive at Christmas and Walmart, the parent company of Asda, has constructed a wish list for children. In their website Toyland, children are asked to pick items from a conveyor belt and build up a wish list of items that, conveniently, are all available in Walmart shops. The website then encourages children to enter their parents' e-mail addresses so it can send them the list and "help pester your parents for you".<sup>[34]</sup>

But its not just things for children themselves that marketers use children to pester their parents about. Pester power features in all major campaigns for family purchases. US market research shows that 67% of car purchases are influenced by children.<sup>[35]</sup>

## PART II: The impacts of the commercialisation of childhood

### Commercial pressure and children's state of mind

In grooming children to buy into brands and immersing them in messages convincing them they need things to be happy, marketers are cementing and promoting materialism in them. A recent review of the available literature found that children's exposure to television advertising was consistently associated with materialism, such that greater exposure led to greater emphasis on materialist pursuits<sup>[36]</sup>. The effects of advertising may begin very young – in one laboratory study, children as young as four and five displayed decreased sociability after being shown a short television advert for a new toy.<sup>[37]</sup>

“In fact, mental health problems are so prevalent among young people that psychologists have declared it a crisis”

There is now a significant amount of evidence and a broad consensus amongst psychologists that holding a strongly materialist value orientation is, all else being equal, detrimental to psychological well-being<sup>[38]</sup>. People who place a high emphasis on material goods and wealth report higher levels of stress and anxiety, lower satisfaction with themselves and their lives, poorer relationships with others, and less concern for the environment<sup>[39]</sup>. These results have been replicated around the world, for various age groups, and seem to be robust and reliable.

In fact, mental health problems are so prevalent among young people that psychologists have declared it a crisis. The Office of National Statistics say that one in ten children have a “mental disorder”<sup>[40]</sup>. Clearly, there are many factors that contribute to mental health problems in children and it is unrealistic to suggest that it is all the fault of aggressive marketing but bombarded with images of how they should look and what they should own children struggle to keep up. Child psychiatrist Professor David Skuse has reported a “convincing increase” in conduct disorders in boys, such as bullying and fighting, and eating and emotional disorders, including phobias and depression, in girls<sup>[41]</sup>.

NCC research concluded “Children do experience stress from the scale and extent of commercial marketing: Young people feel pressure to have the latest ‘in vogue’ items. Girls in particular, experience feelings of inadequacy and discomfort as a result of ‘images of perfection’ promoted by advertising. Advertising, it appears, can make you unhappy. The more consumerist children were – the ones who were ‘brand aware’, cared about their possessions and liked collecting – the more likely they were to be dissatisfied more widely.”<sup>[42]</sup>

There is some evidence that the growth of materialism in adolescence has led to wider shifts in values at the population level. In the US, researchers from the University of California have interviewed around 200,000 first-year university students every year since 1965<sup>[43]</sup>. Whilst the proportion of students agreeing that is important or essential to “develop a meaningful philosophy of life” had fallen from over 80% to around 40% by the late 1980s, the number who thought that “being well off financially” was most important rose from 40% to over 70% in the same period, and has remained at about the same level since. In other words, by the age of 18, a majority of US adolescents have adopted a markedly materialistic outlook on life that colours not only their behaviour now but their aspirations for the future. Given the obvious similarities between the US and UK, there is every reason to suspect that similar trends may have taken place here.

### Sexualisation of childhood

Little girls have always aspired to be grown up like their mothers. They often dress up in their mum's clothes and have for many years had favourite dolls to look after. But the success of marketers and the media in encouraging children to buy in to ‘cool’ images of how they should look and kitting them out in styles that emulate their celebrity heroines has some serious repercussions.

“Research has demonstrated that materialism in children is positively associated with shopping and spending, and negatively associated with school performance”

‘New Consumers: children, fashion and consumption’ project undertaken by academics at Leicester University’s Sociology Department describe the ‘the adultification of children’s clothing’. The project concluded that “Particular anxiety centred on the linkage of this with the sexualisation of girls’ clothing to include overly adult styles, particularly those which expose a lot of flesh.”<sup>[44]</sup>

Former Head teacher Sue Palmer explains “Selling adult fashion trends to children inevitably leads to the premature sexualisation of little girls, with five- and six- year-olds arriving at schools in sexy thongs and lacy bras, and pre-teens plastering themselves with make-up to attract ‘boyz’”.<sup>[45]</sup>

But it is not just in clothing that reflects the sexualisation of childhood. Children’s toys are becoming increasingly reflective of this trend towards sexualisation. While dolls like Barbie have for decades promoted a stereotypical slim leggy image, today’s toys are taking it one step further. Barbie is not being left behind. Take for example the Barbie lip gloss maker, providing young girls with the opportunity to play with make up, internalising the idea of using it. But as Juliet B Schor points out in her book *Born to Buy* that “Barbie is being replaced by Bratz dolls, which ooze contemporary “heat”, with barely there clothes and explicit date themes. The Bratz & Bratz Boyz Secret Date Collection pairs each Bratz character with a mystery Bratz Boy, two champagne glasses, and “tons of date night accessories”. It is marketed at six year olds”.<sup>[46]</sup>

Children’s toys are getting increasingly indecorous - Take for example “sound pops” or “hot licks” designed for children as young as four years old that are “interactive candies” that incorporate a lollipop into a battery-operated handle. The lollipop spins or the toy is activated when your tongue turns it on.”<sup>[47]</sup> Or the “Hunny Bunny” Playboy bunny Halloween costume from a brazenly named Hottie Tottie range manufactured by Design Costumes.<sup>[48]</sup>

Music too reflects this trend. Susan Linn in *Consuming Kids* remarks that “For the past few years, a large chunk of change has been going to Lolita-like girls singers such as Britney Spears, Mandy Moore, or Christina Aguilera, who dress like quintessential male fantasies of teenybopper hookers, sing songs about sex written by middle-aged men, and are marketed to kids.”<sup>[49]</sup>

### **Dumbing down? Recreation, play and development**

It is not just children’s aspirations and psychological well being that are being affected. New types of toys marketed to children often boasting educational or developmental value, are increasingly unlikely to stimulate children’s imagination or ability. Michael Brody, Chair of the TV/Media Committee of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry has said that while story telling is the essence of play, with toys as its catalyst, today’s toys, with their commercial links, actually act as “story blockers”.<sup>[50]</sup>

Commercially created toys are encouraging an increasingly sedentary lifestyle, playing on parents fears of what dangers may lurk outside the front door. Michael Brody notes “The sick child as viewer/consumer has replaced the healthy child of play, sports and make-believe” and Sue Palmer says “The toys that marketers encourage children to covet are no longer levers to their own creativity, but bridges from one type of passive, sedentary entertainment to another.”<sup>[51]</sup>

For boys especially, marketers concentrate on nurturing the competitive instinct and appealing to their inbuilt desires for ‘power, force, mastery, domination and control’<sup>[52]</sup> as well as their natural interest in gadgets and technology. The massive computer games industry is testament to this. Despite age restrictions on computer games in the same way videos and films are rated, surveys

show that large numbers of very young children have played games like Mortal Kombat and Grand Theft Auto III (rated 18+).<sup>[53]</sup> Often unsuspecting parents buy computer games with high age ratings for their children because their friends have it.

## Education

We've already outlined how having 'the right things' or wearing 'the right clothes' are important factors in how children socialise and relate to each other. Nowhere is this more evident than in the school playground. It is in the playground that peer pressure is at its most stark. Pester power works so well partly because parents are worried about their children's experiences in the school playground. Constant bombardment of children with messages of what is cool and what is not pits children against each other. Coupled with the fact that materialism has been shown to contribute to competitiveness and aggression in boys, it is not surprising that bullying remains a big problem in schools.

Research has demonstrated that materialism in children is positively associated with shopping and spending, and negatively associated with school performance.<sup>[54]</sup> But schools themselves have become new targets of marketers. The National Union of Teachers say they are "deeply alarmed at the targeting of schools by businesses seeking simply to market their products and exploit schools, pupils and parents. In recent years there has been an unprecedented increase in the use of commercial materials in schools, with UK brands spending an estimated £300m a year on targeting the classroom to increase sales".<sup>[55]</sup>

Links between schools and the business world are important. Work experience placements are valuable, skill-bolstering learning opportunities and provide school-goers with a taste of what lies beyond the school gates. Teachers often find teaching materials and aids created and provided by companies extremely useful. In fact, the Department for Education and Skills would like to see more commercial materials produced for schools and are encouraging companies in this regard.

The NUT say "Some of the world's largest corporations, which are responsible for undermining health, environment and sustainable development, are at the same time being actively encouraged to become partners with schools and to provide core education materials and services. Companies now claim that such activities are evidence of corporate social responsibility". They go on to say "The NUT believes that the targeting of schools by companies actively seeking sponsorship and other deals with schools undermines teachers' ability to educate children about the dangers of exploitation."<sup>[56]</sup>

There are many well known examples of big companies offering books, computers and sports equipment to schools in return for collectable vouchers. Although on the face of it many initiatives by companies in school appear to be helpful and providing valuable resources that schools would not otherwise be able to afford, research carried out by the NUT, Which?, the Food Commission and others shows that the deals offered are actually rip-offs. One example cited by the NUT in their guidance note to teachers on the use of commercial products and schemes in schools, is the Tesco Computers for Schools scheme. Which? reported that on this scheme for one personal computer worth about £1000 parents would need to collect 21,990 vouchers- that's £250,000 worth of vouchers.

As well as offering books and computers supermarkets regularly offer sports equipment in exchange for vouchers, often to be collected from the packets of snack foods that are high in fat, salt and sugar. Several examples are available of the 'bad deal' that these schemes offer. The NUT cite the multimillion pound "Cadbury Get Active" scheme whereby children as young as seven have been targeted to encourage them to buy 160million chocolate bars, containing nearly 2million

kilograms of fat, in exchange for school sports equipment. In this scheme a child would have to eat 170 chocolate bars costing £71 to receive a basketball.<sup>[57]</sup>

Clearly in relation to healthy eating, encouraging children to consume chocolate or crisps in order to collect vouchers for basketball is giving that child mixed messages. In fact junk food marketing in general contradicts all the messages about healthy eating children receive, undermining their ability to choose better food and their parents' efforts to feed them healthily. As the National Children's Bureau report on food and drink advertising stated "The way food and drink is advertised creates confusion about healthy eating and what constitutes a healthy diet. What children do know about healthy eating gets lost in the face of products designed to tempt and excite them."<sup>[58]</sup>

The study guide industry plays on parents anxieties for their children to be successful and children's fears of failure. Despite Government expenditure on schemes to combat truancy totalling nearly £1 billion truancy levels in schools are at record highs (one fifth of all state school children reported to have missed lessons last year).<sup>[59]</sup> Exam pressure has been slated as a contributory factor in truancy levels. Mick Brookes from the National Association of Head Teachers "Primary school pupils as well as secondary are extremely stressed and some quite disenfranchised from their school because of the high stakes testing the Government is insisting on".<sup>[60]</sup> Clearly, the negatives of exam culture are not all down to marketers, but they do employ a strategy that deliberately exploits and compounds the situation.

### **The health effects of junk food advertising**

The Chief Medical Officer has compared the crisis in children's diets to be a health "time bomb" which must be diffused. The National Diet and Nutrition Survey found that:

92% of children consume more saturated fat than is recommended  
86% consume too much sugar  
72% consume too much salt  
96% do not get enough fruit and vegetables.<sup>[61]</sup>

The children's diet crisis has led to serious health and well-being problems. Sir John Krebs, former Chair of the Food Standards Agency (FSA), has warned that for the first time in more than a century life expectancy may fall, with the real prospect that parents may outlive their children.<sup>[62]</sup>

The most high-profile health issue is the dramatic rise in childhood obesity. The UK now has the highest rate of obesity in Europe,<sup>[63]</sup> and childhood obesity is rising at an alarming rate: 36% of boys and 45% of girls aged 11 to 15 are overweight or obese. Obesity in children under 11 has risen by over 40% in ten years. If this trend continues, half of children will be obese or overweight by 2020.<sup>[64]</sup>

The consequences of childhood obesity are now clear: incidences of high blood pressure, raised cholesterol and even clogged arteries in children are rising. Obesity in childhood is likely to develop into obesity in adulthood: one American study found that 77% of overweight children became obese adults.<sup>[65]</sup> The health consequences of adult obesity include increased risk of coronary heart disease, strokes, type 2 diabetes, breast cancer, cirrhosis of the liver, infertility, osteoporosis, sleep apnoea, varicose veins and depression.

The psychological impact of obesity can be as damaging as the physical for many children. Being

"Even highly conservative estimates show that the health benefits from a 9pm watershed for junk food TV adverts would save the nation up to almost a billion pounds a year"

overweight or obese is associated with increased levels of distress, disadvantage, and psychological problems.<sup>[66]</sup>

Alongside the problems associated with obesity, junk food diets are causing other health problems. For example, type 2 diabetes – once known as “late onset” diabetes and traditionally found in the over 40s – is increasingly found in adolescents.

Junk food diets also have significant effects on children’s behaviour, concentration, learning ability and mood. Children with diets lacking in essential vitamins, minerals and essential fatty acids tend to perform worse academically, may be unable to concentrate and may be more aggressive.<sup>[67]</sup>

It is well documented that junk food advertising and marketing has a pervasive influence on children’s diets and health and is a major contributory factor to this crisis in children’s health.

A systematic review of the research literature on food promotion to children led by Professor Gerard Hastings for the Food Standards Agency concluded that:

1. There is a lot of food advertising to children.
2. The advertised diet is less healthy than the recommended one.
3. Children enjoy and engage with food promotion.
4. Food promotion is having an effect, particularly on children’s preferences, purchase behaviour and consumption.
5. This effect is independent of other factors and operates at both a brand and category level.

In addition to the direct effect on children, the Hastings Review acknowledged the existence of a potentially even greater indirect effect on children’s diet from food promotion, for example through parental influence and peer pressure.<sup>[68]</sup>

A literature review conducted by Professor Sonia Livingstone for the Ofcom consultation on television advertising of food and drink to children came to similar conclusions.<sup>[69]</sup> More recently, Professor Livingstone acknowledged that in spite of the difficulties involved in isolating the effect of the impact of advertising on children’s diets, “the precautionary principle does support the restriction of food advertising to children.”<sup>[70]</sup>

Currently £480m is spent each year advertising junk food (high in fat, salt or sugar) products on television in the UK alone. The TV regulator Ofcom recently announced that junk food advertising in and around children’s television programmes, including programmes that are not aired in children’s timeslots but attract higher proportions of viewers that are under 16 will be banned. Restrictions will also be imposed on the use of free gifts and promotional claims and celebrities or cartoon characters in advertising to primary school children<sup>[71]</sup>. These new restrictions demonstrate that Ofcom recognises the impact advertising has on children’s diets and are a step in the right direction but many have argued that the new restrictions do not go far enough. Children’s Commissioner Sir Al Aynsley Green said “In practice, the status quo will barely shift, with no advertising restrictions for programmes such as X-Factor and Coronation Street - unless it can be proved that 20% more children than adults are watching.”<sup>[72]</sup>

Even highly conservative estimates show that the health benefits from a 9pm watershed for junk food TV adverts would save the nation up to almost a billion pounds a year - at a cost to the whole commercial television industry of £130 million a year.<sup>[73]</sup> To put this into context, ITV paid out dividends of £300 million share-holders last year.<sup>[74]</sup>

However compelling the arguments in terms of children’s health, many involved in creating and



programming children's television assert that quality children's programmes will be at risk if TV channels are not able to fund them through advertising revenue. There needs to be an urgent debate on how to protect quality children's TV in these circumstances.

Importantly, it is not just TV advertising that contributes to the choices children and parents make on what to eat. The Food Commission and Which? identified over 40 "marketing tricks" used to sell food to children<sup>[75]</sup>. Research conducted by the National Children's Bureau into children's views on non-broadcast food and drink advertising on behalf of the Office of the Children's Commissioner concluded "Children highlighted that non-broadcast advertising for food and drink is 'everywhere you look' and that it is usually for products that they consider to be 'unhealthy' such as sweets, chocolate, fizzy drinks and fast food. Despite knowing that heavily marketed and branded foods are often unhealthy, children find the taste and presentation of these hugely appealing." They also concluded "The 'noise' made by non-broadcast food and drink advertising drowns out messages children receive about healthy eating. Many children find the temptation of unhealthy food and drink simply 'too hard to resist.'<sup>[76]</sup>

### **What parents think**

In a MORI poll commissioned by the National Family and Parenting Institute, 84% of parents said that they felt companies targeted their children too much. In discussion groups, parents explained their concerns about the sophisticated methods used to market to children and convince them that they must have a particular product.

Particular dislikes included cinema spin-offs, collectable toys associated with cereals and the use of cartoon characters to promote products.

"Lots of times and you get home and it's 'Can I have, can I have...' whatever character it is. You open it up and they don't like it. They purely wanted it for the picture."

"I have lost count of the number of tantrums I have had in Asda because I won't let the girls have cereal just for the free gift."

Although parents used various strategies to deal with 'pester power' and explain to their children what marketing was about, they admitted to feeling overwhelmed at times.

"I feel like I have to keep saying no because obviously with two children, not working, and I just haven't got the money. And they want this and I'm forever going 'No, no, no, no' and what the kids must think of me - 'Oh I hate Mum, she never buys me anything.' It does get really upsetting sometimes."

"The advertising shows you a little boy and his mum has given him this DairyLea slice and he's saying how good his mum was, and then this other poor boy only had sandwiches. So his mum was really cruel, you know, and that's the wrong impression. That your mum's really cool if she buys you this crappy cheese, plastic cheese."

"I need to ask if the advertising industry are comfortable spending millions of pounds targeting children direct and then saying it's down to mum and dad to stand up to them?"

Parents were concerned about children developing a 'throwaway attitude' but felt under pressure to buy products so their children would not be isolated by not having what other children had.<sup>[77]</sup> A British Heart Foundation survey found that 68% of parents were in favour of restrictions on junk food advertising on television before the 9pm watershed, with only 7% of parents opposing such a ban.<sup>[78]</sup>

Materialism has been increasingly implicated as a causal factor in children's emotional and behavioural problems<sup>[79]</sup> and in difficulties within families. Some researchers have suggested a direct relationship between advertising and children's purchase requests, which in turn become a cause of



family conflict<sup>[80]</sup>. And it seems to be vicious circle – research has concluded that adolescents who report higher levels of family stress are also more likely to associate material possessions with happiness<sup>[81]</sup>.

## Inequalities

“While many of the worst forms of poverty have been eradicated, there are its new, contemporary variants, coupling the lack of money with the lack of dignity. It is not enough to be poor in today’s world. You have to feel it.”<sup>[82]</sup> NCC research showed that children from the poorest households are most concerned with the stuff, and brands and labels on the stuff that they own (or do not own). They found for example that 75% of C2DE children like popular labels compared to 61% of ABs<sup>[83]</sup>.

“NCC research showed that children from the poorest households are most concerned with the stuff, and brands and labels on the stuff that they own (or do not own)”

poorest households are most concerned with the stuff, and brands and labels on the stuff that they own (or do not own). They found for example that 75% of C2DE children like popular labels compared to 61% of ABs<sup>[83]</sup>.

In the extreme, some children have shown that they will do anything to fit in. The NCC report said “There are also important, though rarely acknowledged, connections between crime and a society that promotes high levels of consumption. “The high incidence of mobile phone theft is connected to the need to have the latest handset and the latest features. The most common reasons given by young people who commit crimes are boredom, to get money or to be able to conform to peer behaviour”.<sup>[84]</sup>

Credit card debts are rising as parents too often prioritise having the ‘right things’ for their children against the odds. A study on how low-income parents spend an increase in income highlighted some parents’ concern that their children would be bullied at school if they could not afford to buy them the right brands. “They’re not getting taunted now”. There’s nobody saying well ‘I’ve got a jacket like that how come you’ve no got a name on yours and I’ve got a name on mine.’<sup>[85]</sup>

The NUT make the point that a school taking part in a voucher scheme causes difficulties for many parents. The NUT say “Voucher schemes mean that pressure is put on parents to buy particular brands and shop in particular shops. This can cause additional financial pressures for less well off parents who might not normally shop in particular shops nor choose to spend their income on junk food. It puts pressure on pupils whose parents choose either not to participate in a scheme or cannot afford to participate.”<sup>[86]</sup>

## PART III: Pointers in the right direction?

There are examples of organisations, companies and even whole nations recognising the problems caused by advertising to children and doing something about it. We’ve chosen two examples, one of legislating to restrict advertising to children and the other of voluntary self-regulation by a large retailer, to help start the debate on how to tackle this issue.

### Sweden

Sweden legislated in 1991 to restrict TV advertising to children. Swedish law states:

- \* There must be no television advertisements aimed at children under 12 at any time.
- \* Person or characters that appear in a television transmission aimed at children may not appear in any commercial advertisement of any kind.
- \* Commercial advertisements must not be broadcast immediately before or after a programme or part of a programme intended for children

## The Co-op

The Co-op has voluntarily restricted its activity with regards to marketing foods to children since the publication of its Blackmail report in 2002<sup>[87]</sup>.

The Co-op has pledged to:

- \* avoid direct marketing and advertising to children of products that are high in fat, sugar or salt (where product contains above 20g, 10g and 1.25g per 100g respectively)
- \* not advertise these products during key children's viewing hours or in specific children's titles or adjacent to children's pages in newspapers
- \* include in any advertising aimed at parents for children, such as school lunchbox ideas, a content of at least one-third that are healthy products, classed as 'eat more' lines in the DoH "Balance of Good Health", such as fruit
- \* not give free samples or promote by demonstration in stores, any high fat, sugar and salt products aimed specifically at children
- \* not use high profile character merchandising in stores to promote high fat, sugar and salt products aimed at children
- \* remove all children's characters from own brand packaging categorised as being high in fat, sugar or salt, with the exception of seasonal and special occasion products such as Christmas novelties and birthday cakes which are seen as occasional treats and as such do not constitute part of a regular dietary habit
- \* provide clear labelling of dental health warnings on high sugar products, such as sweets and soft drinks, is applied across all appropriate Co-op Brand products
- \* not encourage the purchase of high fat, sugar and salt products through the use of a free gift in any such Co-op Brand product.

## Summing up

The common response to people raising concerns about the commercialisation of children's lives is 'what's so wrong with a bit of shopping?' The answer is nothing. The problem is that it is not just 'a bit of shopping'. Millions of pounds are spent conditioning children to become young consumers. The dramatic trends of the last ten years that have seen more and more attention of companies and their psychologists, designers and advertisers applied to change children's lives will just grow exponentially – unless something is done about it.

The effects of materialism in children, including emotional problems, eating disorders and behavioural problems have been researched and documented. Surveys show that children themselves admit to feeling stressed and anxious because of pressure to have the 'right stuff'. The NCC found that children "are relentlessly targeted by companies and advertisers, operating on occasion with the ethics of the playground bully. Their vulnerabilities are sold back to them through magazines and marketing. They feel that provides, from mobile phone companies to newsagents, rip them off – that they live in a hostile commercial world, playing to their insecurities. These are not the claims of any pressure group or single interest campaign, but what young people themselves have told us".<sup>[88]</sup>

The damage to children's health of eating the advertised junk food diet has also been well researched and documented.

British children are amongst the most materialist in the world, ahead even of Americans – the NCC found that “Perhaps surprisingly, British children are more consumer-oriented than their American counterparts. Children in Britain are more brand aware and less satisfied than US children with what they have to spend”<sup>[89]</sup> But there remain important warning signs to heed from the other side of the Atlantic. In 2003 the BBC reported a new trend amongst American parents in naming their newborns after global brands. Professor Cleveland Evans of Bellevue University in Nebraska stumbled across the trend when surveying the 2000 US social security records. He found, amongst other examples, 300 girls called Armani, six boys named after Courvoisier cognac, girls called L’Oreal and even one boy named after sports channel ESPN. Professor Evans attributed this trend to “a growing desire on the part of parents to mark their children out as different” and said it reflected the material hopes of the parents.”<sup>[90]</sup>

Sue Palmer cites marketing guru Martin Lindstrom remarking ‘as formal religion in the Western world continues to erode, brands move in to fill the vacuum’. She says ‘If Lindstrom’s right, and marketing continues to follow current trends, the next generation can look forward to a future based on superficial appearances, disrespect, hedonism and instant gratification. Somehow I don’t think that’s going to be enough to keep a complex technological culture afloat’<sup>[91]</sup>. So the question remains who is forming our children – parents, guardians, friends, families, teachers, community workers or an army of psychologists, branding gurus, marketing experts, advertisers who are spending £billions to shape young minds in the name of profit. Can children be children before they are consumers?

Parents can of course influence the way their children are brought up. But only by acting with others who share their concerns can the social and economic impact of commercialisation be effectively confronted. It is time we talked about what we can do.

### **What next?**

We’ve tried as much as possible to stay away from advocating any particular policies and solutions to the problems caused by the commercialisation of childhood. We want to start a nationwide debate on the scope of the problem and what to do about it and we want to know what you think. Are you worried as a child, young person, parent, teacher, health professional or as a citizen? What are the things that worry you? What action or policies do you think would make a difference? Once we’ve collated what people think we will then start looking at solutions, before building pressure for action both in terms of what the Government can do and what parents, children and others can do for themselves.

The more organisations, professionals and parents who sign up their support and endorsement for the campaign the more effective we can be. If you would like further information about the campaign, or to register your support please do not hesitate to contact Zoe in the Compass office at [zoe@compassonline.org.uk](mailto:zoe@compassonline.org.uk)

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