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too young to be a consumer: the toll of commercial culture on the rights of childhood

by Diane E. Levin

A preschool teacher reports, "My student, Gabe, who talks about Batman® and the Power Rangers® all day dissolved into tears when we were out of masking tape and he couldn't figure out how to make himself a 'power shooter' bracelet. Gabe cried, 'Then I won't have powers!' It seemed his prop was critical for him to be happy and know how to play. He often comments that school is no fun because we don't have the right toys, i.e., those he has at home that are directly linked to the Batman® and Power Ranger® movies."

When parents arrive to pick up their five-year-old daughters from a birthday party, they are surprised to find that they all have heavy make-up on. Music from the Disney movie, *HS Musical 3*®, is blaring and the girls are doing a hip-gyrating, sexy dance taught to them by the birthday girl's teenage cousin. At a store the next day, one party attendee, Jessica, runs to a *HS Musical*® padded bra and bikini panty set and excitedly demands that her mother buy it for her — another girl at the party just got them! Every time a lively rhythm comes on the PA system, Jessica begins gyrating her hips just like on the screen. She practices her dancing at home too and keeps asking to see the movie.

A parent worriedly wrote me about her first grade son, Julian. He and two of his friends have just been sent to the principal's office for the third time in as many weeks for attacking another child on the playground. They play 'good guys' and randomly label an unsuspecting child on the playground the 'bad guy.' Then they attack him just like in their 'favorite' superhero movie.

Four year olds unable to play without special Batman® shooters! Five year olds wanting bras and bikini underwear so they can be like teen-age movie stars! Six year olds regularly being sent to the principal for

attacking unsuspecting classmates! What's going on? Are these stories that would have occurred 25 years ago? What do they say about children and childhood of today? Should we be concerned? And what can we do about it?

What's going on today?

The culture in which children grow up — what they see and hear in the world around them — has a huge impact on their likes and dislikes, how they treat each other, their ideas about how the world works and what will make them happy and fulfilled, and even how likely they are to reach their full potential as individuals. The above stories provide a window into the experiences the media and commercial culture that surrounds children today. They can teach us a lot about what children are learning and even, how it may be depriving them of the childhoods they need to develop their full potential.

Screens, Screens Everywhere! Today, screens are a major force in children's lives. There are screens in bedrooms, kitchens, mini-vans, airports, and shopping malls. What's going on as children sit in front of a screen?

- They are having secondhand experiences — not directly involved in the real world having the concrete hands-on experiences we know are so important for their development and learning.
- They are learning someone else's lessons — i.e., the scriptwriter's — about who are the good and bad guys and what good and bad guys do, about the clothes they need to buy to be pretty and 'cool' and how they should act when they're wearing those clothes, i.e., sexy clothes for sexy dances. These are often not the lessons the people who care about them are trying to teach.
- They are getting used to the frenetic, high intensity zap, zap stimulation that can make everything else

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seem boring when the screen is turned off.

- They are not exploring their own ideas, working out their own solutions to problems, being creative and imaginative in their own unique ways, but rather are being programmed by someone else.

Marketing Madness! Children live in a world of marketing without borders. Marketers do not necessarily have the best interests of children in mind when they market to children; rather, their job is to try to capture children's attention so they will want to buy a product. Their job is to get children to want their products — more and more, never enough, promising happiness, brand loyalty at younger and younger ages (Linn, 2005). In fact, companies spend approximately \$17 billion annually marketing to children, an increase from about \$1,000 in 1983 (Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, 2009). In 1984 the Federal Communications Commission deregulated children's television and it became possible to market products to children through television programming for the first time (Levin, 1998). How has this media-marketing onslaught affected children? Today, children live in a world where:

- Between the ages of 2 and 11 years old, children see more than 25,000 advertisements a year on television alone (Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, 2009).
- From Star Wars[®], the Incredible Hulk[®], and Spiderman[®] action figures to Bratz[®] dolls and Disney Princesses[®], most of today's best-selling toys are linked to screens — television, movies, computer games, and web sites. These toys, that are replicas of what is seen on the screen, tell children that when they play they should use the toys to imitate what they saw on the screen, not create their own imaginative play. The backs of toy boxes have pictures of all the other toys children can get in the toy line and children know there are always more to want.
- From morning to night, children are assaulted by products with logos linked to the media — on breakfast cereal boxes and lunch boxes, bed sheets and pajamas, tee shirts and underwear — keeping media images and the products associated with them on children's minds all the time.
- The quick fix to happiness often means that getting some new sought after product brings children more happiness than using what was received. Or the happiness that comes from using what was received quickly wears off as something new in an

ad or that their friend has captures their attention (Levin, 2004).

- Parenting is harder as there are more and more things parents have to say “no” to, creating stress and driving a wedge between parents and children as children often feel parents' “nos” are depriving them of their quick fix happiness.

The price children pay

The stories at the beginning of this article illustrate a few of the ways media and commercial culture is affecting children's behavior. But more than that, they point to how children's basic right to develop their full potential — socially, emotionally, and intellectually — is being assaulted and undermined.

Bye, Bye Play. Screen time and highly realistic, media-linked toys are depriving children of the creative play they need for their optimal development and well being. We see this in all three of the stories above. Jessica's 'play' is imitating the sexy dancing in *High School Musical*. Gabe is obsessed with Batman[®] and Power Rangers[®] and doesn't like the open-ended toys that allow for more creative play at school. He is brought to tears when he can't make the prop he needs to replicate what his favorite media character uses. If he can't have the proper toys, then he can't play. And Julian is so intent on imitating the good guy on the screen who attacks bad guys, that he seems to abandon all he knows about caring social behavior and either doesn't care about or doesn't think in advance about the punishment he will receive.

All three of these children focus their energy on imitating favorite television characters whom they know from second-hand experience. They are not using their creativity and imagination to develop their own characters and scripts, problems and solutions from their direct experience. They have a hard time coming up with their own interesting and meaningful problems to work on and solve in their own unique ways — the very foundation of learning, development, and well being. In a sense, it seems like these children are remote controlled by forces that have power over them, rather than being independent, resourceful, and meaningfully engaged players (Levin, 1998). It also feels like they have developed Problem Solving Deficit Disorder (PSDD), the inability to find and solve interesting problems that are at the heart of play and learning (Levin, 2008).

When children do not engage regularly in creative play, their optimal development and learning is undermined. They are more likely to have short attention spans, flit from thing to thing, and be at loose ends when they have free time or during 'free play'. This is one of the most compelling reasons why media and marketing forces in the lives of children today are undermining and threatening children's basic right to develop their full potential.

Tough Boys, Sexy Girls. In caring environments, through give-and-take interactions with others, children gradually learn how to have positive and respectful relationships and how to work out problems with others in a peaceful manner. If the environment doesn't give children opportunities to interact and model mean-spirited or dehumanized interactions, the opposite is likely to happen.

What social lessons are the children learning in the three stories above? Gabe is so caught up in having the right superhero prop, that he doesn't seem to be interested in or able to play with other children during playtime. Social interactions seem secondary to imitating a script. As Jessica gets caught up in the desire to become involved with the media, products, and behavior connected to her exposure to *High School Musical*, stress is put on her relationship with her mother. And Julian seems to shut out or be impervious to the impact of his actions on others — hurting some anonymous child — as imitating the tough, aggressive behavior he sees on the screen takes precedence.

Today, screen time takes time away from interacting and thereby, learning how to interact with other children. This means that many children have fewer opportunities to learn positive social behavior. In addition, as children are glued to the screen, the messages designed to get them to buy things teach lessons that undermine positive social behavior. Girls learn to judge themselves and other girls as objects — how they look and what they can buy determines their value, not what they can actually do; boys learn to judge girls this way too. And boys learn to judge themselves and other boys by how strong, independent, and ready to fight they are (Levin & Kilbourne, 2008).

These messages are promoting extreme gender stereotypes that narrow the options for what both girls and boys can be and do. They are also turning both girls and boys into objects, who are judged by how well they meet the stereotypes. It's much easier to be mean and uncaring to an object than to a person. This can lead to what often feels like compassion deficit disorder (CDD) — children not knowing how to have caring, connected, give-and-take relationships and more likely to bully and tease each other (Levin, 2008). The commercialization of childhood threatens children of their right to develop to their full potential as social beings — a most basic right of childhood.

Reclaiming childhood

Children urgently need the important grown-ups in their lives to help them counteract the harm caused to their childhoods by commercialization (Carlsson-Paige, 2008). Here is what a comprehensive and meaningful response, directed at children, families, schools, communities, and the wider society, might be:

- Protect children as much as possible from exposure to commercial culture. Help parents create rules and routines around media use as well as what is purchased, when, and how.
- Restore children's right to develop their full poten-

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tial through play by helping them:

- Regain control of their play so it is not remote controlled;
 - Find deeply meaningful content to bring to their play that comes from direct experience, not the screen;
 - Become good problem finders and problem solvers in their play in order to counteract PSDD;
 - Find interesting problems to work on and develop the skills needed to solve them;
 - Have large blocks of uninterrupted time when they can play at home and school;
 - Learn to use open-ended materials such as play dough or blocks in the service of their play, rather than toys that control the play.
- Help counteract the harmful lessons children are learning from commercialized childhood, including narrow gender stereotypes and compassion deficit disorder. Work to:
 - Establish safe channels of communication, whereby children know they can talk to a trusted adult about what they see, hear, think and are worried about without being embarrassed, ridiculed or punished;
 - Reduce gender stereotypes. Help boys and girls expand their concepts of what is okay for them to do as boys and girls and develop a broad range of interests, skills, and behaviors;
 - Help children develop caring relationships and find positive ways to solve problems and conflicts with each other;
 - Teach alternative lessons to the mean-spirited, sexist and violent messages taught by commercial culture;
 - Help children find the deep satisfaction that comes from solving problems and mastering new skills — so they learn “I can do it!” instead of “I want it!”
 - Parents and schools need to work together to support children's right to childhood.
 - Work at all levels to create a society that is more supportive of children's healthy gender and sexual development. This includes promoting public policies that reduce the sexualization of children and limiting the power of corporations to market sex to children.

References and resources

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Web sites

Alliance for Childhood — www.allianceforchildhood.org
Launched a recent, broad-based campaign to bring play back to kindergarten.

Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood — www.commercialfreechildhood.org
Coalition working to stop marketing practices that harm children. Sign on to the e-mail list to support campaigns aimed at marketers who are exploiting children.

PBS Parents Expert Q & A Website — www.pbs.org/parents/experts
Experts, including this author, address issues discussed here in response to readers' questions.

Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment (TRUCE) — www.truceteachers.org
Prepares downloadable practical guides that help parents counteract the negative impact of media and promote healthy play.