

**Why Johnny Has to Have THOSE Sneakers Advertising pitched to kids continues to increase on television, at the mall, and even in classrooms.**

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**Abstract:**

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**Full Text:**

Are your children really born to shop?

That question was posed recently by a group of parents, consumer advocates, and child-development experts.

At a public forum called "Kids and Consumerism," they talked about commercial pressures that children face today - on television, at the mall, and even in school.

The discussion spotlighted an ongoing controversy surrounding marketing to children, "creeping commercialism," and the role corporations play in education.

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Consumers wanted

Why marketers might put more emphasis on children is obvious from a look at young people's spending power. Consumers Union estimates that:

- \* Elementary-age schoolchildren spend around \$15 billion, \$11 billion of which goes for products from toys and games to food and clothes.
- \* Elementary-age children influence \$160 billion spending controlled by their parents - for cereals, shampoos, and even cars.
- \* Teenagers spend \$57 billion of their own money every year and \$36 billion of their families' money.

In addition, the youth market is expected to increase; from about 57 million today to more than 60 million by 2005.

"There is increased interest in marketing and advertising to children," says Linda Coco, a researcher for Ralph Nader's Corporate Accountability Project in Washington.

Not all advertising is bad, says Selina Guber, president of Children's Market Research in New York and co-author of "Marketing to and Through Kids." Her firm, for example, has done research for antismoking campaigns and nonprofits that benefit children.

By some conservative estimates, more than \$300 million is spent on broadcast advertising to children today - about three times the amount spent in 1980 (before cable advertising was factored in).

But beyond Saturday morning television and must-have sneakers, many parents say they view the presence of corporate messages in schools as "worrisome."

A 1995 report by the Consumers Union details this phenomenon. Starting in 1989, Channel One provided schools with TVs and VCRs in return for airing news bits and commercials for such things as soft drinks, snacks, and sneakers. In addition, other "learning materials" - such as teaching videos, guidebooks, posters, product giveaways, and coupons - increasingly arrived on the scene.

But many of these programs had self-serving objectives, or contained misleading, incomplete, or incorrect information, according to the Consumers Union report.

#### Biased educational materials

Examples cited in 1995 by Consumers Union included Procter & Gamble, which, at the time, published materials about the environment that contained "biased" information about disposable diapers (Procter & Gamble makes Pampers), and Kellogg's, which put out an educational brochure about nutrition, promoting cereal over other breakfast choices.

Yet Consumers Union also deemed some corporate-sponsored materials noncommercial and unbiased.

DuPont, for example, came out with a poster kit that helped explore how better package design could reduce solid waste in landfills. The information was judged by Consumers Union to be objective and not commercial. While the DuPont logo appeared on the teaching guide, it wasn't on the poster, and neither pushed DuPont products.

#### Captive audience vs. revenue

But any type of marketing to schoolchildren, whether in the guise of teaching tools or as overt advertising, makes many people uncomfortable.

According to Holmes of Consumers Union, hundreds of corporations are involved in marketing to schools, and thousands of schools accept corporate hand-outs. Holmes cautions that schools stand to compromise educational standards: When brand advertising shows up in schools, there is also a feeling that a product is endorsed, and this can affect the integrity of education.

Several trends put schools in a position of accepting corporate-sponsored materials. Instructional materials have become more expensive, and schools with budgetary problems welcome free materials.

Last year, a Colorado Springs, Colo., school district signed a 10-year, multimillion-dollar deal with Coca-Cola. Coke advertises on school buses and in athletic programs, and increased the number of vending machines. The district stands to receive more than \$8 million that could be used toward such things as furniture, band instruments, and athletics.

The district drew criticism for encouraging a consumer culture among students. But several students said advertising is so prevalent in society that they felt it had no effect on them.

"Naysayers are quick to condemn public schools," says John Bushey, executive director of school management for the D-11 district. "But when funds begin to generate resources, people change their tune."

Corporations do have a place in education, but "many companies don't do it right," says Lorelei DiSogra, director of nutrition and health for Dole Corp. "If you're going to develop materials for

the classroom you have to have the highest integrity, make it noncommercial, and be sure it serves some real education effort." Dole works with teachers and government agencies to develop school materials on nutrition. The kit provided by Dole features vegetable and fruit characters on skateboards.

Gail Goodling, a mother of two in Hillsborough, N. C., mentions two promotions in her children's school. One is a General Mills Box-Top for Education campaign and the other is a Scholastic book club - both of which she feels "OK about."

She says that her children sing TV jingles and have asked for things on commercials. "But at the same time you can use it as a teaching opportunity to talk to them about advertising and the idea that 'what you see isn't always what you get,' " she says.

### Teach Kids to Be Savvy Consumers

What can parents do? If they object to marketing efforts in school, speak up, talk to administrators and the PTA, let the media know, says Anita Holmes, assistant editor at Zillions magazine, Consumer Reports' publication for kids. Encourage corporations to support proper funding of schools, not see them as a marketplace.

In 1996, the Seattle school board approved a policy on allowing corporate advertising in school because it would help remedy a budget shortfall. But many parents objected, so they banded together and got the board to reverse it.

Ms. Holmes suggests that parents teach their children to be savvy consumers. Question advertising messages, she says. Discuss what's behind marketing efforts.

Diane Levin, author of "Remote Control Children" and a teacher and a parent, adds that adults should work to "delay kids' involvement in consumer culture as long as possible." While marketers and manufacturers say it's up to parents to guide children, she suggests that parents encourage companies to play a more-responsible role.

**PHOTO: FRUIT FEST: This Dole home page shows colorful vegetable and fruit characters that are designed to appeal to kids. While some corporate educational materials are considered harmless and helpful, others are based on misleading, incomplete, or biased information.**

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