



Who's Minding the Children?

By Lisa Mullen

In their efforts to shape children's values, advertisers spend about \$17 billion a year and use the latest brain science. What you need to know about their strategies and how to fight back.

"All of these people understand something that is very basic and logical, that if you own this child at an early age, you can own this child for years to come...companies are saying, 'Hey, I want to own this kid younger and younger and younger.'"¹

Mike Searle, former president of Kids 'R' Us

The apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians: "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind" (2 Cor. 9:7). But what if someone is trying to make up your mind for you?

Research suggests it may be possible to cultivate the brain's neural pathways—to sow seeds early in the springtime of a child's young brain—with an eye toward reaping the fruit of that sowing for a lifetime. Knowing this, creative, skilled marketing people are hard at work to teach children what to value, what to need, and

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where to belong. They spend billions studying children in order to instill in them a hunger that cannot be satisfied.

General Mills marketing executive Wayne Chiliki is unapologetic when it comes to targeting kid consumers. He says, "We believe in getting them and having them for life."²

"Advertising at its best is making people feel that without your product they're a loser, and it's very easy to do with kids, because they are emotionally vulnerable," says Nancy Shalek, former president of Grey Advertising.³

Media critic Douglas Rushkoff speaks of the invasive, sustained, coercive strategies that advertisers use. He notes that the use of brain science to sell to kids is called "neuromarketing."⁴

"Today the most intensely targeted demographic is the baby—the future consumer," writes Rushkoff. "[T]he fresh neurons of young brains are valuable mental real estate to ad-men. By seeding their products and images early, the marketers

can do more than just develop brand recognition."

Doctors and counselors often see young people who are suffering from the fallout of years of this kind of marketing strategy. Recently a team of medical and mental health professionals and youth counselors asked, "What's going on? Why are our waiting rooms filled with young people who are crying out, depressed, anxious, abusing themselves with dangerous substances, and at serious risk of violence and suicide?" After studying the latest brain research, human behavior, and social trends, they sounded an alarm in their report, which is titled *Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities*.

Children and youth, they discovered, may be surviving, but they are not thriving. They say it's because human brains are "hardwired" for close nurturing relationships and deeper connections with religious communities.⁵ Kids today need more of both.

Resources for Parents

Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture

By Juliet B. Schor
New York: Scribner, 2004

Comenius' School of Infancy

By John A. Comenius
Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1956 (Available online: <http://core.roehampton.ac.uk/digital/froarc/comsch/>)

Connect: 12 Vital Ties That Open Your Heart, Lengthen Your Life, and Deepen Your Soul

By Edward M. Hallowell
New York: Pocket Books, 1999

Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities

By Dolliene Raabe
New York: Institute for American Values, 2003

Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder

By Richard Louv
Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2006

The Plug-In Drug: Television, Computers and Family Life (25th anniversary edition)

By Marie Winn
New York: Penguin, 2002

Prodigal Sons and Material Girls: How Not to Be Your Child's ATM

By Nathan Dungan
Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2003

What Kids Really Want That Money Can't Buy: Tips for Parenting in a Commercial World

By Betsy Taylor
New York: Warner Books, 2003



I caved to the pressure to conform and adopt the values of consumerism?"

God has given people a sense called intuition. Writer Gavin De Becker calls it a "brilliant guardian," or the "wild brain." He says that if we tap into it, we will hear it "whisper" sometimes not-so-polite truth, for it will "obey nothing, conform to nothing, answer to nobody, and do whatever it takes [to protect children]."⁶ Parents need to heed what their instincts are telling them.

Parents also need to become media savvy and teach their children to do likewise. They need to learn everything they can about the media their children are immersed in. And they need to communicate with their children.

Parents and other adults also need to find ways to connect with children and teach them what it means to be a consumer. One way is to help children understand where food comes from.

When we just pull up a chair and consume the food brought to our table, we are disconnected with the tilling, sowing, waiting, growing, butchering, packaging, cooling, and transporting it took to get it there. Children learn from direct experience. Let a child drop a carton of eggs if

it means he or she will help bake a quiche for supper. Don't deprive a child of the joy of squatting beside a younger brother to teach him about how worms make the soil richer. Take the whole family on an outing to a you-pick apple orchard. Children come to value what they have made, dug, or harvested with their own hands. They will not waste it. In fact, they will want to share it.

Another way to connect with youth is



What You Can Do

Children and young people need to see healthy, balanced ways to live that counteract the messages of marketers. Parents and other adults must look deep inside themselves and ask, "How do I model what I want for my children? Where have

¹ Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don't Need* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), quoted in *Watch Out for Children*, available at www.motherhoodproject.org.

² *Watch Out for Children: A Mother's Statement to Advertisers* (ISBN-0-9659841-9-2; \$7.00), Institute for American Values, 1841 Broadway, Suite 211, New York, NY 10023; (212) 246-3942; Fax: (212) 541-6665; e-mail: info@americanvalues.org; website: www.americanvalues.org.

³ Juliet Schor, *Born to Buy* (New York: Scribner's, 2004), 65.

⁴ Douglas Rushkoff, *Coercion: Why We Listen to What 'They' Say* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), 196-99.

⁵ Doliene Raabe, *Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2003).

⁶ Gavin De Becker, *Protecting the Gift: Keeping Your Children and Teenagers Safe (and Parents Sane)*, (New York: Dell, 1999), 7.

by inviting a few younger people to “friend” you on Facebook. Younger sisters and brothers need trusting relationships with older siblings who have their best interests at heart and will stand by them.

You’re sure to find other creative ways to connect with children and young people. Know the Good Shepherd’s voice and help them to know it too. Help them have enough of what they desperately do need.

“As parents, remembering that our children are the property of the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 1:19), we will bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4) and take all possible care to preserve them from every evil influence.”

Moravian Covenant for Christian Living

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away” (John 10:11-12). ■



Helpful Organizations and Websites

Action Coalition for Media Education:
www.acmecoalition.org

Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood:
www.commercialfreechildhood.org/factsheets/facts.htm

The Center for a New American Dream:
www.newdream.org/kids/brochure.php

Children and Nature Network:
www.childrenandnature.org

Frontline, National Public Radio, “The Merchants of Cool”:
www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/view

Institute for American Values:
www.americanvalues.org

National Institute on Media and the Family:
www.mediafamily.org

National Association for Media Literacy Education:
www.amlainfo.org