



Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood

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Testimony in Support of House Bill 489—An Act Relative to the Public Health Impact of Commercialism in Schools¹

Given Before the Public Health Committee of the Massachusetts House of Representatives

Submitted by Diane Levin, Ph.D.*
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CCFC
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I am speaking to you as a Professor of Education at Wheelock College in Boston, who has spent the past 25 years researching the impact of the commercial culture on children. Seven years ago, I helped co-found the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood because of my deep concern about how marketing to children was undermining their development, learning and behavior.

Marketing in schools does not occur in a vacuum. Children are deluged with marketing in almost every aspect of their lives almost from birth. To fully understand why marketing in schools is so harmful to children we must look at it in the context of at how the commercial culture affects children in general. That is what I would like to address today.

Key examples of how commercial culture is changing children in schools:

- *Commercial culture gives children the wrong messages about the nature of the learning process. It undermines their interest in finding and working on problems of their own making as well as feeling the sense of personal empowerment that comes from solving their own problems.*

The marketing of television, videos, and electronic toys to babies and young children begins to shape children's learning from an early age. Media and high tech toys control what children do, thereby inhibiting their ability to take initiative, to find inherent satisfaction in their own learning, or to become creative problem solvers. The push to become consumers at an early age creates an agenda for children provided by someone else rather than encouraging them to work on their own internal interests and needs. It teaches them to associate happiness and a sense of wellbeing with what they *consume* rather than from having meaningfully experiences in their immediate environment.



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By the time they get to school, children have already internalized a lot about how to learn. Many teachers report that children today are more passive learners, often needing to be directed and “entertained.” These misleading messages about learning are perpetuated when schools join with commercial businesses to reward children with prizes and food coupons for inherently satisfying learning activities such as reading. This is what happens with the Pizza Hut coupons many school’s give to children for reading books.

- *Commercial culture has negative effects on the classroom curriculum. It can undermine children’s interest in the content and activities that are presented. It can also undermine children’s belief in their own ability to master the necessary skills and concepts.*

Children learn best when they are interested in what is being taught. Today, children’s deep interest in the values and messages of commercial culture shape many of their interests and motivations—including the heavy emphasis in marketing on violence, sexualization and celebrity. Teachers struggle to focus children back to the curriculum that has been greatly narrowed in recent years because of the emphasis on standardized tests. There is a chasm between what teachers are trying to teach and what children are interested in learning. It contributes to children being disaffected and unengaged in the school curriculum. It contributes to a failure to putting energy into mastering or believing they can master important skills and concepts. It also means that children get little or no support in school for dealing with consumer culture and the many confusing messages it conveys.

- *Commercial culture has negative effects on the classroom and school culture. It affects children’s relationships with each other and with adults. It contributes to the diminished social skills of children in school and more pronounced gender stereotypes.²*

Marketers work to create a strong peer culture where children have a lot of power in influencing what is cool and what is not. From a young age, a wedge is driven between children and adults as children learn that it is peers, who know what is “cool” and as the commercial culture shows adults as being invisible, stupid, or standing in the way of children getting what they want.

Children’s relationships with each other are also affected. What children can buy affects their popularity and status. Teachers describe a decrease in overlapping interests between girls and boys. Girls come to school often preoccupied, as one teacher says, with “clothes, fashion, hair, and makeup,” while boys’ heads are filled with male images of power and aggression. When conflicts do arise, children have a lessened capacity to resolve them because of their diminished ability to work on their own to solve problems. Is it any wonder that schools now have to ban tag and other games at recess that children have played on their own for generations? And because of No Child Left Behind, children now have less time for social activities in school at a time when they need them more than ever.

- *Young children are especially vulnerable to the harmful effects of commercial culture both in and out of school. They do not have the cognitive skills to understand the nature of marketing which makes them believe what they see and what they are told.*

Young children's thinking is more like a slide than a movie. When they see an advertisement they don't ask how the ad was made, what special effects were used, why the child in the ad looks so happy, or what the product will really do if they get it. They cannot deconstruct the values underlying a product or the process that is involved in getting enough money to buy it. They do not understand why their parents cannot afford or choose not to buy them a coveted product, whereas other parents might buy it for their children. It takes many years for children to develop the skills they need to begin to resist the power of advertising.

Because of how young children think, marketing in schools can be even more harmful to them than marketing in other places. In school, children trust in the authority of adults. In the mind of the child, this trust gives added power and importance to the products that are marketed in schools.

It is in the context of how the commercial culture impacts children that I have just described, that marketing in schools is so harmful. Because marketing is such a pernicious force in today's children's lives, one of our best hopes for counteracting the harmful effects is to give children schools that are commercial-free zones to the fullest extent possible, as we also consciously work to reduce the negative impact of marketing on how children learn and behave in school.

¹ Adapted from "Changing Childhood, Changing Children, Changing Schools" by N. Carlsson-Paige & D. Levin—Summary of talk presented at the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood's 5th Annual Summit: "Consuming Kids: Marketing in School in Beyond," Wheelock College, Boston, MA, Oct., 2006.

² For more information see: Levin, D. (in press). "Compassion Deficit Disorder? The Impact of Commercial and Media Culture on Children's Relationships." In M. Green (Ed.), *Attachment and Public Life*. London: Karnac.