

ADVERTISERS YEARN TO CREATE CRADLE-TO-GRAVE BRAND LOYALTY, HARVARD EXPERT SAYS

Infants and toddlers under the age of two are the newest targets of the marketing and advertising industry, according to a psychologist who spoke recently at the MARIAL Center. The “exploitation of babies” is the worst thing happening in marketing to kids, said Susan Linn, cofounder of the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (CCFC), a child-advocacy group based in Boston. “What these corporations really want to do is own kids for life. They want cradle-to-grave brand loyalty.”

As examples, she cited baby videos created by such companies as Baby Einstein, owned by Walt Disney Company, and Brainy Baby. CCFC filed a complaint with Federal Trade Commission against those companies in May, alleging false and deceptive advertising. The complaint charges that the videos’ packaging, websites, advertisements, and even the names “Baby Einstein” and “Brainy Baby” may mislead parents into believing the videos are beneficial to babies’ development. In fact, Linn said, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no screen time—regardless of content—for children less than two. Surveys indicate that 68 percent of children less than age two spend an average of two hours a day in front of a screen, Linn said, “and there is absolutely no evidence that it’s beneficial.”

Linn is an instructor in psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and associate director of the media center at Judge Baker Children’s Center. She has written extensively about the effects of media and commercial marketing on children. She is author of *Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood*.

CCFC is a national coalition of health care professionals, educators, advocacy groups, and concerned parents who try to counter the harmful effects of marketing to children through action, education, and research.

The baby video market is booming, with more than \$1 billion in the sales of videos aimed at children two and younger. Baby Einstein has the largest share of the market with \$200 million in sales last year. Even Sesame Workshop, the nonprofit entity behind the PBS series “Sesame Street” is getting in on this market, with a DVD series for babies called “Sesame Beginnings.”

Linn said the videos are an effort to establish brand loyalty through characters who are licensed to promote everything from toys to sugary fruit snacks. She displayed a photo of a supermarket store shelf packed with fruit snacks featuring such characters as Dora the Explorer, Clifford, Elmo, Spiderman, and the Cat in the Hat, noting that some are from Public Broadcasting Stations that claim to be commercial free.

“Marketing to children in this country is pervasive, it’s virtually unchecked, and it’s escalating,” Linn said, noting that it “undermines

children’s health and may lead to obesity and eating disorders.” Linn gave examples of how corporations market to children at every age group. Preschools use hand-washing curriculums written by Purell,



Susan Linn

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which makes hand sanitizer, and creative art projects developed by Froot Loops, she said. Day-care centers put out McDonald’s Play-Doh sets that encourage children to make their trademark hamburgers and fries.

Product placement in TV shows, movies, and sporting events attempt to hook children on toys, food, and media that are often inappropriate for their age. As an example, she cited toys and candy featuring characters from *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith* marketed to preschool children. The film is rated PG-13, and its creator, George Lucas, said it is too violent for children. He discouraged parents from taking them to see it. Nonetheless, preschoolers play with Jedi Knight light sabers and beg for Star Wars candy, cereal, and video games.

Preteen girls are being exposed to media that focus on body image, makeup, and sexuality, while young boys play with video games that promote violence, sex with prostitutes, and racism, Linn said. She noted that extremist groups, terrorists, and the military use video games to recruit new members, partly because the games are so popular.

Fighting corporate giants who market to children may seem like a hopeless cause, Linn said. But someone has to challenge the marketing industry, because “if we roll over and take it, it’s all over.” ■