

CHILDHOOD FOR SALE

Children today are growing up in a marketing maelstrom. They are bombarded with commercial messages from the moment they get up in the morning to the moment they go to bed at night. Their immersion in commercial culture is vastly different from their parents' experience of advertising and marketing. To put it in perspective, in 1983 companies were spending \$100 million annually targeting children.¹ Now they are spending nearly \$17 billion.² Children today are targets for marketing on television, on the Internet, in schools, in video games, on the radio, on MP3 players, and on cell phones. And it's not good for them. Marketing is a factor in so many of the problems facing children today including the sexualization of young children, the erosion of their creative play, youth violence, family stress, and the acquisition of materialistic values—the false notion that the things we buy will make us happy.³

In recent years, as corporations hope to inculcate lifetime brand loyalty and exploit children's capacity to influence their parents' spending—which is a euphemism for nagging—they are marketed all sorts of products, from Hummers (in the form of fast food giveaways) to lip gloss (marketed as a kind of “pre-makeup” to preschoolers). Mostly, however, children are targets for food and toys advertising.

As adults, we tend to take toys for granted and to trivialize their meaning to children. Even the term “child's play” is often used dismissively as meaning “a cinch” or something easy or inconsequential. Yet creative play is the foundation of learning, problem solving, and critical thinking. It's also how children experiment with adult roles and how they make meaning of the world around them. The toys we provide for our children are more than mere amusements. They are repositories for, and emblematic of, our cultural values.

With that in mind, the images featured in this provocative and disturbing book bring into exquisite focus a commercialized, sexualized culture glorifying violence and materialistic values—a culture that, decades after the modern civil rights and women's movements came into being, continues to promulgate stultified and stereotyped messages about beauty, and about what it means to be a man or woman in America today. Like peeling back translucent layers from a tossed away onion, the deeper we delve into these photographs, the closer we get to the core of what's rotting in American society.

Immediately catching our eye is the endless array of insipid-faced pubescent dolls—long haired, long limbed plastic bodies of impossible proportion, clad in bustiers, garter belts and fishnet stockings. They stand, chests thrust out, legs apart—sexual objects in and of themselves and objectifying the young women they represent. Their extreme, commodified sexuality stands in contrast to the flip side of feminine stereotypes, the bride doll, clad in virginal white and encased in a box emblazoned pinkly with the words “Beautiful Bride,” or the asexual, wooden, doll house mom, vacuuming in her miniature living room. Next, we notice their male counter points—modern day soldiers and old fashioned cavaliers at war and a grotesque, steroids-run-amok man-monster. We hone in on the details of the ubiquitous, excessive, and utterly unnecessary packaging urging us to “knock his block off” in three languages and touting what's really important about being a man—“muscles, muscles, muscles.” At a time when children's real life sports heroes from baseball to the

Tour De France are exposed for body enhancing steroid use, the biceps of toy heroes like G.I. Joe and Luke Skywalker have increased impossibly as well. Their physiques are as ridiculous as Barbie's, who, at 5 feet 7 inches would have a 16 inch waist.⁴

And what about the American Girl brand, frequently held up as a wholesome antidote to the raunch culture promoted by brands like the Bratz and My Scene Barbie? For one thing, they're not for everyone. A basic American Girl doll, with a few accessories, costs more than six times its Bratz equivalent. And how can we avert our eyes from the widening disparities between rich and the poor and the ever thorny issues of race in America, when we encounter the image of a gaggle of (mostly) blonde little girls watching intently as each of their (mostly) blonde American Girl Dolls has its hair individually and professionally styled by a real live woman of color? The cost? A sense of human worth and \$10 to \$20 per doll plus an extra \$5 each for a facial and some nail decals.⁵

It's disturbing that toys still mostly celebrate a Caucasian, anorexic, silicone breasted standard of beauty, and that they channel children, based on gender, into ever narrowing scripts for play that inevitably shape their perceptions of available options as adults. Perhaps even more disturbing is the sanctity of greed and its ramifications in a commercialized childhood where children are trained, not to be stewards of the earth, but to consume regardless of cost—manifest in the sheer volume of toys captured in these pages, in a child's encounter on an urban street with a huge, discarded, empty box once containing a miniature Cadillac Escalade; and in a tee shirt begging the world to “Buy Me Something.”

It would be easy to dismiss this view of modern childhood as cynical or alarmist. But to do so would mean closing our eyes to the very real damage done to children in a world bent on inculcating marketplace values and behaviors essential to the care and feeding of commercial culture—unthinking brand loyalty, impulse buying, conformity, and unending need for that which money can buy. We know that, as adults, we ourselves are susceptible to marketing. Children are even more susceptible. Until the age of about eight, they don't understand persuasive intent, the fundamental basis of advertising.⁶ They are susceptible to peer pressure, held sway to their emotions, and their capacity for judgment immature. James McNeal, a psychologist and expert in child-targeted advertising, puts it this way, “Kids are the most unsophisticated of all consumers; they have the least and therefore want the most. Consequently, they are in a perfect position to be taken.”⁷ By looking the other way, by shutting out what's in front of us, we enable the hostile takeover of childhood by commercial interests and abandon children unprotected in the marketplace, not just to consume, but to be consumed.

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NOTES

1. Juliet Schor. (2004). *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture*. New York: Scribner. 21.
2. James McNeal quoted in USA today. *Six Strategies Marketers use to Make Kids Want Things Bad*. Bruce Horovitz. 11/22/06, 1B. http://www.usatoday.com/money/advertising/2006-11-21-toy-strategies-usat_x.htm.
3. See Susan Linn, *Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood*.
4. Harrison G. Pope, Jr., et al., “Evolving Ideals of Male Body Image as Seen Through Action Toys,” *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 26 (1999): 6572; Kevin L. Norton, et al, “Ken and Barbie at Life Size,” *Sex Roles*, 34 (3/4) (1996): 287–294.
5. http://www.americangirl.com/stores/experience_salon.php
6. Dale Kunkel, “Children and Television Advertising,” in *The Handbook of Children and Media*, eds. Dorothy G. Singer and Jerome L. Singer (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001), 375–393.
7. James McNeal, *Kids as Customers: A Handbook of Marketing to Children*, (New York: Lexington Books, 1992), 12.