
Rebel Mother.org, New York, NY

**Watch Out for Children:
A Mothers' Statement to Advertisers**

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About This Publication This consensus statement comes from the Motherhood Project of the Institute for American Values. The mission of the Motherhood Project is to put the importance of motherhood on the national agenda and to foster a renewed sense of purpose, passion, and power in the vocation of mothering.

Executive Summary

The line was drawn on Mother's Day 2000, the start of the four-day meeting of the 12th Annual "Consumer Kids" Conference held in Palm Beach, Florida. Of all days to launch a "consumer kids" conference, this group chose the day set aside to honor mothers. The symbolism could not have been more powerful. It brought into stark relief the fact that advertisers and marketers are, intentionally or not, bidding to substitute their values - your values - for the values that mothers try to teach their children.

We are caregivers and nurturers of children. We come from varying walks of life and professions and we hold differing political perspectives. We are united, however, in the view that you are harming our children and that you must stop.

We do not believe that you intend to harm our children. We do not hold you solely responsible for the harm to our children. We admit that we have not done all that we could and should do to protect our children, and that there is much more that we must do.

We raise our voices to help breathe new life into simple common sense notions: all adults must watch out for children; all adults, from parents to business leaders, must watch what they do and say in front of children.

For us, our children are priceless gifts. For you, our children are customers, and childhood is a "market segment" to be exploited. We are alarmed by the mounting evidence, including our own experiences, showing that marketing to children is harming

them. In pursuit of the market for children and youth, you are aggressively extending your reach, going after age groups that until recently have been considered off limits, and occupying more and more of our children's psychic and physical space. Using the powerful tools of the behavioral sciences, and a range of powerful media technologies, you are aggressively targeting babies and toddlers, and pursuing our children wherever they go. The line between meeting and creating consumer needs and desires is increasingly being crossed, as your battery of highly trained and creative experts study, analyze, persuade, and manipulate our children. The evidence of harm to our children's physical, cognitive, and social health, to their values, and to their emotional well-being is overwhelming.

We make the following commitments to the children we nurture and to each other:

- 1.) To look inward and work to change ourselves. We will strive to lead less media-driven, work-driven, and consumption-driven lives.
- 2.) To reassert ourselves and our values in the lives of our children. We will teach our children self-discipline, empathy, moderation, and other values that will help them resist the messages of marketing.
- 3.) To be informed and to deconstruct advertising and marketing messages. We will work to deepen our children's understanding of the strategies used by marketers.
- 4.) To make our homes and families commerce-free zones. To the degree that we are able, we will limit our children's exposure to advertising and marketing.
- 5.) To reach out to our fellow citizens. We will join with our neighbors to form communities of resistance to fight the pull of marketing in our lives.
- 6.) To make our schools commercial-free zones. We will work to ensure that there is no advertising, marketing, or market research in our children's schools.
- 7.) To support companies that support us and refuse to support those that do not. We will find out which companies are supporting us and which are not, and we will make our purchasing decisions accordingly.
- 8.) To work for public policies that adequately protect our children. We join in the spirit of the "Golden Marble" protest against the awards program honoring the "best" advertisements and promotional campaigns aimed at children. We join in the spirit of Commercial Alert's 1999 letter urging Congress to restore the Federal Trade Commission's authority "to enact solutions" to the excessive commercialization of our children's lives "before it gets worse."

We urge advertisers to endorse as minimum standards, the following "Mothers' Code for Advertisers":

Mothers' Code for Advertisers

- 1.) No advertising, marketing, or market research in schools, including high schools.
- 2.) No targeting of advertising and marketing at children under the age of 8.
- 3.) No product placement in movies and media programs targeted at children and adolescents.
- 4.) No behavioral science research to develop advertising and marketing aimed at children and adolescents.
- 5.) No advertising and marketing directed at children and adolescents that promote an ethic of selfishness and a focus on instant gratification.
- 6.) Good faith efforts to reduce sponsorship of gratuitously sexual and/or violent programming likely to be watched by children.

We call upon all mothers to join in this quest to "watch out for children." Together, we will say to anyone who would exploit our children, "No, you won't. If you want to get to our children, you will have to go through us."

I. Why We Join Together

We who bear children, we who care for and raise them, declare ourselves in rebellion against a popular culture that is waging war on our children. At stake is the idea of childhood. At stake, ultimately, is our humanity.

Much of this war is being waged, intentionally or not, by you, advertisers, and the wide range of agencies you employ. We do not believe that you intend to harm our children. Perhaps you do not recognize that you are harming them. But you are harming them with such growing intensity, and with such grave consequences for their well-being, that we have no choice but to challenge you directly as a vital step in reversing the tide that has turned against our children. That is why this mothers' statement - this open letter - is addressed to you.

The war's many manifestations share one common feature: a growing willingness to sacrifice the best interests of our children for the sake of money. In your desire to sell your goods and services, you seem to be erasing all limits on what you will do and say in front of our children.

In the increasingly intense competition for what advertising people call "share of mind," the driving messages are "You deserve a break today," "Have it your way," "Follow your instincts. Obey your thirst," "Just Do It," "No Boundaries," "Got The Urge?" These are just a few of the many formulations of what has become the dominant

message of advertising and marketing: that life is about selfishness, instant gratification, and materialism.

These values are at odds with the values we try to teach our children, values essential for civilized life: that children should care about others, that they should be able to govern themselves, and that there is more to life than material things.

We see the assault on our children in the unrelieved affront to their senses and their spirits nearly everywhere they go. We see it in the incessant advertising and marketing beamed into our homes through radio, television, cable, and the Internet, and surrounding our children on billboards, in magazines, and in other media in schools and in our neighborhoods. We see it in the ways that you target children at younger and younger ages with increasingly sophisticated advertisements designed to cultivate as early as possible a restless and insatiable appetite for wanting and buying things.

"Entertainment Weekly", a leading magazine of popular culture, was recently moved to ask: "Are there no limits?... Filth, raunch, violence, & hate rule pop culture - has showbiz finally gone too far?... And do audiences even care anymore?"[1]

We care. We are caregivers and nurturers of children. We come from varying walks of life and professions, many different places, and we hold differing political perspectives. We are joined, however, by our determination to protect our children. We are united in the view that you are harming our children and that you must stop.

We do not hold you solely responsible for the harm to our children. We admit that we have not done all that we could and should do to protect them, and that there is much more that we must do. We commit to doing our part. We expect you to do your part.

We are aware that many advertisers have adopted voluntary codes of conduct to govern their affairs, that not all advertisers contribute to this problem to the same degree, and that some advertising promotes positive values. But it is clear to us that our children need and deserve a much greater degree of protection.

We know that the challenges facing America's children are the result of a multitude of forces. We are well aware that you are not alone in the pursuit of commercial gain that is so characteristic of our age. As the economist Robert Kuttner has put it, "the market is overtaking areas that once operated on the basis of other principles."[2] This trend is part and parcel of a growing and increasingly globalized economy that recognizes few boundaries and in which "five multimedia conglomerates... exert unprecedented power in marketing messages and products to young people."[3]

Against this backdrop, the nation also faces a crisis of values as adults of all backgrounds seem to have joined in the spirit of the day, focusing primarily on their own self-interest and the gratification of their individual wants and desires. We are, all of us, caught up in a powerful market-driven value system.

As advertisers, you may believe that you are merely riding this wave. But because you are responsible for the advertisements and sponsor the programs that tell the tales that shape and magnify our culture's prevailing values, you have become the chief storytellers of our age. A society's stories help to shape its people, particularly its young people. You therefore bear a special ethical responsibility.

Yet you seem to us to be increasingly unwilling to be responsible, to act with self-restraint, or to respect the boundaries that, until recently, protected the innocence of childhood. You seem to us to be indifferent to how your marketing decisions affect our children.

We raise our voices in the hope of promoting a greater sense of responsibility among mothers, fathers, and other caring adults - including those who lead your companies - for doing their part to set matters right for our children.

We raise our voices to help breathe new life into simple common sense notions: all adults must watch out for children; all adults, from parents to business leaders, must watch what they do and say in front of children.

II. The Money World and the Motherworld

Fundamentally, we face a conflict of values. It is a conflict between the values of the money world [4] and the values of the "motherworld" - the values of commerce and the values required to raise healthy children.

We see one result of the conflict in the growing number of national surveys raising concerns about the state of our children's character. In 1998, for example, when USA Today asked parents whether they thought it was harder to raise children to be "good people" than it was in 1978, nearly nine out of 10 said yes. About three-fourths of the people polled said that TV, movies, and popular music are, on the whole, negative influences on children.[5] Another recent poll reveals that parents believe that marketing is making children too materialistic and damaging their values and worldview.[6]

The difference between the money world and the motherworld is the difference between means and ends. In the motherworld, children are ends in themselves.

They are priceless gifts. We love them. We care for their dignity and for their character. We are concerned for their souls. In the money world, our children are primarily means to other ends. You want to maximize sales. For you, our children are customers, and childhood is a "market segment" to be exploited, a "demographic" for which you are competing.

In this conflict of values, you who see our children primarily as means to an end are winning. We, who nurture and guide the children, are losing. Everywhere we turn, we see the invasion of the motherworld by the money world. We see this trend in our daily

struggles to teach our children to be patient, to be disciplined, and to respect family traditions. We find ourselves regularly undermined by the values that dominate our cultural environment - an environment that, like the air we breathe, we cannot escape.

We are not persuaded, as many advertisers and marketers argue, that advertising and marketing are innocuous. We are alarmed by the mounting evidence of harm to our children, evidence confirmed by our own experiences. It seems to us that on the subject of marketing to children, what is good for your businesses is, on the whole, bad for our children.

We recognize that you love your own children, and no doubt try to protect them from the worst aspects of consumer culture. We suspect that, like us, you too are often torn as you struggle to balance the exigencies of the bottom line with your own concerns for the well-being of children. Many of us also work in the money world. But it is increasingly clear to us that the values of commerce should not be the values of our homes. We must all have sufficient space to teach our children the values of the motherworld before the money world touches them.

Of course, some degree of conflict between the values of the money world and the values of the motherworld is inevitable. We are mothers. You are business people. Our task is to nurture and guide our children. Your task is to sell things. What you do never will and never should be the same as what we do.

But today's conflict between the motherworld and the money world is unprecedented and has never been so destructive. And there has not been a time in recent memory when you have been so aggressive in your pursuits, with such apparent disregard for the well-being of children. Or a time when families have been so alone in our defense of our children. Or a time when our society has permitted you to act with such a sense of entitlement, with such indifference for the values of the motherworld, and with so little regard for the ethical, civic, and human consequences of your actions.

Our nemesis is not the marketplace. We agree that economic freedom is one of the foundations of democracy. Our nemesis is the value system that your advertising and marketing increasingly foster in our children. We mean the value system that promotes self-indulgence, assaults the idea of restraint, degrades human sexuality, promotes the notion that our identity is determined by what we buy, and forces us constantly to scale down our sensitivity to vulgarity, ugliness, and violence. There is nothing called "the market" that compels you to promote that value system.

For us, the line was drawn quite clearly on Mother's Day, May 14, 2000. That Sunday marked the start of the four-day meeting of the 12th Annual "Consumer Kids" Conference held in Palm Beach, Florida. Industry leaders convened, as they do each year, to network, have fun, and learn about the latest "trends, research, and marketing strategies" crucial to their kid campaigns. Very talented people spent four days participating in workshops designed to help them capture "the consumer kids market in the new millennium." They spent time learning about the "influence of schools in

marketing to kids," how to "communicate to kids and moms in ways that eliminate the parental barriers to product trial," how to create "consumer intimacy," and "deciding if you should spend your media dollars against moms, kids, or both." [7]

Of all days to launch a "consumer kids" conference, this group chose the day set aside to honor mothers. The symbolism could not have been more powerful. It brought into stark relief the fact that advertisers and marketers, intentionally or not, are bidding to substitute their values - your values - for the values that mothers try to teach their children.

We have been slow to respond to this challenge because, as mothers in a culture that does not truly value mothering, we have not always trusted our intuitions. In a world that privileges the voices of "experts," we have been hesitant to raise our voices as mothers. We have not been as attentive as we should have been to the need to safeguard our children. Sometimes we have left our children unattended.

No longer. We cannot allow the values of the money world to displace the values of the motherworld.

Our children are not for sale. We will watch out for children and we will insist that you do the same. Put to the choice of acquiescing in a value system that is causing profound harm to our children, or resisting, we choose resistance.

We are rebellious mothers.

III. What You Are Doing to Our Children

Not too long ago, the "watch out for children" signs so common on our nation's streets had profound meaning beyond the obvious concern for the lives of young pedestrians. Those signs reflected a broad societal consensus that children ought to have a childhood during which they are shielded from certain aspects of the adult world - especially those influences that could be harmful to their physical, psychological, and moral development. Underlying this consensus was the premise that children should be nurtured and guided in order to grow to be healthy, responsible, and virtuous adults. Also underlying this consensus was the idea that childhood should be a protected time. [8]

It was understood that families were primarily responsible for teaching and guiding children. But it was also assumed that other adults had important roles to play. It was thus expected that adults would exercise self-restraint around children. All adults were expected to "watch out for children" - to be concerned not just for their physical safety, but also for the development of their minds and souls. Many adults took it upon themselves to guide and correct one another's children, and felt compelled to watch what they did and said in front of children.

Business institutions, too, were expected to be - and many were - deferential to parents and to childhood. Advertisers once did a far better job of "watching out for

children." The National Association of Broadcasters' voluntary "Television Code", which was adopted in 1952 and abolished thirty years later, required, among other things, that "in their totality, programs should contribute to the sound, balanced development of children to help them achieve a sense of the world at large and informed adjustments to their society." [9]

The "Code's" preamble said: "The advertisers who use television to convey their commercial messages also have a responsibility to the viewing audience. Their advertising messages should be presented in an honest, responsible, and tasteful manner." The Code further provided that "the broadcaster and the advertiser should exercise special caution with the content and presentation of television commercials placed in or near programs designed for children. Exploitation of children should be avoided. Commercials directed to children should in no way mislead as to the product's performance and usefulness." [10]

The "Code" pointed out that "because children are allowed to watch programs designed primarily for adults, broadcasters should take this practice into account in the presentation of material in such programs when children may constitute a substantial segment of the audience." The "Code" acknowledged that television is a social force that affects the "ability of the child to make the transition to adult society," and observed that a "child's training and experience during the formative years should include positive sets of values which will allow the child to become a responsible adult, capable of coping with the challenges of maturity." [11]

Today, television and other media are even more compelling social forces than they were when the "Code" was in effect. Television and other media are commanding more and more of our attention, time, and energies. According to "Kids & Media @ The New Millennium", a 1999 study conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, our children are "immersed in media." [12] The typical child in the United States spends almost five and a half hours each day consuming media outside of school. For children eight years of age and older, the amount is nearly six and three-quarter hours a day. Children two to seven years old spend an average of three and a half hours a day engrossed in media of various types. [13] In releasing the study, Drew Altman, Ph.D., president of the Kaiser Family Foundation, noted that "watching TV, playing video games, listening to music, and surfing the Internet have become a full-time job for the typical American child.... This study really underscores the importance of paying attention to the messages and information kids are getting from the media, both good and bad." [14]

Advertising and marketing drive media. In the words of media ecologist George Gerbner, "a principal goal of all programming is to deliver audiences in a mood ready to buy." [15] As Jean Kilbourne, the author of "Can't Buy My Love", puts it, "the media know that television and radio programs are simply fillers for the space between commercials. They know that the programs that succeed are the ones that deliver the highest number of people to the advertisers. But not just any people..." [16] There was a

time when the focal point of your attention was the 18-49 demographic. But increasingly, you are interested in children and teenagers.

"Youth Markets Alert", an industry newsletter, reports that "products marketed to kids are no longer limited to traditional kid fare such as toys and candy. A growing number of companies are looking at children as potential adult customers. Companies such as banks, car manufacturers, and hotels are hoping to build relationships with children that will continue throughout adulthood." [17]

A 1999 article in "Kidscreen", a newsletter "about reaching children through entertainment," notes that: "There have never been more ways in the culture to support marketing toward kids, and there have never been more outlets to study how to speak to them. That makes the competition for kids' attention significantly greater, forcing advertisers to work harder to get inside kids' heads." [18]

The competition to get inside our children's heads has grown intense because children are where the money is - today and tomorrow. You spend more than \$5 billion each year on advertising and promotions to our children. [19] Children "represent more market potential than any other demographic segment," [20] according to James U. McNeal, a leading authority on the children's market. Children ages four to 12 spent almost \$27 billion of their own money in 1998. [21] Children directly influenced over \$187 billion in parental purchases and indirectly influenced at least \$300 billion more. [22] According to one estimate, in 1999, U.S. teens spent about \$100 billion and influenced others to spend an additional \$50 billion. [23] According to the ad tracker Competitive Media Reporting, "the total ad spending on children's educational, children's and family entertainment and animation programming for 2000 was \$1.138 billion, up \$20 million from 1999." [24]

You are targeting ever-younger children and teens, who have huge and growing amounts of disposable income. You are increasingly undermining the parent-child relationship by targeting parents through their children, since parental purchases are strongly influenced by children's desires and by their nagging. You are also targeting children as future adults who, to the degree to which you are successful, will have developed strong and abiding brand loyalties by the time they reach adulthood. [25]

As recently as a generation ago, it would have been unthinkable for so many advertisers and marketers to spend billions of dollars each year to target our children at the earliest possible age with the expressed intention of training them to be life-long consumers and making them feel that their worth as people hinges on the products they buy. Or for businesses to invade public schools to bombard our children with advertisements throughout the school day. Or for corporations to be allowed to use school children as subjects of market research. Or for so many behavioral scientists to lend their expertise to advertisers for the purpose of helping them to manipulate our children. Or for so many advertisers and advertising agencies to use and sponsor sex and violence so blatantly to sell their products.

But the unthinkable has become commonplace.

You seem to have stopped caring about what you do and what you say in front of our children.

In pursuit of the market for children and youth, you are going after age groups that until recently have been considered off limits, thus occupying more and more of our children's psychic and physical space.

Footnotes

1. Lisa Schwarzbaum. 2000. "Lewd Awakening." *Entertainment Weekly*. (August 11): cover and 20-26. See also *People Magazine*. "Just how low can television go?" referring to an episode of *Friends*, as quoted in Jim Edwards. 2001. "Nice TV." *Brill's Content* (March): 91.
2. Robert Kuttner. 1998. *Everything for Sale: The Virtues and Limits of Markets* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf): 56. See also Juliet B. Schor. 1998. *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don't Need*. (New York, NY: HarperPerennial).
3. Public Broadcasting Station (PBS). 2001. "The Clout of the Media Giants." *FRONTLINE: Merchants of Cool*. Available at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/themes/>
4. For a discussion of the "money world", see Robert N. Bellah. 1990. "The Invasion of the Money World." In *Rebuilding the Nest: A New Commitment to the American Family* edited by David Blankenhorn, Steven Bayme, and Jean Bethke Elshtain. 1990. (Family Service America: Milwaukee, WI): 227-236.
5. Deirdre Donahue. 1998. "Struggling to raise Good Kids in TOXIC TIMES: Is Innocence Evaporating in an Open-Door Society?" *USA Today* (October 1): 1D.
6. Center for a New American Dream. 1999. "New Poll Shows Marketing to Kids Taking its Toll on Parents, Families." Kids and Commercialism press release. See www.newdream.org/campaign/kids. A majority of adults in a 1999 Public Agenda poll used words such as "rude," "irresponsible," and "wild" to describe today's teens and more than half described young children in unfavorable terms. See Ronald McDonald House Charities, The Advertising Council, and Public Agenda. 1999. *Kids These Days '99: What Americans Really Think About The Next Generation*. (New York, NY: Public Agenda): 3.
7. Institute for International Research. 2000. Brochure for 12th Annual Consumer Kids Conference. (Institute for International Research: New York, NY). See www.consumerkids.net.

8. To be sure, our ideas of childhood have evolved historically. The notion that childhood should be a time of innocence is a relatively new one. See, for example, Neil Postman. 1994. *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York, NY: Vintage Books) and Kay Hymowitz. 2000. *Ready or Not: What Happens When We Treat Children As Small Adults*. (San Francisco, CA: Encounter Books).

9. National Association of Broadcasters. 1981. *The Television Code*. (Washington, DC: NAB Code Authority): 4. Referring to the role of advertisers in the early days of television Jim Edwards writes: "As for taste, the networks all still followed guidelines developed by advertisers (from the days when they were making the shows) that kept the language tame and the sexual situations (even for married couples) almost nonexistent." See Jim Edwards. 2001. "Nice TV." *Brill's Content* (March): 146.

10. National Association of Broadcasters. 1981. *The Television Code*. (Washington, DC: NAB Code Authority): 1, 12-13.

11. *Ibid*: 4.

12. Donald F. Roberts, Ulla G. Foehr, Victoria J. Rideout, and Mollyann Brodie. 1999. *Kids & Media @ The New Millennium: A Comprehensive National Analysis of Children's Media Use*. (Menlo Park, CA: The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation). (November): 78. Also available at www.kff.org.

13. The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. 1999. "New Study Finds Kids Spend Equivalent of Full Work Week Using Media." Press Release regarding *Kids & Media @ The New Millennium: A Comprehensive National Analysis of Children's Media Use* by Donald F. Roberts; Ulla G. Foehr; Victoria J. Rideout; and Mollyann Brodie. 1999. Menlo Park, CA: The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. (November 17). See also www.kff.org.

14. Drew Altman as quoted in The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. November 17, 1999. "New Study Finds Kids Spend Equivalent of Full Work Week Using Media." Press Release regarding *Kids & Media @ The New Millennium: A Comprehensive National Analysis of Children's Media Use* by Donald F. Roberts, Ulla G. Foehr, Victoria J. Rideout, and Mollyann Brodie. 1999. Menlo Park, CA: The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. (November 17). See also www.kff.org.

15. George Gerbner, Dean Emeritus, Annenberg School of Communication, University of Pennsylvania. 2000. Comments made during Motherhood Project consultation on the commercialization of childhood. (Institute for American Values: New York, NY). (March 3).

16. Jean Kilbourne. 1999. *Can't Buy My Love: How Advertising Changes The Way We Think and Feel*. (New York, NY: Touchstone): 35.

17. Youth Markets Alert. 2000. "Youth Market Growth Sparks Increase in Kid-Focused Marketing Agencies." Youth Markets Alert no. 3 vol. 12 (March 1).
18. Ed Kirchdoeffer. 1999. "Keeping Up with Today's Kids." Kidscreen On Line. (January): 41. Available at: www.kidscreen.com/articles/ks24101.asp.
19. James U. McNeal. 1999. The Kids Market: Myths and Realities. (Ithaca, NY: Paramount Market Publishing): 14-15.
20. Ibid: 17
21. Ibid: 17.
22. Ibid: 86.
23. Public Broadcasting Station (PBS). 2000. "Teachers' Guide." FRONTLINE: Merchants of Cool. Available at: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/teach/cool/>
24. Catherine Schetting. 2001. "Tykes, Tweens, and Teens." Broadcasting & Cable (March 5). Available at: www.tvinsite.com/broadcastingcable.
25. James U. McNeal. 1999. The Kids Market: Myths and Realities. (Ithaca, NY: Paramount Market Publishing): 29-30.