

Ending the Commercialization of Childhood

By The Alliance for Childhood

The Alliance for Childhood has joined 25 other organizations to form a new coalition, Stop Commercial Exploitation of Children (SCEC), to oppose the ever-growing presence of advertising aimed at children. Corporations now spend more than \$12 billion annually marketing to children, according to information compiled by SCEC, which also reports the following:

Children consume over 40 hours of media a week after school and see about 20,000 commercials a year on television alone.

Marketing influences every aspect of children's lives: the foods they want to eat, the way they want to look, how they interact with parents and friends, and how they play.

Children tend to believe what they see and do not understand that ads are meant to sell them something. They have trouble differentiating between commercials and programs.

Advertisers work with psychologists to develop marketing strategies that encourage children to nag their parents.

Ninety percent of Saturday morning TV ads are for foods high in sugar, fat, salt, and calories—and this in a time of growing problems of obesity and Type II diabetes in children.

Forty percent of fifth grade girls report dieting; discontent about body image correlates to how often girls read fashion magazines.

The Alliance for Childhood joined other concerned groups on September 10, 2001 in a public protest of the Golden Marble Awards, an advertising-industry celebration of “excellence” in advertisements aimed at children. The awards pay no attention to how the products marketed affect children and their families. Past winners, for example, include ad campaigns for violent toys, such as the Alien Autopsy action figure, and makers of food high in calories, fat, and sugar.

In contrast, Stop Commercial Exploitation of Children gave “Have You Lost Your Marbles” Awards to six corporations whose practices are considered especially harmful to children. SCEC also gave positive awards, including its highest honor, the Inspirational Leadership Award to the Government of Sweden for leading the fight in the European Union to ban television advertising to children, setting an example for how individual governments can act to protect children from commercial exploitation. SCEC's web site <http://www.commercialexploitation.com> has posted much material about the coalition's summit and demonstration outside the Grand Hyatt Hotel where the industry awards were made.

The coalition has grown rapidly from seeds planted one year ago, when three people who were appalled by the Golden Marble Awards decided to protest them. They were Alvin Poussaint, M.D., the prominent Harvard child psychiatrist who directs the Media Center of the Judge Baker Children's Center in Boston; Susan Linn, Ph.D., the psychologist and gifted ventriloquist who is also assistant director of the Media Center; and Diane Levin, Ph.D., of Wheelock College in Boston, a psychologist who helped found the group TRUCE, Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment. A full list of the SCEC members with web site links can be found at SCEC's web site.

At this year's protest, a colorful array of signs, carried by the 90 or so demonstrators, summed up many of the issues in graphic ways. They read:

Children's minds are not for sale.

*Public education not corporate education.
What's worse than taking candy from a baby? Selling it to her.
Happy meals are not on the food pyramid.
Mothers say, Back Off! Let us raise our children in peace.
Children are supposed to play with puppets, not be puppets.*

*Some signs were held by children:
I am not a target market. I am a child.
Madison Avenue leave me alone.
Stay out of my mind.
Stay out of my heart.
Stay out of my piggy bank.*

The day before the public protest, SCEC sponsored a summit to address the issue of the commercialization of childhood. One of the presentations was by Tim Kasser, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Psychology at Knox College in Galesburg, IL. His book, *The Value of Materialism: A Psychological Inquiry*, will be published in the spring of 2002 by MIT Press. Kasser describes research showing that materialistic values often go hand in hand with a lower sense of well-being. A [summary of his research](#) is available as part of the Alliance for Childhood web site.

The declining health and well-being of children is a primary concern of the Alliance. There are many contributing factors to this, but the increase in the commercialization of childhood is certainly a major one. We urge all parents, educators, and other child advocates to speak out now against advertising aimed at children. We also urge every company and every advertiser to establish a firm policy that they will not advertise to children.

Thanks to the Alliance for Childhood for this article from its website. The Alliance for Childhood may be reached at P.O. Box 444, College Park, MD 20741. Its web site address is www.allianceforchildhood.net