

Ode Magazine

COMMENTARIES

Childhood unplugged

My struggle to save my kids from consumer culture.

Leah Dobkin | April 2008 issue



A war is raging between parents trying to raise children and corporate America trying to raise customers. As a parent of three children, I think I'm losing, or at least losing my mind.

I've tried to educate my children about our materialistic society and how our family values differ from those of a culture of consumption. My kids, however, want more, buy more and throw away more.

I've decided advertising is my biggest enemy. Thanks to ads, my kids won't take no, no, no for an answer and instead nag, nag, nag. Advertising targeted to children in the United States is estimated at more than \$16.8 billion annually, over twice what it was in 1992.

Product placements are on the rise in TV shows, movies, children's books—even textbooks, since my kids' schools have become commercialized because of budget cuts. The number of corporate-sponsored school events and commercialized lunches is climbing too.

I'm most frustrated with the offensive products targeted directly to my teenaged kids. My daughter (14) covertly buys thongs with "Do I know you?" written on the front. Last year, I couldn't find a Halloween costume that didn't make her look like a prostitute. Meanwhile, my oldest son (16) is a walking advertisement for Puma sneakers and Joe Boxer underwear (which is never worn under). My youngest son (12) organizes backpack sales so he can offload his six-month-old, outdated CDs, DVDs and software, and buy the new stuff.

How do I protect my children and raise them to become healthy, caring and well-balanced people in what seems an off-balanced world? I have responded by becoming the media police in our home. I put parental controls on my children's computer, but one child maneuvered around this system, designating herself as the administrator, changing my password and obtaining complete access to the Internet.

I programmed parental controls on our TV that limited viewing to PG- or G-rated programs, and blocked TV access during the school week. My other child figured out the password and shut off the parental controls. My oldest child kept it easy. He just went to his friends' houses to watch violent movies on their TVs, and steal cars and mutilate people on their computers.