

Freedom to be a Child: Commercial Pressures on Children

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Abstract

Children's lives have been transformed over the past century. Family incomes have increased, children lead more solitary lives, attitudes to childhood have changed, new products have been developed and commercial pressures on children have increased. The importance of these commercial pressures is analysed. Do children understand advertising? How is child poverty affected? How does increased materialism affect psychological well-being? The issues raised for public policy are discussed in terms of children's freedom, the rights of children and the protection of children. Finally, the future of childhood is considered and choices between constraining commercial pressures or not are considered.

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Introduction

Two hundred years ago, Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote about the effects of child labour during the Industrial Revolution in her poem 'The Cry of the Children':

The young lambs are bleating in the meadows,
The young birds are chirping in the nest,
The young fawns are playing with the shadows,
The young flowers are blowing toward the west –
But the young, young children, O my brothers,
They are weeping bitterly!
They are weeping in the playtime of the others,
In the country of the free.

In the nineteenth century, one of the first interventions of the state on behalf of children was legislation to restrict the employment of children. As John Stuart Mill argued:

Labouring for too many hours in the day, or in work beyond their strength, should not be permitted to them, for if permitted it may always be compelled. Freedom of contract, in the case of children, is but another word for freedom of coercion. (1848, V, XI, 30).

In the pre-industrial, rural economy and through much of the industrial revolution, children were from a very early age primarily producers. In industrialized societies, the twentieth century saw a transformation in the nature of childhood. Children, once lacking any rights, came to be seen as humans who should enjoy certain inalienable rights. There have undoubtedly been vast improvements in the lives of children throughout most of the world. Yet many aspects of childhood are now causing increasing concern. The historian, Harry Hendrick referred to: 'the popularity in certain quarters of the belief that childhood has been eroded, lost or has suffered a 'strange death'' (James and Prout, 1997, p 57). Neil Postman graphically claimed that the child 'has been expelled from the garden of childhood.' (Postman, 1982, p192)

One of the principal concerns is the growth in commercial pressures on children. A group of 110 professionals and academics working with children recently wrote to the *Daily Telegraph* stating: 'We are deeply concerned at the escalating incidence of childhood depression and children's behavioural and developmental conditions They are pushed by market forces to act and dress like mini-adults and exposed via the electronic media to material which would have been considered unsuitable for children even in the very recent past.' (12 September, 2006). The Archbishop of Canterbury spoke of 'the pincer movement of the commercialisation of childhood and fragmentation of the family' (*Sunday Times*, 17 September, 2006). Compass, a left-wing pressure group published a report that argued that: 'Advertisements and marketing messages are ...shaping the way children see themselves and the world and

are impacting on their values, aspirations, health as well as the way they feel about themselves' (Williams, 2006).

Yet there is little clarity about what is going on. The purpose of this paper is, first, to analyse some aspects of what is happening to childhood in Britain and to clarify some of the major influences. Second, to examine the evidence on the impact of commercial pressures. Third, to discuss the issues posed for public policy.

A Changing Childhoods

Of one thing there can be no doubt. Children's lives in Britain have changed radically in the past century.

A century ago Maud Pember Reeves (1913) described the lives of poor children in London:

As far as close observation could discover, they seemed to spend their play-time – the boys shrilly shouting and running in the streets, and the girls minding the baby and looking on.... Girls sometimes pooled their babies and did a little skipping, shouting severe orders as they did so to the unhappy infants. One party of soldiers, whose uniform was a piece of white tape round the arm and a piece of stick held over the shoulder as a weapon, marched up and down a narrow street for hours on the first day of the August holidays, making such a noise of battle and sudden death that the long-suffering mothers inside the houses occasionally left their work to scream at them to be quiet. The pathways were full of hatless girls and babies, who looked on with interest and envy. ...Indoors there are no amusements. There are no books and no games, nor any place to play the games should they exist. Wet holidays mean quarrelling and mischief, and a distracted mother. Every woman sighs when holidays begin.

Children's lives are now transformed. The main economic role of children is now as consumers. Yet it is important to bear in mind that children as substantial consumers are a relatively new phenomenon.

Five changes that have been occurring over the past century, most rapidly over the past few decades, may be distinguished in analysing children's role as consumers.

1. Family incomes have increased.

In real terms, disposable income per head in Britain nearly tripled over the half century 1955 to 2005. While many families with children remain far below average income levels, the level of spending on children has increased at least as fast as incomes generally, probably faster since more of additional, discretionary expenditure tends to be spent on children.

Levels of consumption have increased as the economy has grown. Household disposable income per head expressed in constant prices has grown as follows:¹

1955	£3789
1970	£5352
1985	£7525
1995	£10142
2005	£12764

Thus real income levels are three and a half times what they were 50 years ago and have doubled over the past quarter century. A substantial proportion of this extra income has been spent on children.

Ownership of consumer durables has increased dramatically. In 1985, 30 percent of all households had a video recorder and 13 percent had a home computer; in 2004-5 these proportions had increased to 88 percent and 62 percent respectively. Among couples with two or more children they were higher still: 97 percent now have video recorders, 91 percent having a home computer and 93 percent had a car, many more than one.²

Detailed empirical estimates of spending on children by parents, by children themselves and by others became available in the important study by Middleton and others (1997). Their findings for the average spending per child are shown below:

	£ per week, per child
Food	18.76
Clothes	5.01
School	3.59
Activities (hobbies, sports, music etc)	5.12
Christmas	5.01
Birthdays	1.60
Holidays/Daytrips/Outings	5.04
Other (nappies, books, videos, phones etc)	12.38
Total	£52.91

Overall, average spending amounted in 1997 to around £3,000 per child per year, and had probably risen to at least £4,000 in 2006. Most of this spending (90 percent) was by parents. Spending on boys and girls was almost the same on average. The variation in spending according to parental economic circumstances was much less than might

¹ *Economic Trends Annual Supplement*, 2006 Edition, Table 2.4

² *Family Spending*, 2005 Edition, Table A51 and A52

have been expected. For families on Income Support, what was provided by social security for the children met only 70 per cent of what was actually spent on the children suggesting that many parent(s) were making personal sacrifices to maintain their children's consumption level.

Government estimates of spending in the United Kingdom by children aged 7-15 in 2002-2004 averaged £13 a week, with girls spending rather more than boys. This was spending by children rather than total spending for children but it illustrates the scale of children's own spending. The breakdown of average weekly spending was as follows:

	Boys	Girls	All
Confectionery, snacks and drinks	2.30	2.40	2.30
Other food purchases (inc, takeaways and school dinners)	2.30	2.20	2.30
Clothing and footwear	1.20	2.70	2.00
Personal care	0.10	0.60	0.30
Magazines, books, stationery	0.60	0.90	0.70
Music	0.60	0.50	0.60
Other entertainments (videos, DVDs)	0.30	0.20	0.20
Games, toys hobbies, pets	2.50	0.90	1.70
(of which: computer games etc)	1.30	0.20	0.80
Sporting and cultural activities	0.90	0.80	0.90
Travel	0.30	0.30	0.30
Mobile phones and charges	0.40	0.70	0.50
Other expenditure	0.90	1.40	1.10
All expenditure	£12.40	£13.60	£13.00

Source: Office of National Statistics, *Expenditure and Food Survey*, National Statistics Online, 8 June 2005

2. *Children lead more solitary lives*

The change from childhood being a phase of life involving extensive production to one marked principally by consumption was described by Hardyment (1998):

In the past children of all classes had an important domestic role of their own. They helped with domestic management, waited at table, sewed, ran errands, took responsibility for hens, weeded vegetable patches. They also earned money, supplementing low family incomes rather than being a drain on them. Legislation and education have changed all this. Childhood is now an experience of consuming food, clothes and entertainments manufactured outside the home and bought with parents' hard-earned cash, rather than a matter of learning about and contributing to a busy centre of production. The average dual-career family's home is

often distinctly dull and lonely for children. Our response has been to supply them with ever more fantastical and hygienic plastic toys, and create special child-orientated environments.

Families are now smaller and more mothers are in paid employment. In 1971, 59 percent of women aged 16-59 were economically active; by 2005, this proportion had risen to 73 percent.³

Concerns about safety and growing car ownership have changed children's lives. In the past children from very young ages went to school and came home on foot or by bus on their own or with brothers, sisters or neighbours. It was a learning experience in social interaction. Now, in place of the school trip, parents drive children of all ages to school.

Playing outside is also restricted; this is in part because of concern about safety but also because areas for play are restricted and adults may be less tolerant of children – 'no ball games' is a depressing sign. Much of the time at home is now spent by children in their own, warm bedroom. In the past, children's bedrooms tended to be shared, certainly with same sex siblings, and were rarely heated. Smaller families, more space and more heating have changed that: in many ways this is for the good but it undoubtedly results in more isolated lives for children.

An important development is the growth in what may be called personal televisions (so prevalent is *household* television ownership that surveys have ceased to measure it). The proportions of British children with a television in their bedroom in 1997-98 were as follows (Livingstone, 2002, Table 2.2):

Age 6 – 8	46%
Age 9 – 11	60%
Age 12 – 14	71%

These proportions were substantially higher than in other European countries. Among 6 – 8 year olds 16 per cent had TV in their own bedroom in France and Germany and 12 percent in Holland, compared to the 45 per cent in the UK.

The average time spent watching TV by children aged 9 – 17 in the UK in 1997 was 2 ½ hours per day (Livingstone, 2002). Over a year this amounts to 900 hours. This may be compared with under 750 hours per year spent in school teaching situations.

The centrality of television in British children's lives is indicated by the fact that 9 out of 10 children watch it almost every day. The most frequent activity performed by parents with children was watching television and, when asked what they talked about with friends, children most often named television (Livingstone and Bovill, 1999).

³ *Labour Force Survey Summary*, ONS Website, 2006

In general, children in Britain are living more solitary lives than in the past. This has surely affected the extent of children's experience and training in cooperation, compromise and problem-solving in human relationships. In many ways schools do more than in the past to widen children's experiences - foreign trips and work experience, for examples – so it is not all bleak. Yet, ironically, as mothers are more engaged in paid work, children are less so. Children are generally more protected from work, except school work. This has surely affected their self-reliance and work-ethic. Interesting though these issues are, however, they lie beyond the scope of this paper.

3. *Attitudes to childhood have changed*

Children's treatment has in many ways improved. Ideas that children should be seen and not heard or that physical violence parading as punishment was good for children now seem dated.

In many ways, children grow up faster. Physically children mature earlier, many wear teenage or adult dress at younger ages, sexual activity starts earlier, alcohol consumption is growing, as is drug-taking. In some ways, parental authority has diminished and more parents accept behaviour unlikely to have been accepted in the past. Fewer families are eating home-prepared meals in the company of their family. Children spend more time shopping independently.

Yet while children may have more autonomy and licence than in the past but they remain ultimately subject to the authority of adults whether in the home, the school or the police and courts. It is adults who create the world of the child.

4. *New products have been developed*

Twenty-five years ago video recorders were rare and trainers were still called gym shoes. Now few children lack one or more of the new electronic gadget -iPods, MP3 players, Nintendo, Play stations, Xboxes, mobile phones, and many more. This electronic revolution has proved particularly fascinating for children and they have adapted to it far faster than older people. In fashion, new magazines expressly targeted at teenagers have been started, such as *Teen Vogue*, and there are new fashion ranges, such as Armani Junior. Thus in many ways amazing and largely unforeseen opportunities and delights for children have opened up.

5. *Commercial pressures on children have increased*

The extent of advertising directed at children has increased. This advertising is not merely 'traditional' through magazines and TV commercials. Increasingly it is linked to the internet, to product placement, to commercial sponsorship and to movie spin-offs. Marketing targeted at children, including infants, is a growth area in the advertising industry. These direct pressures are often based on highly sophisticated and manipulative psychology.

The growth in spending by and for children reflects higher living standards generally but it has undoubtedly been boosted by the efforts of the advertising industry.

In total expenditure on advertising in Britain in 2004 amounted to £18 billion or 2.5 per cent of household expenditure. In real terms the total has tripled over the past 30 years. The amounts spent on advertising particularly directed at children were:⁴

	£ million
Toys and games	92
Cereals	72
Chocolate bars	54
Carbonated drinks	37
Potato crisps and snacks	36
Sugar confectionery	23
Ice cream and lollipops	12
Sports shoes and trainers	12
Alcopops	11

Most of this advertising expenditure is on television commercials.

The extent of television programming aimed at children, the availability of television to children, and the time spent watching have all increased. It was estimated that children in the US are exposed on average to about 20,000 commercial messages per year (Adler et al.1980). The average child in Britain sees at least 10,000 commercials each year.⁵

Twenty-five years ago, children’s programmes on both BBC and commercial channels were typically about 10 minutes of cartoons in the morning and 30 – 45 minutes of children’s programmes in the afternoon. Now the schedule is very different: taking only the two terrestrial channels, at weekends there are about three hours continuous programmes in the mornings and a further 2 hours in the afternoon. The BBC has its own dedicated channel for children – cbbc – with continuous programming.

Thus far more TV time is directed specifically at children. The increase in programme hours understates the increase in commercial content. Twenty years ago most of the children’s programmes had no commercial content and even on commercial television there were few commercial breaks. Now on commercial television there are regular and sophisticated commercials and on BBC there are countless product-related programmes, promotions and prizes.

Kunkel et al (2004) argue the rise in the number of television sets in bedrooms has led to ‘very young children increasingly experiencing media messages on their own

⁴ Tables 2.1 and 3.2, *Advertising Statistics Yearbook*, 2005, Advertising Association, London

⁵ Author’s estimate based on hours of commercial television watched and numbers of commercials per hour.

without any parental supervision. This decreases the parents' ability to serve as a buffer between their children and the commercial' (p.3).

The nature of advertising has changed: it is no longer restricted to toys but now encompasses a wide range of products and increasing advertising is being directed at younger age groups. Everyday products such as toothbrushes and stationery are being turned into branded goods linked with toys in order to be sold to children.

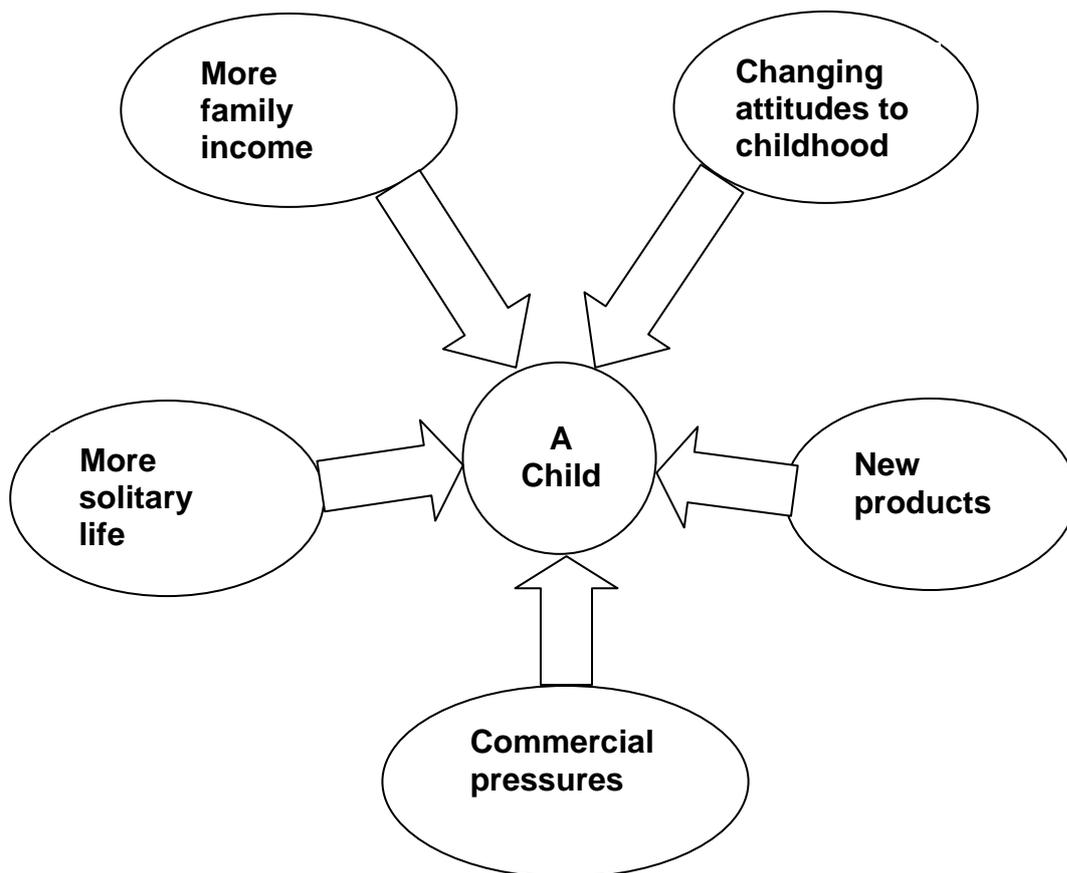
The most rapid area of growth of advertising directed at children has been in internet advertising, but as yet the scale of this is not well documented. One aspect of many internet sites is the blurring of the lines between commercial and non-commercial content.

Quite apart from direct advertising, there is extensive use of television and films to sell products. The programme or film – the plot, the players, the presentation – can be almost incidental. It is part of a marketing strategy to sell the toys and spin-off branded goods. Sales of products based around Postman Pat, Noddy, and the Teletubbies run into hundreds of millions; Star Wars merchandising is in another league, having made more than \$3 billion.

Other more subtle commercial pressures are exerted indirectly and sometimes deviously. For example, it seems unlikely that Coca Cola's sponsorship of the Olympic Games was wholly motivated by a concern for greater fitness and reduced obesity.

The five changes described above have occurred simultaneously and involve complex interactions. The main effects can be illustrated as follows:

Figure 1: Influences on children



There are many interactions between these changes. For example:

- As new products are developed, commercial pressures are put on children to buy them.
- As new products are sold, that leads to new pursuits (eg more time on computer games), leading to the development of yet more products.
- The generation of more family income with two-earner families often leads to more solitary lives for the children.
- Many new pursuits involving more time watching television, videos or computer games lead to a more solitary life.
- More family income leads to more child-related expenditure leading to advertisers putting more pressure on children and on parents (either directly or indirectly via the ‘pester power’ of children).

- More time spent watching television and new media gives advertisers more opportunity to put direct pressure on children.
- Attitudes towards children change as a result of all the other changes. Commercial pressures to spend lead to more sales of new products, more new pursuits, more solitary lives, more pressure on parents and thus, in turn, more pressure for more family income, and more materialistic attitudes among both children and parents.

These then are some of the interacting changes. Yet treating all these changes as a complex, inseparable jumble tends to make them all seem inexorable and inevitable. It is important to separate a number of the concurrent changes, particularly if anything is to be done about them. Distinction is needed between:

1. Levels of consumption of children.
2. Levels of expectations about consumption of children, about social norms and requirements to avoid child poverty.
3. The extent of stimulus, bombardment or noise in children's lives and the availability of space and silence for children to be themselves and develop.
4. Commercial pressures resulting in harm to children.

To describe all the changes in childhood as being the result of commercial pressures, as some writers have tended to do, is neither justifiable nor helpful. Families are better off and technical progress has extended the range of children's opportunities. These desirable developments have changed the pattern of children's lives; they cannot sensibly be described as commercialisation or as being directly attributable to commercial pressures

The only element of the changes discussed that can usefully be described as 'commercialisation' is the 'commercial pressures' component. It is on this that the rest of this paper concentrates.

In the next section the question of whether these commercial pressures matter is addressed.

First, clarification is needed of what is *not* being discussed. The question here is not whether childhood has improved as a result of all the many changes that have occurred. In many, many respects childhood is now more fun, free and stimulating than it was in the past. This observable fact does not, however, mean that children need no protection or that the extent of commercial pressures is appropriate, desirable or legitimate.

Commercial pressures may be part of modern childhood but their effects need careful examination.

B Do Commercial Pressures Matter?

Understanding of Advertising

Selling goods is an inherent part of a capitalist economy. To enable companies to expand sales it is necessary for them to advertise in order to make people aware of what is available to buy. Children require some protection but, broadly speaking, the advertising industry believes this should be minimized. It is argued that the sooner children get used to choosing and consuming the better.

In opposition to this view, many psychologists, applying theories of cognitive development, claim advertising to children is exploitative because young children develop in a series of stages in which they do not understand the world in the same way older children and adults do, making them more vulnerable to the influence of advertising (Levin and Linn, 2004).

Research has shown that children between the ages of 2-3 are unable to distinguish between adverts and normal programmes (Kunkel et al, 2004) and it is only when children reach the age of four they understand that adverts are different to programmes. At ages of 4 and 5, the understanding of the difference was based on physical properties - adverts are shorter - rather than the comprehension that the real purpose of the adverts was to persuade them to buy products; instead they believe commercials are there for entertainment and as a source of unbiased information about products (Roedder John in Hansen et al., 2002). A study in which children were interviewed about the purpose of advertising found that only half of 6-7-year-olds were able to explain the purpose of advertising was to sell products; understanding increased with age with 87% of 8-9 year olds and 99% of 10-11 year olds correctly able to explain the real purpose of advertising (Robertson and Rossiter, 1974).

Piaget's theory of childhood development accounts for children's misunderstanding about the real purpose of adverts. He believed that until children reach the concrete operational stage, usually around the age of seven or eight, they will be ego-centric. As they become older, they begin to understand that people have different perspectives from their own: at first, children believe this is because other people have received different information but later they learn people are able to have different perspectives based on the same information. Once children are no longer ego-centric, they can begin to see the advertisers' perspective: they then understand that adverts are trying to persuade them to purchase goods.

It is also around the age of seven or eight that children begin to understand that adverts are not always truthful (Roedder John, 1999). Ward et al. (1977) interviewed children to investigate how truthful they thought adverts were. They found 50% in kindergartens, 88% in aged 8-9 and 97% aged 11-12 thought adverts did not always tell the truth. Most of the youngest who said adverts lied could not explain exactly why, whereas the older children were able to explain advertisers had the motive of

trying to sell products; this difference reinforces the conclusion that most younger children do not understand the purpose of advertising.

Children's understanding of the real intent of adverts is influenced by a number of factors, including parents' educational levels and parents' attitude towards consumer behaviour. Children with parents who are highly-educated or take a strong line against consumerism tend to understand the real purpose of advertising sooner (Blades, Gunter and Oates, 2005). Once children are older they have developed 'cognitive defences' against advertising and they find it easier to resist it. However, young children without these defences are deemed 'at risk' of exploitation.

As Kunkel et al. (2004) concluded: 'there is a significant amount of advertising uniquely designed for and specifically directed at audiences of young children. Such advertising efforts, in our view, are fundamentally unfair because of young children's limited comprehension of the nature and purpose of television advertising' (p.23).

Health

It is on physical health that most attention has recently been focused – and for that reason it is not explored in depth here. Extensive evidence of increasing childhood obesity suggests that affluence does not necessarily result in sound nutrition. The consumption of crisps, snacks, sugary soft-drinks and junk food generally is promoted, as noted above, by vast advertising expenditure. It may safely be assumed that this advertising has a positive impact on consumption, and thereby yields financial returns, even if it has a negative impact on physical health.

It is not only physical health that may be affected by commercial pressures. Schor (2004) found that children engrossed in consumer culture suffered more depression, anxiety and lower self-esteem. One of the reasons she suggests for this is that children may find it difficult to keep up with consumer culture, leading to feelings of inadequacy, translating into less confidence in dealing with their friends and even their family.

Kilbourne (2004) argues consumer culture has a particular influence on young female adolescents who, more than males, are affected by a loss of self esteem and confidence, contributing to eating disorders. She says adverts convey conflicting messages about how females should behave, sexy but at the same time passive and innocent. These contradictory messages place stress on girls at a confusing period in their lives. In addition, girls are being told the most important thing about themselves is the way they look. Adverts portray the ideal as achieving flawless beauty, suggesting that if they put enough effort in, with the right products, they can achieve this. Kilbourne makes clear that anorexia is not simply caused by advertising because it is clearly a very complicated disorder, but she writes: 'advertising does promote abusive and abnormal attitudes about eating, drinking and thinness' (p.257). She argues body shape becomes an important issue. For young girls with poor self-image creating a slimmer image may become an obsession.

Another commercial pressure affecting mental health and children's development is what has been called 'age compression'. Products usually used by older children are increasingly being targeted at younger ones. Pufall and Unsworth (2004) are concerned about advertisers pushing a concept of how to behave on children who are so young they are still trying to develop their own self-identity. They suggest there should be particular concern about aggressive marketing aimed at toddlers.

Another concern about advertising is that it may create unnecessary intra-family conflict by stimulating desires in children which are then refused by parents, generating resentment in the child and arousing guilt in the parents (Furnham and Gunter, 1998). Robertson (1980) suggests this strain on child-parent relations will be greatest among the economically disadvantaged who will have to deny more of these requests and this may result in maladaptive behaviour, with parents changing their family's consumption patterns to meet their children's demands.

There is some evidence to suggest adverts may be responsible for increasing family conflict. Both Schor (2004) and Atkin (1982) found correlations between the amount of television watched and the amount of reported arguments with parents. Additionally, Schor argues adverts encourage children to rebel against their parents by creating 'adult-free zones' and painting parents as 'uncool'. Schor has found higher levels of materialism are also associated with more arguing with parents.

Child Poverty

Britain is not in many ways a good place to be a child. The latest study for UNICEF (2007) placed the UK at the bottom of a multi-dimensional index of child well-being. Certainly in terms of child poverty Britain does far worse than other western European countries. Although in recent years child poverty has been reduced, one-fifth of children in Britain still live below the government's own poverty level (of 60 percent of median income level).

The government in 1999 set the goal of ending child poverty within a generation. The poverty level rises, as it should, with rising living standards generally since what are regarded as 'needs' change over time. But direct pressures on children inflate what are seen as necessities. This, in effect, makes the goal of ending child poverty harder to attain.

For parents living in poverty, commercial pressures intensify the problems of managing on a very low income. Middleton et al. (1994) have documented the great pressures on low income parents struggling to ensure that their children are not left without. On advertising they concluded:

'Advertisers spend vast amounts of money targeting children and the evidence... suggests that this is money well spent. Children remember advertisements with great clarity... They are aware of the purpose of advertisements but admit to being sometimes influenced by them... children – especially older ones – admit to appending their 'own' money as a result of advertising... Younger children have little

spending power in their own right and have to turn to their parents. Like the older children, they consciously use advertising to put pressure on their parents to spend, spend, spend.... Advertising must be, therefore, yet another source of pressure which falls disproportionately on poorer families. (pp.85-86)

A survey of young people's shopping carried out for the National Consumer Council found that: 'Advertising makes poverty bite. The children that have the least, in socio-economic groups C2 and DE, are most interested in consumer and materialist concerns. This 'aspiration gap' is most marked in the poorest households' (Mayo, 2005).

A poll in 2006 asked what were the biggest social issues facing Britain over the next 10 years. The most commonly selected answer was, perhaps surprisingly, 'People getting into serious personal debt.' (Duncan Smith, 2006). The insidious drivers of most debt problems are the combination of poverty and commercial pressures.

Materialism

A much broader issue is whether the promotion of consumption as a route to happiness has any overall effect on children. Advertising is not of course the only cause of materialism – we live in a material world. Certainly it is hard to draw a line between the impact of advertising and the impact of observation and aspiration and the desire to share in life styles that appear attractive.. For example, Levin and Linn (2004) believe television has an influence on the development of materialistic values through sitcoms and dramas where actors often lead lavish lifestyles, in addition to game shows such as *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* which offer the prospect of instant access to great wealth and, supposedly, an end to all material problems.

Materialism has been defined as 'the tendency to allocate attention to goals that involve material objects, wanting to own them, consume them or flaunt possession of them' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2004, p.92). While all living organisms consume since this is essential to their survival, humans have differed from other species in that they consume well beyond what they need to survive (Solomon et al, 2004).

There are two main pathways for materialistic values to develop, according to Solberg, Diener and Robinson (2004). First, it could be a compensation strategy, in which people buy material goods as a way of countering feelings of insecurity and attempting to bring happiness. Second, materialism may develop through socialisation and the influence of family, peers and popular media.

The constant barrage of advertising aimed at children may result in higher levels of materialism. Children begin to develop materialistic values around the age of 7-11 when, Roedder John (1999) argues, they begin to understand how others may see them and the impression they make. Once children realise this, they begin to believe material possessions can allow someone to enhance their status over someone else.

Advertising may reinforce consumerism, resulting in children buying things they do not need (Roedder John, 1999; Richins, 1995; Blades, Gunter, and Oates, 2005). Levin and Linn (2004) argue that advertising could be responsible for rising materialism, noting the 'message central to almost all advertising campaigns - that a particular product can buy happiness' (p.226). Kasser and Kanner (2000) also believe marketing culture contributes 'to the formulation of a shallow consumer identity that is obsessed with instant gratification and material wealth.'

Goldberg and Gorn (1978) in a study of 4-5-year-olds found that watching adverts for a toy led to a preference for playing alone with the toy over playing with a friend.

Kanner and Soule (2004) argue that 'commercials manipulate people's strongest desires and greatest fears to convince them to buy products' (p 56). They also argue advertising has a negative impact in a number of ways. First, by encouraging people to purchase products which are harmful for them, for example junk food leading to obesity and alcohol and cigarettes. Second, advertising upholds stereotypes of race, gender, and sexual orientation. Third, the sheer quantity of adverts means people are exposed to influences that encourage them to believe happiness is primarily found in material goods. Fourth, adverts encourage people towards more materialistic values, judging themselves and other people by their level of consumption.

Psychologists have found evidence that there is a negative correlation between levels of materialism and individuals' own assessment of their well-being. Correlations do not establish causation so it is possible that unhappy people seek solace in material objects. But Solberg, Diener and Robinson (2004) suggest materialistic people may be more unhappy because there is a gap between their real and desired states and there is no limit to how many possessions someone may have. Equally they believe people may be more depressed because they spend less time with their friends and family because they may work harder in order to be able to purchase more goods. Blades et al. (2005) argue that 'consumerism generates a value system driven by self centredness, individual ambition and achievement, and ultimately greed. In other words it generates a society in which people are motivated primarily by the acquisition of wealth and possessions' (p.95).

There seems little doubt that commercialisation is leading to increased materialism. This is not contributing to the psychological well-being of children.

C Public Policy Issues

The Freedom of Children

A study which over thirty years ago raised many of the issues that arise from this study was Richard Titmuss's study of the supply of human blood for medical purposes, *The Gift Relationship* (1970). He compared blood donation in Britain with the private buying and selling of blood in the United States. He concluded that the commercialized market was inferior in terms of economic and administrative

efficiency, the price to the patient and the quality of the blood. Titmuss argued that: 'It is not enough to present the case for 'consumer choice simply in terms of the individual's 'sovereign right' to buy medical care or be paid for supplying blood' (p.245). Rather he argued that: 'Choice cannot be abstracted from its social context, its values and disvalues, and measured in 'value free' forms' (p.243).

The freedom of the unfettered market ultimately restricted freedom and undermined the 'gift relationship' involved in blood donation:

If it is accepted that man has a social and a biological need to help then to deny him opportunities to express this need is to deny him the freedom to enter into gift relationships.

Titmuss drew far-reaching conclusions from his study about the appropriate role of social policy:

In the past, in Britain and other large-scale industrial societies, social policy provisions were economically and politically justified (or so it was argued) as functional necessities. There was really little choice for society. The functional necessities of public health, factory legislation, primary education and so forth made, in a sense, social policy virtually inevitable. (p.241)

Titmuss envisaged a more positive, freedom-promoting role for social policy in the future:

There are other aspects of freedom raised in this study which are or can be the concern of social policy. Viewed negatively or positively they relate to the freedom of men not to be exploited in situations of ignorance, uncertainty, unpredictability and captivity....It is the responsibility of the state, acting sometimes through the processes we have called 'social policy', to reduce or eliminate or control the forces of market coercions which place men in situations in which they have less freedom or little freedom to make moral choices. (p.242)

The present study is not about blood but about children. It is hard to imagine that Titmuss would have regarded the 'forces of market coercion' as adding to the freedom of children. As he wrote of competing claims over how blood should be distributed:

'The choice between these claims – between different kinds of freedom – has to be a social policy decision; in other words, it is a moral and political decision for society as a whole.' (p.242)

It is similarly a moral and political decision for society as a whole whether children should have the freedom to grow up free of exploitation by commercial pressures.

The Rights of Children

It is now widely recognised that children have rights. They are not the sole property of parents to be used or abused as they think fit, but are individual human beings with their own rights. This is recognised in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. One of these rights (Article 32) is

the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation

More broadly, Article 36 states:

State Parties shall protect the child against all other forms of exploitation prejudicial to any aspects of a child's welfare.

This Convention has been ratified (for what that is worth) by almost all nations. The interpretation of economic exploitation has, up to now, for obvious reasons concentrated on child labour. But the child as consumer can also face exploitation. It is hard to argue that this UN Convention is now being respected.

Another right of relevance is that: 'No child shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy, family, home' (Article 16). Many see advertising as arbitrary interference intruding on the privacy of the family and home.

Yet rights for children pose problems.

In most cases holders of rights, such as property rights, are assumed to be capable of administering rights for themselves, where necessary with legal advice and protection. Parents have been relied on to protect a child's rights, acting on the child's behalf. Yet in many ways government intervenes in children's interests – in education, health, family disputes and other areas. Government is not, however, only acting in the interests of children. Commercial interests may hold sway.

The treatment of children is in marked contrast with the treatment and rights of ethnic minorities, of women and of people with disabilities. For each of these groups there have been commissions in Britain (the Commission on Racial Equality, the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Disability Rights Commission) with responsibility to protect civil, economic and social rights. In 2007 these three Commissions will be brought together in the Equalities and Human Rights Commission. The role of the Commissioner for Children has never been comparable and child rights will not be part of the new consolidated commission's responsibilities.

Woodhouse, an American academic lawyer, has proposed five unifying human rights principles in relation to children: the right to be treated as a person, not an object; the right to a voice and, sometimes, a choice; the right to equal opportunity; the right of the weak to be protected from the strong; and the right to protection of intimate relationships – 'a zone of privacy is essential to the functioning of family systems.' (Woodhouse, 2004, pp.235-239)

It is abundantly clear that children are weak in the face of the strong commercial pressures. It is also clear that these pressures increasingly intrude on intimate relationships within the family. It may therefore be that the law can and should be increasingly used to protect children's rights to a childhood free from commercial pressures.

The Protection of Children

Critics of advertising, such as parent groups, educationalists and other lobbyists, claim adverts are exploiting children. The concern is particularly about the amount of advertising aimed at children, the techniques employed in adverts and the lack of enforcement of regulations (Blades et al, 2005). Surveys show that there is strong support from parents for limiting advertising aimed at children. Research in Britain by the National Family and Parenting Institute (2004) found 84 percent of parents believed their children were being targeted too much by advertisers and that this was a major problem they face trying to raise their children.

If the arguments for greater protection of children are accepted, what should be done? There are two main ways to intervene: regulating the advertising industry and educating children about the dangers associated with it. While these two approaches are not mutually exclusive, Furnham (in Hansen et al., 2002) argues that the two positions are supported by different groups. Those who support regulation tend to be left wing, anti-business, collectivist, and protective of children. Those favouring education, tend to be right-wing, pro-business, individualistic, and wish to treat children as adults.

Protectionists like Levin and Linn (2004) believe the solution to this problem should be a multi-faceted effort by the government, advertising industry, advocacy groups and academia to help limit the negative effects of marketing. They write of the US context, 'The history of other social struggles contains an important lesson. One family, one teacher, one psychologist, one advocacy group alone will have difficulty combating a \$12 billion industry' (p.226). They propose that: the government should pass legislation restricting advertising to children to certain age groups or ban the marketing of particular products; academia should do more to investigate the psychosocial and health consequences of advertising; advocacy groups could do more to raise awareness of its impact; and the advertising industry should do more to regulate itself in order to share the burden of protecting children.

Schor (2004) supports protectionist policies for children and proposes introducing a tax on advertising to children (defined as being when more than one quarter of the audience are children). This would, first, reduce the number of adverts aimed at children and, second, create a fund that could be used to produce commercial-free television. Schor also calls for an increase in the amount of commercial-free television paid for through a new tax or a directly paid-for service that could exist alongside commercially -funded channels. She calls for a blanket ban on advertising in schools which she claims 'violates a fundamental principle of consumer sovereignty: the ability to escape marketing' (p.197).

By contrast, Furnham (1993) thinks it is unwise to ban advertising to children because it would slow children's consumer socialisation. He argues that it would be more beneficial if children were taught what a commercial is and the purpose it serves with the family, schools, and businesses all playing a part in consumer education.

All these writers agree on one thing: that there should be more transparency and accountability from those who carry out the research for the advertising industry. Currently all such research is the property of the companies commissioning it and therefore they are under no obligation to publish it. It would contribute vital knowledge about how much children understand about advertising if this research had to be published. Schor (2004) has also suggested adopting guidelines which would call for all the names of all individuals in the research, writing and production of any advert to be published in an attempt to encourage them to take more social responsibility. The advertising industry needs to adopt the same ethical procedures as apply in academic settings such as gaining consent from participants, protecting minors, and ensuring that those involved are warned of the dangers of participating in the research.

At the very least, as the Compass report by Williams (2006) proposes, there is need for national debate:

Parents can of course influence the way their children are brought up. But only by acting with others who share their concerns can social and economic impact of commercialisation be effectively confronted. It is time we talked about what we can do. (p.19)

The evidence presented here suggests that the freedom of children would be substantially enhanced if commercial pressures were drastically curtailed. This might comprise:

- a) The end of all advertising and other commercial pressures, of any sort on any media, directly or indirectly targeted at children aged under 7.
- b) The end of all advertising directed at children aged 7-15 where this may have adverse effects on some children's health, education, or their personal or social development.
- c) Control of this advertising to made the responsibility of a body whose primary concern is with children, rather than, as now, being left to self-regulation by the advertising industry.

The Future of Childhood

Every child is, to a substantial degree, a child of their times. Childhood is largely socially constructed. Even biological development is influenced by many social and economic factors not least the commercial pressures considered here. It is therefore important to think intelligently about what sort of childhood we want our children or

grandchildren to experience. Disparaging sloganeering about creating a ‘nanny state’ is not helpful.

One thing should be remembered. Children have always been a concern and anxiety about childhood goes back a long way. An inscription on a tablet dated around 2800 BC stated: ‘Children no longer obey their parents. Every man wants to write a book, and the end of the world is evidently approaching.’⁶

It should also be remembered that there are many signs that children in Britain are now generally more considerate, altruistic and outward looking than in the past. Children are more aware environmentally and globally, they engage in more voluntary activities, and they are less tolerant of racism and sexism than ever before. There is also no doubt that more years are spent by more young people investing more time in education with better results. This may be because of greater worries about getting a job or repaying a student loan, but it nevertheless represents increased investment in human capital.

The idea that all children are more materialist and less willing to defer gratification, simply does not stand scrutiny. If there are problems with childhood, Brooks writing in *The Guardian* (16 September 2006) has suggested that it is ‘perhaps adulthood rather than childhood that’s in crisis’.

Yet, even if most children are generally fine, this does not mean that the growing commercial pressures discussed here should be a matter of indifference or that there are not many children who are seriously vulnerable to these pressures.

The evidence presented here indicates that the freedom of children is being eroded and their rights ignored. Protection of children from commercial pressures is seriously inadequate.

Yet whether commercial pressures on children matter enough to require effective action ultimately depends on one’s view of what childhood is and should be. It depends on answers to some of these questions:

- Are the commercial pressures on children a cause for real concern or only of interest to envious, ageing and puritanical kill-joys?
- Does it matter that children are manipulated for commercial ends?
- Are commercial pressures intruding on the privacy of the family?
- Should childhood be a protected space, free from commercial pressures?
- If childhood should be protected until an age when the pressures can be understood for what they are and those pressures can be resisted - what is that age and what protection is needed?

Many, perhaps most, treat increasing commercial pressures as part of the way of the world, an inevitable development about which nothing can be done. It may be

⁶ Municipal Museum, Istanbul

regrettable but there it is and children must live with it. If childhood is primarily a preparation for an adult commercial world then, providing there are the sort of minimal protections such as now exist, then there is little cause for concern and nothing much needs to be done. This is the approach taken by all recent British governments.

Up to now, the general corporate attitude in Britain has not been *irresponsible* – advertisements are not allowed to depict children in dangerous settings such as taking sweets from strangers. But the prevailing corporate attitude towards the wider impact on childhood has been *aresponsible* – an absence of responsibility, with no apparent concern about the overall impact of commercial pressures on children

An alternative view is that we are all jointly responsible for our children's future – parents, government, civil society and corporations too. This view is encompassed in the African saying (used by Hillary Clinton as the title for her book) 'It takes a village to raise a child.' On this view, corporate responsibility extends to the impact of corporate behaviour on children. If the commercial pressures on children are to be curbed, then the corporate sector can no longer be treated as aresponsible or allowed to act in this way. It also requires the government to act decisively to ban advertising directed at children, at the very least young children.

From the free bag of samples distributed in maternity units, to commercials on television, websites, videos, computer games and cinemas, passing advertisements in school corridors, swimming pools, streets and supermarkets, with logos attached to shirts and shoes and school sports, children in Britain now experience a relentless stream of marketing messages at home, at school, at play, and in the community. For many children this stream starts as soon as they wake up and continues until they go to sleep.

These commercial pressures have been gathering pace with each generation of children. If unfettered, there is no reason to think that these pressures on children will do anything but continue to increase.

It is up to the whole of society – parents, civil society, corporations and government – to decide if such a future is desirable and acceptable. If not, all must act together to create a better future for children – and in turn, as generation succeeds generation, a better future for the whole society.

Each child should be free to be a child.

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