



STOP TARGETING OUR KIDS

A coalition for children's freedom from advertising

## Back to School and the Commercialism of Our Children

*Stop Targeting Our Kids is a coalition of parents, professionals and community members in the Western Michigan region. In solidarity with the national Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood, our goal is to reclaim childhood from corporate marketers. Our mission is to keep our schools, businesses, local media and public space free from advertising and marketing directed toward children. We seek to build relationships with school districts, religious institutions, local media, local government and local businesses to facilitate increased awareness of the negative effects of advertising on the physical, emotional, social and intellectual development of the children in our community. We seek to promote this mission through a combination of education, advocacy and research.*

In recent years there has been an increasing amount of commercialism infiltrating our educational system, particularly at the K-12 grade levels. This increase of commercial messages that target school-age children has come about because of two main factors.

First, companies began to see children as primary targets of advertising campaigns and wanted to reach them during the 7-8 hours a day that had traditionally been off limits to commercial influences. The other factor, which opened up educational systems to commercialism, is shrinking school budgets. Recognizing the financial incentives, corporations began to offer “resources” to schools in exchange for the opportunity to target students with their messages.

In the 1990s companies like Channel One began offering free TVs and VCRs to schools as long as they would play their teen-produced programs, which included lots of ads. Soda companies then began to offer schools money in exchange for allowing them to place vending machines in middle and high schools.

In addition, many companies are offering “educational supplements” to teachers for free, which allows certain topics to be presented from the company’s perspective. One example is a booklet and video that Exxon/Mobil produces for teachers on the environment.

There are also influences such as reading incentive programs that are organized by Pizza Hut or the hyper-advertising and music services offered by Bus Radio. Children are already subjected to an incredible amount of commercialism through TV, radio, the Internet, Movies, Video Games and public space ads.

On top of all of this children and their parents are being pressured with even more commercial messages right before school starts with an array of “Back to School” ads. The Stop Targeting Our Kids group has chosen to take a public stand on the hyper-commercialism of our children and want to use this opportunity to address what is fundamentally wrong with the “Back to School” messages which are primary focused on telling children and their parents that the beginning of the school year is all about shopping and consumption.

What follows are some examples of ads we have encountered in the West Michigan media market.

In exploring retailers’ back-to-school advertising campaigns, we notice three dominant trends that effectively shift the emphasis from preparing to meet the academic demands of school toward an effort to fit in, look good, and emulate popular television, movie, and music icons.



*This folder promotes an adolescent television show that depicts highly sexualized teen girls whose goal at school is being sexy and popular.*

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1. Most obvious is the integration of ads for television programs, pop musicians, movies, and toys with items commonly associated with back-to-school preparation:

Nearly every lunchbox, backpack, thermos, folder, notebook and pencil carries the image of a television or movie character ranging in their appeal from the very young (*Thomas the Tank Engine*) to adolescent and teenager (*Hannah Montana* and *The Jonas Brothers*).



Meijer's back-to-school logo, *Mom Approved*, suggests not only to children but also to other adult shoppers that these products are endorsed as useful and necessary for the return to school by other thoughtful and caring parents.

3. Finally, retailers promote items with messages that devalue the worth and relevance of school or school-related subjects or messages that directly associate school subjects with shopping and consumption.



2. Next, we notice that retailers promote the idea that items not normally associated with school are somehow necessary or desirable for academic success:

We notice the same characters donning folders, notebooks, and pencils appear on everything from t-shirts to pajamas to sweatsuits. Interestingly, these clothing items fall under each retailer's *essential* back-to-school logo.

Socks and underwear may certainly be *necessary* but whether they are *essential* for returning to school is highly questionable.



This t-shirt, part of a local retailer's back-to-school campaign, makes it's pitch to the young and rebellious by endorsing the message that school is boring, irrelevant, and confining.



These billboards equate academic literacy with the ability to be a savvy consumer.

For more information and resources on commercialism and children check out:  
 The Center for a New American Dream  
<http://www.newdream.org/kids/index.php>  
 The Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood  
<http://www.commercialexploitation.org/>  
 Citizens Campaign for Commercial Free Schools <http://www.scn.org/cccs/>



### ***Did you know that . . .***

#### **Children are bombarded with marketing every waking moment.**

Children ages 2-11 see more than 25,000 advertisements a year on TV alone. This figure does not include product placement. They are also targeted with advertising on the Internet, cell phones, mp3 players, video games, school buses and in school.\*

#### **Marketing to children is a huge business.**

Companies spend about \$17 billion annually marketing to children, a staggering increase from the \$100 million spent in 1983.\*

#### **Marketing contributes to many problems facing children today.**

Marketing encourages eating disorders, precocious sexuality, youth violence and family stress and contributes to children's diminished capability to play creatively.\*

- Content from the Marketing to Children Overview Fact Sheet published by the Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood:  
<http://www.commercialfreechildhood.org/factsheets/overview.pdf>

**Join the growing movement to protect children from marketing!**

