

Class Action December 2006 Book of the Month

Born to Buy

by Juliet Schor

(New York: Scribner, 2004)

Now in Paperback

Before the children in your life become like adults “who have everything,” you might want to read *Born to Buy*, a readable and mind-blowing book by Juliet Schor.

You may know of Schor who wrote *The Overworked American* and *The Overspent American*, two remarkable contributions to our understanding about overwork and consumption in U.S. culture. In *Born to Buy*, she examines the marketing juggernaut targeted at children. As part of her research, she attended marketing conventions, meetings at ad agencies, and became a visiting professor at the Advertising Education Foundation.

Schor demonstrates that as long as there has been marketing, there have been efforts focused at children. What has changed is a shift in marketing strategy and an increase in the volume of marketing resources aimed at children. Twenty years ago, advertising for children’s products was aimed at “gatekeeper” mothers, trying to convince them to buy items. But today’s advertising is aimed directly at children with the goal of influencing their parental purchases -- not just of toys and cereal -- but of family cars, technological gizmos, and other large acquisitions. Children are coached on the potency of nagging and what some marketing groups call “pester power.”

In 2004, marketing experts estimate that \$15 billion was spent on marketing aimed at children, an increase from \$100 million spent on kid-focused television advertising in 1983. Marketers have segmented the children’s market into dozens of submarkets, each with its own conferences, experts, and tailored messages. The Annual KidPower Food and Beverage Convention discusses how to sell more junk food and sodas to kids while the Annual Hispanic KidPower meeting focuses on marketing to the growing Latino youth market.

Cable TV giant Nickelodeon boasts to potential advertisers that it “owns kids 2-12.” A few other startling facts from *Born to Buy*:

- Upon arrival at the schoolhouse, a typical first grader can identify over 200 brands and will begin to accumulate an average of 70 toys a year.
- The average eight to thirteen year old is watching an estimated three and half hours of television a day and viewing 40,000 commercials a year. Children this age make 3,000 requests a year for products and services.
- Eighty percent of all global brands now require a strategy aimed at “tweens,” children between 7 and 12 years old.

Born to Buy explains many of the new tactics of the advertising industry, such as enlisting trusted institutions like the Girl Scouts to partner on marketing to girls. Advertising on television has increased, but new avenues are growing rapidly such as promotions, sponsorships, and direct marketing, such as museum exhibitions built with Lego brand.

The solution, in Schor’s words, is to “de-commercialize childhood.” She chronicles some of the movements against marketing to kids, including the movement for ad-free public spaces and schools, and families that have unplugged their televisions and reduced the amount of advertising that enters their homes.

She recognizes the complex overlay of class issues on these issues. She describes some middle class parents as being a “tad self-righteous.” “Many don’t acknowledge that being middle class, or even wealthier, is a big part of why they can avoid using the television as a baby-sitter or ban cheap fast foods from their diet.”

There are legislative actions we consider as well. Why not outlaw food advertising aimed at kids, just as tobacco and X-rated movies are now? Why not an outright legal ban on advertising and product placement in schools? See information about the “Parents Bill of Rights,” **Class Action’s December Action here.**

Good news includes the demise of Channel One, the television network that several years ago was planted in over 25 percent of the nation’s middle and secondary schools and claimed a viewing audience second only to the Super Bowl. After parental and educator rebellion, Channel One now faces extinction. A growing number of states are considering legislation banning junk food sales and advertising in schools, with Maine passing landmark legislation.

Born to Buy is a good primer about how childhood has become commercialized and the urgent need to fight back. It's both enraging and inspiring.

Resources

Consider a holiday gift of *Born to Buy*, or perhaps a membership in some of the terrific organizations fighting commercialization including:

[Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood](#)

[Center for the New American Dream](#)

[Citizens Campaign for Commercial-Free Schools](#)

[Commercial Alert](#)

[Dads and Daughters](#)

"A Guide to Ethical Consumption During the Holiday Season," provided by Tikkun Magazine: "You don't have to buy stuff to be loved or to be loving toward others. It's better for the environment if you don't. Here are some creative alternatives to resist the pressure of holiday buying."

Books:

- ***Unplug the Christmas Machine: A Complete Guide to Putting Love and Joy Back into the Season***, by Jo Robinson and Jean Staeheli. The Classic guide in its 13th printing.
- ***Hundred Dollar Holiday: The Case For A More Joyful Christmas*** by Bill McKibben
- ***Celebrate Simply: Your Guide to Simpler, More Meaningful Holidays and Special Occasions*** by Nancy Twigg
- ***Simplify Your Christmas: 100 Ways to Reduce the Stress and Recapture the Joy of the Holidays*** (Little Books) by Elaine St. James
- ***Living Simply with Children: A Voluntary Simplicity Guide for Moms, Dads, and Kids Who Want to Reclaim the Bliss of Childhood and the Joy of Parenting*** by Marie Sherlock
- ***Kicking Your Holiday Stress Habits***, by Donald A. Tubesing

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