

Hey kid - you wanna buy a ...

With advertisers spending \$15 billion a year to target kids under 12, parents are fed up. Many are fighting back by joining groups that take their message to lawmakers.

By Jennifer Wolcott, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor
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Nag factor. Pester power. These have become familiar buzzwords in the conference rooms of America's most powerful ad agencies, according to Enola Aird, mother of two teens. "Advertisers want kids to wear down their parents, and they devote hours to figuring this out," says Ms. Aird. "They are determined to 'own' our children from a young age, turn them into lifelong consumers, and sell to them wherever they can find them."

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Aird is not merely venting. As director of the Motherhood Project in Washington, an offspring of the Institute for American Values, she knows that it's her job to speak out about the concerns of parents. The commercialization of childhood in today's media-crazed culture is now front and center among those concerns, she says.

American corporations spend \$15 billion per year on advertising and marketing to children, twice what they spent 10 years ago. As the average child reportedly watches 40 hours of television per week, sees 40,000 TV commercials each year, and influences \$500 billion in annual spending – on toys, fast food, electronics, and more - this investment appears to be paying off.

With spending soaring and product-hawking venues burgeoning far beyond TV, many parents, educators, and other concerned citizens are becoming fed up by what they consider a rampant assault of commercialism on children.

These individuals feel simultaneously powerless against a multibillion-dollar industry but also emboldened by new scientific research. Studies by the Kaiser Foundation and the World Health Organization both link childhood obesity to fast-food advertising. The American Psychological Association has found that children under 8 are incapable of understanding persuasive intent.

To strengthen their voices, many of these adults are becoming activists by participating in grass-roots ad-busting advocacy groups such as Aird's, so that they can be better heard on the national stage and especially by lawmakers.

In addition to the Motherhood Project, which is lobbying for congressional hearings on regulation of TV commercials, some of the most prominent groups are the Citizen's Campaign for Commercial Free Schools; the Coalition to Stop Commercial Exploitation of Children; Dads and Daughters; and perhaps the leader of the pack, the Oregon-based Commercial Alert.

With Gary Ruskin at its helm, Commercial Alert has gained recent attention on Capitol Hill for its "Parents' Bill of Rights." The document includes nine provisions to help parents combat commercial influences, one of which calls for banning advertising aimed at children under 12 and two of which have already been introduced in the US Senate.

The first bill under consideration requires fast-food chains to disclose basic nutritional information, and the other, introduced last month by Sens. Ron Wyden (D of Oregon) and Ted Stevens (R of Alaska), would ban list brokers without parental permission from collecting data about children 16 and under - everything from ethnicity and family income to hobbies - and selling it to advertisers and marketers.

This practice extends even to the diaper set, which is especially

alarming to parents. But no matter what the child's age, parents consider these lists an invasion of privacy.

"Parents are flabbergasted and angry when they learn that their child's information could be sold on the Internet," says Chris Fitzgerald, press secretary for Senator Wyden. "These list brokers work by stealth," says Mr. Ruskin. "No one even knows this is happening. Children are naturally more trusting than adults, and that trust is often easy to exploit."

Repeated calls to two of the best-known list brokers, American Student List and Student Marketing Group, were not returned. But Doug Wood, general counsel to both the Association of National Advertisers and the Advertising Research Foundation, spoke up in list brokers' favor. Banning them, he says, would be discriminatory and a violation of the First Amendment.

He doesn't even favor an "opt out" feature similar to the Do Not Call Registry for telemarketers. "There would be a huge rush of parents who sign up out of ignorance," Mr. Wood explains. "Some of the things they sell to kids are valuable. The fact that we are a nation of sellers is not necessarily a bad thing."

But Wood, who has three children, does concede that list brokers might want to tweak their approach: "They could do themselves a favor by being more open," he says. The Children's Listbroker Privacy Act will be heard sometime before October, says Courtney Schikora, press secretary for Senator Stevens. That may not be soon enough for some activists, but most are encouraged that politicians are listening.

Just say 'no'

"The fact that Congress is taking seriously what's happening to kids is a really important step," says Diane Levin, professor of education at Wheelock College in Boston and author of six books, including "Remote Control Childhood."

"Commercial culture has gotten out of control," adds Dr. Levin. "It affects who kids are, who they are becoming, how they handle

money, how they want to look ... even some 4-year-olds I know are demanding 'belly-button shirts!' "

To which, Wood and many industry insiders might ask: "What's wrong with saying 'no'?" Instead of pointing the finger at corporations, Wood says, the blame should be directed at parents who let their kids push them around.

Becky Benson concurs. The Minnesota mom, who doesn't subscribe to cable TV or allow her preteen daughters to use e-mail, believes some parents simply aren't doing their job. "Instead of asserting their authority, they give in to their kids," she says. "Saying 'no' is the most powerful way to keep things under control."

Are current regulations enough? Also helpful in keeping things under control, says Wood, are regulatory agencies and laws already in place. He says the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) of 1998, which shields children 13 and under from Internet advertising, is effective, as are the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Children's Advertising Review Unit (CARU).

"These are respected and legitimate organizations, and they have a 96 percent compliance rate from advertisers," Wood says. These groups have good intentions, but they can't do it all, says Lisa Flythe, a new employee of the Motherhood Project, who previously worked for MTV and also developed written commercial guidelines for Nickelodeon.

"The volume of material and the number of outlets and opportunities have increased dramatically," she says. "Even with their best efforts, they can't possibly monitor all the questionable material out there." Of course, the monitoring job can start with parents, says Susan Linn, a child psychologist and instructor at Harvard Medical School. They can take TVs out of kids' bedrooms, limit screen time, and say "no." But to think that moms and dads can do it all, she adds, is naive.

"One family in isolation cannot counter a \$15 billion industry," Dr. Linn says. "And regulators simply aren't doing enough," she adds. "It's not just that children are consuming. They are being consumed." Hence the title of Linn's new book, "Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover

of Childhood," in which she asserts that children are now the focus of a marketing maelstrom. In an ideal world, Linn would ban all marketing aimed at kids.

This may sound radical, she says, but when considered in the context of many other countries, she adds, where regulations are often much more stringent than in the US, it's really not.

America may not be Sweden, where marketing is banned to children under 12. But Linn is not ready to throw up her hands just yet. She is encouraged by growing awareness and activism in groups like her own, the Coalition to Stop Commercial Exploitation of Children, which she founded with Levin in 2000. Even though SCEC has been around for a while, she says, interest has never been stronger. "People are starting to realize they are not alone, and to believe there is something they can do."

Linn even goes so far as to call the recent surge in ad-busting activism a "growing social movement." She adds with a sigh, though, "Like most social movements, this one could take a while to make an impact.

"It will be a long haul." The Parents' Bill of Rights aims to protect children.

The Parents' Bill of Rights contains nine "acts" intended to help parents limit the ways marketers can advertise to children. Congress is currently considering the first two items.

? Children's Food Labeling Act: Would require fast-food restaurant chains to label contents of food and provide basic nutritional information about it.

? Child Privacy Act: Would give parents the right to control any commercial use of personal information concerning their children, and the right to know precisely how such information is used.

? Leave Children Alone Act: Would ban television advertising aimed at children under 12 years of age.

? Children's Advertising Subsidy Revocation Act: Would eliminate tax deductibility as a business expense for advertising aimed at children under 12 years of age.

? Advertising to Children Accountability Act: Would require corporations to disclose who created all of their advertisements and who did the market research for each ad directed at children under 12 years of age.

? Commercial-Free Schools Act: Would prohibit companies from pitching products to children while the youngsters are in school and away from parental influence.

? Product Placement Disclosure Act: Would require corporations to disclose, on packaging and at the outset, any and all product placements on television and videos, and in movies, video games, and books. This would let parents know there are ads in media typically assumed to be ad-free.

? Child Harm Disclosure Act: Would create a legal duty for corporations to publicly disclose all information suggesting that their product(s) could substantially harm the health of children.

? Fairness Doctrine for Parents: Would make the broadcasting Fairness Doctrine apply to all advertising to children under 12 years of age, providing parents and community with response time on broad- cast TV and radio for advertising to children.

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