



(top) The author's daughter, Cassidy, center, with her friends.



(middle) Tanzanian children with self-made trucks.

(bottom) Why use your imagination to build a toy when you can watch the "real" thing on TV and buy the officially licensed replica?

# Protecting Your Child From Capitalism

by Allen Kanner

I'VE QUIT TELEVISION TWICE NOW. THE RELAPSE OCCURRED IN 2002 WHEN THE SAN Francisco Giants made the World Series. I quit again in 2004 upon learning that my wife, Mary, was pregnant.

There are two secrets I'd like to share about giving up television. The first is that after about two weeks the urge to watch goes away. I had thought the impulse would linger for maybe two years.

The second revelation is that quitting is no big deal. Mary and I do not notice the TV's absence. Cassidy, our daughter, who is now three years old, has never seen a show. She leads a rich life filled with family and friends, simple toys, parks, our garden, cafes where we hang out, and above all, a ceaseless imagination that passionately devours everything in its path. She has no idea what McDonald's is, but she can name dozens of fruits and vegetables from our garden and will happily instruct you in ways to prepare them. She's never met a Disney character but instead lives in a world inhabited by numerous imaginary friends.

Choosing a TV-free existence is one way Mary and I try to protect our family from corporate capitalism. We also frequent locally owned businesses and farmer's markets, periodically try to simplify our lives, ask friends and relatives not to give Cassidy toys or clothes produced by large corporations, and send Cassidy to a preschool attended entirely by children from TV-free households. We are fortunate enough as white, middle-class professionals to have the time, opportunity, and, ironically enough, money to erect partial barriers between our family and the oppressive forces of corporate culture. But our decision regarding television has probably had the most impact.

In the United States, the standard sixty-minute TV show includes sixteen minutes of commercials. Add to that product placement, product integration into plot lines, pop-up ads on the periphery of screens, and other new techniques for inserting marketing messages into shows. Although the exact figures are hard to come by, it's a safe bet that one-third of television content is advertising.

TV ads do not simply sell products. Rather, taken together, they convey the message that the constant accumulation of corporate products is the key to happiness. I call this corporate materialism. My guess is that most marketers do not set out to sell the corporate economy to their customers. Instead, their commercials reflect the underlying values and beliefs of the corporate world in which they are immersed.

Similarly, most television shows are written and produced by individuals who work for large media conglomerates. They too, in all likelihood, do not intend to promote capitalism. But their programs at least implicitly—by means of the characters' actions, clothing,

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possessions, and aspirations—endorse consumer values.

TV producers are loath to air programs that are critical of corporations, consumerism, or capitalism, for fear of alienating their sponsors. The result is that television production has built-in filters that block alternative viewpoints, a form of systemic censorship.

Through the interweaving of these three factors—the ceaseless marketing of corporate materialism, programs steeped in consumer values, and censorship of opposing perspectives—television functions as a propaganda tool for corporate capitalism. Mary and I have chosen not to expose Cassidy to such compelling manipulation, especially since far more nurturing and enjoyable activities are available.

One such activity, of course, is play. Cassidy ushers nearly all of her significant experiences into her pretend worlds. This is as it should be, for nature cleverly designed play to be essential to children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. That is why I am flabbergasted that the corporate world is attacking the realm of children's make-believe and succeeding. Many teachers, educators, and parents are reporting the demise of free play. One example: teachers are observing that children don't know what to do when left alone during recess.

As psychologist Susan Linn noted in *The Case for Make Believe*, corporate marketing is a key contributor to the American child's paucity of play. One example is the prevalence of licensed products such as dolls and action figures based on media characters. Children limit their play with these toys to the screen versions of the stories on which the licensed characters are based. Ninety-seven percent of American children under seven own at least one licensed product. Similarly, play is drastically confined by the relatively few options provided by fancy electronic toys, which are extremely popular. In sharp contrast, children's imaginations roam far and wide with simple, open-ended toys such as blocks, generic dolls, and fine arts materials.

We therefore ask our family and friends not to give Cassidy corporate presents and urge them to turn off the tube when we come around. It is tragic that we have to defend our family against our nation's economic system. But it's worth it, for in this protected space we are planting seeds for a better world. ■



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