

YOUR CHILD IS A TARGET FOR CREATIVE MARKETERS

By Carol Yip

Are kids aged below 6 these days more mature than kids of similar age 20 years ago?

Definitely!

And why is that so? Is it because of the different diet kids are taking nowadays or it is because of the environment that they are living in?

I would believe that it is due to a combination of both, but the latter can be a bigger influence on the development of kids' maturity and behaviour.

Parents today are frustrated and concerned about how their children are being subjected by the continuous messages and enticing images in the media and Internet, from the movies, television advertising and TV program and show series, videogames, as well as publications and radio, which are all affecting their children's attitude, behaviour and values in life.

How can the advancement of technology innovation and creative communication media affect our young kids in today's of consumerism i.e how such influences our young kids' wants and needs, which then affect us as parents to spend our money to buy for them.

Marketers are working diligently at developing innovative and creative strategies to capture the minds of the young consumers in a world of high stakes competition. Our children are truly "the target" in a society where their attitudes, beliefs, values and preferences influence 600 billion dollars worth of products and programs a year.

Aware and committed parents are trying to do everything they can to protect their children— but, it's often not enough.

In order to best protect and nurture your children as they develop and grow, it's imperative that you manage how they spend their time and what they are paying attention to.

How in-built attention 'blind spot' impacts your child's behaviour?

Each of us has attention 'blind spot'. It is a developmental condition, either biological or psychological, beyond our awareness, that can prevent us from making accurate, sound and discriminating choices.

However, our children's attention 'blind spot' is especially vulnerable to marketers and advertisers at the younger ages when rational choices and higher levels of thinking and awareness are limited.

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It's important as a parent to understand that attention is a critical first step in the learning process, whether what is learned is positive or negative. Whatever grabs or holds your child's attention will be more quickly absorbed and stored into their rapidly expanding mind map of the world.

This brain-based (biological foundation) attention mechanism is called the "orienting response" and most often occurs unconsciously, outside a child's awareness. It is an automatic response to something in a child's world that is typically novel and different.

It is especially strong if linked to a pressing and powerful underlying need or want, which ultimately increases the strength of the attention or orienting mechanism.

Marketers and advertisers clearly understand the importance of attention, and make it a high priority in designing their age-related advertising and marketing strategies. The name of the consumer game is "eyeballs," and attention is the entry point for gaining access to new products.

Television, movie, radio and video games, computers and other high-tech gadgets and media have evolved at a blinding speed with almost unlimited built-in potentials to trigger the orienting or attention response in children.

These are considered "hot" mediums, complete with moving images, special effects, unique and powerful graphics, exciting colors, humorous and strange characters, and sound effects— all of which increase the potential for gaining your children's higher level of attention.

Compare this expanding range of new visual and auditory hot mediums with the slower, less stimulating, more verbally dominant "cold" media such as printed packages, brochures, flyers, books, newspapers or pamphlets and you'll understand why kids today, immersed deeper in the world of high technology and hot attention-getting media, find school to be increasingly boring.

But, when it comes to your children in today's world of consumerism, there are new and often negative side effects associated with this powerful attention 'blind spot' that can prevent them from making accurate, sound and discriminating choices.

This 'blind spot' is the glue that holds your children's interest to new and exciting products, even if they're not age-appropriate. It's the initial hook that sets desire in motion, and leads to wanting and sometimes even demanding a new product or service, or an experience.

Your children become what they pay attention to

Someone once made the comment that you eventually become what you pay attention to, and herein lays a major concern for today's parents and especially for their children.

It's no accident that hot media consume more hours of a child's time each week, outside and beyond the school setting. Hot media entertain, immerse, compel and excite the senses, keeping the orienting response constantly engaged.

Can a teacher today, in a traditional classroom setting, really begin to compete with this expanding media world so dominant outside of the classroom? And how does advertising and marketing fit into all of this?

As high powered technological advances in media increase, they are rapidly incorporated into the toolbox of marketing and advertising techniques and increasingly used to gain the attention of the potential consumer, especially children.

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The combined onslaught of the techno world slowly and steadily changes what children expect, eventually translating into a media dominant lifestyle or way of life. The result is more time spent with machines and external stimulation and less time spent with human interaction, outdoor activity, reading and imaginative free play.

Morphing techniques are a good example. As computer technology advances, it develops more and more spectacular special effects that can instantly blend or morph one image into another. This creates exciting, entertaining and unprecedented visual images (The Matrix, Batman, Power Rangers, The Hulk, etc.). The technique immerses the viewer into new, out-of-this-world experiences.

We see the translation of these amazing visual special effects into a hotter advertising medium as well. The underlying reason is the attention 'blind spot'.

Spectacular and immersive technologies coerce and command us to pay attention on an unconscious level. They keep us mesmerized, transfixed and in a state of awe.

Our biologically-based orienting response is activated and fully engaged in the wonder and excitement of unique and novel information, opening the gate to the consumer concepts and ideas that advertisers and marketers want to plant into our memory.

Where does this leave us as parents?

Parents are aware of the expanding impact of technological innovation and how their children's attention is constantly being influenced.

But, what can we possibly do to help protect our children from unwanted age inappropriate messages and manipulation, when the escalating advances in technology are being incorporated into ever-expanding media and creative advertising campaigns?

Here are some suggestions that you can do as a parent:

- **Children today are in desperate need of your guidance** – Our children's brains will make meaning out of the world at its own particular developmental level and therefore, with your guidance, your children will be better equipped to make more rational interpretations of what they are being influenced by
- **You're in charge!** Create a family lifestyle plan that limits time spent in front of the television, video games or computers, listening to the radio and other media. Advertisers and marketers will continue to focus on using hot media techniques to create the orienting response to open the gate to higher levels of consumerism and it is only you who can control their level of influence.
- **Promote use of the 'colder' type of media (especially reading)** – to give your child a counterbalance experience of media. Spend time reading to your child, before bedtime will be a good practice to nurture your child's brain. Use the weekends to cultivate your child's interests and talents with outdoor games and activities, or playing indoor games that are mind stimulating like lego, jigsaw puzzle, scrabbles, or spelling games.
- **Promote dialogue** – When you feel that you are able to rationalize senses and reason with your children, discuss and inform your children of the attention-getting devices that are being used by marketers and advertisers. Help your children to understand how attention is the first stage or entry point to captivating their senses manipulating their thinking process.

**Your children learn a great deal
by observing what you do – teach by example!**

Observational learning means that the attention 'blind spot' is focused on you, as well as on outside media. You are always the guide and teacher, the model that your children will learn from, whether you are aware of it or not. Remember, people become what they pay attention to!

If you as parents are influenced by advertisements to spend, your children will pick-up on your spending behaviour and act like you!

Good consumerism practices start at home, and parents have the ultimate power of turning their children's responses to media.