

Kid stuff

By [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [January 11, 2005](#) issue

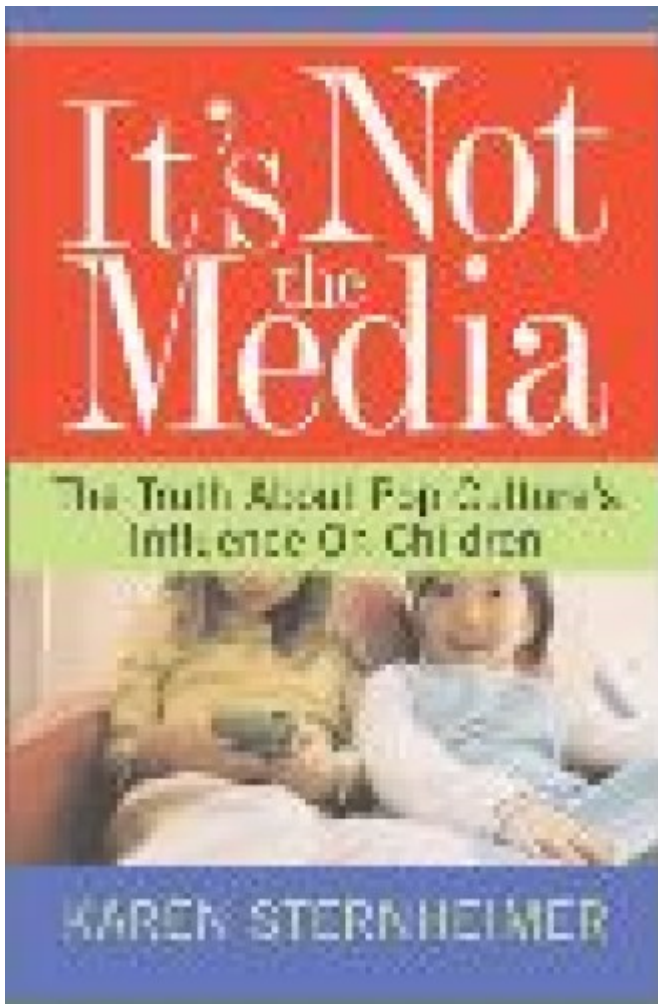
In Review



Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood

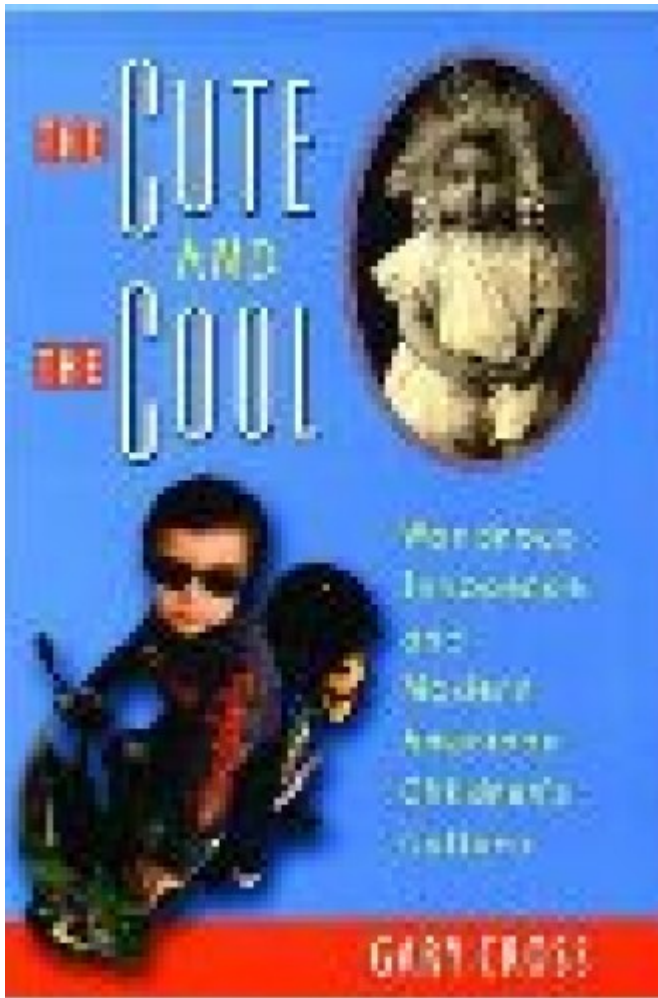
Susan Linn

New Press



It's Not the Media: The Truth About Pop Culture's Influence on Children

Karen Sternheimer
Westview



The Cute and the Cool: Wondrous Innocence and Modern American Children's Culture

Gary Cross
Oxford University Press

As the Christmas season ends and parents push their way through crumpled wrapping paper and parts of half-assembled toys, they may wonder: How did we get from a baby born in a manger to this? How did we reach the state where Care Bear Nativity sets, Chia pets and Ronald McDonald have the iconic force once reserved for the holy? When did the giving season turn into a purchasing season? And where did I hide those receipts, so that my children can exchange the very gifts they once begged for?

Into the mess of American materialism step three authors with very different perspectives on the hold that consumer society has over kids. Susan Linn, an

instructor in psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, points the finger at the advertising industry, which targets children with more force than parents can counter. Not only does the average child see more than 40,000 commercials a year, but children are also bombarded by marketing on the previously sacrosanct Public Broadcasting System. The *Sesame Street* characters of PBS, along with the Teletubbies and Clifford the big red dog, now sell products themselves.

And cute critters don't just sell toys. Linn reports that of 81 G-rated animated children's movies, more than half contained an episode of a character drinking or smoking. This at a time when teenage girls are leading the way for new smokers (drawn in by ads that imply smoking dampens appetite) and when *Media Week* named Budweiser 2001 Advertiser of the Year, saying that "if there was one campaign this year that cut through the increasingly dense media clutter and became a fixture in *playgrounds*, offices and bars around the country, it was the Budweiser series of ads." (The italics are Linn's.)

Linn is worried not only about what is happening on the playgrounds, but about what is not happening: she fears that children are forgetting how to play. The average child lives in a home with three televisions, three radios, a video game console and a computer. Two thirds of children between the ages of eight and 18 have televisions in their own bedrooms, as do over a quarter of children under the age of two. Where once Lego building blocks encouraged creativity, they now come in specific kits with instructions on building the item pictured on the cover.

Meanwhile, the television drones on during school hours as well as leisure time, thanks to Channel One. Linn quotes Joel Babbit, former president of Channel One, on the advertising clout of this network: "The advertiser gets kids who cannot go to the bathroom, cannot change the station, who cannot listen to their mother yell in the background, who cannot be playing Nintendo." No wonder school marketing enthusiast Ed Winter told *Business Week*, "Marketers have come to realize that all roads eventually lead to the schools."

And what of the trend in children's programming in which adults and parents come off as bumbling boobs, while children are portrayed as capable and cunning? The most competent adults children see may be Cap'n Crunch, Ronald McDonald and Lingerie Barbie.

Linn puts her hopes in real-life adults, who, unlike the adults in children's commercials, act intelligently on behalf of children. She ends her book with a list of steps for parents, policy makers and clergy. With the zeal of a reformer and the heart of a dreamer, she calls for turning off the television at home, providing better funding for public schools and public media, and enacting laws that forbid marketing to children altogether. Linn's dire summary: "It's not just that our kids are consuming. They are being consumed."

Not so, says Karen Sternheimer. She turns her critical eye on those who blame music, advertisers and television for children's problems. Studying the reaction to the Columbine High School shootings, this University of Southern California sociologist describes how Americans quickly traced the rampage to the lyrics and video of a song by the band Pearl Jam. While the courts have consistently rejected "the media made me do it" as a legal defense, the public seems to find it persuasive.

Posing the old chicken-or-egg question, Sternheimer draws on voices that remind us that music provides a way to express feelings. As Hilary Rosen wrote in *Billboard* magazine: "You can try to ban music that expresses the views of the alienated and unhappy . . . [but] you won't ban the angst or the anger." *Rolling Stone* editor Jann Wenner opined that targeting and censoring popular culture would "make the geeks even more isolated and humiliated," and argued that the real problem that needs to be addressed is the proliferation of guns.

Sternheimer worries that advertising, music and the media have become easy scapegoats in a culture that does not want to address more complicated issues. Arguing directly with Linn's claim that advertising is linked to youth obesity and eating disorders, Sternheimer points out that it's more likely that childhood obesity has risen in conjunction with adult obesity.

"Yes, food advertised for children is often high in calories and low in nutritious value," Sternheimer retorts. "But we need to question whether *parents* are so controlled by children that they can't say no when kids see something they want on TV."

Sternheimer wonders why we focus on children being manipulated by the media and assume that adults are not. This disdain for children, and for children's culture, serves to further alienate adults and children from one another. Children are actually

smart enough to note that while they are criticized for pouring dollars into the latest trading card fad, their parents are buying a \$40,000 car when a \$15,000 one would work just as well. Sternheimer, who also serves as a consultant for the Center for Media Literacy, argues that the media and advertisers are reflections, not shapers, of our culture.

“It’s too simple to say that we are all just fodder for advertising genius,” Sternheimer argues. Adults “consume what we do for a number of reasons: we need things, we are making statements about who we are as individuals, and we are affiliating ourselves with certain groups, making status distinctions. Children are no different in this regard.”

Until we adults level the same criticism toward ourselves as we do toward children, we will not get very deep into a discussion of consumerism. Sternheimer suggests that depth is not what parents are looking for these days. We bemoan our children’s fascination with the next new toy—as we shop for shoes not to cover our bare feet but to match a new dress. It is easier to blame an anonymous advertising machine than to reflect on our own parenting, easier to blame the media than acknowledge that schools are underfunded.

Here Sternheimer joins with Linn in calling for adults to step into public life. But she suggests that we spend less time fearing the media and more time analyzing it, and using it to teach. “We can learn a lot about race, class, gender, sexuality and age by studying media representations and linking them to systems of power. It is simply not enough to spot these patterns in the media; we also need to implicate other social and historical factors that create such conditions. Sexism, for instance, wasn’t born with the advent of movies or television, but it does live and breathe there.”

These two authors provoke some important questions: Are advertising and media external forces which we must fight, hide or regulate? Or do advertising and media reflect the inner struggle of human beings to consume, made uglier in a culture of affluence? While Linn and Sternheimer have very different attitudes toward the media, they seem to agree that the real struggle is for balance. We must consider the inner yearnings that prompt us to be consumers as well as to be consumed. But neither author allows us to stop the search at our own navels. Both call for public action, spiritual reflection and critique, whether of the advertisers or of those blaming advertisers.

How can two such thoughtful analyses point in such different directions? In *The Cute and the Cool*, historian Gary Cross of Pennsylvania State University reminds us that parents have wrestled with childhood consumption for a long time. Cross frames the history of Western childhood as a struggle between children who are “cute” and those who are “cool.”

The image of children as “cute” emerged in print in the early 1900s as part of a new middle-class approach to childhood. As children left the work force, they took on the role of consumer. Their longing for one consumer item over another led their parents to shower them with gifts. The image of the cute child was the image of a wide-eyed youngster delighted at the newest toy (a toy possibly made by a child from a lower rung of the economic ladder, not yet privileged enough to enter the world of the “cute”).

Cross argues that adults shower “cute” kids with material things in an attempt to recover a consumer innocence that adults have lost. Living in a culture in which one’s level of consumption increases but ceases to delight, we take our little ones to the department store windows or to the toy shop in hopes of remembering what it was like to be delighted by something new.

But then the children turn the tables on us. Having been exposed to the newest and best material things, those cute children begin to morph into something less than cute. They hanker after violent video games and scantily clad Barbie dolls rather than the Teletubbies we hoped they would love forever. They become “cool.”

Cool children are jaded consumers. At the onset of the symptoms of “cool,” parents react with horror and surprise, even though they have participated in the transformation of their children from innocent consumers to jaded consumers. Adults then try to pull children away from the very consumerism they introduced them to.

For Cross, this struggle is both personal and societal. Clearly, the plethora of goods that have become available over the past century, and changing understandings of just how much children can and should have, follow complex social and historical rhythms. We are currently shaped by trends toward child-centered vacations, marketing, music and media, all focused on creating wonder in sophisticated youth who are increasingly less capable of feeling it.

But there is also a swing back and forth in the hearts of adults. On the one hand, adults see children as adorable, innocent creatures capable of a delight that adults have lost. We love to see them take that first bite of an ice cream sundae. We take joy in watching them unwrap their first teddy bear under the tree. On the other hand, we are dismayed when the children grow into trend-hungry, ravenous spenders, who ask more and more of their parents. When the toddler smiling at his first taste of ice cream is replaced by an overweight teenager eating Cheetoes in front of a television, adults have second thoughts.

When confronting the “cool” kids, adults look around for answers, or perhaps for scapegoats. Who is responsible for little Johnny’s attachment to video games? Adults glare angrily at the advertising industry, or at the slackness of other parents who cannot say no to a whining child. Cross suggests that the problem may lie elsewhere, deep within the hearts of all of us, as we struggle with our own desires and where to direct them. As Paul says, “We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin.”

In a world in which children are both consumers and products, and people are indeed sold under sin, the confusion of adults is not so different from that of children. In focusing on the peril of children under consumerism, we are probably trying to understand ourselves, as like Paul we marvel at the tangled strands of our behavior: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want but I do the very thing I hate” (Rom. 7:14-15). In an irony of carnal life, a moment of adult generosity toward a little one plays into a system that turns little ones into big spenders themselves.

Cross suggests that our concern about children’s relationship to things is well founded, for in their longings we learn about our longings. “Without realizing it, children become a ‘valve’ for adults, both opening and restricting consumption,” he says. We can shelter their innocence from the world, or expose them to the world in their still-wondrous innocence. But the pendulum ought to swing back and forth. In the end Cross advises, “History suggests that the balance between shelter and wonder can be struck if adults think seriously about children’s needs for shelter and wonder, and less [about] their own.”

Books like these, which delve deeply into both the human heart and the public square, can help us with the old struggle, the longtime call to people of faith to look not only inward and outward, but upward. For even in the struggle between the cute

and the cool, between desire and restraint, between children and adults, we need not struggle as those who have no hope.

Amidst the detritus of Christmas excess, we may still return to a different story, one in which a meager stable becomes a house for a king. In a world in which children cry “Gimme,” the gospel reminds us that grace is God’s gift freely given. Between the cute and the cool, the Holy Spirit still intercedes with sighs too deep for words, and as we vacuum up the pine needles we are bold enough to hope and to sigh, “Next year, we are going to do this differently.”