

book review

Children, Consumption, Controversy

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David Buckingham

The Material Child: Growing Up in Consumer Culture

Polity Press, Cambridge, 2011

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RRP: £15.99 (PB)

Reg Bailey

*Letting Children Be Children: Report of an Independent Review of the
Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood*

TSO for the Department of Education, UK, 2011

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In an editorial for *Childhood*, sociologist Chris Jenks argues that children are ‘not ordinary people’ but that they belong to ‘a special order’. (6) Jenks is of course referring to the sacralisation of childhood. In contemporary Western culture

children are often seen as innocent, vulnerable beings who must be protected from a variety of risks. As future citizens their successful socialisation is a key priority for parents and governments alike. It is therefore not surprising that debates about children and consumption are so fierce. Consumerism is seen as antithetical to childhood and, for many, the cause of much harm. This review discusses two recent additions to the debate: David Buckingham's book *The Material Child: Growing up in Consumer Culture* and Reg Bailey's report *Letting Children Be Children: Report of an Independent Review of the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood*. These texts join a growing body of literature on children and consumption and reflect rising concerns about the role of capitalism not only in children's lives but also on much a wider scale. Although these texts examine the same phenomenon, their aims, approaches and conclusions differ considerably. Buckingham's book provides a comprehensive summary of research on children and consumption, while Bailey's report highlights areas of concern for the UK government and outlines various strategies to deal with what he sees as the increasing commercialisation and sexualisation of children. Both texts provide vital information for those interested in consumer culture and its impact upon childhood.

Buckingham is one of the leading scholars in the field and in *The Material Child* Buckingham expands on his earlier work, moving beyond the media to consider consumption in the wider sense.² The book is divided into twelve chapters, with each examining a specific body of literature or aspect of consumption. The first three chapters review the research on consumption and the child consumer and provide the theoretical background for the book. Buckingham argues that children have been largely neglected in theories of consumption and notes that when they are discussed, their consumption (like women's and that of the working class) is almost always framed in a negative manner. In Chapter 4, Buckingham 'rewrites' the history of consumption to include the child. He argues that marketing to children is not a new phenomenon, that its origins can be traced back to the nineteenth century when manufacturers began producing children's toys and clothing *en masse*. In Chapter 5, the focus shifts from the past to the present with Buckingham examining the contemporary children's market. He explores the various techniques and strategies marketers use to appeal to children (and parents) today. He argues new technology has completely transformed marketing practices, that advertising today

is increasingly targeted at the individual rather than the masses. In chapters 6 and 7, Buckingham weighs in on two key debates about consumption: the role of the media in both the obesity 'epidemic' and the sexualisation of young girls. He reviews the media effects literature arguing that most of these studies suffer from serious methodological problems. In the case of obesity, Buckingham claims that such research has failed to provide convincing evidence to link obesity to advertising, and that effects research isolates 'children's food consumption from the wider social context', where poverty is a much greater problem than advertising. (105) Buckingham makes a similar argument about the sexualisation of young girls. Although he acknowledges the increasing availability of sexual imagery in contemporary Western society, he concludes that research on the impact of these images is 'limited and inconclusive'. (142) According to Buckingham, complex social problems cannot be reduced to 'simple-cause-and-effect'. (229) In chapters 8 and 9 Buckingham explores the relational aspects of consumption, examining the role parents and peers play in the process. Chapter 8 focuses on pre-teens and the notion of 'pester power', while Chapter 9 discusses teenagers' engagement with consumer culture and the importance of commodities in the construction of identity.

For Buckingham, consumption is not an isolated act but is embedded within complex social relationships. He argues that children's and young people's consumption often involves considerable negotiation with parents and peers. He explores why parents buy products for their children and highlights the ways consumption is bound up with discourses of 'good' and 'bad' parenting. The final chapters examine the ways in which marketing practices are increasingly shaping the provision of public services in the present. Buckingham argues that the commercialisation of television and education has significant implications for children, particularly those in lower socioeconomic groups who may not have access to certain resources. In the concluding chapter, Buckingham addresses the issue of inequality which runs through the entire book. He argues that debates about increased regulation of the market and/or the media serve only to deflect attention away from larger structural inequalities.

Buckingham's argument will be familiar to those who have read his earlier work. In *The Material Child*, he asserts that debates about children and consumption are bi-polar: in the literature children are positioned either as helpless victims who

are exploited by evil marketers or active agents who are empowered by their participation in consumer culture. His goal is to reframe the debate, arguing that children's consumption is far more complex than either of these models suggest. Buckingham calls for a sociocultural approach to consumption, which acknowledges the complexities of the modern economy. He believes the relationship between children and marketers is 'jointly constructed' (103): without children there would be no market; equally, children can only buy what is available to them. Buckingham rejects the 'commercialization of childhood' thesis arguing that childhood does not, and cannot, stand outside the commercial world.³ According to Buckingham, consumption is an inescapable part of everyday life. For him, the solution lies not with increased regulation (although he thinks this is necessary in the case of the internet) but rather with education—he believes that parents and schools have a responsibility to teach children about consumer culture using the model provided by media literacy studies. When it comes to research about children and consumption, Buckingham cautions against sentimentality and melodrama, arguing that we must back up our claims with methodologically sound research.

Evidence is of central concern to *The Material Child*. The book's title not only references the girl in Madonna's song who lusts after material goods, but also points to the 'real' or 'material' child (as opposed to the ideological one) who is so often forgotten in discussions of consumer culture. As is the case with many other debates about children, it is adults who 'speak for' the younger generation. In *The Material Child* Buckingham seeks to include the child's voice. He cites several studies (including some of his own) where children were interviewed about their consumption practices. He believes that we must not pathologise children's consumption, but rather seek to understand how and why kids (and indeed adults) consume.

The *Material Child* is well-structured, easy to read and informative. It provides a comprehensive review of the literature on consumption, examining the history of the child consumer and the ways consumption has been conceptualised with respect to both adults and children. Buckingham examines a wide range of literature and identifies key areas of debate. The book raises interesting questions about current marketing strategies (whether they are ethical or not) and demonstrates the need for education in this area. By using a sociocultural approach, Buckingham highlights

the importance of examining the 'whole picture' rather than just focusing on individual aspects of consumption. *The Material Child* has wide appeal and will be of interest to individuals working in childhood or cultural studies, education, media, marketing and politics.

While *The Material Child* critiques the available literature on children and consumption, *Letting Children be Children* provides recommendations for the British government to minimise the impact of commercialisation and sexualisation on children. The report was commissioned by Sarah Teather, then UK Minister of State for Children and Families, and was the fulfilment of a 2010 election promise to address public concern in this area. *Letting Children be Children* builds on the findings of earlier government reports conducted by Tanya Bryon, David Buckingham and Linda Papadopoulos.⁴ The report assesses current legislation regarding the media and the sale of goods and services to children. *Letting Children be Children* is a valuable resource for those interested in examining the role government plays in the regulation and protection of childhood.

Letting Children be Children is divided into four 'themes' or chapters: the 'wallpaper' of children's lives, clothing, products and services for children, children as consumers, and making parents' voices heard. The first two chapters discuss the increasing sexualisation of Western culture, examining both the media (magazines, advertising, music videos and the internet), and goods and services for kids such as toys and clothing. Chapters 3 and 4 move away from sexualisation to the issue of consumption. While Chapter 3 examines children's buying practices (looking at the notion of 'pester power', the problem of peer pressure and the centrality of new media in the advertisement of goods and services), Chapter 4 address parents' concerns about the increasing commercialisation of Western culture and explores the various avenues that parents can take if they want to complain. Each chapter identifies key areas of concern and provides practical solutions. The report's findings are based on a combination of online surveys and face-to-face interviews conducted with children, parents and businesses over a one-month period in the United Kingdom. The report identifies several gaps in the regulations regarding the sale of music videos to minors and the reliability of age-verification systems on the internet. *Letting Children be Children* makes fourteen recommendations which include providing 'modesty covers' for lad's magazines, banning sexualised

advertising around schools and kindergartens and creating a single website for parents wanting to express their concerns about products or services. These recommendations are designed to protect children from premature sexualisation and excessive commercialism.

The report's title provides a clear indication of its position in the debate. *Letting Children be Children* argues that children are being forced to grow up too quickly as a result of the increasing commercialisation and sexualisation of Western culture and that for children to be children adults must behave like adults. Bailey, the chief executive of Mother's Union (a charity which supports mothers in eighty-three different countries) asserts that children today are not only being pressured to consume but also to look (and/or behave) a certain way. Although Bailey acknowledges commercialisation and sexualisation are not parents' primary concerns (and that evidence of the effects of these phenomena on children is inconclusive), he believes that it is not acceptable to sit back and do nothing. Bailey argues that parents, along with businesses, have a responsibility to ensure children grow up in a safe and healthy environment. Like Buckingham, he does not advocate removing children from the commercial world but rather argues that education is the key. He believes the government should invest money in the development and/or assessment of consumer literacy programs that educate children (and adults) about new marketing techniques. Although Bailey acknowledges there are some gaps in the regulation of sales of certain goods and services, on the whole, he does not think increased regulation is the answer. He believes that businesses can and will act 'in good faith'.

In addition to being well written and easy to read, *Letting Children be Children* is noteworthy in several other respects. Like *The Material Child*, *Letting Children be Children* seeks to include other voices in the debate. At the heart of the report is the belief that parents and children's opinions need to be taken seriously. Bailey's report includes direct quotes from parents and children as well statistical information about some of the key concerns. It therefore fills a gap within the current literature. *Letting Children be Children* also differs from other scholarly works in that it provides practical solutions to the problems identified. It outlines clear strategies to deal with children's exposure to sexualised imagery and excessive commercialisation. The report identifies the organisations that need to enact the necessary

changes. Finally, *Letting Children be Children* provides an executive summary of its findings for those who do not want to read the entire report. The report has broad appeal.

Rebecca Kambuta is a PhD candidate at Otago University, New Zealand. Her doctoral dissertation traces the figure of the unruly child through film and reality television. She is the co-author with Catherine Fowler of 'Extreme Human Makeovers: *Supernanny*, the Unruly Child and Adulthood in Crisis' in *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory* (2011).

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¹ The report can also be accessed for free at the Department of Education website:

<<http://www.education.gov.uk>>.

² See, for example, David Buckingham, *After the Death of Childhood*, Polity, London, 2000 and 'Selling Childhood? Children and Consumer Culture', *Journal of Children and Media*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2007, pp. 15–24.

³ See Naomi Klein, *No Logo*. Flamingo, London, 2001; Stephen Kline, *Out of the Garden: Toys and Children's Culture in the Age of TV Marketing*, Verso, London, 2001; Susan Linn, *Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood*, New Press, New York, 2004; Sue Palmer, *Toxic Childhood: How the Modern World is Damaging Our Children and What We Can Do About It*, Orion, London, 2006; Alison Quart, *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers*, Arrow, London, 2003; Juliet Schor, *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 2004.

⁴ Tanya Bryon, *Safer Children in a Digital World: The Report of the Byron Review*, DCSF, UK, 2008 and *Do We Have Safer Children in a Digital World? A Review of Progress since the 2008 Byron Review*, DCFS, UK, 2010, David Buckingham, *The Impact of the Commercial World on Children's Wellbeing: Report of an Independent Assessment for the Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Department for Culture, Media and Sports*, DCSF/DCMF, UK, 2009 and Linda Papadopoulos, *Sexualisation of Young People Review*, Crown Copyright, UK, 2010.