



Five Tips for Raising Media Savvy Kids

Your child's world is changing every second, but the more things change, the more they stay the same. In *Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers' Schemes* (Lamb & Brown, St. Martin's Press, 2006), we give examples of the kind of stuff that your daughter faces every day in her world. In *Packaging Boyhood: Saving Our Sons from Superheroes, Slackers, and Other Media Stereotypes* (Brown, Lamb, & Tappan, St. Martin's, 2009) we do the same for boys. While the messages are different for your son, they're still everywhere they are and just as narrow as those directed at your daughter.

Below we offer five tips for talking with your children about media and marketers' attempts to influence them. Are there paths through the forest of sexy diva princess pink shopping hotties or tough, wild, hard-partying, cocky players? There sure are. And whether you're a mom or a dad, you can raise a child who can make her or his own way through the prefabricated, prepackaged, homogenized world that marketers are trying to sell.

- 1. Do you own work.** This is a lot harder than it might sound, which is why we put it first. Doing your own work means becoming familiar with what's out there. Watch what your children watch; listen to their music; read their books and magazines, so that you know what messages this world sends them. It also means being aware of your emotional response to the things you see. It's important that you take the time to name and understand what makes you so uncomfortable, so that you can take care of your own feelings before trying to understand theirs.
- 2. Listen to what your daughter or son likes and why they like it.** Ask them about their world. Don't assume you know why she loves shopping at Victoria's Secret, or why he loves playing *Halo*. You might be surprised by their answers. She may love the power she experiences when wearing these clothes or she may enjoy the grown up feeling they give her. He may like the freedom of getting out his aggression in a violent shoot-em-up game, or he may be really enthralled with the storyline and characters. Only when you understand where your child's really coming from can you talk about his or her desires and your concerns.
- 3. Bring them the world on your terms, from your broader view.** Reflect on what they say. Share your discomfort. Help them notice the bigger picture, for example, how looking hot like the latest teen idol can be fun but also connects her with a lot of other stuff she might not have noticed or thought about, or, how acting like a cool slacker dude may have a negative impact on his success in school and thus his future hopes and dreams. Wonder aloud about more general patterns you see, like how all those little purses hanging from everything might make girls think that all girls, even three year olds, are into shopping, or how the over the top action in every form of media might make boys think that they have to be wild and crazy all of the time.
- 4. Start young.** You can help your four or five year old develop a vocabulary and a way of talking that will set the stage for conversations for years to come. What better way to introduce the word "stereotype" to your daughter or son than by walking through the girls' and boys' departments of any clothing store, or the "blue" and "pink" aisles of any toy store? If you question, they'll question. Model a way of seeing and talking about the different choices presented to your children. Ask her to imagine stories other than romance, shopping sprees, or saved by the prince versions she'll see over and over. Ask him to imagine stories other than superheroes or guys that need to fight to teach someone somewhere a lesson. Help your children notice when their world is becoming smaller and more limited, so they can step back and say, "That's silly. That's a stereotype. Real girls and boys aren't always like that."
- 5. Open up possibilities and create options.** Our job as parents is to encourage our daughters and sons to be all they can be and to introduce them to a world of possibilities. Increase the time you spend trying new activities that challenge your child's imagination. Seek mind-opening books, TV shows, and music that aren't marketed to "boys" or "girls" but to all kids. Defy pink. Resist explosions. And offer girls and boys the possibility of action without violence, pretty without sexy, and also, the full rainbow of colors!