

CO-OP COMMUNITY NEWS

From the Parent Advisory Council
of the North Seattle Community College
Cooperative Preschool Program



March 2005

What's So Bad About Ronald McDonald?

BY TOM HOBSON

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Cooperative Preschools

Strangers are targeting your child. Not with weapons, thank god, but with media messages designed to make them beg, whine and cry until you finally break down and buy yet another piece of crap. Excuse my French, but that's the technical word for most of the toys, electronics, candy, and "food" they sell to children.

In college I was part of a student team working on a media buying plan for McDonald's. Our research turned up the fact that in households with children between 2 and 8, it's predominantly the children who make the decision about what restaurant their families frequent. At the time Ronald McDonald was a more recognizable personage for this age group than Santa Claus. We could never determine whether advertising was the

cause or effect of this phenomenon, but I just can't imagine that 2 to 8-year olds had a lot of say in restaurant decisions during previous generations. Twenty years later the ability of marketers to get at your children has only increased. And just as we move heaven and earth to protect our children from those who would target them in other ways, it behooves us to take

measures to protect our children from these marksmen as well.

It's not just television advertising—but mostly it's television advertising—that we're talking about here. We're all aware of the staggering statistics about how much TV American children watch. I feel confident that most of us adhere (more or less)

My personal belief is that targeting children with advertising messages is unethical.

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2004-2005 Calendar

March

5 Co-op Open Registration
14 PAC Meeting

April

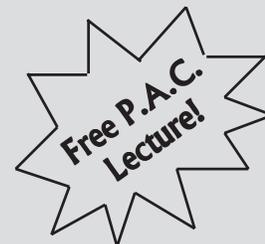
11-15 Spring Break (no school)
18 PAC Meeting

May

9 PAC Meeting
30 Memorial Day (no school)

June

13 Last day of classes for Seattle Public School students



Helping Kids Cope When Things Don't Go Their Way

Wednesday, April 27, 2005
7:00 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.
Faith Lutheran Church
8208 18th Ave. N.E.
(At Wedgwood Co-op Preschool)

A workshop by Elizabeth Crary, NSCC Parent Educator, founder of STAR Parenting and author of many parenting books. Ten percent of sales of Parenting Press books and materials sold at the lecture will go to the PAC scholarship fund.

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to the one hour per day model, but even so, if you permit commercial television your child is being bombarded by dozens of commercial messages a day, hundreds a week, tens of thousands a year. (Don't be deluded into thinking that PBS is safe: its programming is rife with subtle commercial come-ons, and merchandising tie-ins.) And these aren't just index cards posted on a community bulletin board. These are pitches employing the most powerfully persuasive techniques known to mankind and they are targeted directly at your child.

Of course, your child has no money of his own; she can't take herself to the store or restaurant. No, these marketing geniuses realize that they must rely on our little ones to in turn "persuade" their parents. Children are no less marketing geniuses, tending to eschew high tech methods, however, in favor of the old school techniques of persistent pleading, sulking, and tantrums. Even if we parents manage to resist their rhetorical efforts, it generally winds up with children feeling denied, and parents feeling—at least a little—like mean-spirited ogres.

Curse you, Madison Avenue.

Beyond Abstinence: Some Guidelines

Avoiding TV altogether is, of course, the best solution, but abstinence is not realistic for most of us. The American Medical Association (or maybe it's the American Pediatric Association) recommends no television for children under 2-years-old, then no more than 2 hours a day thereafter. I've only personally known one child who was successfully kept from television during her preschool years, but she proudly told me this year (as a kindergartner) that she can watch TV now. People are

weak—most of us cannot be lifelong television virgins.

This is why we need commercial prophylactics. I warn you that the following guidelines (which I've gathered from a number of sources, including parents in my co-op) are far from 100% effective, but they can at least help in your efforts to protect your child from advertising executives and their designs on the peace of your family.

Control the Remote Control

A responsible adult should control the television (as they would any narcotic—if you think I'm exaggerating, ask me about the narcotizing effects of television sometime). Even as your child grows older and can operate the TV himself, he should be expected to ask permission before watching. As I see it, it's a fundamental responsibility of American parents to closely monitor what and how much their child watches.

The Viewing Plan

Develop a TV viewing "plan" that can function something like our preschool rules. If you make the plan clear to your child, it's not you, the parent, limiting your child's viewing, but rather it's the plan. Some families like to predetermine viewing schedules at the beginning of each week; others take it day-by-day.

In our family we began rationing TV by giving our daughter 4 poker chips every day, each worth 15 minutes of viewing time. We've dropped the actual poker chips now, but the concept still lives, with her having innovated the idea of saving her "chips" for a couple of days in order to "buy" a longer movie later in the week.

Whatever you do, the key is to stick to the plan. The moment your child knows the plan isn't written in stone is the moment she will conceive of the idea to plead for exceptions.

Watch and Talk

Watch TV *with* your child as much as possible. Not only do most children enjoy the companionship, but it puts you in the room with those who will target your child—and as powerful as they are, you are more powerful.

I know that you have phone calls to make and floors to mop, but there are many chores (folding laundry, ironing, filing, personal grooming, even exercise) that can happen while you watch. Not only will you be role modeling active behavior, but you will be there to talk during the show.

That's right, there is no better counter-balance to the narcotic haze of passive viewing than talking. Ask your child questions about what they are watching. Offer your opinions about what is going on (this is another of those modern American parenting obligations). Create the sense that TV is a family activity. My memories of watching television as a young child always include my mother, father and brother together in our small den chatting about *The Brady Bunch* (I was Greg and my brother Sam was Bobby) and *The Partridge Family*. We would act out the scenes even as they were being broadcast. I'll never forget Dad's response to my comment that Danny Partridge was funny: "It's just the way his pants fit." I still use the line while I've forgotten everything Danny ever said. On Sunday we would eat popcorn and apples for dinner while we watched *The Wonderful World of Disney*. I have no memories of the actual programming, but very clear ones of the family tradition. TV is not the same as going to a movie or the theater—silence is not golden.

And forget the misguided notion that watching television is restful. Reading is restful, naps are restful. Watching TV alone is narcotizing.

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Teach Your Child to be Commercial Savvy

My daughter has become a master at deconstructing the automobile and beer commercials that target me during sports broadcasts. Now eight years old, she's learned to guffaw at the notion that pretty girls will like a man for drinking a certain beer. She recognizes when cars are shown performing impossible feats of speed or agility. She struggles more when it's a commercial targeted at her, but she's starting to get the hang of it. She said the other day, "That won't *really* make me more popular."

If your child is aware of any brand at all (Disney princesses, McDonald's, Power Rangers), she's ready for your own home school media curriculum. Children need to understand that advertisements are created by people who are trying to get us to either buy something or do something. It's a fun game to dissect a commercial message: Who is trying to persuade us? Why? What do they want us to do? How are they trying to get us to do it? What do they take us for—fools?

For very young children, the game might just be to play "spot the commercial". It can be difficult for a 3-year old to distinguish between the sales pitch and the "entertainment," but it's an important media skill to learn.

Try covering your ears and talk about how the commercial makes you feel with and without sound. This can be a great example of how advertisers try to manipulate our emotions. How do certain commercials make us feel and why do they want us to feel that way?

Commercials often boast about taste tests and other comparison surveys that prove their products are the best. Why take their word for it? Do your own taste tests. Make it even

more fun by involving friends. Does the heavily advertised brand really taste better than generic? It's not something most of us can afford on a regular basis, but I've occasionally purchased an advertised product that Josephine wants simply for the purpose of demonstrating that it's a piece of crap. A less expensive method is to point out advertised products while shopping. How does the actual product compare to the advertisement? Examine the label (especially if it's food) and the packaging. What did the commercial leave out? Where did the commercial exaggerate? Do you feel the same way about the product in your hand as you did about the one on TV? Why?

Young children can often become confused about what is real and what is make-believe on television. Talk about whether or not what is happening on the screen could happen in the real world.

A Final Word

Lest you've missed it in this article, my personal belief is that targeting children with advertising messages is unethical. I have begun writing emails to companies that I find the

most offensive. There are some who would have it be illegal altogether. I won't go that far, but that doesn't mean we can't use our consumer power to pressure companies.

The real battleground, however, is in your living room. This is where these strangers find our children with their slick, deceptive messages, stoking the flames of unattainable desires in their little souls.

Those of us who are currently parents of young children are the first generation to live our entire lives as targets. We don't know life any other way. Some of us have made our peace with it, while others (like me) are still trying to figure out what it all means. Whatever the case, it's pretty certain that advertisers will continue to step up efforts to target our children with junky toys and junky food. And we, seasoned veterans that we are, like it or not, have the job of teaching our children how to sort through the crap.

Excuse my French.



NSCC Co-op Preschools with Openings for 2004-05

	Co-op	Contact	Phone
Pre-3s	Ingraham	Anita Wooster	789.9186
	Meadowbrook	Monica Mace	522.0274
	Northgate PM	Jill Petro	706.1113
3-5s	Broadview	Erika Larimer	425.774.6571
	Meadowbrook	Suzie Rinne	523.6003
	Northgate	Jill Petro	706.1113
	Sandhurst	Andrea Baumgarten	527.2886
	Wallingford AM	Lisa Drake	632.9817
	Wallingford PM	Ann Weber	632.0646
Fives	Meadowbrook	Sara McCoy	524.2209
Web Link	To view current listings and for descriptions of each co-op, please go to our web site at: northseattlecoops.org		

Going Digital with the PAC Newsletter

BY LAUREN HOWELL

Editor, Co-op Community News

Every year in my three years as a PAC rep, we've checked in with the co-ops to see if they were ready to go fully digital with the distribution of our newsletter. Up until now, it hasn't flown: too many of us were still "unplugged" from the Web. But this, my friends, is the year in which we're ready to transition.

Your PAC rep will be polling your co-op to see which, if any, of you still needs a hard copy version of this newsletter. PAC will print a reduced number of hard copies to meet that need, and circulate (to everyone) a link to the newsletter file posted on the PAC web site. Your PAC rep will continue to post a paper copy on your co-op's bulletin board, as well.

For those of you with internet access, you'll need the Adobe Acrobat Reader software (version 5.0 or higher) on your computer. Go to www.adobe.com to download this free program (or to upgrade to the latest version).

The Acrobat format (.PDF extension) is easy to view, share and print across all types of systems; those of you with printers can print it quickly on 8.5x11 sheets. For now, we'll keep the newsletter in black & white for increased ease of use.

The timing is good for a transition to digital. Printing costs continue to rise, even for black & white. PAC doesn't have the resources to manage advertisers (and, frankly, the political

nuances of determining which sources are acceptable to our diverse constituency). We had a sponsor for several years but lost that with the economic melt-down. A search for new sponsors revealed little interest or ability beyond "one-offs", which again brought up the issue of PAC resources (not there).

Thus, two years ago we turned to a pay-for-use scheme, whereby a portion of each co-op's PAC dues pays for black & white hard copies. The cost averages about \$26 per co-op per year, for an annual printing budget of \$1000. This year, rising printing costs mean we must either budget more, or reduce our print quantity. Fortunately, many co-ops are now well on their way to "going digital," so reducing quantity is what we're doing (with an eye toward eliminating printing altogether).

In the meantime, focus is growing on the PAC web site—a terrific resource with untapped potential for both internal and external communication. The printing budget would be well spent to improve that resource; for example, paying the annual fee for maintaining our new (and so easily remembered and passed along!) URL address: northseattlecoops.org

Part of the printing budget could also support the new Marketing Committee's effort to publicize the NSCC cooperative preschool program as a whole—and to create a

"toolkit" of materials that can be customized by individual co-ops needing assistance filling empty slots.

In future, the content of this newsletter, enrollment materials and more will all be part of the web site. Welcome to the virtual world, baby: it's ours to leverage, for better or no.



Wanted!

Page Layout Person to Join Next Year's PAC Newsletter Team

We're seeking a co-op parent to partner with next year's newsletter editor by acting as page layout person/graphic artist for next year's *Co-op Community News*, the monthly PAC newsletter. You should have experience with a page layout program (e.g., we currently use PageMaker) and be willing to serve as PAC rep for your 2005-06 co-op.

This is a terrific job for someone who enjoys layout (the more experience you have, the less time this job will take) and wants to be part of the bigger co-op picture that is PAC.

If interested or for more details, please contact Chinda Roach (our current Assistant Editor who will take over as Editor next year) at email: chinda@comcast.net or phone: (206) 729-2736.



Contact

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Assistant Editor: Chinda Roach

NSCC Cooperative Preschool Program

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206.527.3783 (NSCC Parent Ed Office)

