

Early Childhood Commercialization and the Creation of Value “Mental Maps”

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Abstract

A child develops in the context of family dynamics but his/her competence and the adoption of cultural and social norms depend on his/her peers, teachers, the media and other educational environments that impact behaviour and view formation. Studies reveal that the media have radically changed the way children play and behave by neglecting the importance of creative games, critical thinking and social contacts.

Confrontation against the strong global marketing directed towards greater consumption by children, indiscriminate acceptance of everything offered to children and social isolation seem to be a “mission impossible.” This work presents a scientific and educational discussion of early childhood commercialization and creation of value mental ‘maps’ under the influence of media, consumption, games and toys. In order to effectively protect children from manipulation and aggressive attempts of downgrading the importance of family and educational institutions, the view of the inevitable need to strengthen partnership between parents and educators is promoted in this paper. The establishment of a partnership is an effective and fundamental assumption in encouraging the development and protection of children despite the fact that it appears to be a marginalized pedagogical issue in pedagogical practice.

Key words: *early childhood; educators; manipulation; moral values; toys.*

Introduction

Due to their intensive development period, children are susceptible to environmental influences, as well as to numerous manipulation possibilities. There is an attempt to minimize parents’ and families’ influence on children’s upbringing, while a broader

social environment influence is becoming stronger. Strong mass media development enables a targeted approach to children throughout the day regardless of where the child is. Young children have become a very interesting population for manipulators (corporations) and therefore they are the centre of focus for commercial purposes. They are manipulated through their health, development, game, illnesses and lives, parents, social and economic status. Self-proclaimed “experts” offer children many ways to escape from reality, and thus escape from themselves in an unrealistic virtual world (virtual friends, virtual games, virtual families, virtual pets, virtual life, virtual shops, etc.). They try to impose a “desirable” consumer behaviour and imitation, to broadcast glittery, garnished messages on how to ignore parents and teachers, and how to manipulate parents during the period of life when they are most needed. Children receive messages which imply that it is not necessary to be critical of the imposed and commercially well thought messages or even to think for themselves by telling - “We think about you,” “We know what is best for you,” “Follow us and you will not go wrong”, etc. It is also worth mentioning young (preschool) consumption and shopping addicts who are, due to commercial and profit purposes, told: “You do not have our product? You lack worth! You are not in.” (Miliša & Zloković, 2008). Manipulation (especially child manipulation) is considered immoral behaviour that denies development and any form of freedom using force and coercion. Unlike physical violence with frequent explicit victim’s reactions, psychological or cognitive constraint is more successful because the other person is trying to introduce misleading, deceiving or other “hidden” strategies to eliminate resistance and persuade behaviour from which a manipulator achieves personal benefit (Joule & Beauvois, 1987). Basic manipulation techniques are often emotionally based - referring to feelings, embellishing reality, psychological coercion, deception, appeals to authority, inducing fear and similar. Techniques of cognitive manipulation influence the content of a message - modification and distortion of reality, disinformation, lying about facts, misrepresentation, and coercion of the victim to consent through all of which a manipulator achieves personal benefit. Contrary to criticism, manipulation is often justified by argument that its consequences are almost negligible, especially because the (adult) public is able to manipulate and “decode” it. However, what remains unanswered, or hardly mentioned is what about the children? Here we talk about ‘soft’ methods without acknowledging them with any major significance and which the public receives with a certain amount of humour (commercials, music videos, etc.) as well as everyone’s right to freedom of opinion. Looking at manipulation as inevitable L. Bellenger refers to Laborit’s statement that our culture is based on aggression and therefore manipulation is the only possible alternative to brutality, the use of force and physical violence (1985). Particularly explicit in the defence of manipulation are those who paraphrase Paul Watzlawick “Everything is communication”, and say “Everything is manipulation” (Breton, 2000, p. 10).

Respecting human rights and the right of every individual to freely choose how to have fun, to play, what to read or watch, how to raise children, which are their values,

how and with whom to spend time, replacing the thesis of the educational, moral and desirable in which the manipulator wants to trivialize everything (even life), we consider it unacceptable and harmful to the individual and social level. With regards to possible consequences of ignoring facts on vast children manipulation starting at a young age through games and toys, opposing strong global marketing directed towards children seems to be a “mission impossible”. Not accepting the “culture of silence” and child manipulation, especially their health, development and lives, sacrificing general human values in favour of profits, turning a person (child) into an object, a toy or a person’s value and obedient machine, this work discusses some of everyday examples of manipulation, aggressive imposition of inappropriate content, toys, unhealthy food and drinks, highlighting not only their educational and pedagogical absurdity but also risks to child development (cognitive, physical, emotional, social) as examples of (non)covert violence. Instead of children playing with toys that acquire new useful knowledge, skills, capabilities, and basic educational and moral values according to their age, interests and abilities, there are numerous examples of how they become toys in the hands of adults whose only goal is to create profits and value “mental maps” of the possession of materialistic goods and consumption as the basic life values, symbols of social power and desirable living status.

“Social Blindness” or Child Well-Being?

An interested dealer and manipulator do not find it difficult to approach children. Today almost every child, even preschoolers (in developed or middle-income countries), has a personal mobile phone or at least at the age of nine becomes a regular user of one of the social networks where they spend a large part of the day and free time. Information such as personal data, name, gender, date of birth, interests, daily movements, with whom they live, which school they attend and which class, who their friends are, address as well as information about the parents are all available to any interested adult. Even without any kind of previous attempt to seek permission or inform the parents, text messages and email messages are becoming more common methods of direct communication with a child. Minors are sexualized and abused in trivial activities for commercial purposes. Little girls in the early developmental period (5 years) are denuded and sexualized for instance in advertisements for expensive cars although they will be able to access driving test in 12-13 years or more. Their performance with media comments approving this act is transferred around the world (RTL Television, 2013). Methods of recruitment as young non-critical consumers as possible have no boundaries. Let us mention, for example, Webkinz web sites where tens of millions of children are gathered surrounded by brands. This virtual world created for purchase is accessible only to those who buy a \$15 doll with a hidden access code that will allow them entrance into the magical world of Webkinz. That said, it is not difficult to persuade children to continue buying. A filled-in application provides Webkinz virtual world designers with all the information about a child. Those who

put in their date of birth will receive a congratulations message and a reminder that right now is the best time for purchasing a new Power Rangers watch or any other product from a wide repertoire of offers (InfoSUM.net, 2013).

Paradoxes of inappropriate manipulative relationships with children are also visible within certain educational institutions. Children less frequently attend nature excursions, sightseeing of cultural monuments, exhibitions, performances, or go to the ZOO. Instead, large shopping centres often become places of sightseeing and education. Somewhere, this becomes a common practice. In Chicago, for example, it has become common for increasing number of educational institutions (preschool and elementary school) to take children to see animals but those stuffed, leather and plastic animals which are located in shopping malls (The Media Education Foundation, 2010). A new era of children's propaganda is in its full swing - the promotion of expensive toys and unhealthy fast food, sugary products as a direct attack on human health, while at the same time appealing to the need to reduce obesity in children. Children growing up in Croatia are not devoid of previously mentioned trends or of many other commercially produced trends either. It is believed that children begin their long, risky and expensive consumer journey in early childhood; in the first years of life. From that moment, according to McNeal, children deserve to be treated as consumers (The Media Education Foundation, 2010). Precisely this group of children is the greatest reward for American business. The amount of money received from grandparents, relatives and other adults that 52 million children under twelve years of age spend on clothes, toys, music, electronics (during the holiday season, holidays, birthdays) is estimated at 40 billion dollars every year. In addition to this the consumption of adults directly affected by children has significantly increased. It is estimated at about 700 billion a year (The Media Education Foundation, 2010).

A study conducted in 2006, in Croatia, on a sample of 500 children aged 7 to 14 obtained data about their habits, leisure time, what they like-dislike, how much money they have and what they spend their money on. The results indicate that the money they get from adults most children spend on sweets and snacks (48%), food and beverages (machines), the cost of mobile phones, magazines, toys, stickers and computer games. The advertising industry is particularly interested in children because they have a significant amount of money (estimated 233 kunas monthly child allowance rate in Croatia), and also, they are raised by the media as future loyal customers. The research shows that consumption of children aged 8 to 14 years is growing at a rate of 20% which is significantly higher than any other demographic group. Marketing experts predict that consumption encouraged by children will have doubled every ten years (Šojer, 2011). Based on the fact that, according to the latest census in 2011, there are 678,202 children under 14 years of age in Croatia and that their consumer interests are not different from other peers (in the developed parts of the world), it is certain we are talking about an impressive sum of money. There seems to be no crisis when it comes to investment in advertising targeted towards

recruitment of young consumers. Despite the ban on direct advertising intended for children, it has been noted that in year 2010 alone, which was the time of recession in Croatia, advertising increased by 7%. The advertising industry is interested in babies as well. Children visit a shopping centre for the first time between 2 and 6 months of age, and at the age of 18 months they can point to or say what they want to buy. At the age of 18 months children distinguish product labels and when they are two years old they associate products with brands. Parents have admitted they are the least cautious with money when their children are concerned who then become triple consumers since they buy themselves, affect the purchase of their parents and become “obsessive” consumers (Roditeljski info, 2010). A large number of parents (86%) admit that the selection of products in shops is influenced by their children, and 21% of parents are aware that their children have a final word in the purchase. Parents confirmed (25%) that children want to own what they see in commercials, and they are very persistent in the realization of their desires. Children strongly impact adult consumption not only in relation to purchase of toys, but also when it comes to the choice of cars, summer and winter holidays, choosing an apartment or a house, and furniture. Advertising companies pay special attention to the study of children and their behaviour (preschool period) in order to encourage increased consumption as efficiently as possible. For example, psychologists observe children hidden behind the glass and collect important information that will be used in an advertising attack. Together they go to shops and shopping centres, record the way they observe products, how they take it and leave it, and the way they move. They record children in kindergarten, school, at home when they eat breakfast, as they go to the closet and decide what to wear, in the bathroom while bathing and having shower, watch how they use shampoo, soap, and floating toys. They also organize friendly parties to record children as they talk with friends, what they do meanwhile, the way they sit, which products they use (The Media Education Foundation, 2010). According to Neelankovil and O’Brien, ethnographic research itself is transformed into advertising aim of becoming a kind of “scientific stalking”. Advertisement tries to be present in all segments of a child’s life. Advertising intended for children has become a special industry. In the USA children are “bombarded” with more than 3,000 commercials on a daily basis. Specific strategies are developed to convince them that life is all about shopping, getting, spending. Attempts from the 70s by the Federal Office of Consumer Protection (FTC), which were meant to protect children under the age of eight against aggressive advertising collapsed with an explanation (the federal court, the government) that the last thing a democratic society will do is to restrict advertising affordability to children. Children’s consumption continues to grow by 35% per year, and from \$4.2 billion in 1984 to \$40 billion today (852%). Aggression and manipulation is evident through various television channels with the sole purpose of selling tens of thousands of different toys and their accessories. Children are aggressively attracted to spend more time in front of television screens rather than on

playgrounds or gyms (The Media Education Foundation, 2010). Modern generations of children are significantly different from previous ones. In the USA they are referred to as KGOY (Kids Grow Up Young). They grow up faster, they are better connected, direct and well-informed (Roditeljski info, 2010). The toy industry, and especially electronic toy industry, finds justification to send a message to the preschool KGOY generation: ... “You will never enrol into college if you do not play video games.” Some go so far as to send a message to parents that their children will not thrive if they do not purchase particular products. The importance of the advertising industry, as well as toy and DVD industry for babies (Baby Einstein, Brainy Baby) can be detected in the fact that George Walker Bush himself promoted them in their campaigns during his presidential term (2001-2009). In one of his presidential addresses to the public he presented the owner of a private company Baby Einstein, Julie Aigner-Clark, who in five years made \$20 million by launching DVDs for infants. It seems that opinion of the professionals who have unsuccessfully tried to inform parents and the public about questionable educational value of this software did not mean much to the president. In their opinion, there is no evidence to indicate that babies watching DVDs can learn anything, instead, they have poorer vocabulary (The Media Education Foundation, 2010). The author of this paper (partially) accepting claims about KGOY generation considers inevitable and appropriate to ask the question about whether we are aware of how the present generation and also babies themselves are increasingly manipulated regardless of the damage being done to their health and overall development. The fact is that in comparison to the previous findings there are 40 times more children who are diagnosed with bipolar disorder in some countries compared to thirty years ago, and in addition to that there is an increase in anxiety and depression. In the United States alone 4, 5 million children have been diagnosed with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). Experts report on 8 million prescriptions of antidepressants for children a year. Many parents think if they do not expose their children to the media in early years or if they do not endow them with huge amounts of (expensive) toys they will lag behind other children.

Play and Toys – Developmental or Manipulative Function?

Today, many children want to have it all. Shopping centres resound with children’s disapproval and crying, tossing on the floor, expressing anger and rage when they do not get everything they want from their parents. Parent’s disorientation and discomfort in front of the others means that the child gets exactly what he or she wants. These are mostly attractive and expensive toys. Some illustrative examples of manipulation of parents and children can be found in the book “Influence – Science and Practice” by Robert Cialdini (2007), which describes how large corporations, in order to increase profits in January and February (months when traders record much lower income than in December, the holiday season), use a trick through targeted advertising to

present current “the best and latest - the coolest” toy that children must want and seek from their parents as a gift. Parents could not obtain that particular toy in December because the shop was equipped with only around 20% of the total demand for that product. In January, parents again reach into their pockets to keep the promise they had previously given.

Insurers estimate that British children have toys worth 634 pounds on average. During Christmas holidays in 2005, parents spent around 1.8 billion pounds for new toys. At the same time, Yorkshier’s investigation (Redakcija Business.hr, 2005) showed that only 49% of parents save money for their children (education, health, etc.). Until a child in Britain reaches 18 parents spend the equivalent in the national currency of 950,000 kunas. The report indicates something that many parents probably do not know; for a quality game only eight toys is enough: colourful thread embroidery, coloured paper, crayons, wooden shapes or cubes, clay, beads and various figures (Redakcija Business.hr, 2005).

Besides large amounts of money invested in often unnecessary, useless and expensive toys, many of them broadcast immoral messages. Just think of “Cubes for small children that teach them how to rob the bank.” Although new, a toy Playmobile is criticized by some parents, while many of them do not perceive the dangers which their children are exposed to. We shall highlight one of the scenes from this game: *...A blond haired girl with dark glasses and a gun threatens terrified bank manager with his arms raised in order to steal gold bars....* The scene reminds of those from action movies though it is a game intended for children between the ages of 4 and 10. “Bank Robbery” game comes from German Playmobile company and contains a full set of equipment necessary for robbing a bank (gun, big bags of loot, screw, safe deposit, gold bars, police car). The producer did not see anything controversial in this game, and we do not know whether they see an educational message in the same part of the game where the question is: *“Beware. Bank robber wants to take the money and asks for the key to the safe. What will a bank manager do?”* The toy costs 35 pounds. We do not know whether the mentioned producer is specialized in sending indecent messages but in the storage of many disputable toys there is another one named “buildings”, where the construction workers aside from basic tools and shovels also find three cases of beer (Portal Jutarnji.hr, 2013).

Toys and games have become powerful tools that manipulate children. We could also cite many examples of toys and messages that encourage sex/gender stereotypes - pink toys are not for boys, toy-cars are not for girls. Toys designed for boys and for girls are even physically separated on shop shelves. Toys designed for girls are placed on one side: dolls, doll accessories (clothes, shoes, accessories for maintaining hair and beauty...), figurines, kitchen, irons, cleaning sets, vacuum cleaners. The producer often briefly describes what a doll does or works (Barbie - chef, Barbie Princess, Barbie shopping, Barbie at the hairdresser...). In larger toy shops we have visited in the city of Rijeka and parts of Zagreb city centre we could not find a Barbie doll that

would stimulate some kind of a creative manipulation of this toy. Furthermore, we do not find didactic games for girls on the shelves assigned for them. It seems that the goal is to raise a good wife, tidy housekeeper, caring mother, and supposedly it is not necessary to be critical, creative and intelligent. On the other side are toys designed for boys: action figures, mighty super-heroes, playing sets that encourage motor skills, didactic toys that develop logic, electronic toys, garage and runway Remote Operated Vehicles, vehicles, railways and other toys that, unlike most of those for girls, require/encourage creativity, thinking, and problem solving. Judging by what children's toys represent in the acquisition of knowledge and experience, the message is - boys have to be intelligent, capable and powerful. Sex stereotyped messages are also sent by toys - animals for girls (horses with pink mane, dolls wearing high heels and make-up). Animals - toys designed for boys are powerful, rugged, and rough and super powerful heroes who often do not have a face that could express an emotion. “Male-female” roles in toys are extremely sexualized: Barbie is ultraconservative and seems to be an outdated doll. Nowadays Winx and Bratz are modern; sexy girls, half-naked, in pin-up poses as nude girls in popular calendars (Turčin, 2010).

Even though some fairy tales had been written more than a hundred years ago, they still appear to be fashionable among children. Modern versions of classic children's stories appear today. The makeover motives are diverse. Although we support the liberal worldview in relation to all types of emancipation (except commercial at any cost), it is hard to believe in the moral and benevolent intentions of some new versions of fairy tales. Two years ago it was announced that the “Walt Disney” company intended to make a new film version of the story of Cinderella in which this famous heroine is located in the present time. Cinderella will be an employed yuppie girl who works hard for the company and dreams about great and eternal love. In accordance with this trend - placing popular fairy tale characters in the new era, a cartoonist Scott Campbell made his version of popular children's stories. Each month of Campbell's calendar is presented by the popular heroine of the fairy tale, but with an erotic image. There are the Little Red Riding Hood, The Little Mermaid, and Alice in Wonderland. Heroines are dressed in erotic lingerie and clothes with original fairy tales background. Cinderella is presented as a bimbo beauty, Snow White without the Seven Dwarfs, wearing a mini skirt, while the Little Red Riding Hood and other fairy tale heroines in Campbell's drawings are not exaggerating with respect to length of their dresses (Fančović, 2011). Supposedly we should not be surprised with new “advanced” story Hedgemond the Hunter macro! Hedgemond the Hunter dealer! Hedgemond the Hunter national forest bank robber! or “innovative” toy “Fool Mom and Dad”... The author of this paper asks whether we as a profession can ignore immoral and inappropriate messages broadcasted by many games and toys as well as fairy tales for children.

Aside from immoral, toys also send controversial messages. Crying and talking dolls already exist. They are known to generations of children (now grandparents) from the 1960s. Usually the children (and adults) were enthralled by their reproduction of

one or two words - mum, dad, good afternoon, good night, some were laughing, some were crying, and some managed to blink or move their hands. Expecting inevitable improvements of toys appearance and function we are surprised by certain new trends such as dolls intended exclusively for individual nations or religions. Dolls named "Toys for Muslim children" wear a headscarf and recite Surah of the Quran. "There is no other god but Allah and His prophet Muhammad..." ...My name is Amena and I am a Muslim..." are just some of the words spoken by this doll. The Amena doll was created not only for children to play with it, but also to help them memorize the prayers. The meaning of some of the Surah from the Quran is explained by Amena in English (Koyuncu & Fazlagić-Šestić, 2010). Without considering any of the human rights, religious rights included, it remains a mystery how to solve a situation when a child brings a new doll Amena to kindergarten (attended by children of other religions) and wants to play with it (even if only on that day). Nowadays, expensive toys with integrated electronics are becoming more and more popular. The big boom of toys combined with smart phones and various applications is expected to start this year. It is an interesting fact that even babies are the target group for toys connected to smart phones. Big hit of the largest Toy Fair in the world which was held in early February 2012 in Nurnberg, Germany, was an innovative toy for the baby; the holder in which iPhone is "locked" so the baby can play with a smartphone. This bracket prevents the iPhone from getting broken or damaged, and nothing will happen if it sometimes ends up on the floor (Klinfo.hr, 2012). Very soon we will find many toys for children which will be "must have" on shelves in toy shops around the world and in Croatia as well.

Conclusion

Considering the availability of children to any interested person, regardless of goals to be achieved as well as the expansion of possible manipulation of their development, there is enough reason for the scientific and professional public to search for appropriate approaches to the problem and respond effectively. This primarily applies to the need to help parents who, under pressure of media and advertising, often believe that if they do not buy a single piece of item presented in advertising (manipulating) offers, they will cause irreparable damage to their children. Despite the media pressure and the strong influence children exert on consumption, which especially in the preschool period refers to the purchase of toys, parents' "surrender" proved to be the least desirable strategy. The question is: if five-year-old children manage to manipulate their parents, what will happen in their adolescence? Fortunately, experts warn that children's requirements can be controlled by setting rules and negotiating from their early age (Holly & Borzekowski, 2011). In addition, results of a UNICEF study are also encouraging despite the omnipresent advertising machinery. Children were asked a number of questions about the events of their daily lives. Among other things, children were asked what they would do if they had a magic wand. Very few children said they would like a toy, a mobile phone or something similar. When asked about happiness, a

large number of children answered that they are happy when they are with mum and dad, when they play with friends and when friends of theirs are happy (Šojer, 2011).

Parents certainly want to make their children happy by buying them numerous toys. Many of them do not know that they are the key factor for children's happiness and development. The greatest sources of incentives for young child development are their parents rather than expensive toys. During the first two years of life the brain rapidly evolves and science experts presume that direct interaction with parents, siblings, grandparents, and peers is the best way of encouraging child development. Open, creative games with persons close to a child and placing them in a position to solve problems appropriate to their age, are considered much more efficient than the best educational software. At the same time, it is a fact that the commercial media radically changed the way children play. Creativity, cognitive development, emotional and social development have been pushed out of children's games. The idea of incentiveness of many toys that parents might have established is often just an illusion. Scientific research draws a conclusion that children aged 6 to 8 spend significantly less time engaging in creative games. Creative games have declined by 94% among older children, aged 9 to 12 years (The Media Education Foundation, 2010).

Considering the importance of games and toys by which children acquire new knowledge, skills, abilities and habits, experience the world around them and themselves among others, this work poses the question of whether we raise (or manipulate) generations of children who will never have the experience of creative self-amusement or experience and the joy of playing with their peers instead of isolating themselves in dim (children's) rooms. Games and toys that are aggressively offered to today's generations of children are generally an encouragement to replay the seen or heard, to imitate other's behaviour, other people's desires and other people's values. Parents and children receive information that tends to belittle the importance of social dynamics and close parents-children ties. Material goods and consumption present an imperative of life values. Toys are excellent mediators for achieving these goals. Emphasizing the power of the media and their unquestionable contribution to the rapid flow of information, access and dissemination of new knowledge, stimulation and facilitation of learning, promotion of human rights, and informing the public about the problems of different groups of vulnerable populations, this work examines the role of the media in the light of manipulation of children and the selling of toys. It seems that the media attributes less attention to quality and analysis, because many important positive functions of the media, like communicating with each other and presenting opposing views are sacrificed in favour of profits, sensationalism and triviality.

This work outlines the pedagogical and sociological aspects and brings up some of the questions that are necessary in consideration of the fact that it is becoming increasingly difficult for parents to build and maintain the authority over commercial manipulators which know how to quickly ingratiate children and “carry them away” into the “new” consumer or virtual world. We draw attention to the marginalization

of parental and institutional role in children's education. The question is raised – whether, considering the potential positive effects of primary prevention (in families, kindergartens, schools and beyond), the marginalization of families in everyday life really is a coincidence? We do not advocate the thesis of “deterministic chaos” and/or conspiratorial plot and this is not even mentioned in the work, but we point out to many examples of media manipulation of children. Our goal is to try and unmask those situations which made it impossible for children (and young people) to independently, critically and in accordance with their abilities and interests decide their own destiny or to do so in conversation and consultation with parents.

It is clear that we are open to the modern, new and better, however, quality technical support should be provided for parents in order to more effectively accomplish educational and moral obligations towards children and in order to encourage them to critically review and reflect what is offered and said, what is expected of them, what their goals and needs are. Children (and adolescents), in accordance with their developmental age, should be encouraged to contemplate their idols, their/our personal ideals as the highest standard of something we would like to achieve, and whether we really want to be offered and imposed “mental” maps of everyday behaviour by the manipulator. It can be concluded that we are opposed to “militant” campaigns for “protection” of children's interests and that we advocate primary prevention programs. Children (and adolescents) need to be taught how to use activities that are offered (toys, printed and electronic media...) as well as the media and consumption in general, as instruments of personal expression and social activism, where positive human values and achievements will be promoted. The mission of this work will be greater and more permanent if we search for a concept of new efforts to elevate the level of cultural responsibility towards children in the family and beyond. Establishing a quality partnership with parents of preschool children is one of more effective options, however, in family and educational practice it is still insufficiently applied.

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Komercijalizacija ranog djetinjstva i stvaranje vrijednosnih „mentalnih mapa“

Sažetak

Dijete se razvija u dinamici obiteljskog konteksta. Međutim, njegova kompetencija, usvajanje kulturnih i socijalnih normi ovisi i o vršnjacima, odgojiteljima, učiteljima, medijima i drugim odgojnim sredinama koji imaju utjecaj na ponašanje i oblikovanje stavova. Istraživanja pokazuju da su komercijalni mediji radikalno izmijenili način na koji se djeca igraju i ponašaju zanemarujući značaj kreativnih igara, kritičkog mišljenja, socijalnih kontakata.

Suprotstavljanje snažnom globalnom marketingu usmjerenom prema dječjoj što većoj potrošnji, nekritičnom prihvaćanju svega što se djeci nudi i socijalnom usamljivanju čini se „nemogućom misijom“. Rad predstavlja znanstveno-pedagošku raspravu o činjenici komercijalizacije ranog djetinjstva i stvaranju vrijednosnih mentalnih „mapa“ uz pomoć medija, potrošnje, igre i igračaka. U cilju učinkovitije zaštite djece od manipulacije i agresivnih pokušaja minoriziranja značaja obitelji i odgojno-obrazovnih institucija promičemo stajalište o neminovnom osnaživanju partnerstva roditelja i odgojitelja. Uspostavljanje partnerstva odgojno-obrazovnih institucija s roditeljima jedna je od temeljnih i učinkovitijih pretpostavki u poticanju razvoja i zaštite djece, a u obiteljskoj i pedagoškoj praksi, čini se, marginalizirani je pedagoški problem.

Ključne riječi: *igračke; manipulacija; moralne vrijednosti; odgojitelji; rano djetinjstvo.*