

**Impacts of Advertising to Children  
and Screen Exposure on Children's Health**  
Proposals to the UN Working Group on Human Rights  
**and Transnational Corporations and Other Business Enterprises**

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**Introduction**

Founders of not for profit organisation Edupax have been involved in the issue of children screen exposure since 1986. The UN Year for Peace was actually celebrated by teachers and students of Charlesbourg, suburb of Quebec City. Public expression of children's hope for Peace took the form of collecting war toys in each class, after promising students that their toys would be recycled and reused in a sculpture for peace and disarmament. The celebration was described in an article published by the Canadian Magazine Ourschools/Ourselves in its Fall issue of 2011.

BONJOUR,

Since the UN Working Group on Human Rights and Transnational Corporations and Other Business Enterprises announced that its members «will take into account proposals by all relevant actors in advance of its first session» (16-20 January 2012), Edupax, not for profit organisation with major expertise in violence prevention & media education, has decided to let the Working Group know what Canadians and Quebecers think about business-related children's rights. Edupax would enjoy presenting proposals to the UN Working Group about how to advise governments on the development of domestic legislation to protect children from abuse. Considering the deadline for submissions has been fixed on December 8 of 2011, please find below the article about the relationship between corporations and children in our country, concerning particularly marketing strategies used by advertisers to attract young people and lure them in a culture of overconsumption.

We expect the new expert body charged with identifying and promoting good practices and lessons learned on the implementation of child protection policies, to enhance access to effective remedies to educate kids and adolescents by giving priority to the culture of citizenship, instead of consumerism.

We would enjoy participating in the new annual UN Forum on Business and Human Rights, which, as we could read, should «provide an arena for the discussion of trends and challenges in implementing the UN Guiding Principles on human rights and business. The challenges faced here, in North America, should be useful to share with educators and health workers across the world.

Please express our gratitude and hopes to Mr. Michael Addo (Ghana), Ms. Alexandra Guaqueta (Colombia / USA), Ms. Margaret Jungk (USA), Mr. Puvan Selvanathan (Malaysia) and Mr. Pavel Sulyandziga (Russian Federation).

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## **EMERGENCY FOR REDUCING THE INFLUENCE OF MARKETING, ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRIES ON CHILDREN'S PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH**

Notes from the late [2nd Screen Overdose Conference](#) held at the YWCA Montreal, May 2011. Presentations made at this conference can be viewed on line at this address:

<http://jacbro13.com/colloques/c2-bref.php>

Abstracts and biographies of presenters on May 4, can be viewed in English here:

<http://jacbro13.com/colloques/c2-4maiAC.php>

Presentations on May 5 can be accessed in French here:

<http://jacbro13.com/colloques/c2-5maiAC.php>

Presentations on May 6 can be accessed in French here:

<http://jacbro13.com/colloques/c2-6maiAC.php>

In May 2011, teachers, parents and activists met in Montreal to participate in the second "Screen Overdose Conference", titled *The Impacts of Screen Overexposure on Young People's Health: the facts, the damages, the solutions*. Thirty speakers from California, New Mexico, British Columbia, Michigan, New York, Ontario, and Quebec came to share their expertise about various impacts of screen exposure on young people. The event was hosted by the YWCA Montreal, Edupax and ACME (Action Coalition for Media Education). Most [presentations can be viewed on line](#).

This section focuses on the educator-led campaign to reduce the influence of marketers on Quebec children. The second section examines the legislative and policy differences between advertising to children in Quebec and in the rest of Canada, and provides recommendations to improve regulation in both jurisdictions.

### **What's Wrong With Screen Exposure?**

Quebecers have been known to care about the influence of screen exposure since the mid 1970's when the National Assembly (Provincial Government) voted unanimously in favour of the Consumers Protection legislation, including the ban on advertising to children. Since then, Quebec teachers have spent time and energy trying to improve health protection for their students, despite increasing efforts by the marketing industry to influence children. The article you are about to read includes pieces of the untold story of educational efforts by Quebec teachers and parents to reduce various impacts of screen exposure on children and adolescents in a province where positive news does not always travel easily across Canada.

### **Some History**

Back in April 1990, four months after 14 women were shot dead and 20 injured in the Montreal shooting at Ecole Polytechnique, **Our Schools/Our Selves** published an article by David Clanfield about an innovative educational campaign led by activist group PACIJOU. The article described how teachers got involved in a «war toy project» four years before the shooting.

### **War Toy Campaign of October 1986**

The Quebec war toy campaign began in 1986 when teachers started collecting war toys from their students in all 13 schools of the Charlesbourg school district, located in the northern suburb of Quebec City. At the beginning, the project was simple: children were promised that

their war toys would be recycled into a sculpture for peace. So if they wanted their hope to live in a peaceful world to be seen, they needed a monument visible in the community, they also needed to bring (invest) *many* toys. And they did!

The collection, organized in the fall of 1986, was to commemorate ***U.N. International Year for Peace***. In Quebec, all local teachers' organizations affiliated with Centrale de l'enseignement du Québec (CEQ, a provincial umbrella organization of school teachers unions, health and social workers unions) had been asked by their federation to collaborate with local employers to organize student activities to promote peace in the world. The campaign was particularly unusual since teacher unions in Quebec were better known for being in labour disputes every three years with their employers. But in Charlesbourg, the collaboration happened to be a success.

### **Peace Education Project Led To Five Major Discoveries**

What teachers in Charlesbourg could not predict was what this peace education project uncovered.

- 1) Most war toys given by kids to be recycled in the monument were named after two most popular television series.
- 2) These series were the most violent in the world in the mid 1980's: GI Joe and Transformers, carrying 84 and 81 acts of violence per hour respectively.
- 3) The TV series had been produced by Hasbro, the second biggest toy manufacturer in the world, behind Mattel.
- 4) Hasbro was paying TV networks (ABC in the U.S. and TVA in French Quebec) to air the two series during children's prime time, starting in September in order to stimulate the purchase of associated toys for December—a time of year generally associated with peace and goodwill.
- 5) It was no surprise that kids in Canada and the U.S. were exposed to these marketing-based TV programs. But clearly they were also popular in Quebec, the only jurisdiction in North America where advertising to children under 13 has been illegal since 1980.

These five discoveries had a long-lasting impact. In the winter of 1987, teachers and the Charlesbourg school district authorities hired university students in visual arts to build the [sculpture for peace](#) in the hallway of Charlesbourg high school. The campaign not only elicited enthusiasm from parents and pride from public school authorities, it also obtained active participation by teachers, positive coverage by the media, and motivated students to contribute to world efforts for peace and disarmament. All these elements are essential components of a successful approach to peace education, media education, and Education with a big E. And as all OS/OS readers know, education is a long-term process with huge benefits for society as a whole. Contrast this with war—a short-term lucrative business for a few.

Leading initiators of Charlesbourg's peace education project were honoured by the Roy C. Hill Foundation in the spring of 1987. At the time, the Canadian Teachers Federation was mandated by the RCH Foundation to honour teachers' innovative projects across Canada and

in 1987 the Charlesbourg war toy campaign became one of them.

### **Second War Toy Project Across Quebec, Fall of 1988**

The CEQ found the project promising enough to include it in its 1988 education campaign to commemorate the **40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights**. This time, teacher unions from across Quebec asked their members to collect war toys in their classrooms. Thousand of war toys – well over 25 000-- were sent either to Montreal or to Quebec City, where two monuments for peace and disarmament would be built in the following years. The two monuments were actually inaugurated in October 1990.

The issues raised with this second educational war toy campaigns were as follows:

- a) Gifts and toys marketed through screen entertainment glamorizing and glorifying war and violence as playful or normal ways to solve conflicts, are contrary to healthy educational values.
- b) Advertising war toys to children being a sophisticated (and illegal) form of child abuse, teachers and parents should join efforts to oppose it.

### **Supreme Court Decision, Spring of 1989**

As fundraising for the peace monuments was going on in Montreal and in Quebec City, in April 1989, the Supreme Court of Canada announced its decision about advertising to children, amazingly just six months after the second war toy project. To understand the importance of this decision, readers must know that Canadian manufacturer Irwin Toys had challenged the validity of the Quebec legislation forbidding advertising to children. Irwin argued that its freedom of expression was denied by Quebec legislators, and was therefore contrary to both Canada's and Quebec's Charter of Rights. The Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the Quebec legislation to protect children from advertisers was fully constitutional for two main reasons:

- a) The court agreed with experts that children cannot make a clear difference between fiction and reality before the age of 13. The relationship between professional marketers and children was considered unfair, and so the court concluded that child protection was legitimate.
- b) Since advertising of toys and food was not forbidden when intended for parents, the Court found that restriction of marketers' freedom of expression was «reasonable».

### **Convention on the Rights of the Child, Fall of 1989**

Seven months after the Supreme Court's decision, the United Nation's General Assembly adopted in November 1989 the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. The CRC is the first legally binding international instrument to incorporate the full range of human rights—civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights-- into child freedoms that should be respected by governments. World leaders decided that children needed a special convention just for them because people under 18 often need care and protection that adults do not. The leaders also wanted to make sure that all governments recognize that children have human

rights too.

The Convention sets out these rights in 54 articles, including Article 17e, the right to be protected from “information and audio-visual material injurious to their well being”. By agreeing to undertake the obligations of the Convention, national governments had to commit themselves to protect and ensure children's rights before the international community. States parties to the Convention were [obliged to develop and undertake actions](#) and policies in the light of the best interests of children.

### **Historical Rendez-Vous of Events**

Although not planned by organizers of the war toy campaign, both events--the Supreme Court decision and the International Convention--reinforced the legitimacy of educational efforts to neutralize the influence of advertising violent toys through violent entertainment.

### **Silence of North American Public Deciders, Over 30 Years**

During the 30 years following the ban of advertising to kids in Quebec, not one single jurisdiction in North America dared adopt any similar regulation. The silence of public deciders is particularly worrying since surveys have shown that people in Canada and in the U.S. disagree with allowing children to be targeted by marketers. In order to break the silence about the silence of decision makers on the issue of advertising to kids, Edupax, a not for profit organization created in the spring of 2003, took over Pacijou's mission from the 1980's and started organizing conferences to investigate the impact of screen advertising on young people's health. On these occasions, presenters and participants shared knowledge and expertise about the influence of overall screen exposure on young people's health, including advertising to children. The first conference was held at *Universite du Quebec* in Gatineau in November 2009 and the second was held at *Montreal YWCA* in May 2011.

### **More Screen Time Exposure = More Influence On Young People**

Screens have become the favourite past time of young people in North America and Europe. Both the Kaiser Family Foundation and Active Health Kids Canada found that the average screen time exposure of children exceeds 40 hours per week. Many studies have revealed that screen time exposure plays a major role in the health habits of children and teens. Two industries--entertainment and marketing--use a variety of content to attract young people: entertainment programs, information programs, and commercial advertising.

We all know that ads are primarily produced to influence consumers' choices and that marketers agree to pay more to get their ads viewed by more spectators. Commercials are shown on various screens: television, movies, Internet, video games, DVDs, etc. MTV (and its Canadian incarnations) is certainly the most commercial station where ads are commonly used to advertise music to pre-teens and adolescents.

### **More Funding in Order to Increase Kids and Teens's Screen Exposure**

To understand the impacts of screen exposure on young people's health, it is useful to examine why kids spend so much time watching screen-delivered media.

Every year, for the last quarter of century, broadcasters and producers received more funding to attract more kids and keep them there. For 30 years, [budgets for advertising](#) to children and adolescents in the U.S. have [skyrocketed from \\$100 million USD in 1983 to \\$17 billion](#) in 2007.

For 30 years, increased funding to reach kids and teenagers fueled more aggressive competition between broadcasters and producers. Harsher competition to increase revenues pushed the industry toward more exciting strategies, gadgets, and content to attract more young viewers and capture their attention for longer periods of time.

### **Screens not Devils**

The industry use screens as tools for business. When the entertainment industry increases screen time exposure of young people, it means more financial benefits for stockholders, no matter damages to young people's health. In fact, the industry denies any responsibility for such damages. Their advocates argue that protecting children is parents' responsibility, not theirs. They even lobby decision-makers to prevent them from regulating the use of screens.

In recent years, competition within the industry has led to strategies to capture children's attention earlier in their life, including babies who cannot even walk. Parents are offered DVDs and special TV networks with the argument that it could make their child more intelligent. The primary purpose of early screen exposure is to format minds to fit in a consumers' culture. Gradually, forcing babies to watch images on the screen became more "normal" than allowing them to crawl to and reach for their toys. Screen immersion seemed to provide a richer environment to toddlers than their own home. These arguments have not only proven to be false, but screen exposure was also found to increase the risk of attention deficit disorder and to decelerate language learning.

### **Screen Exposure Linked With Obesity**

Since watching TV is a sedentary activity, most educators know that it is not very effective at burning calories, and scientists agree. In May 2010, soon after its 63<sup>rd</sup> World Health Assembly, the World Health Organization (WHO) posted the following statement, pointing at the marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children as a major factor for obesity:

*Evidence on the extent, nature and effects of food marketing to children shows that advertising is extensive and other forms of food marketing to children are widespread across the world. Most of this marketing is for foods with a high content of fat, sugar or salt. Evidence also shows that television advertising influences children's food preferences, purchase requests and consumption patterns and that increasingly children are being exposed to a wide range of other marketing techniques. Food marketing to children is now a global phenomenon and tends to be pluralistic and integrated, using multiple messages in multiple channels.*

<http://www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/marketing-food-to-children/en/>

### **Advertising to Children: Comparing Child Protection in Canada and Québec**

**The two presentations relevant to this next section were made by**

- Madame [Janet Feasby](#), Vice President of Advertising Standards Canada (ASC),
- Dr [Monique Potvin Kent](#), researcher at University of Ottawa.

## Child Protection From Marketing in Canada and Quebec

In all of Canada, with the exception of Quebec, advertising to children is self-regulated by industry under the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative. In Quebec, where children consist of 15% of the audience, there is an advertising ban to those under the age of 13. A mother of three children, Dr. Potvin Kent understands how powerful commercials can be. Since advertising policies in Canada and Quebec are very different. Potvin Kent and her colleagues at the Institute of Population Health at the University of Ottawa examined the commercials that children from Ontario and Quebec are actually seeing when they watch television. Her research compared the number of food and beverage TV ads viewed by English-speaking children in Ontario, French speaking children in Quebec, and English speaking children in Quebec during their favourite viewing hours. She then evaluated the healthiness of these food and beverage advertisements.

In order to determine what children were watching on television, 428 children aged 10–12 years completed television viewing diaries for a seven day period. At the same time, 32 TV stations were recorded simultaneously between 6 am and midnight. An analysis of children's 90 hours of referred television viewing was then undertaken.

A total of 429 food and beverage ads were analyzed and their nutritional quality was assessed. Study results showed that French Quebec children saw the same number of food and beverage advertisements as the two English groups but saw fewer food and beverage contests and sponsorship announcements, The French Quebec children also viewed fewer candy/snacks, and breakfast cereals advertisements but more ads for beverages compared to the English groups. Children were also targeted less often and spokescharacters (such as Tony the Tiger) were used less often in the French Quebec viewing than in the English viewing. The foods advertised in French to Quebec children were higher in fats and lower in sugar. A smaller proportion of the French Quebec ads were classified as "less healthy" compared to the Ontario and Quebec English where over 60% of foods advertised were classified as "less healthy".

In another study, Dr. Potvin Kent compared the TV ads of those companies participating in the "Children's Food and Beverage Initiative" (CFBI) with those not participating in this self-regulatory initiative. Results showed that companies participating in the self-regulatory initiative fared **worse** than those companies that have chosen not to participate in the CFBI. Participating companies advertised more foods and beverages, and used spokescharacters more frequently than the non-participating companies. Also, the foods and beverages advertised by the companies participating in the CFBI were higher in fat, sugar and salt. A greater number of food advertised by CFBI companies were considered **less** healthy compared to foods promoted by the non-participating companies.

Dr. Potvin Kent concluded her presentation by making recommendations to improve child protection in Canada. These included the need for:

- 1) Federal statutory regulation that would restrict "unhealthy" food and beverages in all media forms and child settings.
- 2) Broad definitions for three concepts: children, marketing, and unhealthy food.
- 3) Systematic monitoring and enforcement of regulations.

In order to improve child protection in Quebec, Dr Potvin Kent made three recommendations:

- 1) Improved monitoring of advertising to children and increased penalties for breaching the law.
- 2) Updating child viewing times that are currently based on 1980 child viewing statistics.
- 3) Extending the existing rules to ban all ads for unhealthy food, regardless if they are child-directed or not.

### **CONCLUSION**

Teachers across Canada and the U.S. Can take advantage from the articles above by considering educational activities with their students to increase awareness about marketing to children and adolescents. They can also consider bringing support for political efforts pushing for legislation to ban advertising to children along the lines of what currently exists in Quebec.