

"Dr. Jim Taylor leads the fight to rescue our values and families. Before it's too late, read this no-nonsense guide to saving your kids. It may be the most important book you ever read."

—Dan Fuller, Chair, Television Committee,
Popular Culture Association

YOUR CHILDREN ARE UNDER ATTACK

**How Popular Culture Is Destroying Your Kids' Values,
and How You Can Protect Them**

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author of *Positive Pushing: How to Raise a Successful and Happy Child*

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A CALL TO ACTION!

Your children are under attack. This assault is not coming from terrorists within or outside our borders. It is not coming from disturbed people in our communities. This onslaught is coming from our own American popular culture. It is ever present, intense, and unrelenting. There is rarely a moment in your children's daily lives in which they are not being bombarded with messages from popular culture. This siege is also in disguise; most parents cannot sense the harm inflicted on their children any more than fish can sense that their ocean is becoming more polluted. And children find these messages so fun and entertaining that they couldn't imagine that they are bad for them. Many of parents seem to have been fooled into believing that popular culture cares about their children. It doesn't! American popular culture cares about only one thing—money—and it will say anything and do anything to make more money. It can no longer be trusted to communicate healthy, life-affirming values to your children. This ever-growing juggernaut of money, materialism, and conspicuous consumption is now left ungoverned, unchecked, and dangerously out of control. This beast has an unquenchable appetite that will consume anyone in its path. The Golden Rule has been distorted into: Whoever has the gold, rules!

As a parent, you might say, “Our generation had popular culture when we were growing up and we turned out okay.” Yes, the current generation of parents had popular culture, but it wasn’t the same as today. Popular culture was once overseen by numerous public and private agencies, and guided by an agreed-upon value of “in the public interest.” You had a handful of regulated television and radio stations that offered a variety of mostly positive programming. But those forces have all but disappeared.

In previous generations, parents and children lived lives that were busy and full of activities. Back then, though, popular culture was not the detrimental force that it is today. At most an irritant, popular culture at that time didn’t make life for families more difficult because its messages were generally consistent with those that parents wanted their children to hear.

Today, children have access to hundreds of TV and radio stations, movies, DVDs, video games, the Internet, cellular phones, saturation advertising, and consumption-driven magazines that celebrate avarice, blatant sexuality, and violence. Children are inundated with popular culture everywhere they go. “The digital media are likely to have a more profound impact on how children grow and learn, what they value, and ultimately what they become than any medium that has come before,” asserts Kathryn Montgomery, president of the Center for Media Education.

The messages that American popular culture communicates to children today are in direct conflict with what is best for them. Popular culture is now a truly counterproductive force in families’ lives and, without societal support, parents have a harder time knowing what is in their children’s best interests and an even more difficult time acting on that knowledge. Children, in turn, are being led farther down a road that makes them less receptive to their parents’ positive efforts and more vulnerable to messages that prevent them from developing into healthy, happy, and contributing people.

The messages from American popular culture can be found in every part of children’s lives; the clothes they wear, the friends they socialize with, in the food they eat, and the way they spend their free time. For example, the website of the fast-food restaurant chain, Burger King, exhorts children to “Fuel up like a superhero with fun stars and

lightning-bolt-shaped Chicken Tenders... Just look in your Big Kid's or regular Kid's meal, because now and for a limited time you can find two great toys and two exciting new shapes. Now go and save the world! What are you waiting for?" Advertisements like this encourage unhealthy eating habits and foster obesity. And I doubt that Superman or Wonder Woman got their powers from fast-food. Another example is the BratzPack dolls—the "Girls with a Passion for Fashion"—who have bare midribs, hip-hugging jeans, pouty lips, and absurdly skinny figures. They tell their fans, "Until next time, take care, be good, and above all else *be beautiful*." These messages brainwash young girls into believing that physical attractiveness is all-important and may contribute to body-image distortions and eating disorders in adolescence.

At a deeper level, these messages influence children's views about the world at large, their life goals and dreams, and most fundamentally, the values that they hold dear. *Your Children Are Under Attack* explores how the messages from American popular culture directly influence and distort the values that your children adopt.

Protection, Past and Present

In the past, the protectors of children could be found in our government, businesses, schools, and at home. But the U.S. government can no longer be expected to safeguard our children—the Office of Homeland Security can't protect your children against this threat. Our government long ago gave in to big business, special interests, and "the bottom line." In doing so, it rejected the very values on which our country was founded and has shown only politically expedient concern for our children.

Big business will not show restraint either. Its very existence is predicated on placing profit above all else. Even so, in generations past, civic-minded business leaders did their best to contribute to the public good by, for example, establishing foundations to support worthy causes (e.g., Ford, Carnegie, Rockefeller). But in recent years, with an uncertain economy, little governmental oversight, and pressure from stockholders, many members of big business have jettisoned whatever humanitarian values or ethics it once held in a desperate and greedy grab for greater profits.

Even schools have become corrupted. With budget shortfalls, deteriorating facilities, and teacher shortages, schools have turned to popular

culture—in the form of fast-food, soft drink, and candy companies—to help subsidize the costs of educating children. In doing so, schools have sacrificed their values to remain viable. Once a safe haven from popular culture, schools are now complicit, exposing children to destructive and inescapable messages that support the unrelenting pressure to adopt the values forced on them by American popular culture. The result is a decline among children in moral behavior, scholarship, and social awareness, and an increase in materialism, violence, obesity, eating disorders, substance abuse, criminal behavior, and suicide. Unless you're homeschooling your children with no communication with the outside world, there may be nowhere for your children to hide from this mind-boggling assault.

The only hope of protection your children have left comes from inside your home—from you. *Your Children Are Under Attack* is a “call to action” for you to wrest power from American popular culture, put a stop to its destructive Pied-Piper allure, and regain influence over your children's lives. If you want your children to have a reasonable chance at developing into healthy and happy adults, you need to understand that your position as the most powerful force in their lives is in jeopardy. It is being replaced by a voracious machine that cares nothing for your children and genuinely has the capacity to destroy their chances to mature and thrive. Only by maintaining your stature in their lives can you forcefully, yet lovingly, guide your children toward a life that is not dominated by valueless dreams of wealth, celebrity, power, and physical attractiveness, but rather is grounded in life-affirming values that can contribute to your children's possibility of leading lives of meaning and fulfillment.

Times Have Changed

Has there ever been a more difficult time to raise children? Have you ever been faced with more choices, conflicting influences, and less ability to affect your children's growth than today? Have children ever had more information and resources available to them, yet had a less clear compass to guide them in using this knowledge? In today's society, people have unprecedented time, opportunities, and freedom with which to shape their lives. Yet the same aspects of American society that give us such a wonderful quality of life also present new demands, obstacles, and risks in raising our children.

Ironically, all of the modern tools that you have available to make your family's lives easier and more efficient seem to work against your child-rearing efforts. Technology should enable you to make better use of your time and to have more free time to spend with your children. Yet the single greatest complaint that I hear from parents is that they are always rushing around trying—often unsuccessfully, they say—to meet their children's most basic needs, much less focusing on instilling values in their children. Despite technology that allows parents to keep in better contact with their children, many parents seem to be losing touch with their children rather than becoming closer to them. This disconnection makes children even more vulnerable to the influence of popular culture.

Cars, cellular phones, microwaves, and other modern conveniences are also supposed to save you energy that you can then devote to the joys of parenting—teaching, encouraging, and sharing with your children. This wonderful form of “multitasking”—another dreaded term foisted on us by American popular culture—has been replaced by scheduling, organizing, feeding, and driving. Parents now complain that they have a hard enough time just getting their kids through the day, much less have the time and energy to be concerned about values.

These technological advancements should encourage greater access to what Thomas Jefferson believed were our inalienable rights: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Yet these rights seem more distant and difficult to achieve today than ever before. These rights seem to have been co-opted and distorted by the very culture that was meant to help us realize them.

A New Parenting Culture

The culture of parenting has changed. An unfortunate phenomenon that I have observed increasingly over the last two decades can only be described as “lazy parenting.” More and more, many parents are choosing the path of least resistance in raising their children. They are making decisions about their children that are in their own best interests rather than those of their children. Instead of taking full responsibility for raising their children, many parents today cede responsibility to others—organized sports, tutors, babysitters, TV, DVDs, video games. I call it *child rearing by committee*. In doing so, many parents have become

enablers of American popular culture, giving in to these unhealthy forces rather than resisting them, simply because it's easier, less time-consuming, and less tiring. Unfortunately, in doing so, parents abdicate their ability to influence their children positively and open them up to ready conquest by American popular culture.

Some parents might get a bit defensive when accused of lazy parenting and cite all the things they do for their children (for example, paying for piano lessons, buying them expensive sports equipment, driving their children to soccer practice, etc.). But these efforts, though certainly time-consuming, actually absolve parents of many of their responsibilities. Parents who have succumbed to the over-scheduled life that American popular culture imposes on them have less quality time to spend with their children. They are required to set fewer boundaries, impose less discipline and consequences, and share fewer meaningful experiences. In general, parents don't have to assume their traditional—and essential—responsibilities in raising their children.

Lazy parenting has led to the two greatest obstacles I have seen to raising successful, happy, and contributing children: fatigue and expediency. In their hectic lives, many parents are simply too exhausted to do what's best for their children, and often make decisions—consciously or by default—that simply reduce their fatigue. Also, much of raising children involves a battle over who will tire out and give in first. Because your children always have more energy than you do, they can nag, cajole, whine, and complain until you throw up your hands in frustration and give your children what they want, even when it is not what is best for them. In a battle of attrition, only the strongest and most resolute parents will win. For those other parents, not only do they lose, but their children lose as well.

Expediency may be the most powerful manifestation of lazy parenting. Lazy parents raise their children in the most convenient way. The choices they make are aimed at making child rearing as easy and stress-free as possible. Television has always been the most universal tool used by parents in the name of expediency. The image of young children sitting entranced in front of television sets while their mother is on the phone or cooking in the kitchen, or their father is working in the dining room, was as common in the 1950s as it is in the

2000s. Says the mother of a fourteen-month-old, “Sometimes it’s a necessary evil. We all know what it feels like to come home and flip on our favorite TV show and just veg for an hour. It feels really good, and so it’s really easy to do that for children. Unfortunately, easy isn’t always the best way to go.”

Recent advances in media technology show how parents have been able to expand the scope of expediency in twenty-first-century America. For example, long family drives have always been a difficult part of parenting. Keeping children from being bored and whiny during long road trips—“Are we there yet?”—have always tested the patience of parents. In the late 1990s, carmakers began installing video systems into automobiles that allowed children to watch DVDs and play video games during trips. As one parent, unwittingly illustrating the power of expediency, said, “Now we always use it on long trips. It turns the drive into a dream date for my husband and me. We actually get to talk up front while the kids are busy watching in back.” I wonder if these parents thought about card games, audio books, or road bingo, or how about plain old conversation? So these parents’ lives are a little easier, but at what cost to their children?

A recent personal experience further highlights the influence of expediency today. I was eating at a restaurant recently and saw a couple with boys who were about four and two years old. During the entire dinner, the boys had headphones on and were watching a movie on a portable DVD player. What a truly painful illustration of lazy and selfish parenting! These two parents didn’t have to engage their children, put any effort into their family dinner, and could take care of their own needs. If this dinnertime practice is a common occurrence, they are unwittingly harming their sons. At a very basic level, the boys are learning that they don’t need to participate in family dinners or be engaged with others during dinner. They’re not allowed to be bored or required to overcome their boredom with their own initiative. The boys don’t have to assume their share of responsibility as part of the family dinner. Imagine what would happen at future dinners if their parents forgot the DVD player or the battery died?

Why there has been this epidemic of lazy parenting is unclear. Most likely, parents’ lives are so busy that they don’t believe that they have the

time or the energy to devote to their children. Two-income households, divorce, loss of extended-family support, and disconnected communities contribute to the lack of available time and the stress parents experience. Being a parent may have become so complicated and unclear that parents may simply feel overwhelmed by the unceasing demands and helpless to overcome the obstacles. There may also be so many mixed messages from all aspects of our society—popular culture, parenting experts, family, friends—that parents just throw up their hands in confusion and exasperation. Or maybe many parents have bought into the messages of American popular culture telling them that they shouldn't have to be so selfless, that they shouldn't have to sacrifice their own lives, that having a family shouldn't have to mean that their children become their life's priority—basically, that raising children shouldn't have to be that hard. Regardless of the reasons, lazy parents become unwitting accomplices to American popular culture and their children become its unfortunate victims.

A Distorted American Dream

The American Dream is what has made America special since its inception. Every immigrant who sailed by the Statue of Liberty saw hope and possibility for a new and fulfilling life. The American Dream inspired millions of parents to work hard in often difficult and unrewarding jobs to give their children the opportunities that they never had. And so many Americans realized their American Dream of affluence and material comfort. In generations past, parents were happy when their children got good grades, played sports for fun, and learned a musical instrument. But somehow, that isn't enough for this generation of children. We now live in a culture in which good is no longer good enough. The standard of what had once been considered average, the 50th percentile, has been mysteriously raised to the 80th percentile, and this new "average" is still not adequate for children. It's as if parents who achieved the American Dream decided that being above average wasn't sufficient, so they raised the bar impossibly high. Today's parents place expectations on their children that are considerably more demanding. Children are expected to achieve straight A's and get accepted to the best schools, be star athletes with professional and Olympic aspirations, excel in music or dance, and, in their spare time, save the world.

This new culture has contributed to the emergence of American popular culture, the corruption of American values, and the decline in the American family. Parents are stressed out trying to provide their children with every opportunity, yet have lost sight of why they are giving their children these opportunities. Children are blinded by destructive messages from popular culture and their parents, and burdened with having to achieve unattainable standards that are not of their own choosing. Families are so busy chasing this distorted American Dream that they don't stop to see the damage it is causing to them. What began as the American Dream is slowly but surely becoming an American Nightmare from which it seems that families will never awake.

The Stakes Are High

What is at stake in raising your children in the early part of the twenty-first century? Nothing less than the future of your children and American society itself. This generation may very well determine the direction that our society takes in the next millennium. As a 2002 *San Francisco Chronicle* editorial asserted so passionately, "Parents must take the lead in reclaiming childhood...protected from a value system that emphasizes material wealth, products, looks, and sex above all else...Anyone who cares about the future of our society, and the values it stands for, must fight back...The challenge is not only to reclaim childhood. It is also to reclaim our nation's more enduring—and child-nurturing—values."

We are currently on the cusp of the old world and a new cultural frontier. The present generation of parents was raised with the old values that lead America to the forefront of modern civilization. You haven't been thoroughly corrupted by our profit-driven popular culture because of the values you learned when popular culture wasn't so ubiquitous or powerful. But what of the next generation? What will happen to your children's children where culture that is not driven by greed and other unhealthy values is just a distant memory, and your children and grandchildren only know American popular culture as we know it now—or worse? Can our grandchildren learn healthy values when their parents grew up immersed in negative value messages? Can they instill positive values in their children

while living in a culture where the value messages are predominantly destructive? Future generations of children have only one hope—that you take a stand, say no to American popular culture, teach your children healthy values, and start a counter-cultural—a counter-American-popular-cultural—revolution that will halt the vicious cycle in which we currently find ourselves caught. This revolution can turn the tide of your children’s futures against the destructive force of American popular culture.

The Pulse of American Families

Since the release of my last book, *Positive Pushing: How to Raise a Successful and Happy Child*, in April 2002, I have been traveling around the country speaking to thousands of parents at public and private schools in big cities and small towns. I have listened to the concerns they’ve expressed about raising their children in a mass culture whose values conflict with their own. What has become clear is that many parents have lost their bearings, and are overwhelmed in managing their family’s overscheduled and stressful lives. I have spoken to educators who, by the very lives they have chosen, are powerful allies for children in the war against American popular culture. They describe the frustration and feelings of futility they experience daily as they try to teach children and ignite interest and caring against a tidal wave of messages from American popular culture that works to extinguish the flames of passion and compassion.

I have also spoken to the kids themselves who, surprisingly, recognize how destructive American popular culture is, but lack the experience and tools to resist its messages on their own. I have sought to understand how and why American families seem to have gotten so lost in a world that offers so many opportunities. I believe that I have found the answer. Just as in politics, where the guiding principle is, “It’s the economy, stupid,” in our society, our communities, and our families, the guiding principle must be “It’s the values, stupid!”

So What Do We Do?

Raising children today is not unlike driving somewhere without a map, or even a destination. You know you want to go somewhere, but you’re not quite sure where or how to get there. Even more challenging, it’s as

if all of the road signs are wrong and people you stop to ask for directions keep telling you to go every which way but the right one. *Your Children Are Under Attack* offers you a destination of where you want to go and a road map to get you there. Having this road map will save you both time and energy that you can devote to enjoying your children and seeing them grow into mature and value-driven adults.

This book will help you to regain your moral compass, identify and reconnect with your values, and make those values the guiding principles in your children's lives. In doing so, you will have the ammunition to join forces with your children, reestablish a line of resistance, and together defend against the massive, seemingly inexorable, and soulless force of American popular culture.

Your Children Are Under Attack will show you how to identify the dangerous messages that American popular culture imposes on your children. You will learn the media through which these messages are communicated. And, importantly, you will come to recognize the unhealthy messages that are embedded in the otherwise entertaining and seemingly innocuous television shows, movies, DVDs, video games, and music that are a regular part of your children's daily lives.

Your Children Are Under Attack will also explore the battlefield where this war is being fought. You will learn about the primary areas in which American popular culture insinuates itself into your children's lives. You will also learn the insidious ways in which popular culture seduces your children. We will look at the specific values that are under attack and what values your children are learning from American popular culture, while describing the values that are essential for your children to become successful, happy, and principled people. Finally, I will show you how you can take sides with your children to instill healthy values and help them to repel the destructive values that are impressed on them by popular culture.

The values I write about focus on areas of your children's lives that are most threatened by American popular culture. These areas also emphasize essential values you must help your children develop to resist the pull of American popular culture. Identifying these crucial values evolved out of my twenty years of working with young people and their parents, and seeing the increasingly invasive and toxic effect our popular culture has had on children.

The first thing I had to do was identify which values are most important to children's development. To do so, I asked two questions:

1. What would happen to children if they didn't have this value?
2. Is the value necessary for families, communities, societies, and civilizations to function and thrive?

If a value passed this test, it was added to the list.

Through these years of talking with and listening to parents and children, I added and removed values, and honed the list until I arrived at the six values that provide the framework for *Your Children Are Under Attack*: respect, responsibility, success, happiness, family, and compassion. You might not agree with some of the values. You might have other values that you think are more important than those I describe in this book. If so, ask yourself the same questions that I did in testing your values and see if you can get closer to your own values in raising your children.

Your Children Are Under Attack will give you clear information and practical solutions to the unique challenges you face in instilling essential values in your children. You'll gain insights into the values your children need, presented in a focused and "to the point" format that bypasses the minutiae and skips the rhetoric found in many parenting books. *Your Children Are Under Attack* will enable you to do more than just try to fit effective child rearing in your family's busy lives. Rather, this book will show how you can be the kind of parent you really want to be every day without running yourself into exhaustion.

The ideas I discuss in *Your Children Are Under Attack* come from real parents faced with serious challenges in raising their children in today's complex world. *Your Children Are Under Attack* offers you solutions that are clear, practical, and grounded in the real world of parenting in twenty-first-century America. With the information and tools you learn from *Your Children Are Under Attack*, you will again have the power and the means to ensure that your children grow up with the values, attitudes, and skills to become positive, strong, and caring people.

The goal of *Your Children Are Under Attack* is to help you provide your children with special gifts that only you can give them. These gifts will allow your children to not just survive, but to thrive in these

challenging times. Your children can be professionally successful, have healthy relationships with family and friends, be happy and contented in their lives, and, ultimately, be valuable contributors to the community in which they live and society as a whole. You can give your children the values and perspectives that will enable them to resist the destructive force of American popular culture. You can instill in them a value system that they can share with their children, extended families, and communities. These gifts not only strengthen your children's resolve against the power of American popular culture, but it also extends the size and capabilities of the resistance against it. Every child that is saved from popular culture is another recruit into a growing opposition in our society that is healthy and life-affirming and, with time and determination, can triumph over the destructive forces of American popular culture.

CHAPTER 1

Know Thy Children's Enemy (Beware of the Dark Side)

American Popular Culture on the Offensive

From the 1994 movie, *True Lies*, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jamie Lee Curtis, and Tom Arnold. [end credit line]

They are driving through Washington, D.C. Harry (Arnold Schwarzenegger) is still shocked by his daughter's behavior. [In the previous scene Harry watched his daughter steal money from Gib's (Tom Arnold) wallet]

Gib: Kids. Ten seconds of joy. Thirty years of misery.
Harry: She knows not to steal. I've taught her better than that.

Gib: Yeah, but you're not her parents anymore, you and Helen [Jamie Lee Curtis]. Her parents are Axl Rose [Lead singer of Guns 'N' Roses] and Madonna. The five minutes you spend a day with her can't compete with that kind of constant bombardment. You're outgunned, amigo.

And you are outmanned as well. There is no more destructive force in your children's lives than American popular culture. It promotes the worst values in people, and disguises them all as entertainment. Reality TV, for example, has made the "seven deadly sins"—pride, avarice, envy, wrath, lust, gluttony, and sloth—attributes to be admired. Throw in selfishness, deceit, spite, and vengeance—all qualities seen and revered in popular culture—and you have the personification of the worst kind of person. American popular culture makes heroic decidedly unheroic values, characters, and behavior.

Most parents realize that popular culture conveys unhealthy messages to their children. In a recent survey conducted by Common Sense Media, three-fourths of parents believed that materialism and the negative influences from television, movies, and music were a "serious problem" in raising children. It further reported that 64 percent of parents believe media content today is inappropriate for children. Over 85 percent of parents believe that marketing contributes to children being too materialistic, sexual content leads children to become sexually active at a younger age, and violent content increases aggressive behavior in children. And 66 percent of parents think they could do a better job of supervising their children's media exposure.

Your challenge is to *know thy children's enemy*. In order to fight back against popular culture, you need to understand what it is, the many forms it takes, how it seduces children, and the messages it sends.

What Is American Popular Culture?

What is American popular culture, you ask? We all know it when we see it, you say. It's Shaquille O'Neal, J-Lo, Ludacris, McDonald's, Toys 'R' Us, Instant Messaging, Coca-Cola, and on and on. But this list only gives examples of popular culture. They are, if you will, some of the weapons that popular culture uses against your children. But they don't really tell us what popular culture is.

Ray B. Browne, a professor at Bowling Green State University in Kentucky, defines popular culture as "the way of life in which and by which most people in any society live. In a democracy like the United States, it is the voice of the people...that forms the lifeblood of daily

existence, of a way of life. Popular culture is...the seedbed in which democracy grows. It is our heroes, icons, rituals, everyday actions, psychology, and religion—our total life picture.” This definition sounds like it might have characterized popular culture fifty years ago, but it seems far too idealistic given how most of us see popular culture today. The voice of popular culture is no longer that of the people, but rather of the companies imposing its values on the people. It has co-opted rather than infused the lifeblood of daily existence. Popular culture hurts democracy by fostering conformity of thought and action and by controlling our choices. Many heroes offered by popular culture are not heroic, many of its icons represent unhealthy values, and many of its rituals, everyday actions, psychology, and religion are in its best interests, not those of the people.

Angela M. S. Nelson, a professor at Angelo State University in Texas, says that “Values are at the core of popular culture. It embodies popular objects or icons, heroes and heroines, and the rituals, myths, and beliefs surrounding these.” She adds that popular culture both reflects *and* manipulates values and beliefs. Other experts assert that “popular culture is undeniably associated with commercial culture and all its trappings: movies, television, radio, cyberspace, advertising, toys—nearly any commodity available for purchase.” Popular culture once mirrored our society’s values, but now the reverse is true; popular culture determines society’s values to a large extent.

Additionally, popular culture is pervasive, dominating virtually every part of our lives. Interestingly, Dr. Nelson says that popular culture relies on formula and repetition to influence people, repeating consistent themes to instill in people the values and beliefs that are endorsed and permitted in the culture. This notion is clearly evident in formulaic television shows (e.g., situation comedies, game shows, soap operas), common genres of movies (e.g., action, romantic comedies, animation) and music (e.g., hip-hop, country), cross-pollination of media (e.g., product placement in movies, films based on video games and theme-park rides), and represented by the profound redundancy of much of the media expressions of popular culture (e.g., repeated advertisements, replaying of music on radio). This unavoidable inundation of unhealthy messages makes it difficult for children to get away from its messages or to resist its influence.

The Profit Motive

Popular culture now exists for a singular purpose: to increase the profits for the companies that now control it: fast-food, soft drinks, candy, fashion, electronics, and so on. They accomplish their goal by brain-washing your children in two ways. Popular culture is like a network of saboteurs that infiltrate your family's lives with stealth and deception. You don't even notice its influence on your children—until it's too late. It is also an invading army that overwhelms your children. It attempts to control every aspect of your children's lives: their values, attitudes, and beliefs about themselves, their communities, the society of which they are a member, and the world that they inhabit; their thoughts, emotions, and behavior; their needs, wants, goals, hopes, and dreams; their interests and avocations; their choices and their decisions. With this control, popular culture can tell children what to eat and drink, what to wear, what to listen to and watch, and children have little ability to resist.

Not All Popular Culture Is Necessarily Bad

Though I will probably come across as militantly against any and all forms of American popular culture, I actually believe that there can be a place for some of it in our society. I confess that I like my share of “trash” movies, including star-driven romantic comedies, action adventures, and sci-fi. Whether popular culture is dangerous or benign depends on its true intention and how it's received by people. Popular culture that is simply aimed at entertaining people has its place in our society. Whether film, music, theater, books, or sports, activities that transport us from our daily lives into temporary alternative realities can play healthy and essential roles in our lives. These diversions act as brief respites from our otherwise busy lives. They give us a “time-out” that relieves stress, provides a small amount of escapism, creates pleasant vicarious emotions, and just plain entertains us. As long as the messages communicated in the media aren't implicitly bad for children, far be it from me to judge whether Spielberg is worse than Fellini or Aerosmith is worse than Beethoven.

However, popular culture that is intended to or inadvertently results in children learning bad values, attitudes, or beliefs, manipulating needs and wants, creating markets, selling goods and services that have

no redeeming value, or impressing upon children anything that is unhealthy psychologically, emotionally, socially, or spiritually, physically is by its very nature, destructive. Examples include advertising that connects certain toys, clothes, food, or drinks with being popular or cool, or music that encourages racism, sexism, drug use, or violence.

The way in which children perceive popular culture also determines whether it is harmful. If children see popular culture as simple entertainment, as I mentioned above, and don't use, for example, unhealthy characters, lyrics, images, or words, as sources of their values, attitudes, and beliefs, then this kind of popular culture is mostly harmless. But, if children, as naïve observers, draw their values and their basic beliefs about the world from popular culture, then, regardless of its intention, it will hurt your children.

But let's be clear here. Even "good" popular culture isn't that good for children. Though there is certainly educational television, video games that encourage creativity, problem solving, and decision making, movies with positive messages and role models, these media, however good their messages are, teach children bad habits. Most of these forms of American popular culture foster passivity, limit meaningful social interaction, discourage physical activity, and take time away from engaging in value-driven pursuits. They waste your children's time—time that could be better spent participating in activities that teach healthy values and habits, and that support their intellectual, emotional, cultural, spiritual, and physical development (for example, reading, sports, arts, unstructured play, and talking with others).

In Your Children's Face

The presence of American popular culture in children's lives is constant, intense, and omnipresent. Your children are exposed to hundreds of television channels. They have free and immediate access to an almost unlimited array of information through the Internet, some of it quite harmful. They have free and immediate access to other people near and far through email and Instant Messaging. And when they're not on the computer, DVDs, video games, magazines, advertising, vending machines at school, and shopping malls fill your children's lives.

Research has shown that typical American children between the ages of two and eighteen spend well over five hours each day consuming

popular culture, such as television, music, movies and videos, magazines, video games, and the Internet. It is likely that there is little time during your children's waking hours that they are not being influenced by popular culture.

But the presence of American popular culture shouldn't be your greatest worry. Rather, your greatest concern should be the influence that this presence has on your children. Few people really understand how popular culture affects children's lives. Even fewer people realize how truly harmful it is to children, families, communities, and to our society as a whole. For example, popular culture encourages your children to:

- be observers rather than participants;
- experience life vicariously instead of directly;
- engage in virtual reality rather than reality itself;
- be sedentary instead of physically active;
- have indirect social contact with others rather than real contact; and
- play it safe instead of take risks.

Is American popular culture beneficial to your children and your family? You decide. How pervasive is American popular culture's presence in children's lives? Let's take a look.

Television

A recent Kaiser Foundation study reported that children under the age of six spend about two hours a day in front of a screen (e.g., television, video games, DVD, computer), as much time as they do playing outside and three times as much time as they spend reading. Two-thirds of children are in homes where the television is on at least half the time and one-third where the television is on almost always, even when no one is watching. Even more disturbing, despite the recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics that children under two years old should not watch any television, two-thirds of toddlers spend over two hours a day in front of some form of screen media.

The Kaiser Foundation study offers some compelling findings on the effects of various forms of screen media on children. For example, reading is fundamental to a child's development, ability to learn, and

success in school. Yet children in “heavy TV households” are less likely to read on any given day compared to children who watch less television. When they do read or are read to, less time is devoted to reading. Even more significant, children who are heavily exposed to television are less likely to be able to read at ages two and six than children who watch less television. And it’s not just reading that’s affected. Heavy television watchers spend, on average, thirty minutes less per day playing outside than do other children. Not only does this hurt their social development, but it also contributes to the epidemic of obesity among children. Yet despite all this evidence, over 40 percent of parents still believe that television helps their children to learn, while only about a quarter believe that it hurts their learning. Perhaps this mistaken belief is based on the educational television programs parents grew up with, for example, *Sesame Street* and *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*, but it is no longer the case. If you think children are watching such kid-friendly shows today, think again. You might be surprised to learn that *Desperate Housewives*, the 2004 ABC hit series about unhappy housewives in upscale suburbia, is the number-five-rated prime-time show among 12- to 17-year-olds. Notes David E. Kelly, the critically acclaimed television writer and producer, “There has been erosion in respect for the media by its guardians...While in years past network executives championed quality scripted television, today they celebrate the junk. Once, they were ashamed of it; now they throw parades for themselves.”

The impact of television on children, particularly in the relationship between violence and aggressive behavior, is well documented. Extensive research has demonstrated that violent images are related to increases in violent thoughts, emotions, and behavior in children. Despite this irrefutable evidence, surveys have shown that over 60 percent of television shows portray violence. Even more damaging, the violence is often associated with humor, the perpetrators are attractive, no immediate punishment is meted out, and few negative consequences for the perpetrators are evident. The messages that children receive from violent television tend to glamorize the violence, minimize its harm, and suggest that they won’t be held accountable for their aggressive actions. The findings of a review of over one thousand studies concluded that children who watch a substantial amount of violence

on television are more likely to demonstrate aggressive values, attitudes, and behavior. A congressional summit involving children's health groups held in 2000 concluded that media violence will:

- increase aggressive behavior;
- desensitize children to violence and to its victims;
- cause children to view the world as violent and threatening; and
- encourage children to see violence as an acceptable means of resolving conflict.

Yet parents are clearly not getting the message.

Video Games

Video games have quite simply become the latest and most potent force for American popular culture, as evidenced by the *New York Times Magazine* cover story, "Joy Stick Nation!: How and why video games conquered music, TV, and the movies to become America's *popular* pop culture." The explosive growth of video games has been nothing less than staggering. For example, sales of video games have topped 220 million at \$20 billion annually. Despite the strong evidence of the unhealthy effects of video games on children, 67 percent of households with children own a video-game system. Though there certainly are educational video games that can foster critical thinking, creativity, and learning, most children are not playing those games. Surveys estimate that 80 percent of the most popular video games have violent themes, and 50 percent of video games that were chosen as favorites by fourth- through eighth-grade children had violent content. A survey of video-game use found that, of 118 M-rated games (for mature audiences, over 17 years old), 70 percent were targeted to children under 17 years of age. Even more disturbing, younger children had ready access to these supposedly restricted video games. Unaccompanied children between 13 and 16 years old were able to buy M-rated video games 85 percent of the time. The video-game industry that produces and markets these games, the retailers who sell them, and the parents who allow their children to buy and play these games obviously do not have children's best interests at heart.

And it's not just that children are playing unhealthy video games, but that they are devoting incredible amounts of time to them. A

recent survey indicated that about 70 percent of children play video games one to four hours a day with 12 percent playing a whopping five to nine hours a day. Moreover, just under 60 percent of parents don't set limits on their children's video-game playing. Says a college freshman who plays video games every day because it gives him something to do, "It's an activity that wastes a lot of time. When you're playing a video game, you really get into it and you lose track of time. Before you know it, an hour or so has passed you by." Not only is this student sacrificing study time, but he is also missing out on the valuable social experiences of college and wasting his parents' money.

The video-game industry vigorously defends itself by saying that they are just giving children what they want and that kids know that video games aren't real. They say that parents should be the ones governing what video games their children play. The video-game industry also denies that violent video games increase violence in children, despite the growing body of research that is finding that video games negatively affect children, particularly those games with violent themes. Studies have shown that children who play violent video games, particularly boys, are more likely to exhibit increased aggressive thinking, emotions, and behavior, and delinquency. They also found that video games can foster social isolation, as many video games are played alone. Gender stereotypes of women as helpless and sexually provocative are commonly portrayed. Some research has reported that academic achievement is negatively related to the amount of time spent playing video games. Not only is it harmful to children in many ways, but it keeps them from engaging in activities and having experiences that would encourage their health and development.

Music

Over the past decade, there has been a public outcry about music lyrics, particularly in hip-hop and hard rock songs. The concern has been that violent and sexually explicit lyrics could lead children to develop aggressive attitudes and violent behavior. This uproar led to Congressional hearings that pressured the recording industry to adopt a voluntary rating system for all popular music similar to that devised by the film industry. Anecdotally, the young perpetrators of the

Columbine school massacre were said to listen to heavy metal music with violent lyrics. Additionally, considerable hip-hop music is sexually exploitive and demeaning of women.

Though less often studied, music may affect children negatively. For example, correlational research has found that listeners of rap and heavy metal music had more hostile attitudes and more negative attitudes toward women, below-average school performance, behavioral or drug problems, increased sexual activity, and more arrests, though a cause-effect relationship can't be determined from this type of research (i.e., does the music cause these problems or are children prone to this kind of behavior drawn to violent music?). One study did report that listening to violent lyrics increased aggressive thoughts and feelings of hostility.

Magazines

The power of magazines to influence young lives has never been greater, particularly among girls, who comprise one of the largest segments of purchasers of magazines (along with adult females). Magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, *Seventeen*, *YM*, and *Teen People*, shape the way many girls think, look, dress, and feel about themselves. In recent years, there has been a shift in these magazines toward addressing issues of real concern for young women, for example, health, diet, and stress. But the overriding messages, particularly visual messages, in these magazines' content and advertising focus on beauty and thinness. The images and words that are the focus of these magazines have a powerful impact on girls' perceptions of their body weight and shape. For example, in one study, 69 percent of girls surveyed said that magazine content influenced their view of an ideal body type and 47 percent said the content caused them to want to go on a diet to lose weight. The study found that there was also a significant relationship between the frequency with which girls read women's magazines and girls' desire to lose weight, and the rate at which they dieted and exercised. Also, the more girls read these magazines, the more likely they were to be unhappy with their bodies.

Advertising

The presence and influence of advertising on children has been growing exponentially in recent years. According to a survey conducted by

the Center for a New American Dream, children view an average of fifty television ads each weekday. If you include the ads children hear on the radio, read in magazines, and see on billboards and in storefronts, the number easily climbs into the hundreds and perhaps thousands. Asserts James U. McNeal, a professor of marketing at Texas A&M University, "Not long ago we considered children vulnerable beings to be nurtured. However, today we increasingly see kids through an economic lens. In our business culture, children are viewed as an economic resource to be exploited, just like bauxite or timber." Adds Wayne Chilicki, a General Mills executive, "When it comes to targeting kid consumers, we at General Mills follow the Procter & Gamble model of 'cradle to grave.' We believe in getting them early and having them for life." Now, these companies have your children's best interests at heart (note the strong tone of sarcasm, in case you missed it)!

Advertising taps into and manipulates children where they are most vulnerable, in their needs for self-esteem and peer acceptance. Over 50 percent of the children surveyed by the Center for a New American Dream said that buying certain products made them feel better about themselves. This number was even higher for 12- and 13-year-olds. A third of the children indicated that they felt pressure to buy the "right" products. Observes Betsy Taylor, the executive director of the center, "They are being made to feel that if they don't have the right low-cut designer jeans, the right video game, or the right designer watch—that they're going to be rejected by other kids."

Unfortunately, our government seems to have little concern for this manipulative and, some might say, abusive treatment of American children. Many European countries have regulations limiting advertising to children. But the U.S. government actually revoked the authority of the Federal Trade Commission to set such limits when the FTC threatened to do so to protect children. It should also come as no surprise to anyone that, as the *Mothering* magazine writer, Gary Ruskin, observes, "The rise in advertising to kids coincides with the rise in childhood problems of obesity, diabetes, gambling, and smoking. It also coincides with a rise in materialism and a decline in interest in political affairs." The uncontrolled exposure of children to advertising may be the greatest weapon that American popular culture uses against your children.

Given the significant evidence of the unhealthy effects of video games on children, you would expect that the video-game industry would act responsibly in their marketing to children. Yet video-game manufacturers are especially guilty of inappropriate and manipulative advertising. According to one report, video games designed and rated for mature audiences are being marketed to younger children. For example, an advertisement for *Resident Evil 2* appeared in *Sports Illustrated for Kids* and the action figures based on the video game, Duke Nukem, are sold in toy stores. Even more egregious, the marketing messages for many video games encourage wanton violence and savagery, even for games that are rated E (Everyone—well suited for a general audience; these games have minimal violence but may contain some crude language), and T (Teens—for older kids, ages 13 and up; these games often have violent content and can contain strong language). For example, an ad for *Dead in the Water* (rated E) states, “I will kill you, maggot,” an ad for *Point Blank* (rated T), says, “More fun than shooting your neighbor’s cat.” Even more extreme, an ad for *Carmageddon*, rated M (Mature—for people 17 and older; these games usually have very violent or gory content, strong language, and possible nudity): “As easy as killing babies with axes.” Says George Broussard, cofounder of 3D Realms, who sells Duke Nukem, an extremely violent video game, “Duke is a mass-market character that can sell two million games. It’d be suicide to make the game unplayable by younger people.” Does the video-game industry have no shame? Obviously not.

Internet

In this age of technology, one of the best measures of what values and messages are most present in your children’s lives is the most searched topics on the Internet, particularly so because young people are its most frequent users. A perusal of the most commonly used search engines demonstrates how overwhelmingly powerful the presence of American popular culture is on children, and offers a rather sad commentary on what interests American children today. For example, Yahoo’s most searched topics in 2003 were: Kazaa (the music file-sharing website), Harry Potter, American Idol, Britney Spears, 50 Cent (a hip-hop artist), Eminem (another hip-hop artist), WWE (the professional wrestling organization), Paris Hilton, NASCAR, and Christina Aguilera.

Conspicuously absent are *any* searches outside of popular culture.

Top-ten lists of the other leading search engines—Lycos, AOL, and Google—show a similar pattern. Two of the four search engines were comprised entirely of popular culture queries. The only significant topics that appeared on any of the search engines' top-ten lists were Iraq, affirmative action, the IRS, and Korea. Even Google's top-ten news stories of 2003 were dominated by popular culture (in order): the Iraq conflict, the Laci Peterson murder trial, the Kobe Bryant sexual assault trial, the Bertrand Cantat murder case (he is a French music star accused of killing his girlfriend, Marie Trintignant, a well-known French actress), the Recording Industries Association of America battle over music sharing, the Jessica Lynch capture and rescue, the Michael Jackson molestation case, the Elizabeth Smart kidnapping and escape, the Korean conflict, and the Dixie Chicks (who were excoriated for criticizing the Iraq invasion).

These search lists paint a richly textured—and painful—picture of what interests people, notably young people, and what they think about, care about, and focus on. The lists reveal the profound inanity of what occupies the time and energy of young people today and their thoughtless disregard for matters of substance and consequence. Predictably, they also reflect the priorities that lie at the forefront of American popular culture and the knowledge that it values. Even worse perhaps, Google's top-ten news stories demonstrate how America's news agencies, once bastions of integrity and depth, have become unwitting accomplices to popular culture; if the news industry didn't focus on the many meaningless stories, they would not likely lodge themselves so firmly in the psyches of young people.

In Harm's Way

Twenty-first-century America offers parents plenty of things to worry about regarding their children. But almost every parent in America is most noticeably concerned about three areas that threaten their children: alcohol, cigarettes, and sex. These three can do the most harm to your children's physical and mental health, and interfere with their development and futures. American popular culture has the most powerful influence on children in these areas and, unfortunately, that influence is pushing your children in the wrong direction. Popular culture has made drinking

alcohol (and, by extension, taking drugs), smoking cigarettes, and having sex attractive and wanted by young people, despite their obvious dangers. In the case of the first two, those industries reap huge profits from getting children to drink and smoke at an early age. As for sex, it has quite simply become the most potent marketing tool in history. Products, from clothing and cars to food and beverages, are advertised ensuring that the buyer will be attractive and popular, and the products' use will result in increased sexual activity.

Alcohol

Alcohol use is one of the most significant areas in which American popular culture influences children because of its immediate and long-term health risks. Various forms of alcohol are the most frequently presented beverages on television. Research has found that alcohol is typically depicted in a positive or neutral light with little or no evidence of negative consequences. Television and radio advertising for alcohol rose over 1,000 percent between 1997 and 1999, after the alcoholic beverage industry lifted a voluntary ban against such advertising. During that same period, the number of websites devoted to the sale and consumption of alcohol rose by 80 percent. Alcohol appeared in over 65 percent of all television shows (an average of over eight times an hour) and in approximately 20 percent of music videos. Alcohol is also one of the most frequently advertised products on television, representing about 77 percent of all beverage commercials shown during sports events.

Not only is alcohol presented to children in incredible frequency, but also in a way that maximizes its allure to children. Drinking is commonly associated with attractive people, popularity, sexual behavior, sports, and fun. Sex is the primary vehicle for most alcohol advertising. For example, ads for beer are the most frequently broadcast and their messages are marketed predominantly to young males. Not surprisingly, these ads (and similar ones for hard alcohol) involve attractive male actors whose sexual attractiveness is enhanced by drinking the advertised beverage and by beautiful young women who are drawn to the actors because of what they are drinking. These ads are especially influential on adolescent males who are just starting to learn about their emerging sexuality and are vulnerable to simplistic and unrealistic messages about sexuality.

Young people learn more about alcohol use from advertising than from more responsible outlets, such as parents and educators. This imbalance of information causes children to be more aware of the images connected with alcohol and its purported social benefits than of the dangers related to drinking. Young people are particularly drawn to the images and lifestyle aspects of the ads, including humor, celebrities, animated characters, animals, and popular music. Research has shown that frequent contact with media depictions of alcohol and alcohol advertising creates positive perceptions about alcohol use and, in particular, viewing music videos was related to drinking at a younger age. Exposure to alcohol advertising also results in decreased concern for the dangers and greater interest in the social benefits of alcohol consumption, and higher expectations of drinking alcohol in the future. Other studies have shown that the liking of ads and the recall of brand names were related to recent and long-term consumption of alcohol.

Smoking

Smoking is another high-risk area in which American popular culture has a significant influence on children. Research shows that 90 percent of smokers begin before they reach legal age to purchase cigarettes and a third begin smoking by age 14. An astounding 10 percent of smokers begin as early as 10 years of age. Much like alcohol use, the research indicates clearly how popular culture, in the form of cigarette advertising and the presence of smoking on television and in film, encourages children to begin smoking. For example, children have been found to be three times more susceptible to cigarette advertising than adults, and such inducements are twice as powerful as peer pressure. Children who spend more time watching television (including movies and music videos) are more likely to engage in high-risk behavior, such as smoking and drinking alcohol.

Connecting interesting animated characters (e.g., Joe Camel) and fun images has enabled the tobacco industry to pique the interest of very young children and plant the seed for future cigarette use. As children get older, the focus of the influence shifts. For example, the onset of smoking in children was related to whether children's favorite film stars smoked. The ready adoration of celebrities by

children and their desire to emulate them increases the risk that children will smoke just to be like them. The presence of smoking in movies was also found to be associated with a greater risk of smoking. The characters portrayed in film who smoke are often macho, feminine, sophisticated, sexy, popular, chic, mature, or mysterious, all qualities that are very attractive to children. With such powerful messages, popular culture lures children into a habit that has well-known health risks to children and significant costs to our society. As with alcohol, the depictions of smokers in film and other media predictably never illustrate the long-term health dangers associated with continued tobacco use.

What attitude does the tobacco industry have toward children? The following is excerpted from Congressional testimony by Dr. Jeffrey Wigand, the “whistle blower” who became the subject of the 1999 film, *The Insider*, starring Russell Crowe: “Children are the mainstays of the tobacco industry. Youth is the key to tobacco industry expansion. In order for tobacco industry profits to be sustained and to rise; in order for company stock to thrive, the tobacco companies must have replacement smokers, smokers who take the place of those who quit, but mostly those who die from a tobacco-related disease. In terms of maximizing profit, children are the most efficient replacement smokers. I heard firsthand from the highest officials at Brown & Williamson [one of the leading cigarette producers] that the company philosophy towards children is simply this: ‘Hook ’em young, hook ’em for life.’”

Sex

The influence of American popular culture on children’s beliefs, attitudes, and behavior toward sexuality has never been greater, particularly in light of the reluctance of many parents and schools to educate children about sexuality. The portrayals of sexuality on television, in music, movies, magazines, and advertising, and its ready access through the Internet offer children messages that are enticing, yet rarely accurate or responsible. For example, over two-thirds of television programming has sexual content, yet only 10 percent mention the potential consequences of sexual activity. Up to one-half of all music videos (depending on the genre) portray sexuality or eroticism.

Two-thirds of movies are R-rated, yet most children under 17 have no trouble getting into to see them. Over 20 percent of radio segments—both music and talk—have sexual content. Each of the top-ten CDs had at least one song with sexual content. Little of the music on CD or the radio communicated sexually responsibly content to listeners. The messages that children get from this inundation of sexual content is that sex is cool, fun, and risk-free. These messages are in sharp contrast to the reality of sexual activity that includes sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy.

Magazines that target girls use sexual themes in much of their advertising and devote much of their content to how girls can get a guy. The Internet has become a significant source of exposure to sexual content. For example, 25 percent of children aged 10 to 17 encountered unintended sexual content while on the Web. With few controls built into Web browsers, children can access sexual material at will. “Sex” is the most searched word on the Internet. Research indicates that the sexual content and messages in American popular culture influence young people’s beliefs, attitudes, and behavior about sex. For example, 75 percent of teenagers indicate that the fact that popular culture makes sex the normal thing to do encourages them to have sex, and its portrayals encourage irresponsible sex. Young teenagers rate popular culture as their top source of information about sex. This finding is a sad commentary on parents and schools, who should be the primary sources of accurate information about sex. Experts on youth sexual behavior suggest that popular culture affects children’s attitudes and behavior toward sex in several ways. The ongoing presence of sexual content in popular culture keeps sexuality in the front of children’s minds. It reinforces a generally accepted set of norms about sex. And popular culture offers little sexually responsible information or models from which children can learn.

The ideas and research I have just discussed and the plethora of other findings that are too numerous to describe here illustrate the overwhelming presence that American popular culture has in your children’s lives and the destructive influence it has in so many areas of their lives. But there is not, to date, any data about the impact that American popular culture has on the values that children adopt. For now, we can only extrapolate the meaning of the available research and

intuit what values are reflected in the children's behavior that the research has observed. Without too much of a stretch, we can assume the values that your children are adopting from popular culture are not healthy or life-affirming for them, your family, the community in which you live, and our country as a whole.

Popular Culture's Two Lines of Attack

American popular culture conveys its values through its many media. Though diverse in its tools of persuasion, popular culture relies on two primary avenues for communicating their messages and influencing your children. The first type of message that popular culture uses is what I call "loudspeaker" messages, in which the messages are deafening, constant, and ever-present. The shrillness of these messages is heard, seen, tasted, or felt, and cannot be readily avoided. Examples of these loudspeaker messages are most kinds of popular culture, including movies, video games, television, and music, in addition to less obvious loudspeaker messages from roadside billboards and magazine ads. Many aspects of children's daily lives have become loudspeaker messages from American popular culture. Many of children's peers and those they admire act as accomplices to popular culture sending clear and unavoidable messages: what they wear, what they eat and drink, what they talk about, how they behave. Just driving down the street in most cities, towns, and suburbs exposes children to bright and flashing lights aimed at luring them into stores (where they can buy products they don't need) and restaurants (where they can eat food that is unhealthy). Because of the invasiveness of these messages, children can't help but notice them and, for most children, can't avoid their influence.

Most parents are aware of these "loudspeaker" messages—they're hard to miss—and many try to avoid or resist them as much as possible. For example, many parents limit TV time, video-game use, and what movies their children see. At the same time, this constant barrage may simply inure parents to the point where they don't even notice them any longer. But don't be fooled into thinking that just because they don't affect you they won't influence your children. Vigilance to all forms of popular culture is essential to protect your children from its harmful effects.

The second type of message that American popular culture uses to seduce children are what I call “stealth” messages. These messages are usually hidden behind characters, images, words, and sounds that are fun and engaging, but are designed to subtly tap into children’s unconscious needs and wishes. Messages that create positive emotional reactions, for example, dancing while drinking Pepsi, or winning a basketball game wearing a pair of Nikes, resonate at a deep and unconscious level with children, causing them to want to feel that way too. Other subtle messages, that tap into children’s fears and insecurities related to self-esteem, social acceptance, and physical attractiveness, are particularly effective in manipulating children.

Using these messages, American popular culture deceives you and your children. What looks like fun and games is actually polluting your children’s minds and spirits. It’s corrupting their morals, taking away their initiative and creativity, and destroying their humanity. But you might miss this unhealthy influence seeing your kids having such a good time. And popular culture feels no sense of responsibility—or decency—toward your children. If you asked popular culture about its influence on your children, it would probably say something like, “I don’t want to harm children. There is no research to support the claims of parents and educators. I’m just giving children what they want. TV shows, video games, music, and magazines that your children watch, play, listen to, and read are just harmless entertainment. I don’t influence children, I only reflect our society.” Or “It’s not fair to blame me. What about parents taking responsibility for their own children? It’s not my job to raise them. They should be the ones who decide what TV shows their children watch, what music they listen to, and what video games they play.”

Examples of the unhealthy value messages that American popular culture conveys to your children are ubiquitous. According to the best-selling author, Larry Woiwode, “Television, in fact, has greater power over the lives of most Americans than any educational system or government or church...The growing influence of television has changed people’s habits and values and affected their assumptions about the world.” Reality TV, a recent spawn of American popular culture, is currently the hottest property on television. Most people assume that it arose out of popular interest, but in actuality reality TV was developed

by networks as a means of curbing the costs of television production and enhancing profit margins. There was no clamoring by the American public for this genre of entertainment.

The values communicated on reality TV are truly destructive. Shows such as *Survivor* encourage deceit, manipulation, backstabbing, and “look out for #1” and “win at all costs” attitudes. Reality shows such as *American Idol* and *The Weakest Link*, though ostensibly about achieving the American Dream of wealth and fame (a false dream which few children will ever realize), places great emphasis on the rejection and humiliation of its losing contestants.

Advertising’s clear purpose is to convince your children to buy products—or nag you into buying them for your children—that the ads are selling. Can you blame advertising for this? I would say not, as it is only doing what it was created to do. Yet the deceit and manipulation is powerful and without conscience. For example, a few years ago an ad for Lays potato chips encouraged viewers to “Get your own bag!” A commercial for Butterfingers candy bar featuring *The Simpsons* has Bart admonishing Homer to “Get your fingers off of my Butterfinger!” Though certainly entertaining, the values that these ads, and many like them, convey to kids is selfishness, hoarding, and lack of generosity, all in the name of greater profits for the companies who manufacture and sell these products. Value messages embedded in ads that are, on the surface, fun and often filled with celebrities, cute animated characters, or amusing people, communicate truly awful values. Advertisers clearly have no shame, even using meaningful values, such as patriotism, for its own greedy ends. For example, they have used the September 11, 2001, tragedy to sell products. Automobile companies draped themselves in patriotism and American flags to sell cars for “no money down and 0 percent interest.” Hummer, the huge, gas-guzzling SUV, intimated that buying their vehicles would be a show of support for U.S. troops in Iraq.

Video games, such as the Grand Theft Auto series and Halo 2, aggrandize criminal behavior, stereotyping, violence, and murder without consequences. The Grand Theft Auto series exemplifies the kinds of lessons violent video games teach children. “This phenomenally popular video game allows you to hijack cars, shoot cops, kill women with baseball bats, have sex with prostitutes (and then kill them too)...In this game, you don’t kill the bad guy, *you’re* the bad guy,”

writes the *New York Times Magazine's* Jonathan Dee, "...it therefore seems undeniable that video games, compared to other forms of entertainment, are disproportionately concerned with violence. (Revenge is the back-story element in a great many games, if only to frame the violence in a justifiable context)...The gore and moral lassitude of games like Doom or Grand Theft Auto...have given rise to a parental panic..." Responds Bruno Bonnell, the CEO of Atari, a leading video-game producer, "I think the mass-market perception of video games...is 'Wow, those games are too violent...' But that represents only about 10 percent of the market." Well, as I mentioned earlier, about 220 million video games were sold in each of the last few years, meaning over 20 million of those games are violent. Assuming that most of these violent video games are played by children, that is an enormous number of children being exposed to unhealthy values.

I could write an entire book describing the truly appalling values that are expressed on television, video games, music, film, sports, magazines, the Internet, fashion, and toys. But the point of this book is not to catalog numerous and detailed examples of the pervasive and harmful effects of American popular culture on children—this topic has been studied and described extensively elsewhere. Rather, my goal is to provide a compelling overview that will convince you of the danger of popular culture and encourage you to explore how you can, for your children's sake, resist popular culture and teach them healthy, life-affirming values.

Your Children Know about the Danger

Over the years, having spoken to thousands of children, I have learned a surprising thing: most children aren't fooled by American popular culture. They know it's bad. They know that all American popular culture cares about is making money. They know that the messages it communicates are unhealthy. Most children also know what good and bad values are and what is right and wrong. But they lack the experience, perspective, and tools to withstand the attraction: its bells and whistles, its bright lights and loud music, its beautiful people, its short attention span. Children have good values deep down—they may even be born with that capacity—but they lose touch with them because the contradicting messages from American popular culture are so

intense, invasive, and persistent. They are simply overwhelmed by the force of popular culture. If those same messages are also part of the messages communicated by you and are a part of your family, the valued goodness that your children have could be so suppressed as to be irrecoverable.