

# Parents of 'tweens' still have lots of influence

**Now that my children are 10 and 12 years old, I'm beginning to fear that they're being exposed to too much about adulthood too early. Is it just me? Can I do anything to counter what they see in the media and at the mall?**

It's not just you. In recent years, marketers have identified the "tween" years — ages 8 to 12 — as a demographic to target not as children but as teenagers. In fact, according to a 2005 article in *Trends* magazine, the Toy Manufacturers of America now limits its marketing from birth to age 10, rather than the previous top age of 14 — a trend that has been building since the late 1990s.

You're right to be concerned. Experts Diane Levin and Jean Kilbourne, authors of "The New Sexualized Childhood and What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids," say that children this age simply don't have the emotional sophistication to understand the messages they see constantly from advertising and the media, and that is leading to higher risk of emotional and social complications previously seen primarily in teenagers.

But as a parent, don't despair. Experts also believe that parents still have a lot of influence over their children during the tween years. In "Dealing with Marketing: What Parents Can Do," the Media Awareness Network (<http://www.media-awareness.ca>) offers guidance on how to directly address those issues and



help your children respond appropriately to marketing messages:

- Educate your kids about advertising and how marketers target young people, often with the goal of getting them to buy things they don't need and may not even want.
- Encourage non-commercial values in your children both by spending more time with them (not more money on them) and focusing on helping others who have less.
- Challenge your children's definition of "cool" by asking them questions about whether they ever felt bad about themselves for not owning something, or if they've ever felt friends might like them more if they had something new.

You can use that kind of discussion to show your children that succumbing to the latest fads doesn't help build self-image, self-esteem and self-respect. Those characteristics come from a wide range of actions and interactions that you can help your children engage in. The Search Institute, a nonprofit organization promoting healthy children, youth and communities, has identified 40 "Developmental Assets" for children ages 8 through 12. As a parent, you can help you children build these assets in many ways, from including children in decision-making to helping them use their time constructively. See <http://www.search-institute.org/40-developmental-assets4-6>.

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**Dear Subscriber:** This column was reviewed by Kara Newby, program coordinator in human development and family science for Ohio State University Extension.

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