Chapter 1

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Childhood Affluenza

I can still remember the names and the games that rang out across the dusty playground "Red Rover, Red Rover, send Emerson Yazzie right over!" It was the fall of 1969, and I was teaching at a Navajo Indian boarding school in New Mexico. The 10-year-olds I taught grew up in one-room log dwellings scattered across the arid countryside. Their families earned less than a $1,000 a year. The children possessed scarcely more than the clothes they wore, and the school, nearly as poor, offered little to amuse them during recess periods.

Nonetheless, these lively boys and girls were always able to amuse themselves. More often than not, wide smiles illuminated their sunburned faces as they made up their own games and entertainment. Never did I hear them say they were bored.

At Christmastime that year, I returned to the suburban neighborhood where I'd grown up. My own 9-year-old brother and his friends were children of prosperity, with bedrooms resembling toy stores. Yet they continually complained to me that they had "nothing to do."

In the years since then—in a Guatemalan refugee camp in Mexico, or a landless peasants' settlement in Brazil, for example—I have seen poor children, cheerful and resourceful despite their lack of possessions. Meanwhile, their affluent American counterparts, awash in stuff, often feel deprived. They are the perpetually dissatisfied victims of an emerging, airwave-borne epidemic I now call "affluenza."

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Among affluenza's childhood symptoms one might include:

- a fever for shopping and spending,
- swollen expectations about material needs,
- decreasing immunity to the assaults of advertisers,
- self-concepts defined by brands of clothing, and
- a rash of debt by the time they leave college.

Polls consistently find that a wide majority of American parents today believe their children are "too materialistic." Psychologist Mary Pipher calls today's teenagers the "I want" generation. But that's no accident. Children have become the hottest targets of today's marketing dollars.

A generation ago, the Federal Trade Commission considered restricting advertising aimed at children, but, in 1980, Congress passed a law *preventing* such action. Since then, the amount of money spent by advertisers to reach children has increased by a factor of 20—from $100 million to $2 billion a year.

"Children are consumers in training, superstars in the consumer constellation," writes James U. McNeal, a leading expert on the youth market. Americans under the age of 12 now spend or influence the spending of an astonishing $565 billion a year. Alex Molnar, author of *Giving Kids the Business*, says many companies view children as "cash crops to be harvested." Those are harsh words, but even a quick visit to a marketing conference like Kid Power, held annually at Disney World, confirms Molnar's observation.

Speakers talk freely of "*owning*," "*branding*," and "*capturing*" children, seemingly without a second thought about what those words mean. "Connecting with kids in the face of moms is a constant challenge," says one Kid Power speaker. So marketers go behind Mom's back. They refer to parents as "*gatekeepers*" and offer tips to increase "*the nag factor*," so children will effectively pressure their folks to buy. They suggest rude and aggressive ads that make parents seem like fools. Paul Kurnit, founder of the KidShop marketing firm, teaches that "anti-social behavior in pursuit of a product is a good thing."