



This Green Life

A Journal of Sorts



WHAT'S A PARENT TO DO

June 2004

Establishing a green lifestyle is one thing. Getting your kids to go along is another, and the difficulty grows the older they get.

My kids are at the tail end of 10 and 13. When they were toddlers, there was no problem containing their desire for "more," since my husband and I ruled the roost. Now that they're older, they have money of their own, go to stores without us, and are heavily influenced by their friends, most of whom are serious consumers.

Kids are prey to more than 40,000 TV ads a year, and are far more easily manipulated by what they see than adults. Though my own kids have been brought up without TV (more to encourage reading and play than to keep out commercial influences), it doesn't seem to have made a difference. Through radio, magazines, billboards, the Internet, and that strange process known as osmosis, they've gotten to know the same jingles, logos and pitches as everyone else and to long for the same brands.



Not too long ago, my 13-year-old daughter was swept up in the consumerist tide. Now, shopping trips with friends are a weekly affair, resulting, more often than not, in a purchase. Interestingly, the stuff she comes home with isn't always for herself -- often it's a present. The point for her is less to have than to buy.

Why do I care? Because everything bought -- indeed everything produced -- uses up natural resources, and everything discarded ends up back in nature, often in a harmful form. Through most of history, the quantities consumed were small enough that it didn't matter, but with the population explosion of the 20th century and rise of the market economy, consumption has skyrocketed. Since 1950, we've used up more resources than all the earth's previous inhabitants combined.

Overconsumption is causing "strains on the environment never before seen," according to a 1998 United Nations' Human Development Report. In addition to depleting non-renewable resources, like fossil fuels, it uses up renewable resources like fish stocks and forests before they can replenish themselves, and causes pollution and waste beyond the powers of the earth to absorb them.

The bottom line is this: if we don't lower consumption soon, we may overwhelm the earth's capacity to support us. The results could be catastrophic. Whether or not that sounds melodramatic to you depends on what you think catastrophic is. For me, it's something less than New York freezing over. It's the current loss of 30 million acres of global forest a year, warming of the earth's climate and mass extinction that scientists believe is already underway.

We can look to technological improvements and legislation to help get us out of this mess, but I don't think they'll be enough without a cultural



Sheryl Eisenberg, a long-time advisor to NRDC, posts a new This Green Life every month. Sheryl makes her home in Tribeca (NYC), where—along with her children, Sophie and Gabby, and husband, Peter—she tries to put her environmental principles into practice. No fooling.

Can't get enough. This pile of make-up (at left) is just a fraction of my daughter's stock.



Math lesson. We adults have to learn, with our kids, to factor in environmental costs when calculating the price of things.

shift. A new ethos is needed that puts the long-term health of our planet above status, wealth and instant gratification.

It's that ethos that I'm trying to cultivate with my teenage daughter by teaching the notion of limits -- both financial and natural -- and the idea that our actions have consequences that are no less real for being invisible. There's one thing, at least, that I don't have to teach -- a love of nature. The same girl who delights in shopping, and can never get enough music or clothes, has been entranced by animals since her earliest days. At 5, she was cupping butterflies in her hands to observe them and rescuing drowning bees from pools. As much as she adores city life, she also thrills to walks in the country.

In other words, the challenge for her isn't appreciating nature, but recognizing her own impact on it. I still struggle with that one myself.

—Sheryl Eisenberg

MY STRATEGIES

Here are some methods I've used with my kids to quench the desire for things they don't need:

- I established a rule early on that they couldn't buy something -- even with their own money -- if they didn't announce their intention of doing so before entering the store. (I can't hold them to this when they shop without me, but the idea still serves as a touchstone.)
- When we happen upon an egregious ad, I pull it apart to show how it plays on their anxieties and desires. I point out misleading statements and images, or I just say, "how can that be true?" -- and let them discover the falsehoods themselves.
- I have them compare expectations to reality. After they get something they wanted desperately, I ask if it turned out to be as wonderful as they thought. If the answer's no, we discuss what produced such high expectations in the first place.
- When they're offered a plastic giveaway at a restaurant or fair, I suggest not accepting it if it's going to end up in the garbage the next day.
- I try to be a more sustainable consumer myself and discuss my personal choices with them.
- We talk about happiness -- what gives it and what never can.

The fairness issue. Global consumption isn't only too high; it's unevenly distributed. While the richest 20 percent of the world enjoys 86 percent of the resources, the poorest 20 percent gets just over 1 percent. Justice suggests that we raise the poor's share, at the same time as we bring consumption down overall.



Connecting with nature.

When my daughter was 8, we rented an old farmhouse in northern Italy. Characteristically, she spent the trip getting to know the local fauna, including moths, praying mantises, spiders and lizards -- many of whom are now featured in our family album.

Sheryl Eisenberg is a web developer and writer. With her firm, Mixit Productions (<http://www.mixitproductions.com>), she brought NRDC online in 1996, designed NRDC's first websites, and continues to develop special web features for NRDC. She created and, for several years, wrote the Union of Concerned Scientists' green living column, *Greentips*, and has designed and contributed content to many non-profit sites.

ONLINE RESOURCES

For your kids

PBS: Don't Buy It - <http://pbskids.org/dontbuyit/>
CONSUMER REPORTS: Consumer Reports for Kids - <http://www.zillions.org/>
WWF/CENTER FOR A NEW AMERICAN DREAM: Be Different - <http://www.ibuydifferent.org/>

For you

SIERRA CLUB: Why Consumption Matters - http://www.sierraclub.org/sustainable_consumption/tilford.asp
WORLDWATCH INSTITUTE: A Consumption Manifesto - <http://www.worldwatch.org/pubs/goodstuff/principles/>
CENTER FOR A NEW AMERICAN DREAM: Kids and Commercialism - <http://www.newdream.org/campaign/kids/>
MEDIA AWARENESS NETWORK: Dealing with Marketing - What Parents Can Do - <http://tinyurl.com/2ryr2>
CONSUMERS UNION: Commercial Pressures on Kids at School - <http://www.consumersunion.org/other/captivekids/summary.htm>
CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR: Branded for Life? - <http://www.csmonitor.com/2002/0401/p15s02-wmcn.html>
UNITED NATIONS: Human Development Report 1998 - <http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/1998/en/>

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