

**Commercial Alert**  
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September 30, 1999

Richard Suinn, PhD  
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**RE: The Use of Psychology to Exploit and Influence Children for  
Commercial Purposes**

Dear Dr. Suinn:

The American Psychological Association (APA) was founded to advance the understanding of the human psyche in order to promote health. The APA's founding documents articulate this mission in inspiring detail. The organization is to "work to mitigate the causes of human suffering;" it seeks to "improve the condition of both the individual and society," and to "help the public in developing informed judgments."

That is a high calling. The APA's healing and helping mission is accentuated by what the organization and its members are not supposed to do -- namely "exploit or mislead other people."

We are writing today about the latter prohibition. We are concerned that members of the APA are ignoring it, for monetary gain. They are not using their knowledge to mitigate the causes of human suffering. They are using it instead to promote and assist the commercial exploitation and manipulation of children. As individuals, that is their right, of course. But as a profession dedicated to human welfare, psychologists have a responsibility to the public. The APA should not condone such behavior among its members, nor should psychologists look the other way.

Regrettably, a large gap has arisen between APA's mission and the drift of the profession into helping corporations influence children for the purpose of selling products to them. Advertising and marketing firms have long used the insights and research methods of psychology in order to sell products, of course. But today these practices are reaching epidemic levels, and with a complicity on the part of the psychological profession that exceeds that of the past. The result is an enormous advertising and marketing onslaught that comprises, arguably, the largest single psychological project ever undertaken. Yet, this great undertaking remains largely ignored by the APA.

The sale of psychological expertise to advertisers to manipulate children for monetary gain goes without comment let alone sanction. The profession does very little to protect innocent children -- the people it is supposed to help -- from the psychological cajoling and assaults that it itself helps to create. This behavior is not even mentioned in the APA's "Ethical Principles of Psychologists And Code of Conduct" ("Ethics Code").

Several countries and provinces have laws to protect children from the attempts of adults to influence them in this way. For example, Sweden and Norway prohibit television advertising directly targeting children below twelve years of age. Greece bans television advertising of toys to children between 7:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m. Quebec prohibits television advertising directed at children below the age of thirteen. However, in the United States, children have no such protections, nor any protection against the use of psychological insights and expertise to manipulate or influence them.

If the APA stands for anything, and if it takes its own mission seriously, it ought to expose and challenge this abuse of psychological knowledge. It must not continue to tolerate by silence such abuse by its own members.

Specifically, we urge the APA to:

1. Issue a formal public statement denouncing the use of psychological techniques to assist corporate marketing and advertising to children; and,
1. Amend the APA's Ethics Code to establish limits for psychologists regarding the use of psychological knowledge or techniques to observe, study, manipulate, harm, exploit, mislead, trick or deceive children for commercial purposes; and,
1. Launch an ongoing campaign to probe, review and confront the use of psychological research in advertising and marketing to children. The campaign would include: (a) ongoing investigation of the use of the tools of psychology in advertising, marketing and market research targeted at children; (b) publication and ethical evaluation of these findings; and, (c) the promotion of strategies to protect children against commercial manipulation and exploitation by psychologists and those who use the tools of psychology.

The use of psychological insight and methodology to bypass parents and influence the behavior and desires of children is a crisis for the profession of psychology. But it also presents a chance for the profession to affirm its high public calling. The American public is hungry for acts of principle and courage on the part of the professions, and we urge the APA to take this step.

Sincerely,

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