

## **Response to 'Commercialisation of childhood? The ethics of research with primary school children' by Agnes Nairn**

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### **Barbie Clarke, Family Kids and Youth**

As a researcher with 20 years experience of working with children and adolescents, I was interested to read Agnes Nairn's piece. There are few who are unaware of the plethora of criticism levelled at child and youth marketers recently. Jamie Oliver's 'School Dinners' programme last year has done much to raise awareness of the poor standard of food that children are eating, and with this has grown an understandable, and worldwide concern about the nature of marketing and advertising to children, not just food and drink, but all products. If further proof is needed that this is a global concern, read Eric Schlosser's latest book 'Chew on This' targeted to 8 – 12 year olds.

As researchers, and especially those of us specialising in young people, it is imperative that we become involved in the debate, and I welcome Nairn's questioning of the industry's stance on carrying out research with children.

Criticism of advertising to children is of course highly emotive. Many in our industry are ambivalent about the rights and wrongs of targeting children to sell goods. In the most recent Research magazine (May 06), the redoubtable Michael Warren writes in his report of the MRS Conference 'I've always been slightly iffy about advertising to children .. Ian Brace and Julie Tinson cheer me up with the thought that child consumers are increasingly savvy about advertising ..Good. Kids are still asking awkward questions. All is not lost.'

A recent report from 'Which?' called 'Child Catchers – the tricks use to push unhealthy food to your children' (January 2006) is typical of the criticism levelled at marketers. Its introduction states 'Here we expose the top twelve 'dirty' marketing tricks that food companies use and which parents may not even be aware of'. Sensational perhaps, but it goes on to show how SMS marketing, as well as highly popular children's websites, are actively being used to promote 'unhealthy food' to children by food and drink manufacturers. In the future it predicts that companies will (if they are not already) make use of various other communication tools such as Chatbots, Blogs, and Digital broadcasting to reach children.

As researchers we must not be complacent about such techniques, as they often involve research as part of the marketing mix. Nairn, rightly, cites three areas that concern her in terms of children's research: driving a wedge between children and parents, asking children to spy on their friends, and exploitation of children.

Clearly neither marketers nor researchers should attempt to alienate children from their parents. Parents and children have a right to be informed about the nature of the research the child is participating in, and parental permission should be sought *each time*, I believe, a child is asked to take part in a survey, on-line, by SMS or otherwise. This means that any approach to a child should be through the parent or responsible adult, and never direct to the child, even if a parent has given a one-off consent for this to happen.

Equally 'viral research', asking children to spy on their friends, is essentially asking children to become researchers, who effectively are recruited to report back on what their friends are doing on a regular basis. It sounds like an innovative technique, but the friends, nor the friends' parents, are really aware of what is going on, a practice that is complete anathema to the research world.

Exploitation of children is something that none of us would wish for, and in a world where children are increasingly being given a voice, we must be careful as an industry not to jump on the bandwagon and treat children in a way that we would not treat adults. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child led to an act being passed in most countries (in the UK it was 1989) and it was the first time that significant recognition was given to the individuality of the child over and against both their parents and the state. The notion of children having rights, and being given a voice is reflected in the welcome growth of children's services. But the research industry has been slow to respond.

Many of Nairn's concerns centre on practices that are carried out by organisations that may not be members of our professional bodies. As researchers we have become used to non-research organisations making use of new technology to provide and sell on-line and SMS research. It is often described as 'cheap and dirty' but clients will buy into it. In the case of child respondents we should be concerned by this.

The ESOMAR and MRS Codes of Conduct go a long way to give guidance to child and youth researchers, but grey areas exist. For research purposes I would define a child as under 16, and believe that a responsible adult or parent should give consent *each time* a child is asked to participate in research, whatever the method. I also believe that research should be carried out or overseen by someone with qualifications in child development. And it goes without saying that anyone coming into personal contact with children for research should have enhanced Criminal Record Bureau clearance.

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