

# Introduction

Dear Parent,

We are excited that you are interested in gathering parents committed to peace and justice. Parents are our children's first and most influential educators. By coming together to discuss, reflect, and pray about values of peace and justice related to parenting, we hope that you will be strengthened to continue to work for positive social change and to make conscientious decisions that teach your children how to be justice doers and peacemakers.

We know that it isn't easy being a parent. Some would say that it is an even harder task to do well in today's world. Globally, our world is rife with conflict, war, and the threat of terrorism. All of these contribute to hunger, poor health care, and lack of educational opportunities for too many people in our world. Within our country, there is an emphasis on personal gain over communal well being that often leads to a lack of balance. It can be hard to live out our values in the face of commercialism, busy lives, and other pressures. Our world is in great need of peace and justice!

The **Parenting for Peace and Justice** program provides support by gathering other parents who share similar values and are facing similar challenges. The program goals are to:

- Learn and reflect upon peace and justice issues relevant to family life
- Give and receive support as parents committed to peace and justice
- Support a spirituality that does justice
- Build community

This book contains five thematic meeting plans for starting a **Parenting for Peace and Justice** group. The five themes are:

1. Simple Living and the Family
2. Families that Care for the Environment
3. Peace in the Family: Non-Violence Communication
4. Nurturing Respect for Diversity
5. Living in a Global World

The meeting plans include time for sharing a meal, opening and closing prayers or rituals, the sharing of a children's story related to the theme, and large and small group discussion. There is a list of materials you will need for each meeting, and worksheets for copying.

We hope that these program materials are a useful guide for facilitating a **Parenting for Peace and Justice** group. Your feedback is most welcome since it will help us to improve this program. Good luck and many blessings to you and the parents in your group! May you find great support, inspiration, and hope in each other.

With peace and justice,

Lynn Herink  
Project Coordinator, IPJC

# Simple Living as a Family



*Theme: Commercial pressures to buy, buy, buy abound in our society. The pressure exerted on kids is growing daily. Families can respond creatively by intentionally choosing a simple lifestyle, and in doing so promote values such as critical thinking, stewardship of resources, and building relationships with people.*

## Before the Meeting

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### Suggested Time Frame

*To enable all family members to participate, we recommend meeting in the evening or on the weekend. Allow two hours if you share a meal, keeping in mind that energy might dwindle towards the end if parents have young children with them. Allow an hour and a half if you do not have food.*

### Set Up

- 1. Prepare the ritual table with the candle in the middle; scatter the seed packets around on the table*
- 2. Post the chart with the heading "Ways to Resist Commercialism"*
- 3. Have the chart with small group directions and questions prepared and/or posted*
- 4. Cut out the quotes cards on Commercialism (Appendix, Page 49)*

### Materials

- 1. The Gift of Nothing, by Patrick McDonnell*
- 2. Chart paper with the heading "Ways to Resist Commercialism"*
- 3. Markers*
- 4. Candle and matches or lighter*
- 5. Envelope with cards that have quotes on Commercialism (Appendix, Page 49)*
- 6. Seed packets (one per person)*
- 7. A chart with the following small group directions and questions written in large print:*
  - What surprises you?*
  - What scares you?*
  - What impact do you think this could have on your child/family/society?*
  - How does it make you feel?*
  - What are possible responses to this information?*
  - Brainstorm 2 or 3 ways to resist the influence of commercialism.*

## Roles Needed

1. A reader for the opening prayer
2. Someone to chart the ways to resist commercialism

## Reference Materials (these are not required but may interest you or the participants for further reading)

*Born to Buy*, by Julia Schor

"Tips for Parenting in a Commercial Culture", by New American Dream— [www.newdream.org](http://www.newdream.org)

"Stealing Childhood", *Mothering Magazine*, by Rachael Ashak Porter

"The Best Things in Life Aren't Things", by Joann Davis

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## Meeting Plan—Dinner, 30 minutes

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### Opening Prayer, 5 minutes

**Facilitator:** Welcome everyone. Tonight's theme is about simple living in the family. Let's take a minute or two to let go of the stresses of the day and be present in this time and place. Then \_\_\_\_\_ will read our opening prayer.

#### For Serenity

Slow us down, Lord!

Ease the pounding of our hearts by the quieting of our minds.

Steady our hurried pace with the vision of the eternal reach of time.

Give us, amid the confusion of our day, the calmness of the everlasting hills.

Inspire us to send our roots deep into the soil of life's enduring values,  
that we may grow toward the stars of our greater destiny.

—Adapted from a prayer by Helen T. Michalka

*Maryknoll Book of Prayer*

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### Information on the Theme, 15 minutes

**Facilitator:** In this meeting we are examining the impact of commercialism on our family and how we can resist its influence. Let's start by thinking about our own experiences with commercialism as it relates to pregnancy and parenting. We will take a minute or two to think back on our experiences and in a few minutes I will begin the sharing.

*Begin the sharing after a few minutes of quiet reflection time. It is very important that you model brevity in your sharing, and that you remind participants to keep their sharing short so that there is enough time to hear from everyone.*

## Small Group Work, 15 minutes

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**Facilitator:** We recognize the powerful influence that commercialism has in our lives. More and more market pressure is aimed at children every day, and our children do not have the ability to analyze and filter it out like adults do. How should parents respond? For the next activity, I would like you to work in groups of 2-4 people to discuss information about commercialism. I will pass around an envelope now with cards inside. Please draw out a card and read it to yourself. Then, move into your small groups and read your card to the people in your small group. Discuss your reactions to the information. What surprises you? What scares you? What impact do you think this could have on your child/family/society? How does it make you feel? What are possible responses to this information? As a small group, brainstorm 2 or 3 ways to resist the influence of commercialism.

In 15 minutes you will be asked to share a highlight from your conversation and at least 2 ways to resist the influence of commercialism.

## Large Group Sharing, 20 minutes

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**Facilitator:** Let's gather back together as a large group to hear the highlights of your conversation. Tell us what struck you about the information on the cards. Then tell us the two ways you came up with to resist commercialism. \_\_\_\_\_ will chart the ideas for resisting commercialism and I will compile the list and e-mail it out to everyone. Is there a group who would like to go first?

## Children's Story, 10 minutes

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**Facilitator:** I'd like to read a story that discusses gift-giving and true friendship. I think you will really enjoy *The Gift of Nothing*, by Patrick McDonnell. The characters are from a famous comic strip that some of you might recognize, and the story is sweet and simple. It is a good one to facilitate a conversation with your kids about what is really important in a relationship.

*You may choose to shorten the reading by skipping pages or sections. Or, if time is short, you could only introduce the book instead of reading it aloud.*

## Closing Ritual, 15 minutes

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**Facilitator:** Together we have generated a wonderful list of ideas about how to resist commercialism. In keeping with the idea of simple living and caring for the earth, there are seed packets on the ritual table. Planting a garden, or even a pot of tomatoes or beans, is a way of resisting commercialism because it teaches our children that food comes from the Earth, not a store! Plus kids are fascinated to watch new life grow. I encourage you to plant these seeds with your kids, no matter what their age, and use it as an entry point for conversation.

**Facilitator:** In closing, you are invited to share one action step for resisting commercialism that you will take this month. I'll give you a minute to think of what action step you will take this month, and then I will start the sharing. As you share, please take a packet of seeds from the table. If you would prefer to share with silence, please take a packet of seeds.

"This month I will \_\_\_\_\_ to resist commercialism."

## Quotes About Commercialism

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| <p>Children have become conduits from the consumer marketplace into the household, the link between advertisers and the family purse. Young people are repositories of consumer knowledge and awareness. They are the first adopters and avid users of many of the new technologies. They are the household members with the most passionate consumer desires, and are most closely tethered to products, brands, and the latest trends. Children’s social worlds are increasingly constructed around consuming, as brands and products have come to determine who is “in” or “out,” who is hot or not, who deserves to have friends, or social status. In such a world, how many parents opt to downshift or simplify? It’s a radical step many children don’t welcome. <i>Born to Buy</i>, page 11</p> | <p>Our commercial culture is particularly problematic for people who can’t afford to buy the latest brand name items. When young people define their self-worth by what they wear or own, low-income kids feel the pressure most acutely. As Jennifer Hall of Michigan explains, “When my oldest child was four years old he was already embarrassed to be seen in our beat-up car when I dropped him off at day care. The effect of the affluent kids is pervasive—it even affects things as seemingly innocuous as lunch. The poor kids qualify for free hot breakfast and lunch, which creates a caste system in the schools. Kids don’t understand why they can’t have what they want when their friends do. What are we supposed to do, tell them they can only be friends with poor kids to make it easier for mom and dad to say no?” “Tips for Parenting in a Commercial Culture” page 14</p> |
| <p>Marketing is also fundamentally altering the experience of childhood. Corporations have infiltrated the core activities and institutions of childhood, with virtually no resistance from government or parents. Advertising is widespread in schools. Electronic media replacing conventional play. We have become a nation that places a lower priority on teaching its children how to thrive socially, intellectually, even spiritually, than it does on training them to consumer. The long-term consequences of this development are ominous. <i>Born to Buy</i>, page 13</p>  | <p>Parental time pressure and longer working hours have also driven this trend. Time-starved households have become easy prey for marketers, whose research shows that parents who spend less time with their children will spend more money on them. “Guilt money,” as they call it, came up in almost all my discussions about why kids have so much influence now. ....parents who spent more hours working bought more discretionary items such as toys, videos, and books for their children. <i>Born to Buy</i>, page 25</p>  |
| <p>Virtually from birth, today’s children are exposed to TV commercials, banner ads, billboards, logos and product placements. In what is called “cradle to grave” marketing, advertisers openly court children on an unprecedented scale, rushing to create brand loyalties the minute a child is old enough to distinguish company logos or recite product jingles. “Tips for Parenting in a Commercial Culture” page 4</p>  | <p>The more that market-drive trends structure peer interactions parental restrictions put kids at risk for social exclusion. But basing decision about what to allow on the basis of other kids’ or parents’ choices may mean losing control altogether. It’s one of the trickiest aspects of parenting today. <i>Born to Buy</i>, page 198.</p>   |

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| <p>The typical American child is now immersed in the consumer marketplace to a degree that dwarfs all historical experience. At age one, she's watching <i>Teletubbies</i> and eating the food of its "promo partners" Burger King and McDonald's. Kids can recognize logos by eighteen months, and before reaching their second birthday, they're asking for products by brand name. By three or three and a half, experts say, children start to believe that brands communicate their personal qualities, for example, that they're cool, or strong, or smart. Even before starting school, the likelihood of having a television in their bedroom is 25 percent, and their viewing time is just over two hours a day. Upon arrival at the schoolhouse steps, the typical first grader can evoke 200 brands. And he or she has already accumulated an unprecedented number of possessions, beginning with an average of seventy new toys a year. <i>Born to Buy</i>, page 19</p> | <p>Far from being a consumers' mecca ruled by diverse and rich choices, children's consumer culture is marked by bigness and sameness. Four companies now dominate the children's media and entertainment market almost entirely.</p> <p>Disney<br/> News Corp (Parent of Fox)<br/> AOL Time Warner<br/> Viacom (Parent of MTV Networks)</p> <p>Two companies dominate the toy industry: Mattel and Hasbro. They own Playskool, Fisher-Price, Parker Brothers, Milton Bradley, Tonka Trucks, Tyco, Hot Wheels, American Girl, Cabbage Patch Dolls, Tinker Toys, Avalon Hill, Wizards of the Coast, and Mr. Potato Head.</p> <p>Candy: M&amp;M and Hershey's<br/> Soft Drinks: Coke and Pepsi<br/> Fast Food: McDonald's and Burger King</p> <p><i>Born to Buy</i>, pages 27-8</p> |
| <p>Children today are increasingly dependent on junk food, fast food, and microwave meals, and they are disconnected from growing, preparing, and appreciating food. The family meal, once an important social ritual, is now endangered. In recent years, a food reform movement has emerged, advocating a return to "slow food"—locally grown organic food, seasonal menus, and closer ties between consumers and farmers. <i>Born to Buy</i>, pages 203-4</p>  | <p>Tying identity and self-worth to "coolness" encourages kids to value image over substance and cash over compassion. The more image-oriented we become, the more empty we feel, and young people are especially sensitive to this. From eating disorders to crime and drug use, much of the trouble our young people experience comes from an inability to find lasting satisfaction in material goods. "Tips for Parenting in a Commercial Culture" page 11</p>  |
| <p>When a society is preoccupied with material things, children and adults lose touch with non-commercial sources of happiness. In trying to fulfill non-material needs materially, we can lose contact with friends, nature and creative play. "Ads have encouraged this generation to have material expectations they can't fulfill," says noted author and clinical psychologist Mary Pipher. "This generation is the 'I want' generation. They have been educated to entitlement and programmed for discontent." "Tips for Parenting in a Commercial Culture" page 10</p>   | <p>Too much time spent in front of the TV also has been linked with increased violence, low self-esteem and obesity. Both the Surgeon General and a Stanford University study have linked watching TV to excess body weight. In some school districts, over half the student population is overweight. And, unfortunately, many of these children will carry their weight problems into adulthood—over-weight teenagers have an 80% chance of becoming obese adults. "Tips for Parenting in a Commercial Culture" page 10</p>   |



Marketing and advertising have been influential in transforming children into autonomous and empowered consumers. They have done this by overturning the original 1920s formula for selling children's products, which was an alliance with mothers. Advertisers had to convince moms that the product was beneficial for the child. This approach, which the industry termed the "gatekeeper model," was practiced through the postwar era as well. Today, marketers create direct connections to kids, in isolation from parents and at times against them. The new norm is that kids and marketers join forces to convince adults to spend money. *Born to Buy*, page 16

Recent immigrants also worry about this pressure on their children. Barbara Gootleib-Robles of Maryland says about her daughter, "she's finding it hard (as a 4 ½ year old recent immigrant to the States) to resist the dazzle of all her friends' toys, videos, games, new shoes, etc. etc. ad nauseum. We wonder what values she will finally hold." Immigrant families struggle to maintain ties to their native lands while adapting to life in a new culture, and this pressure becomes especially acute because of the strong pull of American commercialism. "Tips for Parenting in a Commercial Culture" page 14

Advertisers are targeting kids today because that's where the seeds of hyper-consumerism are planted. The evidence is obvious:

- At six months of age, the same age they are imitating simple sounds like "ma-ma," babies are forming mental images of corporate logos and mascots
- According to recent marketing industry studies, a person's "brand loyalty" may begin as early as age two.
- At three years of age, before they can read, one out of five American children is already making specific requests for brand-name products. "Tips for Parenting in a Commercial Culture" page 4-5
- Kids' spending is skyrocketing. In 1991, children aged four to 12 spent \$8.6 billion of their own money each year. By 1999, four- to 12-year-olds took in \$31.3 billion in income from allowance, jobs and gifts, and spent 92 percent of it. In 2001, teenagers spent \$172 billion.
- Children are exhibiting extraordinary influence over their parents' spending. Twenty years ago, children aged four to 12 influenced about \$50 billion of their parents' purchases. By 2001, that figure reached an estimated \$300 billion. Marketers call this influence the "nag factor" or "pester power." "Tips for Parenting in a Commercial Culture" page 6
- The average American child aged 2 to 17 watches 17 hours, 30 minutes of TV per week.
- On average, American children view over 20,000 TV commercials each year, which works out to well over 50 TV ads a day.
- The average American child aged 2-18 spends nearly five and a half hours a day out of school consuming media in the form of TV, music, magazines, video games, and the internet. "Tips for Parenting in a Commercial Culture" page 6