Ask them straight out, and most upper-income parents will tell you they do not buy much for their children, because they have the “right values.” Meanwhile, low-income parents will try to convince you they buy quite a bit, because they are not “in trouble.” Go into their children’s bedrooms, however, and you will find many of the same objects—the Nintendo or Sony gaming system, the collectible cards, the Hello Kitty pencils.

We are living through a spending boom that is unprecedented, and which is exacting a great price. Childhoods have become ever more commercialized, with hundreds of billions of dollars annually being spent on or by children in the United States alone. In one recent survey, families with children were twice as likely as those without children to report that they did not have enough money to cover their expenses, to worry about whether or not their income was adequate, and to be anxious about the extent of their consumer debt. Parents with income constraints struggle to provide an ever-expanding list of goods that compete with rent, food, clothing, and other basics of life. Families are also concerned that their children have good priorities, that they understand what matters most; to be able to buy more for their children, parents sacrifice things they nonetheless fear might be more important. We might say that the expanding children’s market brings with it what feels
like a spiritual calamity for affluent families and a financial one for families of lesser means.¹

What does buying mean to children, and to their parents? Why does buying for children seem to generate so much anxiety and concern? If consumer culture is the “enemy” of good parenting, why do so many parents invite the enemy into their homes?

I started the research that led to this book because questions like these at times defined my daily life, as they do for many parents. With three young children, I found myself continually struggling to find the way toward a more meaningful path, strewn with memories rather than objects. I was surprised that despite the intense cultural scripts surrounding many childhood rituals, families essentially had to invent their own versions of Christmas, Halloween, the Tooth Fairy, allowances, birthdays—each time adopting a particular stance toward the consumer culture that was banging on the door, peering in the windows, and sometimes climbing down the chimney to get in. But even if parents settled on a particular configuration—“one coin under the pillow, but let it be a Sacagawea dollar,” say, or “a cheap, slapdash costume, but all-you-can-eat candy for three days”—that felt somehow right within the family, the negotiation was not over. Children, acting in their natural capacity as community journalists, always knew others who did more, who had more, who had the newest or the latest or the best, and then there was consumer culture again, forcing parents to draw a line, to define themselves and their families, to come up with something that was who they were in response to the constant onslaught.

Many parents regard the commercialization of childhood with concern even as they participate in it. Survey researchers report that nearly nine in ten Americans feel that “children today want too many material things,” and four out of five parents think America’s overly materialistic society produces “over-commercialized children.” “All the kids have [gaming systems]. All the parents break like I did,” one affluent father told me, his half grin taking back just some of the violence in the word “break,” with its connotations of domination, relentless pressure, duress.
“We are roped by these kids, wanting to do something for your kids. Toys are just the worst. It’s . . . it’s just a waste.”

Why do parents engage in the very behavior that they say they deplore? The most common explanations for rampant consumption for children—what we might call “child-rearing consumption”—suggest that children desire, and parents buy, because neither group can help itself, either because of the insidious power of corporate marketing or the heady thrall of instant gratification. In my own experience, in the process of establishing just what we were going to purchase, repeated almost daily and reemphasized by the rituals and holidays punctuating the year, advertising was certainly present, and some materialism, even greed, to be sure. Missing in these popular explanations, however, seemed to be some measure of the social world in which children and their families travel, in which some (but not all) goods and experiences come alive with very particular, local meanings, in which family decisions acquire new emotional salience, and in which children take collective measure of their childhoods.

Let me be clear here. I am not arguing that advertising is unimportant in stoking the fires of consumption. Indeed, research on the impact of advertising is crucial, because, like Dorothy in the Land of Oz, such research pulls back the curtain to reveal the corporate sales agenda behind the dazzle of children’s media. One very real danger of focusing instead on the social contexts in which things get their meaning for children is that such a project might deflect attention from corporate actors, tactics, and ethics. At worst, such research can reinforce common perceptions of overconsumption as stemming solely from personal choices, or even from individual vice, as opposed to the billions of dollars annually invested in selling things to children. Yet while advertising is undoubtedly a powerful factor in animating children’s desires and parents’ buying practices, it is surely not the whole of how we come to want things.

Two premises underlie this work, then. The first is that most parents are neither dupes nor hedonists, but rather well-intentioned people trying their best to make do, including to bring up their children to be
reasonably healthy, happy adults. The second is that advertising is ubiquitous, and corporate marketing targets children and parents; this book thus assumes a media-rich environment and asks, then what? If we seek to understand the explosion of spending for children, the spread of what we might call the “commodity arms race” in elementary schools far and wide, we would do well to look beyond advertising. We need to focus on how children come to view some things as must-haves and some experiences as must-dos, and how parents respond to these imperatives. After advertising has laid out the menu, how do children’s social worlds shape the buying patterns of affluent and low-income families? How is it that Marine World or the Star Wars movies can evoke immediate, intense emotion, and how do Game Boys and Bratz dolls acquire personal, local meanings? What is the impact of such feelings on children’s lives?

Some of my questions are contentious ones, ventured in an environment in which practically everyone has an opinion. Low-income buying in particular seems to be a fulcrum of controversy, because privacy of spending is a luxury we grant—and even then begrudgingly—only to the more affluent. Thus before this book even came into print, one reader took issue with the idea that low-income children have consumer desires that they and their parents interpret as psychological needs and go to great lengths to meet. Most low-income parents in the inner-city are concerned simply with their children’s safety in a dire environment, this reader argued, writing: “[What children need] in such cases [is] simply not to be shot.”

While others may share this view (which is why I raise it here), I could not disagree more (while I am certainly grateful to the reader for articulating it). This book offers evidence to refute the (middle-class) assumption that psychological needs are a luxury the poor cannot afford for their children, by pointing to the moments when they are prioritizing exactly that. We may be full of sympathy for the beleaguered low-income parent plagued by very real urban violence, but we should not also assume that the only or even the best thing low-income families living in dangerous neighborhoods offer their children is survival. The parents in my
study—including even those living next to crack houses, yelling at the “perverts watching [their daughters] jump rope”—aspired to something more. For all its sympathy, this assertion—“[poor children just need] not to be shot”—is the flip side of the outrage one white middle-class woman confessed that she felt one day standing behind a family buying expensive prepared foods with their food stamps, exclaiming to me later, “I can’t even afford that stuff, how can they?” Both views presume to know what low-income families can, or, more exactly, should, afford.

Embedded in all discussions of consumption is an implicit measure of what children “need” (not to be shot) versus what they merely “desire” (to hold their heads up at school). But these normative categories are notoriously slippery, and vigorously contested, part of a fusillade in the battle over defining what a child needs, the social contest about moral worth and deserving. This contest does not take place only among scholars or pundits, but also in conversations among children, as well as between children and the adult caregivers in their homes. In essence, this book plumbs those conversations for what they can tell us about how competing definitions of need—among children, between parents and children, among rich families and poor ones—shape the explosion of child-rearing consumption.

This book, then, offers an in-depth look at how children and parents interpret and use consumer culture as they are constructing childhoods. It is a book with many moving parts—children and parents, consumption and inequality, the private and the social—but one that therefore provides a broader vantage point on how the emotional meanings of goods and experiences—in a word, culture—twist and turn alongside the structure and shape of people’s social worlds. Most important, the book examines and explains the consumption boom that shapes and defines childhood and parenthood today.

The contradictory stories parents offer—as virtuous nonconsumers or as stable providers—signal both the promise and the threat behind child-rearing spending. Children and parents invest great meaning in commodified goods and experiences. Their emotional connections are
expressed and felt through the ephemera that corporations sell to them for a profit, and that some families purchase at great sacrifice. Yet the lived experience of inequality makes these connections at once more elusive and more urgent. In this book, I contend these are the real crises of child-rearing consumption.

The costs of consumption make the practices that incur them seem misguided, and the common explanations for consumption on behalf of children make those practices seem inexplicable. And yet the stakes of our misunderstanding are high. If we cannot understand how and why consumer culture permeates the lives and relationships of parents and children, then we cannot address the crises that such consumption engenders.