

## THE ROLE OF CHILDREN IN FAMILY DECISION MAKING A Theoretical Review<sup>1)</sup>

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### **Abstract**

*Family is the basic unit where most individuals learn about product categories, how to consume it, and soon. So, understanding family buying behavior is very important. It used to be that husband and wife hold dominant influence family decision-making process. However, now, their role is changing. Today, children's role in family decision-making process is also significant today. Their influence relates to a wide variety of products needed by their family, or not just to the items that directly relate to their need, such as toys or foods. This means that, to market successfully to the children, marketers must understand children's buying decision making process and what media that can be used to socialize their products to them.*

**Key words:** family decision-making, children's role in family decision making, consumer socialization.

### **INTRODUCTION**

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The effect of the family on consumer behavior has often been overlooked. Until relatively recently, the implicit assumption that family exerts of its members has been commonly employed. During the past two decades, however, consumer decision making within the family has received growing amount of attention because of the effect the family can exert over the consumer activities of its members (Burns 1992).

Such decision-making activity typically involves several family members who play a variety of roles in the process. Furthermore, children appear to be major emerging players in the family decision making process. McNeal estimates that, in United States, 4-12 years old influence purchases of more than US\$ 130 billion (Lackman & Lanasa 1993).

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the role of children in the decision making process, especially in developed countries such as United States and Australia. However before this, the family decision-making will be reviewed and a model family decision-making will be presented.

### **FAMILY DECISION MAKING**

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The family is a major influence in the consumer behavior process. As the basic group, which an individual belongs, the family provides early childhood learning about products and product categories, provides the

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<sup>1)</sup> Jurnal Siasat Bisnis Edisi Th. 1 Vol. 3, Nopember 1996

opportunity for product exposure and repetition, and sets the consumption unit, the family members. As a major consumption unit the family is a prime target for most products and product categories (Schiffman & Kanuk, 1983).

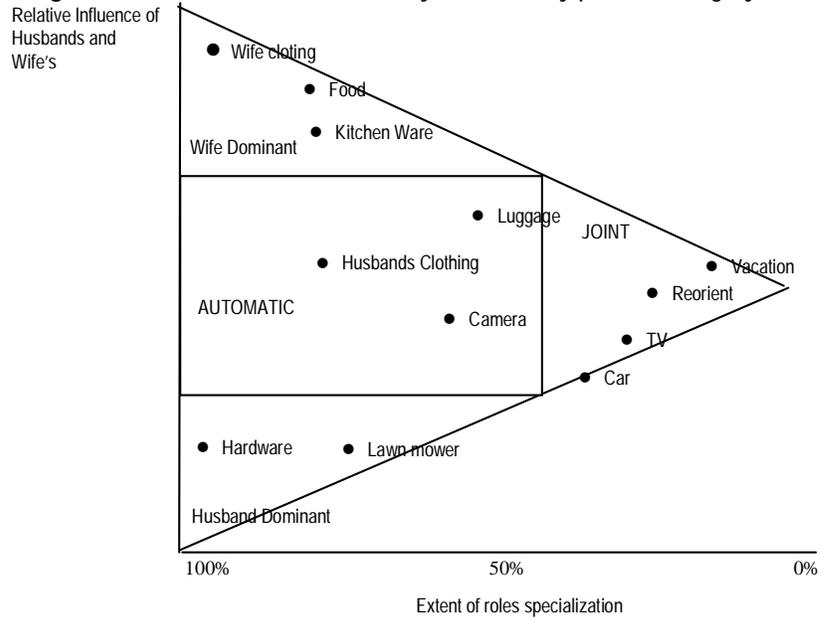
Loudon & Della Bitta (1993) define *family* as a group of two or more persons related by blood, marriage, or adoption and residing together as a household. A number of different types of family exist. The *nuclear family* consists of a husband, a wife, and their offspring. The *extended family* consists of the nuclear family plus other relatives, such as parents of the husband or wife. Such a trend has been called the *detached nuclear family* structure which has characteristics as follows: free choice of mates, higher levels of divorce, increased residential mobility, entry of large numbers of women into the labor force, and lower responsibility of children to care for their parents in their old age (Mowen, 1995).

During the course of everyday living, thousands of decisions are made by family members. The husband and wife are clearly the dominant *influences in family decision-making*. Most studies have focused on their role in decision-making and the dominance on their role in decision-making and the dominance of one or the other. The relative influence of the husband and the wife is likely to vary according to (1) type of product considered, (2) the stage in decision making, (3) the nature of purchase influence, and (4) family characteristics (Assael 1992). Some studies classified *type of product considered* into four categories:

1. Products for which the husband tends to be the dominant influence (*husband dominated decisions*) (Mowen 1995).
2. Products for which the wife tends to be the dominant influence (*wife dominated decisions*) (Mowen 1995).
3. Products for which decisions are made by either the husband or the wife, either one equally likely to be dominant (*autonomic decisions*) (Assael, 1992).
4. Products for which decisions are made jointly by husband and wife (*syncratic decisions*) (Assael, 1992).

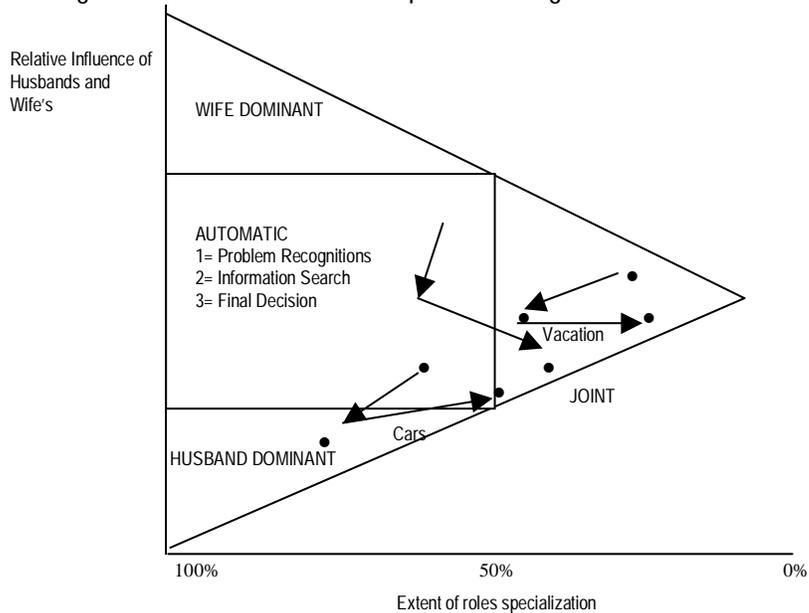
Figure 1 shows a figure of husband-wife roles in family decisions by product category. The influence of the husband or wife may vary according to *the stage in decision-making*. In the Belgian study three such family decision stages were identified –*problem recognition, search for information, and final decision* (Mowen 1995). These authors found that as the family decision stage moved closer to the final choice, the role specialization in general became more syncratic. Figure 2 shows the figure of changes in husband-wife roles from problem recognition to the final decision. The important key questions in the decision stages include: when to buy?, how much money to spend?, what style to buy? What color to buy? What pieces to buy? And where to buy? (Mowen 1995).

**Figure 1.** Husband-wife roles in family decisions by product category



Source: Assaei, H., 1992, *Consumer Behavior & Marketing Action*. (4<sup>th</sup>.edri) PWS-KENT Co., Boston, USA, 462

**Figure 2.** Changes in husband-wife roles from problem recognition to final decision



Source: Assaei, H., 1992, *Consumer Behavior & Marketing Action*. (4<sup>th</sup>.edn) PWS-KENT Co., Boston, USA, 464

Husband-wife roles may be determined by *the nature of the purchase influence*. The purchase decision within the family may be influenced by the particular role—whether instrumental or expressive-involved (Assael 1992). *Instrumental roles* relate to activities or tasks to be performed, and they are primarily economic in nature. The spouse who prepares meals, works outside the home, cares for the children, or makes home repairs is performing an instrumental role (Walters & Bergiel, 1989). In terms of the final purchasing decision, decisions on budgets, timing and product specifications would be task oriented. *Expressive roles* facilitate expression of group norms and provide group with social and emotional support. Decisions about color, style, and design in the final purchasing decision, are expressive since they reflect group norms.

*Family characteristics* also play an important role in terms of influencing the nature of purchasing decisions (Loudon & Della Bitta 1993). Culture, subculture, social class, reference groups and social interaction, stage in life cycle, mobility, geographical location, and children are specific characteristics that have been identified as influencing family decision making.

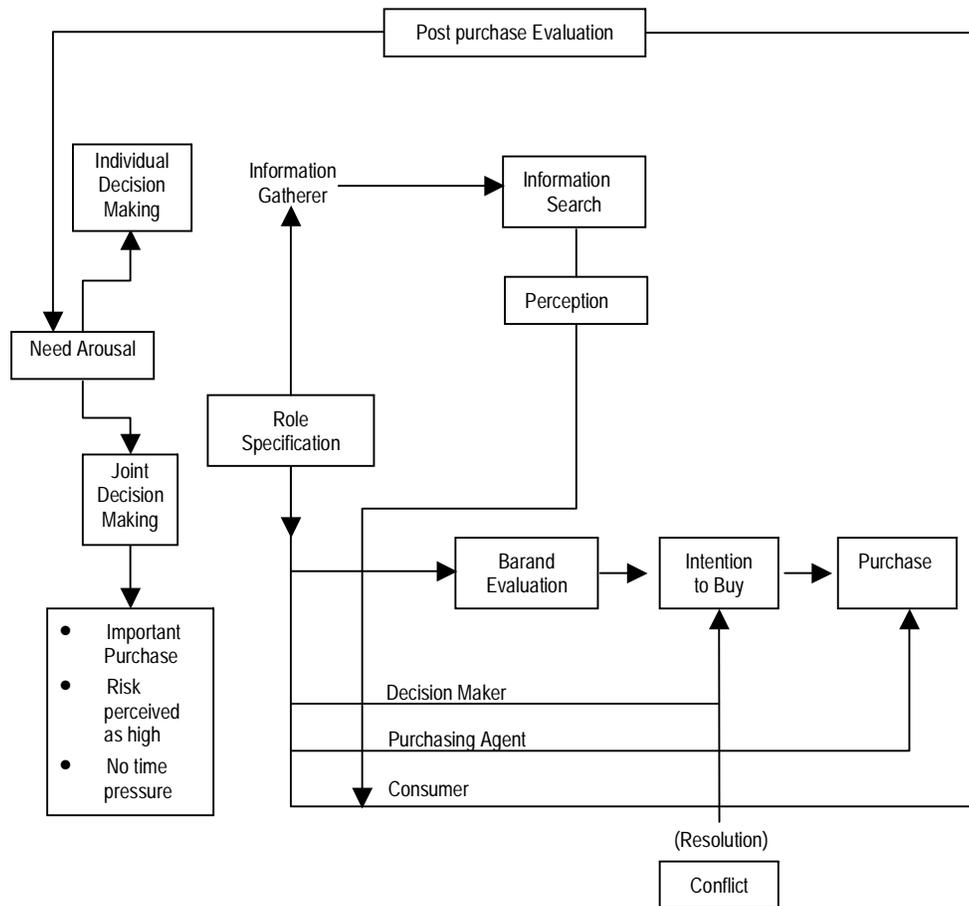
In addition, specific conditions such as *financial resources of the family member, the importance of the decision of the family member, and the gender role orientations of the family members* have been identified as having a strong influence on a member's family (Mowen 1995). Researchers have found that, as financial contributions to the family unit increase, influence of the family members on decisions also increases. Similarly, the importance of the decision to a family member also increases that person's influence on a particular decision. A family member who is highly involved in the purchase and desires that it reflect his or her individual interests and preferences would have a greater influence than one who is not involved (Mowen 1995).

Gender role relates to the extent to which a family member follows traditional normative conceptions of how males and females should behave. One study found that as gender roles in the family become more modern and less traditional, the influence of female members is likely to increase. The research on the effects of gender role suggests that families that are less traditional and more modern in their gender role orientation have a greater tendency to use a joint decision-making style. In general, gender role responsibilities of husbands and wives (Mowen, 1995).

## **A MODEL OF FAMILY DECISION MAKING**

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Family decision making is different from individual decision making and is more complex because of three factors: 1) the likelihood of joint decisions, 2) different role specifications for members in the process of decisions (Assael 1992). Figure 3 presents a model of family decision-making.

**Figure 3. A Model of Family Decision Making**

According to Shets (1974), *joint decision making* is more likely in the following situations: 1) when the level of perceived risk in buying is high, 2) when the purchasing decision is more important to the family, 3) when there are few time pressures, and 4) for certain demographic groups (e.g. upper and lower socio economic groups, younger families, those with no children, and those with only one of the parents working).

Family members play a variety of roles in decision-making. There are *five roles* that could be played by the members of the family. In any given situation, the same member may take on several or even all five roles (Assael 1992): *The information gatherer (gatekeeper)*, *The influencer*, *The decision maker*, *The purchasing agent*, and *The end consumer*. In a family decision, there is likely to be some *conflict* in purchasing objectives, atti-

tudes to ward alternative brands, and the selection of the most desirable alternative. There are *three areas of conflict*: 1) who should make various purchase decisions, 2) how the decision should be made, and 3) who should implement the decision.

However, Davis (1976) identified various strategies to resolve conflicts by *consensus* (that is, when family members agree about goals) and by *accommodation* (when they disagree about goals). To reach consensus the family can use problem solving, role delegation, and budgetary allocation. On the other hand, when family members disagree about goals they can apply bargaining and persuasion. Table 1 presents alternative strategies in family decision-making.

**Table 1.** Alternative Strategies in Family Decision Making

Goals	Strategy	Ways of Implementing
Consensus (family members agree about goals)	Problem solving	The expert The better solution The multiple purchase
	Role delegation	The specialist
	Budgetary allocation	The controller
Accommodation (Family member disagree about goals)	Bargaining	The next purchase The impulse purchase The procrastinator
	Persuasion	The irresponsible critic Spousal intuition Shopping together Coercion Coalitions

Source: Assael, H., 1992, *consumer Behavior & Marketing Action*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn), PSW-KENT co., Boston, USA, p. 459.

## THE ROLE OF CHILDREN IN FAMILY DECISION MAKING

As has been mentioned before, children play an important role in family decision-making, especially in influencing family purchase decisions (Schiffman & Kanuk 1983). McNeal (1992) views children as a *primary, an influencer, and a future market*. As a primary market, children have around US\$ 9 billion in income from their families, their household responsibilities, and work, and they spend a major portion of it on a wide variety of items to please them selves. As an influencer, they give directions to at least US\$

130 billion of parental purchases. Finally, as a future market, they will eventually buy all food for their own families.

In terms of family purchase decisions, children have both direct and indirect influence. Direct influence refers to children making requests for goods and services such as suggesting where to eat out, telling mom to buy a certain brand or flavor of ice cream, or making the selection when the family is shopping. Indirect influence means that the children's preferences are given consideration when parents make purchases (McNeal 1992).

Usually, children make purchase requests while accompanying parents during shopping trips. In addition to influencing parental purchases in the shopping environment, children make purchase requests in the home, in the car, at the movies, during television viewing, on vacation, at mealtime, even in church.

The influence that children have on parental purchases is extensive and principally embraces the following areas (McNeal 1992):

1. Items for the children, including snacks, toys, consumer electronics, clothing, and hobbies equipment and supplies.
2. Items for the home, including furnishings, television sets, stereo systems, and foods and beverages for meals.
3. Non-household items for family members, including vacations, automobiles, clothing, restaurant meals, and recreation.

In addition to these three groups, there are others that are more difficult to classify. They include family gifts to the children's grandparents and family donations to charities. Also, children often influence the parent's choice of stores and shopping centers. Table 2 shows products purchased and influenced by children.

According to McNeal (1992) following are factors that allow children to influence the family decision-making:

1. Parents are having fewer children and therefore tend to give each child more things and more say so in buying things.
2. There is an increasing number of one-parent households in which the child is expected to participate more in household decision-making.
3. Having children is often postponed until later in life when parent's careers are established and "nest eggs built". When children do arrive they are given much more attention. Part of this attention is in the form of letting children join in with parents when planning purchases.
4. In almost 70 percent of households both parents work (and are working longer hours) and they therefore expect more household participation from the kids. What parents used to consider as influence is increasingly becoming children's responsibility.

**Table 2.** Products purchased and Influenced by children

Products Purchased by Children		Products Influenced by Children	
Items	%	Items	%
Candy, gum, and toys	30	Owens clothes	80
Soft drinks	28	Toys	80
Presents	28	Cereals	72
Snacks	24	Ice cream	68
Books, magazines	20	Soft drinks	55
Fast food	18	Videotapes	43
Clothes	13	Toothpaste	31
Batteries	12	Radio	30
Records, tapes	11	Television sets	18
Movie admissions	8	Cars	15
Sports equipment	8		

Source: *Adapted from Assael, H., 1992, Consumer Behavior & Marketing Action*, (4<sup>th</sup> edn), PSW-KENT co., Boston, USA, p. 471

## CHILDHOOD CONSUMER SOCIALIZATION

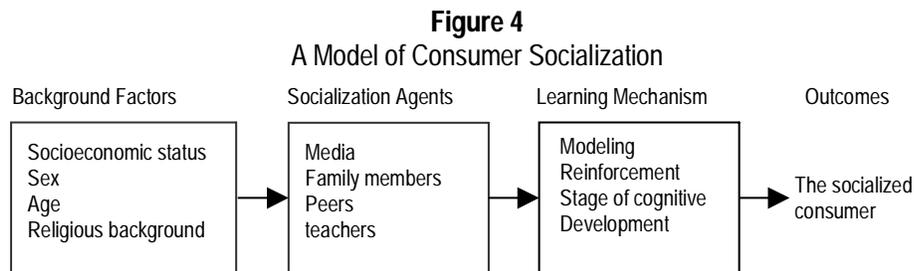
Childhood consumer socialization refers to the “process by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace” (Mowen 1995, p. 673). Children learn about purchasing and consumption primarily from their parents. Televisions may have a persuasive influence on what children see and how they react to a certain brands. However, “the family is consumption, including basic consumer needs” (Assed 1992, p. 467).

In recent years, children have acquired more purchasing influence than ever before. Since many children come from dual-earning and one-parent families, they often have to do the shopping and take care of the house when they come from school. As a result, the process of consumer socialization is occurring much earlier and much faster than it used to. Children are learning to be consumers because they are often the purchasing agents for the family. In addition, McNeal (1992) identifies stages in the development of children's consumer behavior pattern as follows:

1. Accompanying parents and observing.
2. Accompanying parents and requesting
3. Accompanying parents and selecting with permission
4. Accompanying parents and making independent purchases
5. Going to the store alone and making independent purchases

## A MODEL OF CONSUMER SOCIALIZATION

Mowen (1995) presents a simple model of consumer socialization that can be seen in figure 4. The model suggests that consumer socialization is based upon three components-background factors, socialization agents, and learning mechanism such as cognitive learning, operant conditioning, and modeling.



Source : Mowen, J. C., 1995, *Consumer Behavior*, (4<sup>th</sup> edn), Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, USA, p. 674

Socialization background factors include such variables as the consumer's socioeconomic status, sex, age, social class, and religious background. Socialization agents are those individuals directly involved with the consumer who have influence because of their frequency of contact with the consumer, importance to the consumer, or control over rewards and punishments given to the consumer. Examples of Socialization agents include parents, brothers and sisters, peers, teachers, the media, and personalities, such as athletes, movie stars, and rock stars.

### Parents as consumer socialization agents

Parents are what sociologists call primary agents of socialization (Berger & Berger 1976) and are surely the most important agents involved in the consumer socialization of children. It is the parents, while the children are still in their arms, who introduce their children to the retail store, the store personnel, the shelves of products, and the procedures of shopping and buying. It is the parents who initiate the youngster in the use of money by permitting the children to give money to the "store man" and put coins in vending machines. It is the parents who encourage the youngster to make his shopping effort alone to the nearby convenience store.

In addition to the marketplace, the home environment is another training ground for children's consumer behavior. By observing their parents' consumer practices and by interacting with their parents about products and other consumption activities within the family environment, chil-

dren have the opportunity to learn both effective and ineffective consumer behavior (Ward, Wachman & Wartellah 1997). Furthermore, children also have the opportunity to see parents using products in the home and hear them verbally judging the products. There is opportunity to overhear conversations between mother and father about consumer purchases or even to participate in the decision making process (Davis 1976).

The role of parents in trying to teach their children to be more effective consumers is illustrated by the following findings:

- Parents teach price-quality relations to their children, including experiences with the use of money and ways to shop for quality products.
- Parents teach their children how to be effective comparison shoppers and how to buy products on sale.
- Parents influence the child's brand preferences.
- Parents have influenced the child's ability to distinguish fact from exaggeration in advertising.

In addition, there is another factor in the family that influences a child's purchasing and consumption behavior that is type of parenting style. Carlson and Grossbart (1992) identify four types of families:

1. *Authoritarian parents* seek a high level of control over their children and expect unquestioned obedience. They try to shield children from outside influence.
2. *Neglecting parents* are distant from their children and do not exert much control over them. They do little to maintain or encourage their children capabilities.
3. *Democratic parents* foster a balance between parents and children's rights. They encourage the child's self-expression and value autonomy. They are warm and supportive, but they also expect mature behavior from the child. If they regard the child as "out of bounds", they use discipline.
4. *Permissive parent* seek to remove as many restraints from children as possible without endangering them. They believe children have adult rights but few responsibilities.

### **Peers as consumer socialization agents**

The influence of peers apparently pervades all aspects of children's consumer behavior. "It made my friend's hair bouncy too," said Monica who uses her own shampoo, Revlon's Clean & Clear, because, she says, ads in Teen magazine show how it gives hair bounce and body (Sellers 1989, p. 114).

Studies about the influence among peers on consumer behavior are numerous but the results can be summarized under two headings: con-

formity and satisfaction of needs (McNeal 1987). In the case of conformity, children are expected to conform to group norms; perhaps more important, children normally want to fit in with a group, usually their age group, in order to gain acceptance. To firmly weld himself to groups, which will confirm independence from the family, conformity is necessary, and conspicuous products such as clothing conveniently permit this conformity.

In addition, a child accepts the influence of other children in order to satisfy a variety of needs. McNeal (1987) suggests that the following needs can be satisfied by accepting the influence of others:

1. *Need to understand.* By accepting directions from others, a child can gain an understanding of certain products and certain aspects of his environment.
2. *Need for affiliation.* In order to have good relationships with others, there must be some give-and-take. By accepting the influence of others, children obtain cooperative relationships with others that in turn permit development of independence from the family.
3. *Need for infavoidance.* Term of infavoidance refers to the need to avoid humiliation and embarrassment (Murray 1938). Children are embarrassed frequently because their limited knowledge causes them to make mistakes. Their peers can help them to prevent these mistakes through recommendations or even subtle signals about consumer behavior. As illustration, peers can confirm what clothing is in fashion, what brand of shoes is the most popular, and what stores have the best prices on certain items.
4. *Need for achievement.* Children, especially in western society, are usually encouraged to achieve: to achieve recognition, win awards, make high grades, and gain friends. Their friends can help them by recommending various products that may help them achieve certain goals. For example, a youngster may find that an Apple computer helps him make higher grades, and Michael Jackson tapes help him obtain friends.

### **Teachers as consumer socialization agents**

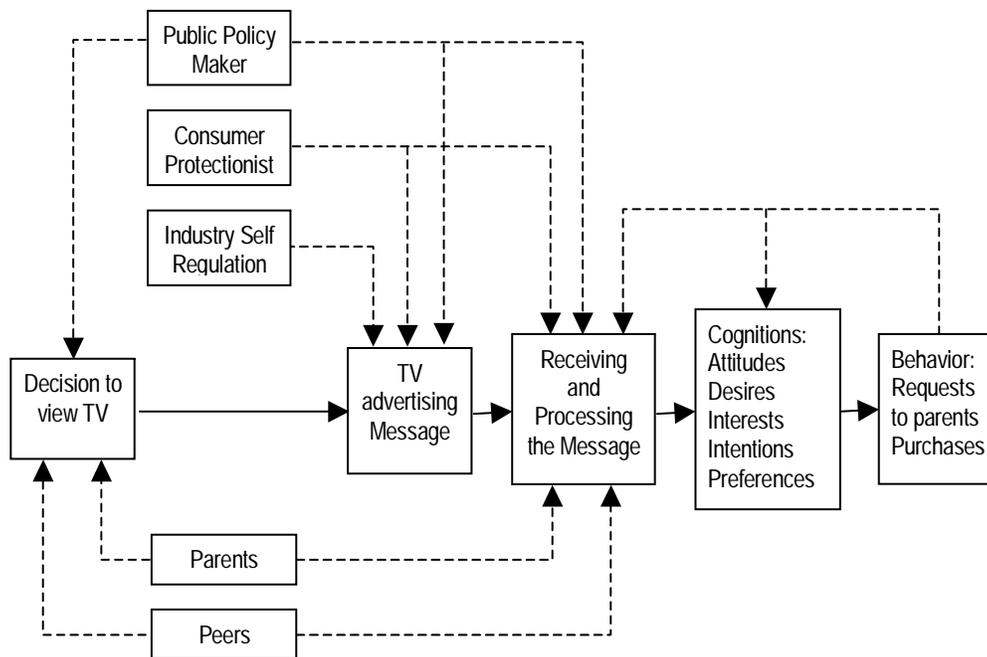
The influence of schoolteachers on the development of the child is also considered. Perhaps one useful influence consisted of tips how to spend money wisely. In elementary school children learn basic consumer education. Consumer education refers to "the skills and knowledge that enable an individual to utilize available economic and personal resources for the satisfaction of personal wants and needs" (Richardson 1977). Consumer education in elementary school embraces such topical units as understanding the marketplace, understanding one's motives, and understanding the purchases transaction. Teachers who teach such topics to children

certainly must be recognized as important agents in the consumer socialization process of children; they are important because of what they teach and important of their central role in the children life (McNeal 1987).

### Media consumer socialization agents

Kotler (1994) defines media as one the communication channies that carry massages without personal contact or interaction. Media consists of print media (newspapers, magazines, direct mail), broadcast media (radio, television) electronic media (audiotape, posters). The primary media used by manufactures to influence children's consumer behavior is advertising, especially television advertising "Chritopher Whittle, the CEO of Whittle Communications, point out that kids are already exposed to 100 minutes of ads a day he is adding two minutes more" (Sellers 1989, p. 115).

**Figure 5.** A Model of Children Interacting with Television Advertising

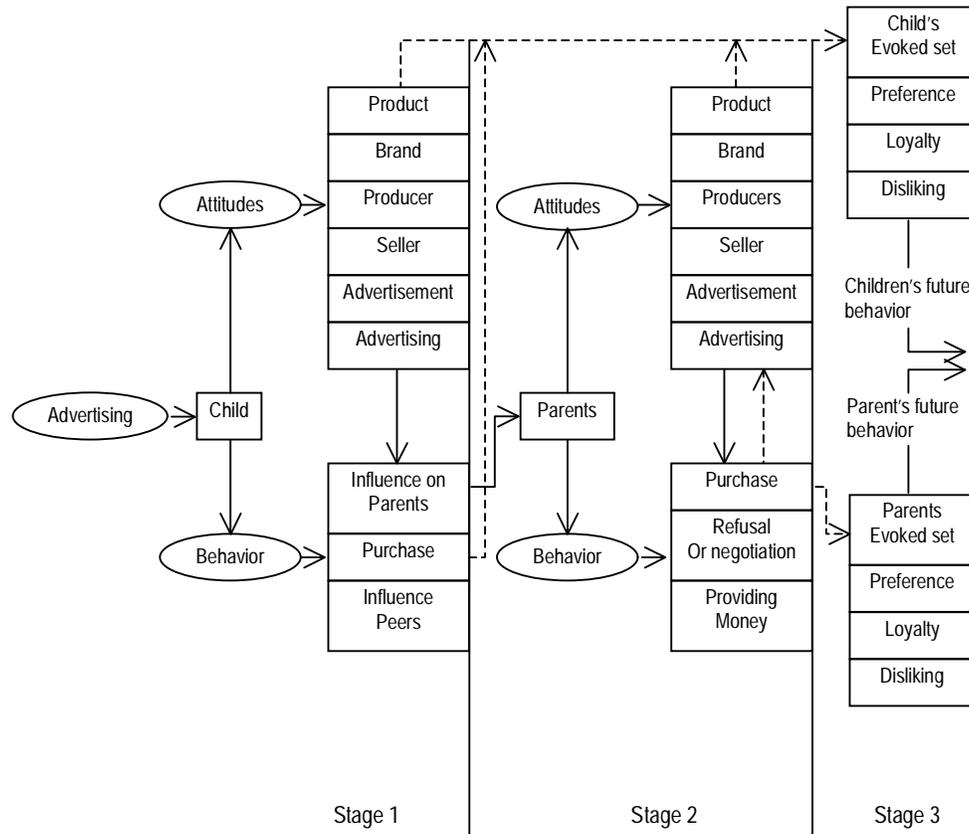


Source: McNeal, 1987, *Children as Consumers, Insights and Implications*, D.C. Health and Company, USA, p.64

In terms of investigating how children's consumer behavior is induced by advertising, especially television advertising, McNeal (1987) presents a model of children interacting with television advertising as shown in figure 5 above. This model shows that television advertising may indeed produce three types of behavior among children: purchases, purchase requests, and antisocial behavior. As children have their own money, they may like a buy desires products that are advertised on the television without asking their parents. Purchase requests made by children typically do vary according to television viewing. Robertson & Rossiter (1977) divided children into low and high TV exposure groups and studied their purchase requests for toys and games during the Christmas season when ads for these items are most intense. The result showed that the high-exposure group requested significantly more toys and games than the low-exposure group. Behavior induced by television may not always be positive. An analysis of the impact of television advertising on children's behavior patterns indicates that where advertising puts pressure on children to make purchase requests to parents, the results can be unpleasant conflicts between parent and child. "Many parents fear the socialization effects of advertising, principally because the effects may conflict with their own goals and desires for their children" (Grossbart & Crosby 1984). Another result may be disappointment among the children when requests are denied. It does appear, then that such advertising may actually result in substantial antisocial behavior among family members and among peers.

In addition, McNeal (1992) presents a model of the effects of advertising on children as show in figure 6. The model has been roughly divided into three stages. In the first stage advertising influences children to buy products and/or to get parents to make purchases. In the second stage, parents consider the product at the recommendation of the child. In stage three, the attitudes of the child and parents that have been induced by advertising and purchase behavior determine their future behavior toward advertised products.

**Figure 6**  
The Effect of Advertising to Children



Source: Mc Neal, 1992, Kids as Costumers, *A Handbook of Marketing to Children*, Macmillan, Inc., New York, p. 145

## OUTCOMES OF THE CONSUMER SOCIALIZATION PROCESS

The outcomes of the consumer socialization have not been defined by research; therefore, some are simply unknowns (McNeal 1987). However a set of cognitions (attitudes and knowledge) and a set of behavior that were revealed in a study of children under the result of consumer socialization via the various socialization agents. This list is at least representative of consumer socialization outcomes among children and is indicative of the complexity and importance of this process.

**Table 3**  
Consumer Cognitions and Behaviors Found  
Among a Sample of Children in 1964

<p><b>Cognitions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Brand knowledge</li> <li>Brand preference</li> <li>Store knowledge</li> <li>Store preference</li> <li>Product knowledge</li> <li>Product preference</li> <li>Understanding of the purpose of advertising</li> <li>Understanding of the goals of retailers</li> <li>Understanding of money</li> <li>Understanding of price and competitive prices</li> <li>Plans for purchases</li> <li>Purchase decisions</li> <li>Feeling of purchase satisfaction/dissatisfaction</li> </ul>
<p><b>Behaviors:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Making independent shopping trips</li> <li>Shopping (comparative) for products</li> <li>Seeking personal information about product purchases</li> <li>Accepting personal influence related to product purchases</li> <li>Choosing products in stores</li> <li>Performing the purchase act</li> <li>Using purchased products</li> <li>Demonstrating purchased products to others</li> </ul>

Source: McNeal, 1987, *Children as Consumers, Insights and Implications*, D.C. Heath and Company, USA, p. 24.

## CONCLUSION

Purchase decision the family is more complex than in the individual buyers, because the members in the family play an important role in influencing the decision. Generally, husbands and wives have been recognized as dominant influencers in family decision-making. It has been identified that in traditional families, husbands are the most dominant in decision making, while in modern families purchase decisions are made jointly.

In addition to husbands and wives, children also play an important role in decision-making process. They influence decisions for almost every kind of products whether for themselves or for the whole family. They acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes, relevant to their functioning as con-

sumers in the marketplace, through or media, parents, peers, and teachers has been identified as that of consumer socialization agents for children.

Parents are the primary agent of socialization in terms of teaching the children from the earlier age by influencing them with their consumer behavior. Peers, in addition, were also found to be an important socialization agent. They contributed particularly to the purpose of conformity and satisfaction of needs among children. Moreover, teacher's role as socialization agents can be recognized by a their contribution in teaching consumer education at school. Finally, media, especially television has been pointed out as socialization agents that have a strong influence on child consumer behavior.

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