

Hello Bunny!

Playboy Utilizes Spencer's Gifts & Kiddie Designs at Your Local Shopping Mall

Is Spencer Gifts the Witch's house meant to entrap Hansel and Gretel? In that story, the Wicked Witch decorates her house with candies to entice curious children, whom she then enslaves and eats. Spencer stores feature games, gumball machines, gag gifts—and sex toys—to lure child “guests” into their deviant backrooms, which host a wide array of pornographic products.

Spencer Gifts began as a “novelty and gag” mail-order house in 1947. It now has over 650 stores in the U.S. and many in Canada. These stores, located mostly in shopping malls, claim that their target audience is 18-to-25-year-

olds, but in fact they cater to younger teens, “tweens,” and even children. Many of their shops are located next to children's stores or play areas. One Spencer's store in Durham, North Carolina, is adjacent to a Build-a-Bear shop,

and another is next to a children's carousel, according to a *Good Morning America* story from March 2008.

Among the sexually explicit items that can be found on Spencer's shelves are “Pimp” and “Ho” mugs, pole-dancing kits, g-string and phallic-shaped candy, handcuffs for sadomasochistic “games,” sexualized school-girl costumes, and pornographic posters and tee-shirts. An example of the latter depicts various silhouettes of a woman on a leash, along with the words “How to train your bitch.” The stores also feature items promoting illicit drugs (such as marijuana-flavored lollipops) and binge drinking.

While Spencer's erototoxic (the toxic form of eros) items are supposed to be kept in the back of the store and sold only to persons over age 18, many of them are on display for general viewing and handling by all-age browsers—some are even in the front window display so that someone just passing by might see them. The store clerks do not always check the age of patrons; in one store, I found one clerk requiring age identification, while several did not. In fact, the clerks are often teenagers themselves, because Spencer's has found that children are more likely to buy pornographic materials from a teenager than from an adult.

Playboy Connection

Given all this, it should come as no surprise that, according to the website wordiq.com, Spencer's has a partnership with Playboy Enterprises, under which it markets Playboy-branded products and holds contests whose prizes are trips to the Playboy mansion.

Playboy has a line of children's products, aimed at tween girls, that were test-marketed in the United Kingdom. Several of these items were patterned after Mattel's line of “Hello Kitty” products,



designed for 6-to-12-year-old girls. A glance at Playboy's pink bunny-head pencil case shows that it is clearly a "Hello Kitty" pencil case copycat.

The resemblance between the "Hello Kitty" and Playboy versions of other products—including purses, necklaces, and even a doggie coat for real or stuffed dogs—is obvious when the two are compared. Indeed, Playboy can be said to have pilfered the style of these items from "Hello Kitty." What else would motivate Playboy to produce a *doggie coat*? Marketing research shows that tween girls are easily enticed into trading up their cute kitty logo for the more sophisticated Playboy bunny logo.

In U.K. stores such as WH-Smith, Playboy bunny items are shelved alongside Disney and Winnie the Pooh. One can find diaries, zip files, gel pens, eraser sets, and school ring-binders all featuring the Playboy bunny logo. A 2005 article in the English periodical *The Guardian* wondered at

the subtle way that porn brands have infiltrated the [English] children's market . . . selling Playboy-branded stationery, targeted at teenage girls. . . . The cute bunny, surely one of the most ingenious ideas in the history of morally loathsome marketing, is embedded as respectable, normal. It's so subliminal and all the more pernicious for it. . . . Playboy stationery is one of the most popular brands sold by WHSmith—targeted at children.

Main Street Sex Marketing

The purpose of all this marketing, at Spencer's and elsewhere, is to



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groom tweens and children into sexual conduct that is harmful to them. A publication for the FBI's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention defines "grooming" as seducing "children over a period of time by gradually lowering their sexual inhibitions."

Based on that definition, Spencer's is Main Street Grooming Central. Jani Zubkovs, a sex-book marketer, brags in his eBook *Marketing: How to Successfully Sell to Spencer Gifts* that the store caters "to young audiences" and that it "is the only mass merchandiser that is not afraid to put vibrators in their mall locations."

When various neighborhood retail stores refused to carry Zubkovs's sex kits, Spencer's agreed to pander his devices. "A lot of mom-and-pop retail gift outlets really frown on a dildo sitting on their shelves," Zubkovs wrote. "I needed stores that didn't care. I needed Spencer's Gifts."

Over the years, Spencer's has increasingly come to show that it doesn't care about mixing drug and sex paraphernalia with the "gag jokes and cards" on its shelves. When asked for a response to reports such as the *Good Morning America* story cited above, Spencer's disingenuously claimed that it was store policy to

"discourage the sale of items with an adult theme to guests under the age of majority" (emphasis mine).

Reasons for Concern

Given the fact that many of our shopping malls are dotted with such stores as Victoria's Secret and Abercrombie, should we be particularly worried about the proliferation of Spencer's stores in these malls?

Indeed we should, because the effort to curtail child sexploitation is ongoing, and laws protecting "community standards" and children will always have to struggle against greedy businesses and sexual deviants. Before the Sexual Revolution, the joint power of women and the church had forced brothels to the outskirts of most towns, Now, it appears that Spencer's is the gateway to

bringing brothel merchandise and eventually brothels themselves back to Main Street.

Rhode Island suggests the future. A loophole in that state's law makes "inside" prostitution (as distinguished from streetwalkers' solicitations) legal. As a result, brothels are thriving (boston.com noted in an August 2009 story that there are about 40 currently operating in the state, many in business and shopping districts), and efforts to outlaw or even regulate them effectively have so far failed.

In addition the demand for sexual slavery (i.e., prostitution), on a national and even global level, has resurfaced, with Las Vegas as its epicenter. Hugh Hefner was given the "keys to the city" for his Playboy casino there. And Spencer's stores have given Playboy Enterprises the access they need in their campaign to poison

the culture of childhood and groom girls for the sex industry.

But parents have fought back, mounting protests that garnered news coverage in many cities, including Atlanta, Salt Lake City, Washington, D.C., and Durham, North Carolina. The website BoycottSpencerGifts.org notes that several states have laws that prohibit or regulate the sale of sex devices, and it encourages people to check the laws of their own states and municipalities to see what might be done about the pornographic merchandise Spencer's has on open display to browsing youths.

Spencer's (and its parent company, ACON Investments) clearly doesn't care about community standards meant to protect children from harmful materials. That is why we need to care. For to lose our Main Streets is to lose our society. ☉

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