“Kids identify with the puppets”: Susan Linn, founder of Fairplay for Kids, on working with child survivors, advocacy coalitions, and the impact of marketing on children.

Rollo Romig
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Rollo Romig: Could you start off by introducing yourself and giving an overview of what your work has been?

Susan Linn: I'm Susan Linn. I'm a psychologist, a ventriloquist, an activist, an author. All of my work from the very beginning has been for or on behalf of children, and particularly young children.

I began as a ventriloquist. I worked with Fred Rogers on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. I was on his show, but also worked with his company to make videotapes about difficult issues for kids, which I had been doing with and for other organizations for quite a long time. With Fred Rogers' company, I made a video to help kids with cancer go back to school and one for children of depressed parents. And then we did a whole series on racism for first to third graders. We did nine different episodes that came with a teacher's guide and were distributed in all 50 states in schools around the country.

I think the first time I was on his show was when I was 21, maybe 22. I was really young. But I started doing videos on a whole range of topics for children. Nonprofits would ask me to do these videos, and I would work with their expertise. I did videos for the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. I did one on physical abuse, one on sexual abuse, and one on emotional abuse, and videos on death and loss for kids, the death of a friend, videos for children of alcoholics, and for kids with diabetes. All sorts of medical problems and also physical and psychological problems. Another video that I did for Fred Rogers' company was about kids in homeless shelters.

I had left school when I was 19, after my sophomore year, to earn my living as a ventriloquist. And then I went back to school and took almost entirely psychology courses and courses about children. Then I was earning my living doing live performances for kids. I created a job at Boston Children's Hospital as a puppet therapist doing play therapy with puppets. I think one of my strengths is that I'm really good at knowing what I don't know and when I need help. So when I started I realized I was way over my head. I was very fortunate—I got hooked up with a psychiatry resident, who went on to be head of the psychiatry department for a while. He supervised me for seven years as if I were a psychiatry resident. I got incredibly good supervision.

And at some point I decided I would go back to school, and I got into the Harvard Graduate School of Education. At that time they had a program in counseling and consulting psychology. I applied to that, I got in, and eventually got my doctorate. And in the course of making the videotapes about racism, one of the consultants was Dr. Alvin Poussaint, who was at Judge Baker Children's Center and was an activist. He was in Mississippi in the 1960s. He is responsible for integrating the hospitals in the south. Our meetings just kept getting longer and longer. And he had just gotten some funding to create a media center at Judge Baker Children's Center, which is affiliated with Harvard Medical School.

He asked me to come work with him, and I did. And we did a whole range of different things, including creating a pilot for a television show designed to help children acquire social coping skills. It was the '90s, a time when television was really changing. When we made the pilot, there was money from the National Endowment for Children's Educational Television, which was funded for three years. We got funding for two of those three years. But in trying to bring that pilot into a program, it became clear that we couldn't do it without commercials and without commercialism. McDonald's was interested in funding it, and that was horrifying to me.

I mean, I came of age at a time when there was a lot of hope for television. It's a powerful teaching tool. And Alvin was a child psychiatrist. And the idea that he would be involved with a program that was sponsored by McDonald's—it was just awful. It wasn't a route that I wanted to go on, as much as I loved performing and writing and creativity, but the whole business model was really repulsive to me. That was the beginning of my concerns about commercialism and the impact of corporations targeting kids with advertising and marketing.

Early on there was a lot of hope for television, and there were activist groups who convinced the FTC that they should ban marketing to children. And they actually said they were going to ban marketing to children under the age of 8, and ban junk food marketing to kids under the age of 12. That was before the obesity epidemic, which is so clearly linked to marketing. Then people were basically concerned about cavities. So the FTC said they were going to ban marketing to kids. And every corporation that would get any benefit from marketing to kids put huge pressure on Congress. Congress temporarily defunded the FTC and then made it harder for the FTC to regulate marketing to kids. That was the atmosphere.

What changed me from a concerned mom and a psychologist was that I was seeing the impact of commercialism on my daughter, who was in elementary school at the time. We live in a town that is known for its really good schools. And I walked into her elementary school one day and saw that her spring concert was going to be an evening of Disney music. I had a visceral response. School is supposed to expand your horizons; it's not supposed to feed you what you were getting every day anyway. I was appalled, and I was the only parent who was concerned about that.

I was also working at the time with very low income kids who had HIV, doing play therapy with puppets. And it was a little girl there, who was about four years old, who first introduced me to Britney Spears. So I was getting it at home, and I was seeing it in my work. But what really transformed me into an activist was when public television PBS imported *Teletubbies* from Britain and was marketing it as educational for babies, without any research. The idea that it was PBS made it particularly painful.

Alvin Poussaint and I wrote an article for a magazine called *The American Prospect*. That was when Jerry Falwell was attacking *Teletubbies* and accusing Tinky-Winky of being gay. The point of our article is that the real trouble with *Teletubbies* wasn't Tinky-Winky's alleged sexual orientation, it was that PBS was marketing it as beneficial for babies when they had no research, and the amount of brand licensing that went along with that was just outrageous.

Having written that article, I got really interested in commercialism. I wrote another article for *The Prospect* about advertising and marketing to kids, and people started contacting us because of those two articles. We were invited to what was originally supposed to be a very tiny study group on corporate influences on children, but it got a huge response and turned into a whole conference. I discovered that I wasn't the only one who was concerned. And fortunately, my boss, Alvin, was also concerned. I used to say that Alvin's job at Judge Baker was to do anything he wanted, and my job was to do anything I wanted as long as it overlapped with what he wanted, and most things did. I was really lucky to be there at that time.

Then I discovered that there was a marketing company, Brunico, that was giving out awards for marketing to kids: the Golden Marble Awards. All these horrible companies were getting these awards in New York at the Grand Hyatt. So I went to my boss and I said, this would be a really great focus for a demonstration. And he was an activist, so we set about organizing a demonstration on 42nd Street, and we used the list that we got from that conference and contacted people. It isn't that a lot of people came, but a really interesting collection of people came from around the country, [including] a guy named Jim Metrock, who was in Alabama and who was taking on Channel One, which was corporate-sponsored news that was piped into schools and that kids were being forced to watch. It included ten minutes of news and two minutes of commercials. He called me up and he said, "Dr. Linn, I'm thinking of joining your demonstration. I've never been to a demonstration before. Are we going to get arrested?" I said, "Do you want to get arrested?" And he came.

That was the start. It was just very clear to me, first of all, that this was a social justice issue, and also that we were stronger together with other people. We formed what started out as a coalition of different advocacy groups. It was 2000 at that point, and there were people responding to the corporate messaging that was going on, but they were doing it based on important issues that they were worried about. There was an organization working on messaging to girls called Dads and Daughters. There was one out in California that was working on marketing in schools. And there were ones working on violent media. And it was clear to me that the problem that linked all of those was the commercialization of children's lives with the advertising and marketing, and that what we needed was an organization that addressed the underlying problem. That was the beginning of what is now Fairplay.

I wrote *Consuming Kids*, which was my first book, and that really helped the movement. It legitimized it in some ways. And then, a few years later, I wrote a book called *The Case for Make Believe: Saving Play in a Commercialized World*. And in 2022, I came out with my third book,

which is, *Who's Raising the Kids?: Big Tech, Big Business, and the Lives of Children*. It was just so clear that because of the technology, there were more and different things to say, even though the intent of the corporations and the conglomerates hadn't changed, but their tools just got so much more powerful.

Rollo Romig: You've taken a lot of different approaches in attempting to shift social norms on this problem, from the videos to the books to your activism. What have you found is most effective in changing social norms? What has actually moved things?

Susan Linn: Stamina. I've been thinking about this a lot because *The American Prospect* has asked me to write an article on the growing movement to ban cell phones in schools. It's so important for people engaged in activism and advocacy to understand that social change takes a really, really, really long time, and that the change might not even come in their lifetime. Adam Hochschild wrote an amazing book called *Bury The Chains*, which was about the twelve Quakers in England who, in the late 1700s, decided to end the African slave trade. They did it, and it took them 70 years. If you look at social movements, when they come to surface and become known and part of the public conversation there is, underneath that, years and years of people toiling away, laying the foundation. That's a really important lesson for activists or people wanting to create social change, that it doesn't happen quickly. You really have to understand why you're doing it, and you can't expect that there's going to be an easy win. I am not kidding about stamina.

I don't think that it's one thing that foments change. In 1984, under Reagan, the FCC deregulated children's television, so it was fine to create a program for the sole purpose of selling toys. So by the late '90s, people were beginning to see the consequences of that, and the consequences of the whole '80s love affair with the market and capitalism. I was at a meeting with a lot of people doing good work in children's television, and I raised the issue of commercials, and someone just looked at me and said, "Well, capitalism won after the fall of the Soviet Union."

People were beginning to see that all of these skinny models were hurting children, that the extreme violent media starting with television and moving to video games was bad for kids, and materialism, which these days is so clearly linked to the environmental movement. I mean, global warming has its roots in consumption. People from different walks of life or different parts of the world need to be experiencing the harms and then start to try to do something about it. And then there needs to be somebody who brings them all together.

If you look at the union movement—I was just in Butte, Montana, which I found out was where the very first union in the United States was formed—if you look at the strikes in the 1920s and '30s and the violence that those people trying to organize labor felt, there was the IWW [The Industrial Workers of the World]—a way of bringing people together. If you look at the 1960s civil rights movement, if people know anything about it they know John Lewis and SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee], but even those people were standing on the shoulders of people who came before, in the 1940s and the 1950s. It takes the harms of whatever [the problem] is reaching different people, and it takes somebody deciding they want to do something about it. And then it takes something or somebody that brings all those people together.

The harms of social media are so clear now. And you have these parents whose kids committed suicide for all sorts of reasons linked to social media. Those parents became activists. Now there's the two bills in Congress, KOSA and COPPA 2, which passed the Senate with only three no's. It's astonishing to me. And there are so many groups now dealing with various aspects of kids' screen time, and that's really remarkable. But what's fortunate is that Fairplay was there to bring people together to push things forward.

Rollo Romig: What do you think parents maybe still don't understand about where the threats are coming from in the media landscape for kids?

Susan Linn: One thing that is still very, very concerning to me is that they don't understand that it starts with babies. It's not all of a sudden teenagers. The push to addict kids to their devices starts with babies. There are these programs designed specifically to target kids and to sell to babies. What's happening to teenagers is really terrible, and I support everything that's going on there. But really the problem starts with infancy, and that's what parents don't know and they don't understand. They don't understand that their habits with their phones are going to influence and affect their kids. And they don't understand that putting their kids in front of a device—you can say you're only going to do it for a minute, but it's not really for a minute, and it's addictive. These programs that are designed specifically to target babies and toddlers, they work with child psychologists, [just] as the marketers did years ago. They know exactly what will trigger a baby's interest or a laugh. That's what they don't understand.

Also, people don't understand that one family in isolation can't do very much. The onus and the burden needs to fall on the corporations and not on parents so much. And it begins in infancy.

Rollo Romig: I want to jump back to that earlier phase in your career when you were making videotapes for children about social problems. What did you learn from that process, and from working with Fred Rogers, about how to reach children and how to communicate with children, especially about difficult things?

Susan Linn: I went to see Fred Rogers when I was 19, when he first came on the air, and I just thought, wow, this is what I want to do. I went to see him in Pittsburgh with my puppets. And what he said to me is, "You must really remember what it's like to be a child." I think he had that. Even as a young adult, it was always really clear to me that children had deep feelings. Their cognition wasn't as sophisticated as adults, but they had the complete range and depth of feelings. Understanding that was helpful to me.

Also, in the 1970s, there were some really amazing books written about children. The pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton wrote a book called *Infants and Mothers*, and it was the first book I ever read about children. There was that and Haim Ginott's *Between Parents and Children*, Selma Fraiberg wrote *The Magic Years*, John Holt wrote *Why Children Fail*, and Herbert Kohl wrote *36 Children*. I read all those books. That really contributed to my understanding of and my respect for children, but I never romanticized them, and the people that I admired and that I was reading didn't romanticize children either. That was really helpful, and that's what Fred Rogers had. I mean, he was supervised. Those scripts were read by a child analyst.

I never saw myself as the authority on whatever topic I was working on. I worked with experts in that particular field. I also often ran things by the child psychiatrist who supervised me. And when we did the racism project, we had a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-disciplinary advisory board, and they weren't token. They read every script, and they were really quick to let me know when I was off track in the writing. I think that another one of my strengths is that I'm pretty good at taking criticism.

Rollo Romig: You mentioned that when you started working at the Children's Hospital, you were in over your head. What did you feel like you didn't know, and what did you learn under that mentorship?

Susan Linn: I was being faced with kids who could die and kids with really awful physical conditions, and I had never done any therapy with kids. I mean, it's amazing that I got hired. I just knew that I needed help. Part of the help is learning to understand what's you and what's the person you're working with. It's really crucial in a therapeutic relationship that the therapist understands that. And also not to open wounds that you can't close. I think that I intuitively knew

this anyway, but not to feel that I had to interpret what the kids were doing, that the play itself was therapeutic and that we could work things out in the play.

I had to learn to set limits around violence to the puppets. The puppets are very disinhibiting. So, learning that they couldn't hit my puppets and how to set limits. Also, learning which kids could benefit and what kids really couldn't. I learned that kids who had a lot of impulse control problems were not good candidates for puppet therapy because the puppets are so disinhibiting, and that almost made it worse. You have to be able to differentiate between reality and fantasy. They had to know that the puppets were pretend, and I learned that you couldn't take the children's play literally, but the themes were real. That's really what the heart of it was. You play out of your own experience. That's all you have. So a child portraying a mother was portraying that child's understanding of what mothers do. That could range from a child who kissed Audrey goodbye and said, "Now, be good. Mommy will be back later," to another child who's created a mother that watched implacably as my puppet drowned. And it's not that I think his mother ever let him drown, but it was his experience that they weren't going to help. You couldn't count on them helping.

Rollo Romig: I want to ask specifically about the videos that you made that were addressed to children about sexual abuse. What did you feel like you learned from that experience? What did you find was effective in that?

Susan Linn: I think that one of the incredible benefits of puppets is that they can say things that kids can't say, and they can do that in a way that is not threatening to kids. Kids identify with the puppets. The most important thing about abuse was the importance of being able to tell somebody that they trust that it happened. Not to try to make light of things, to remain calm and supportive, to make sure that the puppets knew that they could come back and that they could talk to me about anything, was especially central. It's not their fault. That was really key. And it’s okay to be angry. It’s okay to be sad. It's okay to have those feelings and it's important to be able to talk about it. This secret must be told.

Rollo Romig: Is there anything you'd like to add that maybe didn't come up?

Susan Linn: One thing that I did learn in the early days, when I was invited to give talks based on my first book, is that I needed to have solutions. I couldn't just address the problem. I needed to have solutions. That's really important. I had to leave people with hope. I think that that was true in the videos as well, although I don't think I articulated that to myself. But in talking about this overwhelming problem of the corporate takeover of children's lives, it is overwhelming, it's

depressing, it's upsetting, and I had to learn not to leave people hanging like that. If you're going to talk about something that's horrible to people, you need to leave them with hope. That doesn't mean minimizing it at all, which there is a tendency for people to do. But you need to leave people with hope. There are things that you can do.

Rollo Romig: Thank you. It's been great talking with you.

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***This conversation has been edited and condensed.*