Business and Children: Mapping Impacts, Managing Responsibilities

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ABSTRACT. In recent years, issues of childhood obesity, unsafe toys, and child labor have raised the question of corporate responsibilities to children. However, business impacts on children are complex, multi-faceted, and frequently overlooked by senior managers. This article reports on a systematic analysis of the reputational landscape constructed by the media, corporations, and non-government organizations around business responsibilities to children. A content analysis methodology is applied to a sample of more than 350 relevant accounts during a 5-year period. We identify seven core responsibilities that are then used to provide a framework for enabling businesses to map their range of impacts on children. We set out guidelines for how to identify and manage the firm’s strategic responsibilities in this arena, and identify the constraints that corporations face in meeting such responsibilities.

KEY WORDS: corporate responsibility, children, marketing, content analysis, risk management, corporate reputation

Introduction

Corporations spend billions of dollars every year on producing and marketing products for children. Key industries, such as toys, computer games, children’s clothes, and food, not to mention family segments in travel and leisure, have experienced unprecedented growth over the past decades. For example, companies now spend about $17 billion annually marketing to children, a huge increase from around $10 billion in the 1980s (Horovitz, 2006; Schor, 2004). The Mintel research group estimates that steadily growing sales have swollen the UK market for children’s clothes to around £5.2 billion, with the US market said to be around $49 billion. According to a US Federal Trade Commission report on food marketing to children, food and beverage companies now spend around $1.6 billion annually marketing their products to children (Marr, 2008). The children’s market is unmistakably big business, and children have become a central component of many companies’ marketing strategies. Building strong, trusted brands that appeal to children and their parents, and developing positive and lasting relationships with families have therefore become key aims for companies across various sectors.

However, there is a dark side to this picture too. Questions about childhood obesity, unsafe toys, and the specter of child labor are all potential threats to the positive relationship that corporations seek to nurture with children and their parents. Moreover, these are just the tip of the iceberg. Business impacts on children in many and diverse ways, some of them positive, some of them negative, but many of which remain off the radar of senior management. While the creation of appealing products or stimulating advertisements for children may be front-of-mind, managers may fail to recognize the wide range of other ways that firms can impact children’s lives. This is not surprising given that socially responsible investment indexes (such as the FTSE4Good and the Dow Jones Sustainability Index), as well as other rankings of social responsibility (such as Business in the Community’s Corporate Responsibility Index and the Corporate Responsibility Officer magazine’s 100 Best Corporate Citizens ranking) barely mention child issues in their rating criteria.

However, understanding child impacts is critical for managers for two reasons. First, in the absence of such knowledge, firms will be attempting to manage strategically important relationships with children and their parents without having a full understanding...
of the context, dimensions, or implications of those relationships. Creating value for children (or any other constituency) requires that firms assess how value is created (and destroyed) across their operations, not simply in one dimension alone. Brand building investments in one area (e.g., labor practices) may be offset by inattention in another area (e.g., product safety).

Second, business impacts on children tend to be intrinsically sensitive, and this in turn raises major reputational risks for firms. An obvious example of this reputational risk is provided by clothing and sportswear firms such as Nike, Gap, Primark, and various others. For all the of these companies, it was the revelation of child labor in their Asian factories in developing countries that really kick-started the widespread attention to responsible labor practices in their supply chains. The widely circulated accounts of children as young as seven or eight toiling for long hours and low wages to make products for global multinationals created substantial reputational risks for such firms. Similarly the long-running Nestlé infant formula boycott relied extensively on presenting evidence of child cruelty associated with corporate activity. While these are all examples of children from developing countries, the same principle also holds for the developed world. Most recently, attention has been focused on food and nutrition issues, especially in Europe and North America; but this has also increasingly become an issue in Asia (Chhabara, 2008).

Because of the enormous sensitivity around child-related issues, any stories and images featuring negative links between children and corporations pose enormous reputational risks for firms— as do positive ones offer significant opportunities. This is because firms are able to exercise considerable power and influence over children who in many respects are a uniquely vulnerable stakeholder of the firm. Such vulnerability invests firms (and others) which special responsibilities to protect children’s interests, at least to the extent that their policies and practices have a material impact on children’s lives [see for example Goodin (1985) for a discussion of vulnerability]. Moreover, as Horgan (2005, p. 76) suggests, “almost all businesses come into contact with children at some stage along the value chain.”

Developing a socially responsible approach to children is therefore gradually becoming recognized as a major business issue. Children have begun to be identified as a distinct stakeholder group in themselves, with a unique set of expectations and responsibilities placed on firms as a result (Horgan, 2005). Child issues typically possess considerable legitimacy and urgency, making them a key “dependent” stakeholder for firms (see Mitchell et al., 1997). With the media and powerful non-government organizations (NGOs) ready to expose irresponsible corporate behavior toward one of their most vulnerable constituencies, children thus represent an area of considerable risk as well as opportunity for corporations. Yet this is a complex arena, fraught with disagreement over the relative responsibilities of business, government, parents, and educators, and marked by a dearth of reliable research on the size and significance of the corporation’s impact, whether positive or negative, on the lives of the children it touches.

In this article, we provide a framework that maps the impacts of business on children, grounded in a systematic analysis of the reputational landscape that corporations are located within today. This analysis focuses on a 5-year sample of media accounts of business impacts on domestic children, together with reports from 120 companies and nine children’s charities. Altogether, we collected more than 350 relevant records which we then submitted to content analysis. Content analysis of public documents from the media, business, and NGOs was adopted in order to, as far as possible, identify objectively the types of child impacts and responsibilities deemed relevant, newsworthy, and important by key stakeholders, rather than prescribing which issues “should” be taken into consideration.

Our findings suggest that firms in virtually every sector attempt, at least to some extent, to manage their responsibilities to children, from the usual suspects such as soft drinks, toys, and apparel to the less obvious, including transport, defense, and land management. In general, though, the business approach to children is largely ill-defined, fragmented, and frequently reactive. We therefore set out guidelines for how to identify and manage the firm’s strategic responsibilities in this arena, and identify the constraints that they face in meeting such responsibilities. Understanding these impacts, responsibilities, and constraints is essential for corporations seeking to develop more socially responsible strategies toward children, whatever industry they are in.
Corporate responsibilities and children

Children are among the most vulnerable of the constituencies that corporations interact with. Whether through the products and services that they advertise and sell to them, or through the employment of children and their parents in the process of production, business can have enormous impact on the lives of young people. However, to date, most of the attention given to these issues in the corporate social responsibility (CSR) literature has tended to focus either on the employment of child laborers in developing countries, or on the ethics of advertising to young children.

For example, much attention has focused on the responsibilities of multinational corporations (MNCs) for dealing with problems of child labor in their supply chains (Bachman, 2000; Winstanley et al., 2002). This has prompted a lively discussion around the ethics of child labor in developing countries and the corresponding obligations of corporations for the activities that take place in their contractor factories. This has given rise to a view of corporations having responsibilities “to support and respect the protection of internationally proclaimed human rights within their sphere of influence”.1 To date, where this debate has taken account of children it has focused almost exclusively on child workers in developing countries. However, the programs actually put in place by firms to attend to child labor issues, such as codes of conduct, are typically global in scope, albeit frequently relativistic in their treatment of child rights issues—the majority of companies refer to national standards of child protection (e.g., minimum age requirements) in their “global” codes of conduct (Kolk and van Tulder, 2004). Ultimately, though, one of the main insights from this debate is that firms may realistically be assigned responsibilities for even some of their indirect impacts on child workers, providing such impacts are within their sphere of influence.

The other main area where the academic CSR debate has focused on business impacts on children is in relation to responsible marketing practices, where research has been underway at least since the 1970s (Turk, 1979). This aspect of study has investigated: the arguments for and against advertising to children; the role of regulation and self-regulation; children’s understanding of the purpose of advertising and its effects on them; consumer socialization of children (Moore, 2004; Oates et al., 2001; Sharp Paine, 1993). There is considerable difficulty here in deciding at what age children can be legitimately regarded as able to make rational, informed consumer decisions. Although there is much controversy over research results, it is apparent that even very young children tend to recognize and recall advertising well, but it would appear that they do not have a good understanding of its persuasive intent, at least until they start to reach ages of around 8–12 years old (Oates et al., 2001)—and even then may not invoke that understanding when forming judgments (Moore, 2004). The basic conclusions from this research then are that children get socialized into consumption from a very young age, although many are unaware of the persuasive intent of advertising and therefore require safeguarding in some way.

Hence, there is some consensus that the varying degrees of vulnerability among children necessitates some level of protection from (or education about) advertising. This has given rise to a range of regulatory and self-regulatory initiatives including, for example, a complete ban on advertising to children under the age of 12 years in Norway and Sweden, and prohibitions on advertising during cartoons in Italy (Hawkes, 2004). In the UK, children’s television personalities are prohibited from appearing in any advertisements before 9 pm, while merchandise based on children’s television programs must not be advertised within 2 h proceeding or succeeding the program concerned (Hawkes, 2004).

The research findings from the existing literature therefore clearly yield considerable insight into corporate responsibility in relation to child labor and the targeting of children through advertising. However, not only do these two streams of literature remain completely uncoupled from each other, but they also offer only a very partial picture of the range of child impacts that are relevant for businesses today. The CSR debate has yet to take children seriously as a key area of responsibility for companies. The current debate has largely been dominated by a few specific issues, or has largely concentrated on the welfare of children far from home. Yet, corporations impact children just as much, if not more, within a firm’s domestic operations as they do in the sweatshops of Asia, and advertising is just one of a number of corporate functions that affects the lives of children.
Having said that, the evocative images of materialistic preschoolers or exploited child laborers have created substantial reputational risks for firms operating in these spaces. The reputation of a firm in terms of how it is represented in the media constitutes a significant strategic resource that in turn can influence its overall performance (Deephouse, 2000). Poor reputations can eliminate a firm's voice in an emerging issue due to poor reception of past actions (Mahon and Wartick, 2003). Therefore, because of the high level of emotional power they possess, stories and images that link children and corporations can potentially have a substantial impact on firm performance. In North America and Europe, this is especially evident in the areas of childhood obesity and toy safety but the reputational risks posed to the pharmaceutical, telecommunications, media, childcare and other industries are also significant. In recent years, Time magazine has featured cover stories with headlines such as “Are kids too wired for their own good?” and “Are we giving kids too many drugs?” The headlines from newspapers are even more strident, as shown in Table I.

For firms then, the key issue is how to understand and manage their reputational risks in a more comprehensive and proactive way – realizing, dealing with, or preventing the potential problems before they hit the newstands. For some companies, children are also potentially one of the most valuable constituencies that they come into contact with. Given the prospects of stimulating early brand attachments and loyalty amongst children, and potentially generating a lifetime of commitment, whether as consumers, employees, or simply as supportive members of the community, reaching out positively to children can have clear pay-offs for firms that understand how they create value for children across their operations – and that successfully negotiate the reputational minefield in doing so. So far, however, there has been little attempt to investigate which issues matter in terms of business impacts on children, or on how firms can develop an effective response.

This article details evidence from an extensive content analysis of media articles, corporate reports, and websites, and nonprofit reports over the last 5 years dealing with business impacts on children in the UK. The results suggest that while the youth market is big business – and getting bigger all the time – virtually all the sectors actually impact upon children in some way. These impacts on children can be positive or negative, direct or mediated, and relate to seven main areas: physical protection; moral protection; social and cultural participation; economic well-being; education and employability; parental employment and family life; impacting children’s charities. We will discuss each of these impacts, before turning to an analysis of the significance of these impacts, and an assessment of their implications for the management of child-related responsibilities by corporations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Headline</th>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cigarettes, drink and bad diet could kill off today’s youngsters before their parents</td>
<td>The Observer</td>
<td>14/11/2004</td>
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<tr>
<td>Childcare is “harmful for the very young”</td>
<td>Daily Mail</td>
<td>26/09/2006</td>
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<tr>
<td>Babies given drugs untested on the young</td>
<td>The Guardian</td>
<td>02/02/2006</td>
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<tr>
<td>Computer game addicts fail in the classroom</td>
<td>Daily Mail</td>
<td>08/01/2005</td>
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<tr>
<td>How family life is being wrecked by weekend work</td>
<td>Daily Mail</td>
<td>18/09/2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food industry criticised over tactics to tempt children</td>
<td>Financial Times</td>
<td>31/01/2006</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eat now, play later: Cadbury is just the latest brand to court controversy by its marketing to school kids</td>
<td>The Guardian</td>
<td>30/04/2002</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anti-depressant market hit: Suicidal behaviour among children casts a shadow on sector</td>
<td>Financial Times</td>
<td>13/12/2004</td>
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The research study

Business impacts upon children in many diverse ways. It is therefore difficult to set parameters as to what to include and preclude from a survey of relevant impacts. This study does so by capturing those issues deemed to be of public interest by the media, business, and children’s charities. These sources were selected since they were identified as being the main constituents of the “organizational field” within which firms are situated in relation to the issue of child impacts (Hoffman, 1999), and the most significant sources of information about corporations’ impacts on children in terms of their potential to affect firms’ reputations. As Fombrun and Shanley (1990, p. 234) state: “publics construct reputations from available information about firms’ activities originating from the firms themselves, from the media, or from other monitors.” Such actors in turn “frame” issues in particular ways that shape public opinion and stakeholder views about an issue and its potential resolution (Mahon and Wartick, 2003).

The media in particular was chosen since it represents an important source of influence on public attitudes in general, and on firms’ reputations specifically. The media plays a significant role in setting the public agenda about which issues are salient (Carroll and McCombs, 2003). And, as Deephouse (2000) demonstrates, media reputation – namely how a firm is presented in the media – is an important component of a firm’s overall reputation, and has significant performance impacts for firms. Therefore, by designing our data collection to include a substantial component of media analysis, we are assuming that presentations in the media capture at least some of the reputational risk that firms are exposed to. Similarly, by incorporating reports from firms and nonprofits, we are assuming that these also contribute to the overall informational flows through which reputations are constructed (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990). Moreover, as active marketers to children (firms), and vocal guardians of children’s interests (nonprofits), communications from these organizations are critical for understanding relevant areas, issues, and activities where companies can create or destroy value for children.

We therefore designed the study as an extensive content analysis of newspaper articles, media reports, corporate reports and websites, and nonprofit reports over the last 5 years dealing with business responsibilities to children. Content analysis is “an empirically grounded method, exploratory in process, and predictive or inferential in intent” (Krippendorf, 2004, p. xvi). It has been widely used in empirical research on business ethics and CSR, for example, in relation to corporate whistleblowing policies (Hassin et al., 2007), recruitment practices (Daspro, 2009), and ethical codes (Helin and Sandström, 2007; Stevens, 1994), as well as social and environmental reporting (Campbell and Slack, 2008; Grant et al., 1995; Maignan and Ralston, 2002; Milne and Adler, 1999), environmental advertising (Banerjee et al., 1995), and reputation analysis (Deephouse, 2000). With this methodology being adopted, we could identify the types of child impacts deemed relevant, newsworthy, and important by key stakeholders, rather than prescribing which issues “should” be taken into consideration.

In order to ensure a common cultural context and to maintain a manageable sample size, we restricted our analysis to a single country (the UK) and a single constituency of children (UK children). The content analysis consisted of media reports from 2002 to 2007 from five leading national newspapers (the Financial Times, The Times, Sunday Times, The Guardian, and The Observer), the BBC news website, and two monthly CSR publications (Ethical Performance and Ethical Corporation). It also included full searches of the websites and CSR reports of 120 companies from 37 sectors in the FTSE 500, and similar searches of the nine major UK children’s charities (Barnardo’s, ChildLine, NCH, NSPCC, Prince’s Trust, Save the Children, SOS Children, UNICEF UK, and Variety Club).

For the newspaper analysis, we conducted 130 web searches based on predefined combinations of terms (see Table II). LexisNexis was used to search for newspaper articles relating to the impacts of business on children. The date was set between January 1, 2002 and September 1, 2006. The search was restricted to the headlines. The search included all the industries, and all the subjects, and the country was specified as the UK. Information from the relevant newspaper articles was presented in a table in Excel which contained the source, date, sector, core business function, direction of the impact, description of the issue and, where relevant,
the age group, gender, and ethnic group of the children affected.

The BBC website offers a simple search and to find relevant articles the following terms were used – “impact,” “business,” “children,” and “UK.” The results were sorted by relevance which produced 500 pages of results. Information from relevant articles (for articles written between 2002 and 2006) was placed in the Excel table. In order to prevent unnecessary repetition and make the workload more manageable, a saturation point was set whereby the search was stopped at the point where, for five pages in a row, there was only one relevant article per page and where the main issues of the relevant articles had already been covered previously.

Ethical Corporation and Ethical Performance magazines: The search methodology was very similar to that of the BBC search, except for the search terms that were used. For both magazines, the search term used was “children” which produced a manageable amount of results. Relevant articles from 2003 to 2006 were entered in the Excel table.

We conducted the review of the websites and reports of 120 Companies (UK FT500) from 37 sectors based on the UK FT500 categorisation (see Table III). We searched the company websites and CSR reports for information relating to children (using search terms such as “children,” “child,” “parent,” etc.) and extracted the relevant information.

We also conducted reviews of websites and reports of nine UK NGOs: Barnardo’s, ChildLine, NCH, NSPCC, Prince’s Trust, Save the Children, SOS Children, UNICEF UK, Variety Club. We then extracted the information which related to the impact of business on children. This was done by searching the websites using terms such as “business,” “corporation,” “firm,” etc.

This provided a detailed picture of those business impacts deemed to be of public interest by various stakeholders. Altogether, some 357 records were captured and analyzed as part of the study. Out of these, 203 were from the media, and 154 from business and nonprofits. These were content analyzed, and key impacts and themes were identified. These were subsequently organized according to types of impact (positive/negative), form of impact (direct or indirect), business sector, and relevant core business functions. All of the self-reported accounts from business and NGO reports were about positive impacts on children – they all portrayed business in the role of creating value. Such representations could be expected to have a positive impact on reputation where companies took on the relevant responsibility. Regarding the media records, accounts were more mixed. Approximately, 15% were stories about initiatives with positive impacts, 30% were stories about recommended initiatives with potentially positive impacts, 25% were stories about initiatives with negative impacts, and 30% were stories with mixed positive/negative impacts.

A word on these categories is worthwhile. Positive impacts refer to initiatives that were already in place or about to be launched and were presented as primarily positive in terms of their impact on children. Recommended initiatives were not yet in evidence, but were suggested to be initiatives that would potentially have a positive impact on children if implemented. For instance, a 2005 Guardian story reported that Scotland Yard planned to ask Asian businesses to hire vulnerable youngsters from their own communities in an attempt to divert them from crime. Such accounts were useful in identifying issues where corporations could have an, as yet unrealized, positive impact on children and in turn on their reputations should they shoulder additional responsibilities. Negative impacts refer to initiatives that were already in place or about to be launched and were presented as primarily negative in terms of their impact on children. These were interpreted as

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**TABLE II**

Search terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UK AND</th>
<th>Children, child, boy, girl, parent, youth, young person, adolescent, teenager, mother, father, infant, baby</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business, corporation, firm, SME, market, industry, marketing advertising, labour, work</td>
<td>AND</td>
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TABLE III

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business sectors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aerospace and defence</td>
<td>General financial</td>
<td>Non-life insurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automobiles and parts</td>
<td>General industrials</td>
<td>Oil equipment and services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banks</td>
<td>General retailers</td>
<td>Oil and gas producers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beverages</td>
<td>Healthcare equipment and services</td>
<td>Personal goods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemicals</td>
<td>Household goods</td>
<td>Pharmaceuticals and biotechnology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Construction and materials</td>
<td>Industrial engineering</td>
<td>Real estate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity</td>
<td>Industrial metals</td>
<td>Software and computer services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic and electrical equipment</td>
<td>Industrial transportation</td>
<td>Support services</td>
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<tr>
<td>Equity investment instruments</td>
<td>Leisure goods</td>
<td>Technology hardware and equipment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fixed line telecoms</td>
<td>Life insurance</td>
<td>Tobacco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food and drug retailers</td>
<td>Media</td>
<td>Travel and leisure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food producers</td>
<td>Mining</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gas, water and multi-utilities</td>
<td>Mobile telecoms</td>
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issues where firms were likely to experience a negative impact on reputation. Mixed impacts refer to stories where the business impact on children was presented as contestable. For instance, a 2002 FT article described how food companies were backing a programme that aimed to teach children how to handle food advertising (positive), but also stated that critics saw it as a “cynical attempt to stave off legislation” (negative). As such, mixed accounts were important for identifying areas of potential reputational impact, both positive and negative, around corporate responsibility issues.

In order to move from these initial codes and categories into a meaningful typology of impacts, we interpreted different types of issue from our dataset. In the first round of interpretive coding, we developed descriptive labels for each issue identified in each account. These were of the form of “contributes to childhood obesity,” “producing affordable essentials for children,” “sale of untested medicine,” etc. Altogether, we identified 34 unique issues. Descriptive or “open codes” such as these were then refined through a second round of coding that identified specific impacts. For example, “contributes to childhood obesity” and “sale of untested medicine” were both coded as “health hazard,” while “producing affordable essentials for children” was coded as “helping poor families.” This produced 22 impacts. A final round was then completed to interpret the core responsibility associated with the impact. Thus, through successive rounds of inductive reasoning, we identified a set of “meta-impact” types, which we ultimately refined into seven final types of responsibility.

At each stage of the coding, two of the researchers took a sample of the data and developed an appropriate coding scheme and decision rules. Coding of successive portions of the dataset was then conducted by one of the researchers, in consultation with the second researcher, a trained professional in child impact assessment. This provided guidance and training for the main researcher to ensure reliability. As each portion was completed, the second researcher then checked the coding and any differences resolved or re-analyzed. Because we were only applying qualitative codes to the data (e.g., the nature of impacts) and not seeking to apply any quantitative assessment (such as size of impact or importance of issue), and because of the relatively low number of interpretative coding categories, reliability problems were minimized. As Milne and Adler (1999) attest, primarily employing a single trained coder can be effective in ensuring reliability, and enables the application of a consistent interpretative scheme.

The seven corporate responsibilities to children

In this section, we map out the seven key areas where businesses were found to be confronted with issues of corporate responsibility toward young people. These are presented in Figure 1 and discussed in more detail below.
Physical protection

Safeguarding children in terms of their physical protection is a key area where business can have a positive or negative impact on children through its core business activities. This is most evident in two areas: the physical safety of children, and their overall health and fitness.

Physical safety

Many companies can impact upon the physical safety of children, and threats to child safety are a matter of significant public interest. Safety impacts can happen in three main ways. First, some companies sell products that can be actively used to provide direct safeguarding to children, or that offer parents greater reassurance about the safety of their children. This includes products such as automotive components like safety seats, or pharmaceutical and other health products specifically formulated for children, such as sun care products. Child safeguarding products and services represent a growing market niche, yet to date, many industries have yet to seriously consider the potential new product offerings that could be developed in this area.

Second, some companies sell products for use by children that are potentially directly dangerous in themselves, e.g., pharmaceutical products, mobile phones (e.g., by radiation), tobacco, or products containing hazardous chemicals. The threat may come from normal use or misuse by children, but either way, this represents a situation that can be seized upon by the media in ways that can severely tarnish the corporate reputation. Consider when the media picked up on a survey published in 2004 that claimed that British children were likely to be contaminated with hazardous chemicals (Blyth, 2004). The chemical DEHP, which is used in plastics, PVC flooring, food packaging, cosmetics and toiletries, and is suspected of disrupting hormones in children, was found...
in over three-quarters of volunteers in the research study, throwing the chemical and manufacturing industries into a major public relations furor.

Third, some companies are in a business that presents a physical threat to children because it is a potentially hazardous location – companies in construction, power generation, land management, etc., all manage physical locations that pose threats to child safety. Our evidence suggests that many companies in this category have taken on responsibility for minimizing their negative impacts through education and awareness initiatives. For example, despite an absence of negative press, many large construction companies routinely visit schools to tell children about the dangers of building sites. They also provide lectures, site visits etc. as part of school education programs and to promote the professions of construction and engineering to school children.

**Health and fitness**

It is not only in threats to life and limb where business has a role to play in safeguarding, but also in contributing positively or negatively to children’s overall health and fitness. This has become a hot-button issue in the face of escalating rates of child (and adult) obesity in many countries. Here, the impact of business is typically less direct – food and exercise decisions are often made by, or shaped by, the actions of parents, schools, politicians, and others rather than simply by children alone – but companies clearly have an important part to play, not least because these issues go to the heart of their product development and marketing decisions.

Various businesses have an impact here, from healthcare companies to food and drink producers, as well as food retailers, restaurants, and food service companies. This is a controversial area, where the specific impact of companies is hotly debated, and where regulation is typically resisted quite vigorously. However, many firms are attempting to make more positive impacts, through offering healthy options, providing educational programs, and various other initiatives aiming to get children to be more active. Some of these have been successful while others have fueled further criticism. On the negative side, a 2003 attempt by the confectionary company – Cadbury’s – to get children to be more active through a high profile cause-related marketing campaign spectacularly backfired after it emerged that children needed to eat the equivalent of 5440 bars of chocolate in order to receive a set of volleyball posts and nets for their school from the company (Carter, 2003). Critics argued that Cadbury’s were “making kids fat while pretending to help them get fit” instead of facing their core business responsibility to make their products healthier (Hilton, 2003). As a result of the controversy surrounding the campaign, Cadbury’s discontinued the token collection scheme that had provoked the media furor but maintained other aspects of the campaign.

On the more positive side, mineral water companies, such as Buxton Water, have launched ranges aimed at children in an attempt to get children to drink water as a healthy alternative to soda (Matthews, 2002). In addition, perhaps, more significantly, self-regulatory initiatives have also emerged as a way for companies to proactively manage their impacts on children. Consider the announcement in 2006 by the Union of European Beverages Associations (UNESDA), which includes Cadbury Schweppes, Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, and Unilever, whereby its members voluntarily agreed to ban advertising to children under 12, to prohibit the installation of vending machines in elementary schools, and to commit to supply machines in high schools with healthier products (Ethical Performance, 2006a). With the establishment of a third party monitoring system and reporting regime, the industry demonstrated that it took child health issues seriously and succeeded in forestalling further talk of governmental regulation.

**Moral protection**

In addition to the physical protection of children, business clearly also has a role to play in safeguarding the moral protection of children, either through the products it produces, or directly in the workplace.

**Products and inappropriate content**

For many companies, especially those in leisure, media, and telecommunications, there is a significant possibility of exposing children to inappropriate content designed exclusively for adults. This may happen in three ways: (1) companies produce products or services that in themselves contain inappropriate content, and require safeguards for children, – e.g., alcoholic beverages, adult magazines and films, gambling services, etc.; (2) companies produce products or services that enable children to
access inappropriate content produced by others, e.g., via the internet, or by fixed or mobile phone; (3) companies produce products or services that enable others to access inappropriate content actually containing images of children.

This is a challenging arena because firms typically want to maintain normal services for adults, but need safeguards in place to minimize the risk to children, and to prevent illegality. Progressive cell phone companies, for instance, have introduced filters, parental control tools, and age-verification processes so that adult classified mobile services are inaccessible to children. Many companies across a range of industries with at-risk content have also recognized the need to work with parents and children’s charities in developing interventions. Some reports suggest that many parents do not know how to help their children use new technologies safely, and it is clear that educating parents is at least as important as dealing directly with children. Thus, business can work with children’s charities to inform parents better, as illustrated by an initiative from the International Federation for the Phonographic Industry (IFPI), which joined with ChildNet International to distribute educational material to parents about file sharing and online music to prevent young children from facing prosecution for piracy. However, in some industries, such as gambling and alcohol, there can also be considerable skepticism from stakeholders about companies working directly with children to develop safeguards, especially in the absence of trusted intermediaries.

Finally, this is also a challenging area for business because it appears that there is not always a clear consensus on what content, or how much, constitutes a threat to children’s moral protection. This is mainly the case when content is legally permissible for children, and indeed may even have some educational value, but has, for example, significant sexual content. Consider the ongoing controversy around adult content in magazines targeted at young female children. Media criticisms have focused on magazines supposedly for girls aged 14–19 actually being marketed to those aged 9–12 and often containing articles about love, sex, and relationships (Parkinson, 2004). For instance, Sugar controversially advertised free condoms for readers, while Cosmo Girl published a sealed guide to sex, promising to “answer all the questions they don’t teach you in sex education.” Celia Duncan, editor of Cosmo Girl defended the magazine, claiming that it discussed sex in a responsible manner, informing readers rather than promoting sex (BBC, 2003a).

Exploitation through child work
The second area of moral protection concerns the potential for children to be exploited directly in the world of work. As we have already shown, there has been much attention focused on this in developing country contexts, which is appropriate given that this is where the majority of child work occurs. Indeed, out of approximately 211 million working children under 15, more than half (over 120 million) are involved in the worst forms of child labor including work that is hazardous, that poses a health risk, and, in some cases, even threatens children’s lives. More broadly, though, involvement in child labor threatens the rights of children to education, raises the potential for exploitation, and can be harmful to the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral, or social development.

Having said that, child work remains a fairly under-investigated issue in developed countries. Nonetheless, evidence from the International Labor Organization estimates that there are also some 2.5 million child workers in developed economies, while evidence from UNICEF suggests that in developed economies children, parents, and even employers are often ignorant of the legal safeguards in place. Reporting specifically on the UK, a 2004 UNICEF report concluded that “child employment laws in this country are not adequate and that thousands of children are exposed to levels of risk which should not be acceptable, either here or in the developing world” (UNICEF, 2004).

To date, few businesses outside of a few targeted industries such as apparel and carpets seem to be aware of the potential risks they might pose to children, even those close to home. Moreover, despite substantial advances in workplace monitoring, the experiences of Gap Inc recently showed that there is no reason to expect such problems to recede in the near future.

Social and cultural participation
Business’ role in the physical and moral protection of children has to be considered in the context of its role in children’s broader social and cultural participation.
In highly industrialized, consumerist societies, corporations and their products represent a vital conduit for children’s societal engagement and success. This can either be as direct consumers, or as influencers or subjects of family decisions. Business can have a positive or negative impact here.

**Positive social and cultural impacts**

These include the development of products designed specifically for children that improve their cultural life, including television programming, music, books, and other media products, as well as specific family-oriented products and services. Products such as clothes, electronic goods, and other culturally significant goods can also potentially provide a positive impact on children in terms of self-esteem and social/cultural development.

**Negative social and cultural impacts**

These include the problems of individualism and consumerism brought on by an overemphasis on commodity culture, the dangers of some children being priced out of socially important products and services, and even specific exclusions by companies of children from privatized “public” spaces such as shops and malls.

There is, understandably, some doubt here about what active role, if any, business should take on in this arena, and there is a good deal of ambivalence about the overall impact of creating legions of child consumers. It is interesting to note, however, that while some of the largest categories of child spending, such as clothes and books go largely unremarked upon, others such as toys, computer games, mobile phones, and make-up have stirred up considerable debate. Firms need to take account of their specific reputational landscape in formulating strategies in relation to social and cultural impacts.

**Economic well-being**

The result of this increasing emphasis on children as consumers gives rise to a related theme concerning children’s economic well-being, either as individuals or in terms of their family’s economic circumstances. It is notable that an economically advanced economy alone does not automatically translate into child well-being, with countries such as the US and the UK stuck at the bottom of UNICEF’s recent assessment of child well-being in rich countries (UNICEF, 2007).

**Children’s personal economic well-being**

Our evidence suggests that advertising to children, and the shaping of demand for a continuous stream of new, and sometimes questionable, products is a major theme in media reports. Although this has implications for the future economic well-being of children, there has yet been little media attention on this particular facet of the issue, and few businesses have begun to consider any positive initiatives to address children’s personal economic well-being. Some positive signs, however, have emerged from the banking sector, albeit at an arm’s length. For instance, the HBOS Foundation annually contributes to the “Money Matters” program run by the NCH children’s charity that aims to promote financial awareness and provide money advice to support underprivileged children and vulnerable young people (HBOS, 2004). This suggests that business can potentially have a positive impact on children’s financial awareness and competence. Initiatives from the food, alcohol, and tobacco industries also suggest that companies marketing “problem” products can potentially play a positive role in educating about responsible consumption of their products – but there is substantial skepticism about such programs from some quarters.

**Family economic well-being**

Business can also have an important, even if indirect, impact on children through their contribution to parental poverty and debt. For example, firms may encourage excessive debt to vulnerable parents through the marketing of loans, credit cards, and store cards. However, there is a range of potentially positive interventions that might also be considered. We can usefully categorize these into three types. First, firms can provide low cost or free products and services to economically disadvantaged parents. For instance, the energy company, Centrica runs a household poverty program that supports families with young children, for example, by installing energy efficiency measures for free. Second, firms can provide advice, assistance, and products to enable better financial planning and money management among economically vulnerable parents. This is particularly relevant to the financial services industry, where, for example, Barclays has
developed a scheme to help over-indebted lone parents and offers a childcare savings plan. Third, firms can help economically disadvantaged parents gain employment. A good example is the Marks & Start initiative at the UK retailer Marks & Spencer that offers work experience placements to, amongst others, schoolchildren, single parents, homeless people, and the young unemployed. These latter two types are particularly significant in that they involve business in more than just charity, but in longer-term development initiatives that can bring mutual benefits to businesses, parents, and children.

**Education and employability**

Business impacts on education and employability are by far the most widely acknowledged and promoted by corporations themselves – educational initiatives are evident in virtually all sectors of the economy, and are actively promoted in corporate responsibility communications. There are three main ways in which this happens: supporting education, incorporating education into products, and educating for employability.

**Supporting education**

The most straightforward and widespread approach is for business to provide support for education, usually with donations of money, time, access, or other resources. Sometimes this is at arm’s length – by sponsoring education initiatives by children’s charities – but many companies also encourage field trips to their sites or provide speakers for schools, or else link employee volunteering programs to educational initiatives. Many companies seek to support educational initiatives that are linked in some way to their business – banks contributing to mathematics education; utilities contributing to environmental education; food companies contributing to food and nutrition education; or pharmaceutical companies contributing to science education. Partly this is about focusing on where particular companies have most to give; partly it is also about promoting the industry and its underlying skills base in schools; partly, it is also about the turn from basic giving to cause-related marketing campaigns that “reward” consumers with donations to educational causes that add value to the firm’s brand. Given the extent of business involvement in education, there is currently a relatively low level of negative publicity regarding these developments. Nonetheless, the escalation of corporate presence in schools, and the ubiquity of brands on educational materials, might increasingly raise criticism.

**Incorporating education into products**

Another way that business positively supports education is through incorporating educational value into company products. This is obviously the case with avowedly “educational” products, but other less obvious products such as computer games can also provide positive educational impacts. Consider the case of the watch industry, where companies have recognized that time-keeping is an important educational issue and have developed a range of analog watches to help children learn to tell the time. For instance, since 1987, the Swatch Group’s Flik Flak brand has been highly popular. There are 46 models, all of which feature Flik, the “big brother” blue-and-white minute hand and Flak, the “little sister” red hour hand. The watches are often divided into “past the hour” and “to the hour” and the hands, bezels, and dials all help children to learn to tell the time (Doulton, 2005).

**Educating for employability**

Finally, there has also been an active debate in the media about children’s apparent lack of awareness and knowledge of business, and limited preparedness for careers in industry. For example, a survey conducted by the Financial Times in 2003 showed that employers think that the majority of graduates and school leavers have a poor understanding of business. It is therefore perhaps no surprise to find that many companies go beyond traditional educational initiatives to focus on employability skills and knowledge. This may happen in three ways: (1) some businesses seek to make positive contributions to children’s general employability; (2) some businesses seek to make positive contributions to the employability of specifically disadvantaged or vulnerable young people; (3) some businesses focus on developing knowledge and skills for their own industry. This approach is particularly evident in industries such as construction, engineering, and technology, where there is a more pronounced skills shortage among young people. As such education and employability
initiatives are often interlinked, and they tend to operate through partnerships with schools and charities, where they can play an important role in sustaining the longer-term economic well-being of children and their communities.

**Parental employment and family life**

Another very well-publicized issue in the media concerns business impacts on family life through the employment of parents. There are three main themes here: working hours, flexibility, and childcare.

**Parents and working time**

Evidence about the long hours that firms expect their employees to spend at the workplace has given rise to concerns about the negative consequences this can have on children’s development. There are a number of strands to this debate, and a considerable amount of controversy. For instance, some research has clearly shown the importance of parents spending time with their children. In order to illustrate this point, research conducted in 2003 concluded that mothers going back to work after the birth of a child can have a negative impact on a child’s development. In the short-term, returning to work could cause slower emotional development in children aged between 4 and 12. In the long-term, children in their teens and early twenties could do less well at school or college (BBC, 2003b). Moreover, babies and toddlers cared for full-time by their mothers have shown better social and emotional development than those cared for by others (Moorhead and Ward, 2005).

Similarly, it has been argued that a father’s investment of time in his children’s future is as important to society as the time he spends at work. Research has shown that if fathers are heavily involved with bringing up their young children, the children do better at school as teenagers, are less likely to have a criminal record at 21, and have better mental health in their 30s. However, research conducted in 2004 revealed that the hardest-working fathers spent little more than half an hour per day caring for their children; men who put in at least 55 h at the workplace spent an average of only 3 h and 42 min each week on childcare (Turner, 2004). A survey carried out in 2006 on 500 children aged 11–16 found that 35% of children thought their parents were “stressed out” and many children would like to spend more time with them. Furthermore, 83% of children believe mothers with children aged three and under should not work full-time (BBC, 2006). On the other hand, it has been pointed out that parents’ personalities and emotional stability, parenting practices, and the friends and networks that children experience while growing up will play a much bigger role than simply parents’ working hours (BBC, 2003a, b).

**Flexible work practices for parents**

Ultimately, the impact of businesses on children through parental employment may well be more about when parents work, rather than just how much they work. This has led to a major debate in some countries on flexible work practices, much of which focuses on the responsibilities of parents and regulators as much as it does on companies. For instance, legislation introduced in the UK in 2003 has given employees the right to request more family-friendly working arrangements. The legislation states that employers are obliged to “seriously consider” requests from parents of children under six to job-share, work from home, work flexi time, or staggered hours (Hall, 2004). Although research has shown that most requests for flexible time are accepted by employers, it has also revealed that many parents remain unaware of their rights to ask (Hall, 2004). With or without legislation, then, companies remain in the spotlight regarding their attention to flexible working, and its impact on children.

**Childcare**

Aligned with the issues of working time and flexibility is that of childcare provision for working parents. Business can have a positive impact on children by directly providing childcare, or helping employees to deal with the financial burdens of childcare through subsidies, vouchers, or even in the case of financial companies, offering parents childcare savings products. The childcare industry itself seems to be in a period of growth, albeit one characterized by skills shortages and affordability problems. Most media reports extol the benefits of childcare, both for children and for parents, and it is notable that media attention toward the childcare “crisis” has tended to focus on the government’s role in developing an effective policy strategy, rather than on the childcare business itself, or on employers.
Impacting children’s charities

The last major theme concerns the indirect impact business can have on children by impacting on children’s charities. This can happen in three main ways: corporate giving, strategic philanthropy, and partnerships.

Corporate giving
The majority of the companies surveyed had given donations of one sort or another to children’s or educational charities – child-related causes appear to be very popular with the corporate sector, and millions of dollars worth of revenue are generated to improve the lives of children in this way each year. This was probably the single most widely cited initiative mentioned by business, although reports on the actual impacts of corporate giving varied in quality. This type of activity can occasionally raise criticism though when donors are seen as being inappropriate, as has been the case with tobacco and arms company donations to children’s charities.

Strategic philanthropy and cause-related marketing
Corporations appear to be moving away from basic charitable giving to more strategic approaches that go beyond good works to “win–win” solutions. This means that firms are seeking to invest in initiatives from children’s charities that clearly enhance the firm’s brand values (e.g., linking a food company to a child nutrition project) and/or that link corporate giving to sales, such as the UK retailer Tesco’s Computers for Schools initiative where during a fixed period each year, customers can collect vouchers for every dollar spent which can then be redeemed for IT equipment by local schools. Children’s projects are now the third greatest beneficiary of CRM (after health and education) (Business in the Community, 2005). The mixed motives inherent in these initiatives can raise skepticism from the public, but if both sides are careful about partner choice, they can offer positive benefits to children.

Partnerships for change
Finally, corporations can have impacts on children’s charities and other public and non-profit children’s organizations beyond simply the financial. The movement toward closer business-nonprofit relationships has given rise to partnerships that create deeper change in collaborating organizations. Corporations can offer skills and competences to children’s charities, schools, and agencies, which enable them to work more effectively on behalf of children. An example of this is DHL’s “Skills in Motion” program with Whizz-Kidz, a UK charity that provides specialized mobility equipment for disabled children. Four projects were undertaken which included improving an existing marketing strategy for Whizz-Kidz wheelchair skills training, and identifying the training needs of staff at the charity’s new mobility centre. DHL’s 2-year partnership with Whizz-Kidz therefore offered fundraising opportunities, as well as an innovative skills-sharing project that enabled DHL employees to share their expertise and skills with the charity’s employees. As a result, evaluation by an independent consultancy found that the scheme had brought significant improvements in teamwork, planning, and organizational skills at Whizz-Kidz (Ethical Performance, 2006b).

Assessing corporate responsibilities to children

Our research suggests that the field of corporate responsibility and children is a complex one where the impacts of business on children are many, diverse, and often ambiguous. Corporate impacts on children can be positive or negative, and direct or mediated. Mediated impacts emerge from the choices of parents, teachers, charities, health professionals, and others. For example, parents may choose to take up flexible working practices at their workplace to enhance their childcare arrangements. Charities may receive sponsorship from business for an educational initiative.

This suggests there are different types of social responsibility that firms have in dealing with their impacts on children. First, there are responsibilities to provide. In some arenas, especially in the area of physical and moral protection, and social and cultural development, where firms may be regarded as having direct responsibilities to provide positive social outcomes and minimize negative outcomes for children. Second, some areas will include responsibilities to enable. Often firms will not be dealing directly with children, but will have mediated effects through others. In this case, the firm may be thought of having responsibilities to enable child protection to happen – e.g.,
through enabling education and employability of children, supporting children’s charities, or enabling positive family situations for children. Third, we need to consider responsibilities to participate. At a lower level, firms may simply be expected to participate in processes of responsibility that are led by others, e.g., they may participate in debates and education about responsibilities toward children, or they may be involved in helping governments to draw up rules and regulations for child protection.

It would probably be fair to say that the former type of responsibility has been the most commonly discussed in the CSR debate thus far, but corporate responsibilities to enable and participate have begun to be debated as well, for example, in the area of social inclusion/exclusion (Devlin, 2005; Kempson and Whyley, 1999), and in poverty reduction in developing countries (Hart, 2005; Prahalad and Hammond, 2002). With respect to children, and child protection in particular, any of these three responsibilities might figure – firms can provide protection, enable protection by others, and participate in protection initiatives. Corporate involvement in educational initiatives appears to be particularly strongly linked to enabling responsibilities. This might go from enabling children’s development by providing resources for schools, to enabling child protection by organizing awareness training about child abuse among their employees. Therefore, firms often cannot be held solely responsible for negative impacts, and may be unable to develop positive impacts alone. It is clear that in many cases, the management of child impacts requires collaborative effort, partly because of these mediated effects, and also because of the controversial nature of many of the impacts, and the diffusion of responsibility that accompanies such impacts. As such, it is typically appropriate to conceive of child impacts in terms of “collective responsibilities.”

Overall, however, it is clear that the approach of corporations in relation to children is usually ill defined, fragmented, and frequently reactive. Many sectors tend only to take up issues that have been raised by the media, government, or NGOs. Few, if any, companies have a clear and comprehensive policy toward children, yet many see the child market as a major source of revenue and growth. Different parts of a company may generate negative as well as positive impacts, e.g., the same firm may market products that put children at risk while offering flexible work policies and childcare. Most firms do not appear to have a coordinated approach. Moreover, while many are within their comfort zones when providing education and community programs, many of the relevant issues require attention to core business issues such as product development and employment practices.

Such a situation is perhaps understandable given the substantial constraints and barriers that oppose greater business attention to child responsibilities. To begin with, the collective nature of many of these impacts makes it difficult to apportion blame (or praise) on any given party when children are positively or negatively affected. Specific corporate responsibilities are unclear, and the incentives are uncertain. Moreover, most approaches to stakeholder identification and mapping would characterize children as a disaggregated group – children as employees, children as consumers, children in the community – but not a single unified constituency that can be managed in a coordinated way. Moreover, although market growth and escalating expenditure per child suggests that there is plenty of scope for premium ethical niches, e.g., ranges of non-toxic toys, or internet services with additional safeguards for children – consumers would need to be made more aware of the impacts of companies across sectors (and of their own purchases) on children than is evident at present for these to become more widely attractive.

If we look at other market incentives, such as socially responsible investment (SRI), the limited extent of SRI screens to adopt specific child-related criteria in their ratings of firms is quite striking. Looking at the two main SRI indexes FTSE4Good, and the Dow Jones Sustainability Index, child issues are barely mentioned. The FTSE4Good includes criteria relating to company commitments to ILO conventions on child labor. It also makes some reference to child issues in its equal opportunities indicators, namely, “flexible working arrangements and family benefits (meaning at least three of the following – flexible working time, child care support, job sharing, career breaks, or maternity or paternity) pay beyond the legal requirements”. The Dow Jones Sustainability Index similarly includes a question about employee benefits in its assessment questionnaire, where some of the benefits listed are “medical care for employees’ families,” “maternity and/or paternity leave,” “child care,” and “flexible work
schemes”, but has no further specific attention to child issues.

Perhaps out of all of the markets, the business case for responsibility toward children could possibly be most substantial in the case of labor. In the context of a “war for talent,” family-friendly work practices could prove to be a major potential source of competitive advantage in attracting and retaining a qualified workforce. As one report put it: “quality child care supports the bottom line … because it improves productivity, reduces absenteeism, cuts turnover and can increase company value” (Shellenback, 2004). Nonetheless, such an incentive will only be present in certain knowledge-intensive industries, while in others, where human resources (and hence child care) are largely just a cost to be minimized, we can expect rather less attention to child issues.

Finally, if we consider the popular maxim that “what gets measured, gets managed,” it is evident that most companies are not presently managing their impacts on children in any kind of integrated way, even within their existing CSR measurement and reporting tools. Measuring performance on child impacts has to date been largely confined to audits of child labor and (indirectly at least) of gender pay and discrimination issues. In the case of child labor, attention has understandably been focused on evidence in developing countries, but audit processes such as those conducted by companies in the UK’s Ethical Trading Initiative also include supplier assessments at home, in Europe, and North America. In the case of equal pay and other gender issues that are likely to have a bearing on child welfare and poverty, most companies simply report on the presence of equal opportunities programs, or percentages of women in the workforce. As a result, the full impacts on children remain beyond the scope of existing auditing and reporting mechanisms.

Other impacts of business on children rarely undergo much thorough assessment at present, but there are some examples of companies auditing their marketing codes (e.g., Nestlé has undergone audits of its compliance with its code on the marketing of infant formula), while there may also be transferable methodologies available from the public and NGO sectors to estimate key performance indicators such as children’s education, health, and poverty. However, according to our research there is not a single corporation at present that has produced a social impact report that explicitly identifies its aggregate impacts on children. Children have simply yet to be identified as a distinct constituency of social responsibility.

Given such barriers, the question that remains is how should firms position themselves in relation to their responsibilities for child impacts? Although child protection in most countries is a heavily regulated space – e.g., with laws relating to advertising and broadcast regulations, toy safety, and pharmaceutical safety – most of the impacts we have identified within this reputational field refer to activities beyond the legal minimum. That is, most of the issues identified in our analysis detailed instances that were not about breaking laws, but were those that required firms to consider additional obligations they could have toward children. This can range from individual firm initiatives to more comprehensive self-regulatory initiatives. Different firms will obviously adopt different strategies with respect to such responsibilities. With the utilization of Zadek’s (2004) five main orientations to corporate responsibility, these can be described as follows:

Defensive – here, firms will mainly deny either that they have practices impacting upon children, that the outcomes are negative, or that the firm has any responsibility for dealing with the impacts. For example, a pharmaceutical company may contest scientific evidence about products harming children, or an alcohol firm may reject the idea that they have any responsibility for alcohol-related child abuse.

Compliance – here, firms will adopt policy-based compliance approaches and accept this as a cost of doing business. This approach may include developing a child impact statement or policy, and responding reactively to specific criticisms with one-off, or ad hoc initiatives.

Managerial – in this case, firms will go further by embedding child impact issues in their core management processes – for instance, by instituting a management system, or a code of conduct and an auditing regime. This has been the path trodden by some firms dealing with child labor issues in the supply chain (i.e., they have developed codes and regular systems of audit – see Kolk and van Tulder, 2004), or in relation to their marketing activities aimed at children. Firms may also institute specific responsibilities within the business to particular managers, departments, committees, or directors. Some firms now have CSR
directors, ethics officers, ombudsmen, and social audit departments. Similarly a "children’s champion," a "child protection officer," or a similar role could be developed.

Strategic – at the next level, firms will integrate one or more child impact issues into their core business strategies. This is a "built-in" approach, where corporate responsibility is dealt with by innovating new processes and capacities in core areas of the business such as marketing, procurement, production, and human resource management rather than simply "bolted-on" as ad hoc philanthropic activities (Grayson and Hodges, 2004). For example, the cable TV network Nickelodeon has integrated positive themes of child empowerment, strong female role models, and racial diversity into its core programming and branding (Baner-Weiser, 2007) – a strategic approach to addressing children’s social and cultural participation.

Civil – here, strategies promote broader participation in corporate responsibility for children, for instance, by leading industry coalitions and multi-stakeholder initiatives, and lobbying for better regulation. These types of strategies require firms to acknowledge that they also have broader responsibilities as "good citizens" and that they might legitimately participate in public policy development – providing sufficient organizational values, constraints, and countervailing powers are in place (Moon et al., 2005). For instance, in the broader corporate responsibility area, the Carbon Trust has suggested that companies should take the opportunity to "shape the future" by developing innovative low-carbon products and then lobby for regulation (Charlesworth, 2008), while Nike has led a number of industry-wide initiatives relating to working conditions (Zadek, 2004).

At present, many firms it would seem are still in a defensive mode, at least in relation to their management of child impacts – but they may employ different strategies for other issues. Other firms have oriented more toward compliance – accepting criticisms and developing responses. Some, it would seem, may have developed more managerial or strategic approaches, but only for some child issues. Civil strategies are limited at present but advancement in NGO partnerships and other initiatives seems to suggest that some firms can engage at this level. Also of note here are self-regulatory initiatives such as the UNESDA programme discussed earlier that bans advertising to children under 12 and publically reports on independently audited progress toward its targets. Nonetheless, the collective nature of child responsibilities that we identified earlier means that voluntary initiatives by firms, even when well designed in terms of transparency and accountability, may be insufficient to fully address the reputational risks they face in such a sensitive area. As Doane and Holder (2007, p. v) suggest, voluntary, multi-stakeholder initiatives should “always be accompanied by a public policy strategy to ensure that minimum rules and standards are sought in the medium to long term.” Government and NGO involvement is often critical to ensure that initiatives are credible, robust, and effective.

As the reputational landscape faced by firms intensifies with respect to the issue of child impacts, we might therefore expect firms to pay increasingly greater attention to the more advanced levels of corporate responsibility strategies. This is likely to be particularly the case for those firms and industries with: (1) a higher potential impact on children; (2) greater capability to change business impacts on children (either directly or indirectly); and/or (3) more reputational risk at stake. Clearly, more research will be required to test these assumptions empirically, but there is evidence to suggest that, for example, apparel and retail firms have moved quicker than firms in other industries to “managerial” approaches in responding to child labor issues because of greater potential impact and higher perceived risk (Kolk and van Tulder, 2004). Further research should also focus on identifying more clearly the relationships between disruptive reputational events (such as media stories), changes in (regulative, normative, and cognitive) institutions around child responsibilities (such as marketing codes), and their impacts on both corporate reputations and corporate performance in addressing child impacts.

Conclusions

The debate on corporate responsibility has yet to fully embrace the full scale and variety of the responsibilities that corporations can have to children. As we have shown, the current academic and practitioner literature has mainly concentrated on child labor (in developing countries) and advertising to children. Our research suggests that there are numerous other ways that
corporations affect the lives of children, both positively and negatively, and directly and indirectly. In identifying seven core types of child responsibilities, and the ways in which these responsibilities might be manifested, we have provided a solid foundation for understanding better these responsibilities in a more integrated and comprehensive way.

The framework offered in this article also provides managers, policy makers, and researchers with the means to potentially develop, expand, and improve child protection. In a number of areas, more research is necessary; in others, more robust methodologies of assessment and measurement are required; in some, the main need is for further development of tools, business processes, and strategies of responsibility, which are built on our findings to make business engagement in child issues more effective. As we have also shown, though there are considerable barriers to achieving more positive impact, including an ambiguous responsibility context, a lack of integrated measurement and reporting tools, and relatively limited market incentives in many sectors. Yet, not only do children remain one of the most vulnerable constituencies of corporations, but also corporations are clearly increasingly vulnerable to child responsibility issues.

Our point, though, is not that all the firms have similar responsibilities toward children, or even that a single type of responsibility will fit all the child issues in a particular firm. Social responsibilities toward children will clearly vary by country, sector, and firm context. What our research clarifies, however, is that the scope of potential impacts any given corporation or sector can have on children is considerably wider than commonly considered. In addition, actions to address such impacts are likely to comprise a mixture of regulation, self-regulation, business-nonprofit partnership, and market-driven change. It is incumbent on corporations, nonprofits, and governments to recognize the scope and type of these impacts and to institute ways of managing these that are sensitive to the relevant barriers and limitations.

Notes

1 UN Global Compact, Principle 1. See www.ungc.org.


4 See, for example, Hoffman (1999) in relation to the development of institutional fields around environmental issues.

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