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Meeting Liesbeth Hop

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Today I'm meeting Liesbeth Hop, an entrepreneur who has made it her mission to empower children and help them develop a critical attitude towards the all-encompassing onslaught of media and advertising in today's hyper-connected world.

I ask her how kids' empowerment became her passion and what techniques she has developed to create more awareness, not only among the young generation but also among their parents, carers and teachers.

"It all started in 2004," Liesbeth remembers. "My son was in primary school and I started to realize the huge impact that advertising and media was having on him, and also on other children. Kids that age haven't developed a critical attitude to what they see; they absorb everything..."

"But what do you do about it? One school of thought says you have to protect children against that kind of exposure – for example by not letting them see ads – but I wanted to help kids stand up for themselves and give them a critical eye.

"My initial focus was advertising, but that soon expanded to media in general and even beyond."



"But why kids?" I ask her. "In the end, we're all exposed to media and advertising 24/7..."

"Children are more vulnerable and influencable. They are also often placed in a passive position: adults discuss their behaviour and decide what's best for them, without asking their opinion."

"I understand you're organising a debate around the theme Child Labelling under the motto "Let kids decide on their own label". What's that all about?"

"I see a general trend in today's society towards less tolerance of 'others'. Diversity enriches society, but today that diversity is under threat. You're expected to conform and stick to the norm, and if you don't, you're in trouble. I want to counter that trend and show children that it's important to be yourself.

"It's a project I created after being repeatedly confronted with the 'labelling' phenomenon, which is the tendency in medical circles. ADD, ADHD, bipolar disorder, Asperger's syndrome and autism are increasingly common diagnoses. Doctors prescribe drugs, which obviously suits the pharmaceutical industry well. Meanwhile parents are relieved with the diagnosis, because it clears them of any responsibility and explains why their child is so restless or absent-minded. But this approach is too hard in my view, and it's also very masculine.

"We forget that context has an enormous impact on a child's behaviour: parents, school, friends, TV, media, social media... This is a more sociological approach that is more feminine and softer, but that is largely ignored."

"So what is the aim of your campaign?"

"I want kids to show that they have a right to label themselves. Every child is a child and has a right to be himself. It's even crucially important that they are all different. It makes our society grow. If we are all the same, progress stops, on every level."