

Media Advertising and Your Child

Information for Parents and Caregivers



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Preschool children live in a world of electronic media, a world of vivid colors, sounds and images. Most youngsters watch television and Internet. They view DVDs and movies. Many of them play video games. Some of them even use cell phones with screens and keypads. They see information mixed with many forms of advertising. They also see advertising in printed form on signs and billboards. By the time children have reached the age of eight, most of them are watching media and exposed to advertising more than 7½ hours a day, seven days a week. Recent research tells us that children ages two to eleven years old see more than 25,000 advertisements a year on television alone.

Objectives of this fact sheet

As parents, how can we help young children to know the difference between advertising and information? This fact sheet helps parents to answer that question by

- discussing ideas to protect children from the influences of media advertising
- offering tips about helping preschool children become critically thinking consumers

Why is there so much advertising on television, the internet and all around us?

Marketing is a major way to sell products and make as much money as possible. Children and youth pay attention to advertising. They buy things by themselves. They also influence parents and others to buy things that they want to own. They spend more than \$200 billion in food purchases alone every year, not to mention other kinds of products.

Marketers suggest that buying things will make people happy. However, recent research shows that many people do not like all the advertising. The pressure to buy more and more things creates too much stress and makes people less happy.

Marketers create brands for the things they sell, such as movies, food, soft drinks, clothing, and cars. People come to recognize the brands

- pointing out the influences of advertising on young children
- describing how children develop awareness of media advertising

because marketers use certain logos or symbols, colors of images, musical tunes, cartoon characters, or movie or television stars that show up constantly in many places. Many adults have brands they like. They buy the products that carry those brands. Even very young children learn to like some brands because they see and hear about them so often.

Marketers know that children will nag their parents to buy items that they see on television, in the movies or on the Internet. Marketers do not care if those products are healthy or harmful for children's minds or bodies. They just want to make money. Currently, there are no government regulations to limit media advertising. Thus, marketers spend billions of dollars on advertising targeted to children and youth. Those costs pay off, though, because many people of all ages buy their advertised products. Much of what people buy is unnecessary for their health and well-being. Some products are even harmful when consumed in excess.

What happens to young children when they become enmeshed in the culture of getting and spending?

Even healthy children are likely to be worse off under the onslaught of advertising. Parents cannot watch

over their children when children are away from home. Children must use their own judgment about buying food, toys and other items for themselves. When parents shop, they like to give children choices about the things they use at home. They like to see their children speaking up for their likes and dislikes. However, children often make choices based on brands and what their friends see as "cool." A national survey in 1999 showed that parents are frequently aware of this manipulation and do not like it. They like their children to feel popular, though. Many times they go ahead and buy items on that basis.

Some research contrasts with the parents in the survey. Those findings indicate that children who focus on buying things are less happy and more depressed. They have lower self-esteem and report more anxiety. They share less and do not care for the welfare of others.

Food marketing and childhood overweight

Food marketing to children is a large factor in the childhood overweight epidemic. Childhood obesity is widely recognized as a grave public health concern. The result is life-shortening diseases such as hypertension, asthma, and type II diabetes. A 2008 study showed that 30 percent of American children

are moderately or severely overweight. Such problems start with children's diets very early in life. Sometimes toddlers and preschoolers ask for sugary, fattening foods and drinks that cause those diseases. Children see such foods constantly advertised using easily recognized brands. Preschoolers are too young to know the difference between advertising and program information. They just know they like familiar songs, logos and cartoon characters.

"Food fun" and the "Big Five"

Food marketers have created a young children's food culture that tends to add to childhood overweight. Food offerings center around the "Big Five": fast food, pre-sugared breakfast cereals, chips and salty snacks, soft drinks and pastries. Such food choices are marketed as "food fun" to appeal to children. Packaging using bright colors and cartoon figures enhances the food as entertainment.

Another marketing ploy is offering collectible toys as premiums for purchasing certain foods or restaurant meals. Recent research shows that preschool children and sometimes even their parents want to collect all the versions of the toys. Doing so strengthens children's loyalty to food and drink brands.

Such brand loyalty is long lasting. It is hard to change people's preferences for brands, once set. Children's food culture, coupled with more sitting and less active playing, leads inevitably to overweight. The rise in childhood overweight is increasing in much of the developed world.

Other kinds of marketing to children

Marketers target children by advertising other products in addition to foods. Toys, clothing, accessories, movies, television programs, and video games are examples, but there are many others. Marketing encourages children and youth to help make decisions on family purchases of automobiles, vacations, air travel, and even homes. Parents struggle to set limits. However, companies undermine them with portrayals of parents as mean or foolish and images of children as competent and powerful.

What are young children able to understand about being consumers and about media advertising?

- Babies and toddlers learn mostly through their five senses. Their brains build knowledge by taking in sensory information. Those ideas constantly change and become more complex. Gradually children learn to use words to stand for the objects they see, taste and touch.



Children's food culture, coupled with more sitting and less active playing, leads inevitably to moderate and then severe overweight.

- Preschool children from about ages four to seven have learned how to speak. They understand the use of symbols to represent real things. For example, they can use a word to represent an animal and a number to stand for a set of objects. However, they tend to see only one aspect of a situation at a time. For example, if you give a preschooler two rows with an equal number of pennies, they may think that the more spread-out row of pennies has a greater number than the shorter row.
- Younger children learn more quickly earlier in their lives if an adult explains and plays games with them using real objects such as coins or real boxes and cans of food.
- Being able to see only one aspect of a situation means that younger children cannot understand other people's points of view very well. They know only their own likes and dislikes, and what belongs to them. Therefore, they cannot reason well about the advantages and disadvantages of a product. They must rely on older children or adults to help them with the decisions.
- Thus, until the age of about eight, children do not understand advertising's intent to persuade them. They cannot distinguish between commercials and

program content. However, from an early age they can recognize one brand from another because of the theme song or colors.

- Advertising on a screen is still difficult for younger school age children to consider logically because they cannot use all their senses.
- Young children learn by observing and modeling older children and adults around them. Even before they can talk, they point to what they want while visiting the supermarket with a parent. Parents then must decide whether to grant children's wants. Parents need to remember that they are models for their children.
- Children absorb the consumer culture around them. That culture includes
 - the language people use
 - the consumer activities that are common in the area
 - the habits and attitudes of the community
 - the actual brands and prices of products that are for sale
 - the social rules around them, such as what gift to take and how to behave at a birthday party

Children and their families feel that they either belong or do not belong to the culture. Their financial situation makes a difference in their sense of belonging.



The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no more than two hours of screen time daily, and no screen time for children under two years of age.

How can parents educate young children about managing money and media advertising?

- Think carefully about your children's ages and abilities.
- In playful ways, teach your child about spending, saving and sharing money.
- Watch television and Internet with your child. Point out the features of advertising.
- Explain to your child in plain words what the intent of the advertising is: to persuade you to buy things. Ask: Do we really need that item? Is it helpful or harmful?

- Limit the daily amount of television and Internet your child watches. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no more than two hours of screen time daily, and no screen time for children under two years of age.
- Be firm in turning off the television or internet if there is too much advertising and if it is too violent or sexual. Clearly explain your actions to your child.
- Do not permit television or a computer in your child's bedroom.
- Do not permit yourself to be pestered into buying products that your child has seen on television or the Internet. Explain why you will not buy those products.
- Plan to eat meals together daily as a family at least several times a week. Children learn good nutrition as they eat healthy rather than entirely "fun" foods. They gain an understanding of table manners. They also learn to participate in family conversation.

- Creatively plan real-life activities you and your child can do in your spare time. Such activities might include reading storybooks or playing outdoor or indoor games. Just taking walks together is good exercise. Riding bikes, cooking, gardening, visiting neighbors, going to interesting community museums, zoos or parks are other ideas.
- Work with your child's school to eliminate media advertising during the school day. Research has shown that young children can begin to understand the differences between media advertising and valuable program information as they grow and develop. As parents, we need to keep teaching them about the effects of media advertising. Healthier children, youth and families will be the result!

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