

Media Advertising and Its Influence on Children

In-depth Information for Educators



The average child ages two to eleven years old is estimated to see more than 25,000 advertisements a year on television alone.

Preschool children live in a media-filled world, 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. A lot of what they see electronically consists of advertisements interspersed with information. In addition, they constantly see advertising in printed form on signs and billboards. By the time children have reached the age of eight, they are engaged with media and exposed to advertising more than 7½ hours a day, seven days a week. The average child ages two to eleven years old is estimated to see more than 25,000 advertisements a year on television alone. This saturation of media advertising greatly influences children's desires. Parents who want to teach young children about spending and saving have a challenging task instilling realistic attitudes about money management.

Objectives

How should educators assist parents and those taking the parenting role to guide young children in using money wisely when so much media advertising swirls all around them? The objectives of this publication are to:

- become more informed about the issues relative to media advertising
- point out the influences of advertising on young children
- describe preschoolers' developmental capacities for managing media in their lives
- suggest ways to help children become aware of advertising influences
- discuss ideas to protect children from the influences of media advertising
- offer tips about guiding preschool children in becoming critically thinking consumers

Motives of media advertising

In our consumer society, marketing is a major way of selling products and making as much money as possible. For example, in 2006, children under age 14 spent about \$40 billion annually on advertised products. Children and youth directly, or by influencing parents and others, spend more than \$200 billion in food purchases every year.

Marketers suggest that buying things will make people happy. However, there is increasing evidence that the opposite is true; the pressure to spend, eat, and

use products actually makes people less happy. Exposure to media and marketing may promote materialistic values in children and their families. People may find such exposure stressful and unhealthy, even if they are attracted to the messages and the products. The influence of media-marketed playthings decreases children's ability to play, and thus think, creatively.

Recent research shows that the goal of marketers is to establish brand loyalty from infancy to adulthood through licensed toys and accessories associated with foods, clothing, music,

snacks and other consumable products featuring media characters, logos and music. Brand loyalty, once established in young children, stays strong over time. As a further marketing ploy, media advertising often depicts parents as incompetent and youth as powerful and controlling, playing into natural developmental urges to assert independence in school-age and teen-age children. There appears to be little concern about selling items that may not be developmentally appropriate for some age groups. In addition, some electronic advertising is violent and laced with sexual content.



Costs to the marketing industry

The advertising industry currently spends over \$17 billion per year on ads targeted to children, a huge increase from the \$100 million spent in 1983. In 1980, Congress repealed the Federal Trade Commission's authority to regulate advertising viewed as "unfair," leaving in place only the regulation of "deceptive" practices. Then in 1984, the FCC substituted a policy of self-regulation, or voluntary regulation, for the advertising industry. This policy remains in effect today. Since 1984, advertising targeted to children has greatly increased. Almost every major media program for children has a line of licensed merchandise that may include food, toys, clothing, and accessories. By 2008, food and beverage advertisers spent \$10 to 15 billion a year targeting children and youth. It is clear that the food marketing industry finds that marketing to children and their receptive parents is worth the cost.

Consequences of unlimited exposure to advertising media

What happens to young children when they become enmeshed in the culture of getting and spending? Even psychologically healthy children will likely be worse off. It is difficult for parents to regulate the choices chil-

dren make outside the home. Many parents want to respect their children's preferences for food, beverages, activities and toys. They like to see their children speak up for their likes and dislikes. Marketing experts in large companies work with huge budgets that employ child psychologists. These experts take advantage of young children's inability to separate real information from advertising. Studies show that parents are frequently aware of this manipulation and do not like it. However, a national survey of parents in 1999 found that 63 percent believed that their children feel good about themselves in relation to what they own.

Research also indicates that children who are more materialistic are less happy, more depressed, have lower self-esteem, and report more symptoms of anxiety. They engage in fewer positive environmental behaviors such as reusing paper or using less water while showering. They report less generosity and decide to give less money to charity when they imagine receiving a windfall.

Food marketing and childhood overweight

Food marketing to children is a large factor in the childhood epidemic of childhood overweight. Childhood overweight is widely recognized as a grave public health concern. However,



In 2008 more than 30 percent of American children were estimated to be moderately or severely overweight. In contrast, only 2 percent of them eat a diet recommended by the United States Department of Agriculture guidelines. This steep rise in rates of childhood overweight parallels the rate of increase in unregulated marketing aimed at children.

media advertising continues to target children with high density, low nutrient foods. Medical dangers to overweight children include hypertension, asthma, and type II diabetes, a disease formerly found only in adults. In 2008 more than 30 percent of American children were estimated to be moderately to severely

overweight. In contrast, only 2 percent of them eat a diet recommended by the United States Department of Agriculture guidelines. This steep rise in obesity rates parallels the rate of increase in unregulated marketing aimed at children.

A 2005 study found that 83 percent of food commercials aired during popular preschool children's shows was for snacks, fast food, or sweets. In 2007 in a study of three to five year olds' recognition of fast food branding showed that preschool children preferred the taste of foods packaged in a well-known fast food restaurant's wrappers over identical unwrapped foods. However, both sets of foods came from the same restaurant. A 2001 study found that children as young as two years old can tell the difference and choose between brands after viewing just one 30-second food commercial. Marketers want link cartoon characters with brand food products to entice children to think about brand characters and foods in as many ways as possible, as often as possible.

"Food fun" and the "Big Five"

Food marketers have created a young children's food culture that has contributed to the prevalence of childhood obesity. Food offerings center around the "Big Five": fast food, pre-sugared break-

fast 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 an entertainment effect. Children's food culture, coupled with an increasingly sedentary lifestyle, leads inevitably to overweight. The rate of 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 but a few examples. 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.

Developmental characteristics of young children

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

- According to Jean Piaget, a well-known child development theorist and

researcher, babies and toddlers build knowledge by using their five senses to learn about the world around them. Their brains construct ideas as their sensory experiences increase. Those ideas constantly change and become more complex. Gradually they learn to use words to stand for the objects they see, taste and touch.

- Preschool children from about ages four to seven have learned how to use language. 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, given 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.
- Recent research has shown that younger children can come to understand more than one aspect of a situation earlier in their lives if an adult explains and involves them in hands-on experiences using more and fewer coins of different values and actual consumer activities.

- Being able to see only one aspect of a situation means that younger children may not understand other people's points of view very well. They tend to consider only their own likes and dislikes, and what belongs to them. Therefore, most preschoolers cannot reason well about the advantages and disadvantages of a product. However, recent research by indicates that some older preschoolers mature cognitively earlier than others and can begin to understand other people's viewpoints, as well as comparisons of products. Thus, until the age of about seven or eight years old, children in general do not understand advertising's intent to persuade them. They likely cannot distinguish between commercials and program content. However, from an early age they can recognize one brand from another because of a theme song or colors. Their interest in favorite brands can even overrule their own sensory information such as taste, smell, sound or visual appearance. As they become older, children are more able to make logical decisions and understand more than one aspect of a situation at the same time. However, they are still limited in that understanding to dealing with real objects they can see, hear,

Until the age of about seven or eight years old, children in general do not understand advertising's intent to persuade them. They likely cannot distinguish between commercials and program content. However, from an early age they can recognize one brand from another because of a theme song or colors.

touch, taste, or smell. Advertising on a screen is still difficult for them to consider logically.

In what ways, then, can younger children learn to distinguish advertising from information?

- They can practice making decisions with real objects and screen advertising, guided by adults.
- They also 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. Young children like to observe older people's spending, saving, and sharing attitudes and habits. Therefore, parents need to be mindful of their own consumer habits.



- Children are also molded by the consumer culture in which they live. The cultural environment includes the language people use, the consumer activities that are common in the area, the habits and attitudes of the community, and the actual brands and prices of products that appear for sale. Children and their families feel that they either belong or do not belong to the culture based on their economic possibilities.
- Children learn about the social rules around them. For example, they learn what gift to take and how to behave at a birthday party, depending upon the gender and age of the birthday child or adult. They hear language about products spoken and printed.

Children thus learn from and influence others about brands, packaging, pricing, and advertising. The society around them teaches them a great deal about being a consumer.

Roles of parents regarding money management and media advertising

How can parents educate young children about managing money and media advertising? First they can think carefully about their children's ages and abilities, as explained above. Using that knowledge, parents can consider the following suggestions from researchers and educators:

- Teach your child about spending, saving and sharing money in short, interesting ways as you manage your family's resources.
- Become electronic media wise. Watch television and Internet with your child and talk with your child about what portion is advertising and what part is programming.
- Explain to your child in plain words what the intent of the advertising is: to persuade you to buy things. Often these are things you don't really want or need.

- 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, sexual, or manipulative. Explain your actions to your child.
- Do not permit television or a computer in your child's bedroom where you can't monitor what he is watching.
- 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, or at least several times a week. Children learn good nutrition as they eat healthy rather than **entirely** "fun" foods. They also gain an understanding of table manners and learn to participate in family conversation.

- Creatively plan real-life activities you and your child can do in your spare time that don't involve media. Such activities might include both of you reading storybooks, playing outdoor or indoor games, taking walks, riding bikes, cooking, gardening, visiting neighbors, or going to interesting community museums, zoos or parks.

- 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. We as parents and those taking a parenting role need to keep teaching them about limiting the effects of media advertising by our explanations and examples. Healthier children, youth and families will be the result!

Developed by Carole A. Gnatuk, Senior Specialist for Child Development, University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension, and Nancy Granovsky, M.S., CFP®, Professor and Family Resource Management Specialist, Texas AgriLife Extension Service, The Texas A&M University System

References

- American Psychological Association (2004). Protecting children from advertising. *American Psychological Association Monitor* 35 (6): 58. Report of the APA Task Force on Advertising and Children. Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood (n.d.). Factsheet: Materialism and family stress. Available at <http://www.commercialfreechildhood.org/factsheets/materialism.pdf>.
- Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood (n.d.). Factsheet: Selected research on screen time and children. Available at http://www.commercial-freechildhood.org/sites/default/files/kidsand-screens_0.pdf.
- Danes, S.M., and T. Dunrud (2008). Teaching children money habits for life. St. Paul, MN: University of Minnesota Extension. Available at <http://www.extension.umn.edu/family/youth-and-money/teaching-children-money-habits-for-life/>.
- de la Ville, V., and V. Tartas (2010). Developing as consumers. In D. Marshall (Ed.), *Understanding children as consumers*, pp. 23-40. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Holden, K., C. Kalish, L. Scheinholtz, D. Dietrich, and B. Novak (2009). Financial literacy programs targeted on pre-school children: Development and evaluation. Unpublished report to the National Credit Union Foundation with the support of the Credit Union National Association (CUNA) and Philip Heckman, then CUNA Director of Youth Programs. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin.
- Kaiser Family Foundation (2010). Daily media use among children and teens up dramatically from five years ago. Report released on January 20, 2010. Available at <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/entmedia01201nr.cfm>.
- Kalish, C., K. Holden, J. Hemphill, R.A. Raasch, and F. Tahir (2009). Preschool financial literacy education: Lesson models and evaluation framework. Unpublished report to the National Credit Union Foundation with the support of the Credit Union National Association (CUNA) and Philip Heckman, CUNA Director of Youth Programs. Phase 2.1 report. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin.
- Holden, K., C. Kalish, L. Scheinholtz, D. Dietrich, and B. Novak (2009). Financial literacy programs targeted on pre-school children: Development and evaluation. Unpublished report to the National Credit Union Foundation with the support of the Credit Union National Association (CUNA) and Philip Heckman, then CUNA Director of Youth Programs. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin.
- Kline, S. (2010). Children as "competent" consumers. In D. Marshall (Ed.), *Understanding children as consumers*, pp. 239-257. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Linn, S. (2010). Commercialism in children's lives. In *State of the world: Transforming cultures from consumerism to sustainability*. New York: W. W. Norton: The World-Watch Institute, pp. 62-68. Available at <http://blogs.worldwatch.org/transformingcultures/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/Commercialism-in-Childrens-Lives-Linn.pdf>.
- Linn, S., and C.L. Novosat (2008). Calories for sale: Food marketing to children in the 21st Century. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science (AAPSS)* 616:133-155.
- Marshall, D., ed. (2010). *Understanding children as consumers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Marshall, D., and S. O'Donohoe (2010). Children and food. In D. Marshall (Ed.), *Understanding children as consumers*, pp. 167-182. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

- McAlister, A.R., and T.B. Cornwell (2010). Children's brand symbolism understanding: Links to theory of mind and executive functioning. *Psychology & Marketing* 27 (3): 203-228. Available at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/mar.20328/full>.
- McAlister, A.R., and T.B. Cornwell (2012). Collectible toys as marketing tools: Understanding preschool children's responses to foods paired with premiums. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*. Ahead of print. Available at <http://www.journals.marketingpower.com/doi/abs/10.1509/jppm.10.067>.
- Media Smarts (n.d.). Dealing with marketing: What parents can do. Available at http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/parents/marketing/dealing_marketing.cfm.
- President's Advisory Council on Financial Capability (2012). Available at http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/financial-education/Documents/Principles_for_Recommendations.pdf.
- Rideout, V.J., U.G. Foehr, and D.F. Roberts (2010). *Generation M²: Media in the lives of 8- to 18-year-olds*. Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation.
- Schor, J.B. (2004). *Born to buy*. New York, NY: Scribner.
- United States Department of the Treasury, Resource Center for Financial Education and Financial Access (2012). Available at <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/financial-education/Pages/default.aspx>.