



Advertising—an overview

What is it?

Children are exposed to high levels of advertisements on free-to-air TV, on the internet and, to lesser amounts, on pay TV. Some of these advertisements will be specifically directed at children.

Advertising directed to children includes paid advertisements or commercials that appear in TV programs specifically made for children or in other programs for children and where the product is principally of interest to children under the age of 13 years.

Where does it occur?

Free-to-air TV

Advertising directed to children occurs:

- in TV programs that are specifically made for children (such as C programs on commercial TV)
- in other children's programs (such as cartoon programs), and
- in other G programs.

The amount of advertising can be as high as 15 minutes per hour.

Sometimes, the descriptions of prizes for a competition, or the demonstration of a product in a cartoon program can be construed as advertising. Such practices should occur in discrete segments within the program.

Pay TV

Pay TV also carries advertising directed to children, but at a lower level of minutes per hour.

Internet

Advertising directed to children also occurs on the Internet e.g. in banner ads.

Relevant statistics

Australian children on average watch 2 hours and 30 minutes of TV per day. In terms of advertising this means that Australian children watching commercial TV are likely to see:

- 30 commercials per hour
- 75 commercials per day, and
- 23,000 commercials per year

Why advertising to children is a problem

What is advertised

Many of the products advertised are fatty, salty, sugary and fast foods. Nutritionists and other health professionals see these as promoting poor eating practices in children (see related topic *Food Advertising* on ACCM website).

Other ads are for toys, many of which:

- limit creative play
- encourage violent play
- are linked to violent movies which are unsuitable for children, but nonetheless marketed to them
- encourage girls to focus on their appearance, including a range of highly sexualised dolls with skimpy clothing, unrealistic body proportions and provocative expressions (see related topic *Toy Advertising* on ACCM website).

Ability to distinguish advertising from programs

Young children are particularly vulnerable to advertising as they are often unable to distinguish advertising from programs. US researchers such as Dale Kunkel (University of California at Santa Barbara) and Don Roberts (Stanford University) say that children under age of 5 or 6 do not distinguish effectively between advertisements and the programs they are watching.



Ability to understand 'selling' intent of advertising

Children under the age of seven are unlikely to understand selling intent. As Roberts says, to understand selling intent, the child has to be able to take the perspective of another, and to understand that the seller will engage in puffery, trickery, exaggeration in order to sell. Children are not developmentally capable of this until the age of seven or eight.

Many of the advertisements use techniques that mislead children as to the worth or performance of the product, both food and toys.

Impact on family

Children are effective influencers of family purchasers, pestering their parents to buy products that they neither need nor really understand. A British study reported that 85% of a sample of 4-13 year olds acknowledged that they had asked their parents to buy advertised products and 66% claimed that their parents had met their request.

Advertising pressures can produce significant conflict between parents and children. Many vulnerable families succumb, spending dollars they can least afford. Pester power often works.

Who are the most vulnerable?

Children under the age of 7 or 8. Advertising directed at this age group is inherently unfair.

But even older children do not always know when advertisements are telling the truth, and are vulnerable (as are adults) to the appeals to their self esteem, anxieties, and need to be seen as "cool".

Steve Biddulph, noted Australian author of books on child raising, says that advertising to children is an unfair practice. He says that advertising works by making them unhappy with their lives, anxious and unsatisfied. It sells to them by damaging their mental health.

The advertising industry

- Big business now runs annual conferences (with big fees) to share the best techniques to sell their products to children. Children are being actively targeted by the advertising industry for three reasons:
- they have considerable money of their own
- they are powerful influencers of family purchases, from breakfast cereal to the family car

- if captured early, can develop a warm and fuzzy feeling towards a company for life.

Relevant rules and regulations

The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) has a set of legally binding standards for advertising directed to children (http://www.acma.gov.au/WEB/STANDARD/pc=PC_91814) that occurs within C programs.

Commercial television stations and Pay TV have Codes of Practice governing advertising directed to children in other children's programs, including limits on the amount of time occupied by the advertisements.

Basically they require that no advertisement may mislead or deceive a child, and that the techniques used in ads should fairly represent the product.

There are requirements that apply to the promotion of "premium offers" (the trinket a child gets if they buy some other product such as a fast food meal).

For more information about, and links to the various Codes of Practice operating in respect of Australia's broadcast media, see the Codes section of the ACCM website (<http://www.youngmedia.org.au/codes/codes.htm>)

What parents can do

- If you see advertising that you believe is misleading or unfair, complain to the station that screened it. For more information about how to complain go to the Complaints section of the ACCM website (<http://www.youngmedia.org.au/codes/complaints.htm>)
- Give your children a solid sense of self esteem. For more information about self esteem and how to help your children develop it, go to the South Australian Department of Human Services, Child & Youth Health topic *Self Esteem* (<http://www.cyh.com/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetails.aspx?p=114&np=141&id=1702>)
- Minimise exposure to commercial TV until children are over eight. Watch the ABC or Pay TV. Keep a stock of favourite videos (or borrow from the local library) for young children.
- Avoid exposure to cartoon series that are toy linked. (see related topics in the Advertising section of the ACCM website.)
- Encourage children to avoid Internet sites that are product linked.

- Use your power as parent to educate your children about advertising. Talk about the techniques, show children the real product in stores and compare it to the way it was advertised. Comment on advertisements that exploit.

What regulators could do

Regulators need to be encouraged to enforce the present set of standards for advertising to children more effectively.

Summary

Advertising and marketing to children is big business. The techniques being used are unfair to young children. Parents need to minimise (where possible) young children's exposure to advertising, and seek less commercial environments. Parents can also be powerful media educators.

Useful links

Commercial Alert (US)

<http://www.commercialalert.org/>

Media Smart (UK) Helping children to watch wisely.

<http://www.mediasmart.org.uk/>

PBS Kids: Don't Buy It (US) A fun, media literacy based section for kids offering interactive games and exercises along with facts and figures on advertising/ consumerism, television, and media production.

<http://pbskids.org/dontbuyit>

Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood (US)

<http://www.commercialexploitation.com/>

TRUCE - Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment (US) in particular their Toy Action Guide

<http://www.truceteachers.org/>



For more information about children and the media, call the **Children and Media Helpline**

Up to date and reliable information for parents and caregivers about the impact of the media on children

1800 700 357

National freecall, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week or go to the ACCM website

www.youngmedia.org.au

Books and articles

Some selected texts on the topic of advertising directed to children:

Austin, EW (2006) "Why advertisers & researchers should focus on media literacy to respond to the effects of alcohol advertising on youth." *International Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 25, No. 4

Hust, SJT (2006) "Alcohol advertising & youth: themes, appeals & future directions." *International Journal of Advertising* Vol. 25, No. 4

Jones, JP (2006) *When ads work: New proof that advertising triggers sales*. 2nd ed M E Sharpe Inc

More references are available on the Readings and Research section of the ACCM website. (http://www.youngmedia.org.au/mediachildren/10_bibliography.htm)

Related fact sheets

Other topics in the Effects of advertising directed at children section of the ACCM website:

- Food advertising
- Television food advertising and childhood obesity / overweight (Keep your children out of the firing line series)
- Strategies for parents to counter television food advertising (Keep your children out of the firing line series)
- Body image problems, eating disorders and media messages (Keep your children out of the firing line series)
- Toy advertising
- Standards in relation to advertising
- Effect of advertising on children's body image
- Too sexy, too soon: the sexualisation of children in the media
- Strategies for parents around advertising
- Advertising: true or false

Ordering more fact sheets

The Australian Council on Children and the Media (incorporating Young Media Australia) has over sixty printed fact sheets about the impact of the media on children. To get a list of available ACCM Fact Sheets, or to order your copies, call the

Children and Media Helpline 1800 700 357

You may also read ACCM Fact Sheets or download them from the **ACCM website www.youngmedia.org.au**