

Advertising To Children

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In the life of a child, family is the most important influence – but television is not far behind. Through television, and through other screen media, the minds of our children are being handed to advertisers and corporations.

Our children's window on the world is now largely through the eyes of advertisers. The average American child sees upwards of 40,000 commercials each year *on television alone*, of which 5500 (15 per day) are for food or beverages. Combine that with billboards, Internet ads, magazine and newspaper ads, radio ads, Facebook/social networking site (SNS) ads, and young people are immersed in a commercial culture from infancy.

As corporations are placing greater emphasis on building “brand loyalty” and “cradle-to-grave” marketing, children are their easiest prey. The media shape children's food choices and caloric intake, including exposing children to persuasive messages about food, cuing them to eat, and depressing satiety cues of eating while viewing.

Through television, children see a world of fast-paced, entertaining commercials with glamorous people and cartoon characters convincing them that happiness comes from having things they don't really need, and from eating foods that aren't at all good for them.

For example, did you know that Saturday morning children's programs have an average of 11 commercials per hour, half of which are for food products? And ninety percent of these food products are high in fat, added sugar, and/or salt!

Bottom line: The overwhelming majority of food-product advertisements seen on television by American children and adolescents are of poor nutritional content. Healthy foods account for only 3 percent of the foods children see on television.

Kids are daily bombarded by virtually irresistible messages that say, in effect, “Eat this now!” Little wonder kids crave the foods least healthy for them. It is simply deplorable how food producers seduce children into eating foods good for profits but bad for health.

And make no mistake that advertising to children is good for profits. Why else, according to the most recent figures, do corporations and their sophisticated marketing departments spend over \$1.5 billion annually in the United States on marketing to children?

That's right. There is a \$1.5 billion industry out there working day and night to undermine parental authority. And millions of busy, indifferent, or simply overwhelmed parents give these corporations free rein by allowing unlimited access to screen media.

Need proof? Look no further than research that shows how, over the past few decades, American children have steadily grown more influential in how the family dollar is spent. Children are now estimated to influence as much half of American household spending.

And, in recent years, the push to advertise to children has only gotten stronger, and more widespread. Advertisements to children are conveyed not only through television, but also through the internet, cell phones, movies, videos, and podcasts.

With websites and cable channels devoted entirely to their interests, today's children are far more exposed to marketing than their parents or grandparents were.

And as their access to media has grown, so again has their power to influence their parents. Companies have discovered that it is often more effective to recruit a child as an in-home marketer than to try to convince a parent to buy their product.

Put in simple terms, in our materialistic and consumeristic culture, childhood innocence has become overmatched by corporate omnipresence. A hundred years ago children were exploited as laborers. Today, children are exploited as consumers.

So what? What does it matter to the larger society?

It matters because the constant bombardment of materialistic messages penetrates deep into the children's psyches, molding their values and their understanding of the world. Materialistic values are antithetical to compassion, generosity, and kindness. They are associated with selfishness, and a lack of neighborly concern.

Remember, thinking and caring isn't advertised on television. Only buying: food, toys, entertainment. And buying more food, toys, and entertainment.

Regarding Advertising To *Young Children*

Logos and cartoon characters on diapers and designer clothing, Band-Aids and Barbies, baby bottles and counting books. Hero athletes, celebrities, and cartoon characters in food commercials and on food packaging. Toys or figurines in fast food meals. Advertisers know that when kids see characters they recognize or adore on products, they will demand those products from their parents.

And, it must be admitted, parents, too, are often gullible in buying products adorned with characters they know their children, or even they themselves, love and enjoy.

But what most adults do not realize is that children view television with far less skepticism than most adults, and are thus vulnerable to advertising. Children under the age of 8 – especially – are not usually able to discriminate between commercials and programming, and do not understand that the intent of commercials is to sell products. They are cognitively and psychologically defenseless against advertising.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, in fact, minces no words when it says, "Advertising directed toward children is inherently deceptive and exploits children under 8 years of age. "

Advertisers exploit this childhood innocence and vulnerability by selling feelings of friendship and happiness. Happiness comes from purchasing the right product. Twenty to forty-thousand times a year, kids are made to feel as if they need a particular product to be truly happy, and that until they have the product, everyone else in the world is having fun without them.

Again, foods poor in nutritional content are overwhelmingly represented as the fuel for fun.

In the late 1970s – more than thirty long years ago – a series of Federal Trade Commission hearings concluded that it was unfair and deceptive to advertise to children younger than 6 years of age.

The FTC understood that young children are not developmentally capable of coping with media messages. Children use media to learn about culture, but typically lack the knowledge and experience to recognize what is unrealistic.

In fact, a number of European nations either ban all advertising directed at children, or severely restrict it. Not us. No, here in the United States, marketing to children is a big and getting bigger business, despite that the vast majority of products marketed to children and adolescents are harmful to them.