



Advertising and Children:
Effects, Regulations, and Suggestions

*The Digital Splinters
and
the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*

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Page One

Introduction

by Chris Bassitt

Advertising directed towards children is all over the place these days. It can be found on television, in magazines, on the radio, on billboards, and the list goes on. In this newsletter, we will explore some of the different aspects of advertising on children, including anti-drug advertising, food advertising, television commercials, regulations of television advertising, benefits of children's advertising, and the importance of media literacy for children as a result of advertising.

Taking Children into Consideration: Children's Media Regulation

by Rebecca Baldwin

Many voices cry out for regulation on advertising when it is directed towards children. Advertising can be either directly or indirectly intended for children. Children are affected by the advertising that is specifically targeted at them, as well as advertising that is made for adults. According to a major voice in the regulation of children's advertising, the Children's Advertising Review Unit in the National Advertising Division of the Council of Better Business Bureaus, self-regulation by advertising agencies has been the way to go to control children's advertising content (n.d.). There has been contestation to the policy of self-regulation on advertising as a whole as well as companies over-stepping the boundaries on what is acceptable in children's advertising.

The philosophy behind self-regulation is that advertising agencies will screen the content of their promotions to make sure that the material is appropriate for their audience. When advertising is made for children, special consideration should be given to them. The Children's Advertising Review Unit (CARU) has created seven guidelines that advertising for children under 12 should follow. 1 - Children have a limited ability to judge the credibility of advertisements, as well as the nature of the personal information they are giving out about themselves on the internet, therefore advertisers should not use this weakness to their advantage. 2 - Advertisers should not unreasonably exploit the imagination of children. 3 - Inappropriate content should not be marketed towards children. 4 - Advertisers should portray truthful information in a language that children can understand. 5 - Advertisers should promote wherever possible positive social behaviors. 6- Cultural diversity should be encouraged whenever possible. 7 - Wherever possible, positive relationships between children and parents should be encouraged. In the event that an advertisement directed at children does not follow these guidelines, CARU seeks voluntary compliance from the agency responsible for the advertisement (n.d.).

After the massacre at Columbine High School, President Clinton expressed his concern about how violence is marketed to children. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) Chairman Robert Pitofsky explained, "It is deceptive or unfair for companies to market their products in a way that is inconsistent with their own ratings" (Safe and Smart, n.d.). The solution proposed was that the entertainment companies need to have improved self-regulated advertising. Self-regulation is said to be more favorable than a government regulated system. When the government directly regulates advertising, it becomes an issue of first amendment rights.

See REGULATION on page 5

Importance of Media Education for Children Due to Advertisements

by Stephanie Acheson

Today's children are bombarded with advertisements. From the moment of birth, people are surrounded by advertisements such as logos, labels, and commercials. Kerwin and Leonhart (1997) explain, no one ad is bad, but the combination of 400 ads a day creates in children a combination of narcissism, entitlement, and dissatisfaction. Therefore, it is imperative to teach children the importance of media literacy. A media-educated person will be able to limit use of media; make positive media choices; select creative alternatives to media consumption; develop critical thinking and viewing skills; and understand the political, social, and emotional implications of all forms of media (Bar-on and Hogan, 1999). Thus, advertisements are a beneficial tool that can be used to educate children on the value of media literacy.

One reason that it is important for children to become media literate is for the fact that advertisements are created to target children. For example, Brand name marketers are taking advantage of kids who are trying to fit in, and depend on brand names just to fit into the in crowd. Kathleen Kerwin and David Leonhardt's article is Madison Avenue taking get em while they re young too far? explains marketers [are] gathering information about children's preferences and then hiring psychologists to analyze it (1997). As a result of the increased studies on the child psyche, children today are more vulnerable to negative messages. Companies are therefore able to benefit from larger sales because of the fact that children are such a malleable consumer. Nickelodeon alone surveys 4,000 children every week in its offices, at schools, over the phone, and on the Internet (Kerwin and Leonhart, 1997). Thus, by making kids aware of the effects of media advertisements, they will be able to live their life without having brands controlling them or their self-worth. For this reason, it is imperative for children to receive media education so that they will be less likely to succumb to the social pressures that ads place on kids. An additional reason that it is imperative for children to become media literate is for the simple fact that children are less educated than the advertisers. Author's Erica Austin and Christopher Knaus (2000) state, children do not develop adult-level comprehension skills until about eighth grade, with middle childhood representing a critical period for decision making about a variety of topics Further, an article by Daniel Stout Jr. and Russel Mouritsen entitled, Prosocial behavior in advertising aimed at children: A content analysis from the Southern Speech Communication Journal (1998) states, Several studies point out that children often fail to comprehend the commercial intent of commercials (p. 161).

See EDUCATION on page 3

Letters

by Kate Allanson

Dear Abby,

I recently found that my 11 year old daughter has wanted everything that she has seen on TV. She comes home from school talking about what her friends got after seeing a commercial. Children are greatly affected by advertising at a young age (Starik, 1997 and Clay, 2000). Before they can read, most children are requesting brand-name products. "It's Captain Crunch. He started it all. In the first commercial, Captain Crunch has this little pirate, who had this big jar of peanut butter. And then they run into each other, or into someone, or something like that. And they both merged together [laughs], and it became 'Peanut Butter Crunch' [laughs]. That's why I bought it," Pam, a ninth grader, said (Toy Industry Association, 1997-2000). This example shows that children are affected by the commercials that they watch. She bought something because the commercial made it appealing to her. Children, aged 2 to 12, are exposed to over 20,000 commercials each year (Federal Trade Commission, 2003). My daughter has recently seen a commercial for make-up and I don't want her to start wearing make-up at such a young age, what can I do?

Sincerely,
A concerned parent

Clay, R.A. (2000, September 8). *Advertising to Children: Is it ethical?*, *Monitor on Psychology* (31). Available Online: <http://www.apa.org/monitor/sep00/advertising.html> (accessed October 18, 2003).

Federal Trade Commission (2003). *Advertising to children*. Available Online: <http://www.lawpublish.com/ftc-child900.html> (accessed October 18, 2003).

Starik, R.B. III (1997, July 25). *The ABC's at the FTC: Marketing and advertising to children*. *Minnesota Institute of Legal Education*. Available Online: <http://www.ftc.gov/speeches/starek/minnfin.htm> (accessed October 18, 2003).

Toy Industry Association (1999-2000). *Toy Industry Fact Book* (chap. 5): *Advertising to children*. [Electronic Version]. Available Online: <http://www.toytma.org/industry/publications/fb2000/advertising.htm> (accessed October 18, 2003).



John
Michael
Yanson

Opinion Column

Getting the Message Out to Kids: Anti-Drug Advertising

by Jon Berrien

Media surrounds us from the moment we wake up to the second we close our eyes and go to sleep. Americans are constantly exposed to advertisements. Whether it is a clothing logo, a television commercial, a billboard, or an ad found in a bathroom stall, Americans are engulfed in media. Due to the fact that the media has such a tremendous impact in our daily lives, many anti-drug advertising campaigns and organizations have begun with high hopes that it will reach out to America's youth and prevent them from using drugs. Organizations such as Stand and My Anti-drug have been developed to help aware teens of the negative consequences they could face or develop while using illegal drugs or tobacco.

Everyday, 1,200 people in American die from diseases caused by tobacco everyday (Truth.com, n.d.). Through their very recognizable commercials, Stand has helped impact the increasing number of teens who have decided to stand up and speak out against tobacco companies. In order to persuade teens not to smoke, Stand uses staggering facts and visual aids in their advertisements, which stuns their target audience, teens, in hopes that they will make the right decision to either quit smoking or even not start (Ohio Tobacco Use Prevention and Control Foundation, 2002).

My Anti-drug is another organization that is creating public service announcements to further aware teenagers about the consequences of using drugs, such as marijuana, cocaine, or alcohol. My Anti-drug has developed a very ingenious tactic to reach out to teens and deter their use of drugs. They relate everyday activities and hobbies, and use them to show how they can be your anti-drug, such as listening to music or dancing. Have you seen the public service announcement (PSA) where the little brother gives his older brother who lives in the basement his wallet and shows how he amounted to nothing because of marijuana? Or perhaps you have seen the commercial where a group of teens drive out of a drive-thru and hit a kid because of their impaired actions due to marijuana. All of those PSA's were a product of My Anti-drug (Freevibe.com, n.d.).

There are many organizations and non-profit coalitions working hard to keep America's youth from being corrupted by drugs, tobacco, and alcohol. With hopes that our teens are listening they will continue to push the resistance of altering substances and hopefully have a profound effect on today's youth.

Freevibe.com. *National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign*. Available Online: <http://www.freevibe.com>. (accessed November 1, 2003).

Ohio Tobacco Use Prevention and Control Foundation (2002). *Standonline.org*. Available Online: <http://www.standonline.org/home/index.asp> (accessed November 1, 2003).

Truth.com. *Welcome to crazy world*. Available Online: <http://www.thetruth.com> (accessed November 1, 2003).

The Digital Splinters and the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles

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Advertising to Kids: A FAT Problem

by Chris Bassitt

Cheeseburgers, pizza, tacos, french fries; these are some of the favorite foods of kids today, but why? Are these good foods for our children to eat? What are the consequences of eating these foods? I am going to explore the nature of why kids seem to enjoy these foods so much, and the fact that children are becoming more and more over weight from eating these foods.

About 25% of school aged children in the United States are over weight, or at risk of it, and many school aged children eat diets that can lead to chronic disease (Levine, 2000). The question is why do children eat these poor diets? The answer may be found in the advertising of unhealthy foods.

Kids are constantly blanketed with advertisements from fast food restaurants. They see them on TV, magazines, and even in their own schools. Everyone has seen McDonalds commercials for happy meals which show children playing with toys, outside having fun, or having Ronald McDonald perform some magic trick. These commercials are often very irrelevant to the food, and never mention the nutritional value of any of the food products. Nonetheless, they are directed at children, and are very effective at making children want to eat there.

Children can't even escape the fast food industries in their own schools. Many schools today offer fast food gift certificates as rewards for accomplishments in the classroom, and I have seen this first hand. When I was in elementary school all the students were involved in a program called Book It. This was a program where every time a student finished reading a book they were rewarded with a coupon for a free personal pizza at Pizza Hut. We also often received McDonalds certificates for many things including, good grades or selling so many items in a fundraiser.

Why do advertisers target children anyway? According to kids marketing expert James McNeal, targeting children is a good short term and long term investment. Children have money to spend, influence family purchases, and are future customers, a sort of cradle-to-grave market (Levine, 2000). Advertisers are intentionally targeting children because it's profitable, regardless of the health risks.

Children in our country are becoming more and more over weight, and it is often due to their diets. The amount of fast foods kids eat today is very high, and it needs to stop. Children see fast food advertisements all the time, and it needs to be cut down before it becomes an even fatter problem.

Levine, J. (January 2000) (No Title) *Education Digest*, 65(5), 32-35.

Media Education for Kids

EDUCATION from page 1

Therefore, since children are less educated than their advertisers, it is imperative to teach children the importance of media education, and thus reduce the level of persuasive effects that advertising can have on children.

One positive aspect of media literacy is that it teaches children not to believe everything in an advertisement is completely truthful. The August 1999 issue of *Pediatrics* explains, A media-literate public is able to decipher the purpose and message of media rather than accepting it at face value (Bar-on and Hogan, 1999). Advertisements serve as excellent tools to teach children the importance of not accepting advertisements at face value. Thus, children who have the ability to think critically about the messages that are conveyed to them through advertising are better able to understand media messages. Therefore, if children become media literate they will be better able to make sense of the misleading messages found in an advertisement.

An additional benefit of media literacy is that children become less likely to succumb to the negative aspects of the media. Therefore, media education is beneficial to children because it offers a multifaceted approach to understanding and eliminating the negative impact that media messages present to young people (Bar-on and Hogan, 1999). If children are first educated about the manipulative effects that advertisements can have, such as the promotion of drugs, sex, and alcohol, then they will be better able to make more informed choices for themselves as they get older. A recent study on adolescents discovered a change in attitudes regarding intention to drink alcohol after a media education program (Bar-on and Hogan, 1999). As a result of promoting media education, children will be less likely to be manipulated by media messages, and will therefore be able to make more informed choices.

Further, media education will help children to disregard persuasive appeals. Austin and Knaus (2000) explain, Once identification has been established, expectancies develop that in turn guide future behavior. Therefore, children that have a working knowledge of media literacy at a young age, then they are likely to identify with negative behaviors when they reach middle school. Children will benefit from media education because they will be given the knowledge needed to make positive life decisions that will in turn benefit them in their future. Hence, it is imperative for parents and school teachers alike, to teach media education so that children will be able to benefit from healthy life decisions, and not be manipulated otherwise.

In conclusion, it is essential for media education to begin at a young age so that advertisements do not take advantage of children's vulnerability, due to their lack of knowledge. Kids are the most pure consumers that you could have They tend to interpret your ad literally (Kerwin and Leonhart, 1997). Rather than succumbing to manipulative advertisements, media literacy will enable children have the knowledge to make positive life choices. For these reasons, it is imperative for children to be media literate so that they will be able to prevent the negative influences of today's advertising-thriving culture, and as a result make well informed decisions.

Mouritsen, R. H. (1998). *Prosocial behavior in advertising aimed at children: A content analysis*. *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 53, 159-174.

Kerwin, D. & Kerwin, K. (1997, June 30). *Is Madison Avenue taking "get'em while they're young" too far?* *Business Week*. Retrieved September 23, 2003, from EBSCO research database.

Austin, E.W. and Knaus, C. (2000, January-March). *Predicting the potential for risky behavior among those 'too young' to drink as the result of appealing advertising*. *Journal of Health Communication*. Retrieved October 6, 2003, from EBSCO research database.

Bar-on, M. and Hogan, M. (1999, August). *Media education*. *Pediatrics*. Retrieved October 6, 2003, from EBSCO research database.

The TV Story: Television and Children's Advertising

by Brittany Betz

Television is filled with advertisements that are produced with the intent of attracting children. The average American child views as many as 40,000 commercials every year (National Institute of Media and the Family, 2003). With so many children watching television and viewing these commercials, there are bound to be some effects on them.

Many companies, such as alcoholic beverage manufacturers, put out commercials that tend to be fantasy and unrealistic. This is done in hopes of drawing kids and adults into trying their products. Children are exposed to on average 100,000 drinking commercials before they are actually legal to drink. Seeing commercials of these products will lead kids to drink earlier and earlier than past generations. This will obviously have its effects on the children in numerous ways. Toy companies are also big marketers to children for obvious reasons. However, these companies tend to manipulate the children that they advertise to. For example, they will advertise toys that are very expensive. The advertisers make these toys look more fun and of higher quality than cheaper toys. However, the cheaper toys have been proven to give the children much more entertainment and meet their educational needs (Young Media Australia.org, 2003). By advertising these high priced inadequate toys children are not getting the educational needs, which can create long term benefits that they will need.

Children are also watching more and more television. Advertisers often times target there advertisements toward children, because they are most likely to watch. McDonald's restaurants went to court for advertising to children. They would sponsor school activities for the kids, and when the kids saw McDonald advertisements, they will begin to desire the company's products. This, in turn, resulted in their parents losing money and the children not getting the correct amount of daily nutrition that they need. McDonald's also markets toys to draw kids into wanting Happy Meals. They offer a wide variety of toys in their famous Happy Meals, which leaves kids wanting to come back for more (Mcspotlight, 2003).

When a child watches a television program and likes what they see, they will often times watch the show over and over. As a result, they will see many commercials and they will continue to watch television. This can cause obesity in children, because they are in front of the television viewing thousands of commercials and their favorite television show. This occurs instead of the children going out and doing activities that keep them fit. Advertising companies and the television companies know this, but they continue to advertise and reach out to children. Children are much easier drawn to things like television, which makes companies target them. Not only obesity is a result, but changes in the morals of children could occur while viewing these opinionated commercials. Many times children will see something, such as drinking, that they don't want to do, but end up doing it because a famous person advertises for the alcohol company or it seems cool on the commercial.

This is also true in magazines with cigarettes. Usually cigarette companies use beautiful girls or good looking guys to pose for an advertisement. By associating a role model or famous person to the habit, kids think that they will look good smoking (National Institute of Media and the Family, 1998). Sometimes children start to smoke due to this. A nurse at a local school district commented that when asked why they start smoking, most children tell her that they do so to look cool.

Therefore, when advertisers market to children in any way it has a bigger effects than people imagine. The effects of advertising on children are endless. There are so many reasons that create a need for companies to be careful when they advertise to children. The companies need to think about the needs of the children and that children have a tendency to want everything in sight. When advertising should make sure that a particular item that they are advertising does not harm children or that it is in the children's best interest.

McSpotlight.org (October 27, 2003). *The issues advertising*. Available Online: <http://www.mcspotlight.org/issues/advertising> (accessed November 3, 2003).

National Institute on Media and the Family. (November 12, 1998). *Fact Sheet: Effects of advertising on children's use of tobacco*. Available Online: http://www.mediafamily.org/facts/facts_tobacco.shtml (accessed November 3, 2003).

Young Media Australia.org (October 16, 2003). *Toy Advertising*. Available Online: http://www.youngmedia.org.au/mediachildren/03_06_ads_toys.htm. (accessed November 3, 2003).



Children's Media Regulation

From REGULATION on page 1

With this in mind, companies should be extremely careful about what advertising they target towards children. Though self-regulation is preferred, some guidelines of what is acceptable and appropriate content for children's advertising are necessary (Safe and Smart, n.d.). There are many people who are critical of the advertising self-regulation system, especially when children's advertising is the focus of discussion. It is contested that it is not clear what advertisements constitute children's advertising. Many advertisements directed towards adults are seen by children as well, because there are very few audiences that are not a mix of adults and children. Another term that has been loosely defined is also acceptability. Debra Harker and Glen Wiggs said, "Defining any value-laden term such as acceptability is problematic" (2000), and this difficulty is exacerbated by the competing interests that enter into debates on advertising. It is difficult for advertising regulations to compromise on the definition of acceptability. The controversy that any kind of children's advertising regulation brings up is between those who are looking towards the best interests of children, and those who are looking to preserve free speech.

One aspect of children's advertising regulations that has been debated is the effects of regulation on technology. Technology has been advancing and television is now moving into the digital age. There has been controversy about the regulation of advertising so quickly on this new digital capability. The Center for Media Education seeks a limited ban on advertising web links on children's programs. This ban would prohibit programs from airing a link to a website that is selling something. The American Advertising Federation is concerned with limiting broadcasters' options by regulating children's advertising on the new digital medium so rapidly (Teinowitz, 1997). The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act was passed in 1998 to restrict the usage of children's information obtained by companies on the internet. This law requires all companies to obtain parental consent before being allowed to use any information that they acquire about children (Safe and Smart, n.d.). This regulation on children's privacy was challenged when advertisements began to show up on children's mobile phones. These advertisements get to their audience via information obtained on the web. The National Union of Teachers said that legislation should be introduced to protect kids from this advertising. While at the same time, the advertising agencies say that this type of advertising is very effective, because they know who their audience is (Teinowitz, 2001).

Additionally, another source of controversial advertising has been the regulation of outdoor tobacco advertisements, such as billboards and subway ads. In 2001, the United States Supreme Court reviewed stiff regulations by some states on outdoor tobacco advertisements. The argument for the regulation of the public advertising of tobacco products was that children are exposed to them, increasing the risk that they will begin to smoke. Mark Berling, an associate for Phillip Morris (a large tobacco company, who owns brands such as Marlboro), said that tobacco use is dangerous, but it is legal and as long as it is legal, the state cannot cut off all advertising to adults just to make sure that children are never exposed to ads. The Supreme Court ruled that it was against the first amendment to prohibit the tobacco companies from advertising outside (Varney, 1998).

All in all, the system to allow advertisers to self-regulate advertising directed towards children has both positive and negative aspects. It helps preserve the first amendment rights of free speech. On the other hand, some advertisements that do not reflect the positive guidelines set up to protect children are allowed to get by. By the time the problem is addressed, many children have already been exposed to it. The system is constantly growing and improving, so let us hope that it works out all of the kinks.

Varney, C. (1998, June 9). *You Call This Self-Regulation?* *Wired News* Retrieved September 21, 2003, from the World Wide Web: <http://www.wired.com/news/politic/0,1283,1282300.html>.

Teinowitz, I. (2001, February 5). *Kids TV at issue again*. *Advertising Age*, 72(6), 8.

Teinowitz, I (1997, July 7). *FTC hopeful on Web self-regulation*. *Advertising Age*, 56(27), 28.

Safe and Smart. (n.d.). *Government Regulation and Industry Self-Regulation*. Retrieved September 20, 2003, from the World Wide Web: <http://www.nsb.org/safe-smart/regulation.htm>.

Council of the Better Business Bureau. (No date). *Children's Advising Review Unit*. Retrieved September 20, 2003, from the World Wide Web: <http://www.caru.org/index.asp> [2003, September 20].

Harker, D. & Wiggs, G. (2000, January 21). *Three Generations of Advertising Self-Regulation: Learning from our Forefathers*. Retrieved September 21, 2003, from the World Wide Web: <http://marketing-bulletin.massey.ac.nz/article11/commentary1b.asp>.

Sexualizing Children through Advertisements

By Bill Appler

All around these days you cannot look at an advertisement without seeing some sexual content. American children have viewed an estimated 360 000 advertisements on television before graduating from high school (Strasburger, 1989). Young children view these commercials and advertisements while watching Television or hear them while they ride to the grocery store with their parents. It is inappropriate for young children to see scandalously dressed women promoting their next album or fashion show. Young children are being sold by the fashion industry. There are stores like Abercrombie and Fitch, who promote girls wearing thongs, tight jeans that are low cut, and revealing tops. Stores like these have no problem promoting to youth, because the youth buy and they can make a lot of money from these children. There are commercials now with women exposing a lot of bare skin that children will clearly see. Women in dresses showing their cleavage for a quarter-pack of gum do not need to be shown to children. This is corrupting our kids' minds by exposing sexually provocative images.

Advertising does not only tell children that dressing sexy and doing mature adult things at a young age is allowable, but they also describe to the young males the stereotypical views of women. Exposure to sexist ads is a contributing cause to much of the havoc in society, as well as many social problems, including such behavior as violence against women, sexual harassment, and eating disorders.

Children are influenced most easily by any form of advertisement, because of their innocence and willingness to believe. Children want to grow up and be like adults, but they cannot, for they are children for a reason. They need to stay young for an appropriate amount of time or they will regret not having a childhood and being able to do childlike things.

Promoting sex and trying to teach and persuade kids that sex is okay is wrong. Sex should be something engaged by consenting adults who are ready for the responsibilities of their actions. Exposing children to these images and kinds of lifestyles is not needed. It takes away from children's innocence. Advertising companies can find other ways to promote their items, but everyone knows that sex sells.

Strasburger, V.C. (1989) *Children, adolescents, and television: The role of pediatricians*. *Pediatrics*. 83: 446-448.