

Children & Advertising

Research conducted by the American Psychological Association shows that children under the age of eight are unable to critically comprehend televised advertising messages and are prone to accept advertiser messages as truthful, accurate and unbiased. This can lead to unhealthy eating habits as evidenced by today's youth obesity epidemic. For these reasons, the American Psychological Association has recommended that advertising targeting children under the age of eight be restricted.

The researchers estimated that advertisers spend more than E12 billion per year on advertising messages aimed at the youth market. Additionally, the average child watches more than 40,000 television commercials per year.

The six-member team of psychologists with expertise in child development, cognitive psychology and social psychology found that children under the age of eight lack the cognitive development to understand the persuasive intent of television advertising and are uniquely susceptible to advertising's influence.

While older children and adults understand the inherent bias of advertising, younger children do not, and therefore tend to interpret commercial claims and appeals as accurate and truthful information.

Because younger children do not understand persuasive intent in advertising, they are easy targets for commercial persuasion. This is a critical concern because the most common products marketed to children are sugared cereals, sweets, fizzy drinks, and snack foods. Such advertising of unhealthy food products to young children contributes to poor nutritional habits that may last a lifetime and be a variable in the obesity among kids.

The research on children's memory and product preferences confirms that advertising does typically get young consumers to buy their products. From a series of studies examining product choices the findings show that children recall content from the ads to which they've been exposed and preference for a product has been shown to occur with as little as a single commercial exposure and strengthened with repeated exposures.

Furthermore, these product preferences can affect children's product purchase requests, which can put pressure on parents' purchasing decisions and instigate parent-child conflicts when parents deny their children's requests.

Finally, in addition to the issues surrounding advertising directed to young children, there are concerns regarding certain commercial campaigns primarily targeting adults that pose risks for child-viewers. For example, beer ads are commonly shown during sports events and seen by thousands of children, are creating both brand familiarity and more positive attitudes toward drinking in children as young as 9-10 years of age.

Another area of sensitive advertising content involves commercials for violent media products such as motion pictures and video games. Such ads contribute to a violent

media culture, which increases the likelihood of youngsters' aggressive behaviour and desensitises children to real-world violence.

According to the findings in the research the American Psychological Association it is imperative that we restrict advertising primarily directed to young children of eight years and under. Policymakers need to take steps to better protect young children from exposure to advertising because of the inherent unfairness of advertising to audiences who lack the capability to evaluate biased sources of information found in television commercials.

If that cannot be done even to simply ensure that disclosures and disclaimers in advertising directed to children are conveyed in language clearly comprehensible to the intended audience (e.g., use “You have to put it together” rather than “some assembly required” or “The picture of the beach in the background does not come with the doll!”).