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Ads That Target Kids

They're already starting - those television ads pushing our children to ask for the latest toy or gadget for a holiday gift. Increasingly, kids are the target of major merchandising efforts. Why? Because kids do influence family purchases. Just think about it. Your typical six year old wakes up between Rugrats sheets, slips on her Power Puff girls t-shirt, runs into the kitchen to eat Captain Crunch cereal and trots off to school carrying a Winnie the Pooh back pack.

Advertising aimed at kids isn't just your typical commercials during cartoon breaks. Other examples include:

- In school promotions. Companies provide "educational packets" to schools, which generally include a heavy dose of advertising.
- Licensing. Characters that win children's hearts are used to sell everything from pajamas to toothbrushes. You're pressured to purchase over and over again as new characters win their affection.
- Celebrity endorsements. Sports or music stars promote a costly "status product." Kids have robbed and even murdered for status sneakers and jackets
- Kids Clubs. Children can sign up for a "club" where the only way to participate is to buy things. They may get a free gift or coupon, but they don't get the chance to meet new friends or have the fun and growth that a traditional club offers.
- Product Placement. Advertisers pay to have their products featured in movies. The star is seen drinking a popular soft drink or ordering pizza from a well known pizza chain.
- Advertorials. Ads in magazines look like games, puzzles or comic strips.
- Web Based Advertising. Kids shows urge them to "log on" where they find attractive activities mixed with commercial messages.

What's the effect of these promotions? Kids get the message that what's important is what you HAVE, not who you are. How can a parent overcome these messages?

Start early teaching your children to be wise consumers. Talk about the commercials you see, explaining what the promoter is trying to do. Encourage a healthy skepticism of advertising promises, and explain the difference between wanting something and needing something. And as with most things, kids learn best by what they see their parents

Inside This Issue . . .

- ✓ Do you "Supersize?"
- ✓ Control the Home Screen
- ✓ Become "Media Literate"
- ✓ Should your kids' room be "wired?"

doing. Make wise consumer decisions yourself, and explain them to your children.

The Food Industry is “Supersizing” America!

Each year the American food industry spends billions of dollars on advertising and promotion to create an environment that constantly pressures us to eat. And it’s not hawking carrots and celery sticks! According to Kelly Brownell, Yale University Professor, and one of the nation’s leading obesity experts, Americans are exposed to a “toxic” food environment. That is strong language, but his point is, we

are bombarded with media messages to *eat, eat, eat!* Secondly, most of the heavily promoted food is good tasting, high-calorie, high fat foods that are widely available. The consequences, an epidemic of diet-related diseases, and obesity.

The fast-food industry is making food available everywhere. Almost every gas station has been combined with a convenience store such that when you gas up your car, you can grab fast-food as well. Fast food is even infiltrating some schools. Students choose lunch from Pizza Hut, Taco Bell, or McDonald’s. The *New York Times* reports that a corporate goal of McDonald’s

is to have no American more than four minutes from one of its restaurants.

Fast-food marketers also boost sales by boasting of “value meals” and “supersizing it” - code words for ballooning portion sizes. Americans now eat 40% of their meals away from home, and the food industry is promoting what they feel their customers want - more food for the money! For example a regular burger, small order of fries, and a small soda add up to a reasonable 630 calories. But the “value meal” of a *Big Mac*, medium fries and medium soda dishes up more than 1,200 calories. “Super-size it” to the max, and your meal is a whopping 1,800-plus calories!

Balancing Act is published monthly by University Extension and area Extension Specialists to help busy people balance their many responsibilities. It is provided by your local extension council.

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Disclaimer: No special endorsement is intended of products mentioned, nor is criticism implied of similar products not mentioned.

Home Screen Basics for Busy Parents

Balance your children’s lives by controlling and managing TV, video and screen games.

- Limit viewing to 5-10 hours per week.
- Establish a few rules and strive for consistency.
- Teach children the value of intentional viewing.

Set up your home to be a media-literate environment.

- Carefully decide where the home screens are placed.
- Keep your children’s bedroom tv-free
- Post and discuss upcoming specials.
- Explain your reasons for choosing certain TV shows and videos.

Use the home screen to improve children’s communication, thinking and creativity.

- Role play TV and move characters as a family.
- Delete audio or video portions and discuss your child’s reactions, thoughts and impressions.
- Ask the questions, “What if?” often, “What if TV had never been invented?” “What if we watched this show as if we were movie critics?” “What if you had written the script?”

Media Literacy: Sorting out Meaning

Because we are exposed to hundreds, even thousands of media images and ideas not only from television but now also from newspaper headlines, magazine covers, movies, websites, photos, video games and billboards, we need to give our children skills to sort the meaning of media messages.

What is media literacy? It's the ability to interpret and create personal meaning from the multitude of verbal and visual symbols we take in everyday through television, radio, computers, newspapers and magazines, and of course advertising. It's the ability to choose and select, the ability to challenge and question, the ability to be conscious about what's going on around you and not be passive and therefore, vulnerable.

Advertising: Learn to read an ad. What's the message? Who is the ad targeting? What are they using to make the ad appeal to their target audience? Test an ad's claims. Be creative - can certain shoes really make you jump higher? Do you have more energy when you eat certain cereals?

Computer/Internet: Track how much time you spend on the computer and/or Internet.

How do you use this time, work? games? research? etc.? Where is your computer located? It is easier to know how and what computers are being used when they are in family and/or community areas. Set rules about what kinds of information can be shared on the computer.

Movies and Videos: Develop rules for watching and guidelines for choosing movies and videos. Dialogue and listen to what children are saying about movies and videos. Watch together, you not only learn about the content, but how others are reacting to it.

Television: Track how much and what kinds of programs

are being watched. Keep the television in the family and/or community rooms. Develop rules for television usage and guidelines for choosing programs. Watch together, it's the easiest way to learn about content and how others react to it. Talk and listen to what children say about TV. Use the TV Rating System.

Video Games: Develop rules and limits for game playing. Play games with your child. You will learn about the game content and your child's reaction to it. Keep video games in the family or community room.

Educate your children to be conscious of media and to turn the closed, one-way

Q&A Q&A Q&A Q&A Q&A Q&A Q&A Q&A

Q: My daughter's gifted teacher wants to introduce more information on media literacy. Are there resources for educators and parents related to media?

A: Yes, there is a Center for Media and Values and other educational resources available for parents and educators. Check out www.medialit.org and www.action4mediaed.org and <http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/HomePage> as other possible sources. A commercial site www.growsmartbrains.com is written by an educator and has thoughtful, research-based information related to media and young children.

system of
commercial
mass media
into a
two-way
process of
discussion,
reflection and
action.

Go to Your Room!

That was a traditional punishment back in my childhood. However, sending a child to his or her room takes on a whole new meaning today if your child's room is linked to the outside world through television, radio, telephone and computer! Where's the punishment in a room full of electronic gadgets that allow children to communicate and entertain themselves without the interference of adults?

My daughter did a survey last year, of 170 sixth grade students in Clinton and discovered that all households

had at least one television. In her elementary survey, she found that six households actually had 10 televisions and the average household had six televisions. Nearly sixty percent of the sixth grade students surveyed had a television in their rooms. My daughter felt this survey was great testimony to why she should have a television in her room; she still doesn't have a t.v. of her own.

Why do kids want "wired" bedrooms? Of course, privacy is at that top of the list. Kids want to be able to do what they want, when they want,

without parental interference. Why do we, as parents, not want our children to have "wired" bedrooms? Control...we must monitor inappropriate television/videos, we need to see chat rooms and E-mail activities, and we need to hear telephone conversations. Often it is easier to give your children their own telephones, televisions and computers because they are begging. However, your family will be more giving and sharing if you share your wired media in a public area such as family and living rooms.