

**REPORT OF THE
APA TASK FORCE ON
ADVERTISING AND CHILDREN
Recommendations**

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I. PUBLIC POLICY

Restrict Advertising Primarily Directed to Audiences of Young Children

We recommend that television advertising be restricted during programming directed to or seen by audiences primarily composed of children 8 years of age and under.

Research establishes clearly that most children under the age of approximately 8 years do not comprehend the persuasive intent of advertising. Such children lack the capability to effectively evaluate commercial claims and appeals, and therefore tend to accept the information conveyed in advertising as truthful, accurate, and unbiased. Consequently, children in this age range are uniquely vulnerable to commercial persuasion.

Long-standing public policy in the area of advertising holds that all commercial content must be clearly identifiable as such to its intended audience, in order to allow the consumer to consider the source of the message in evaluating its claims. Advertising that violates this standard is deemed unfair, and a violation of federal law. Given that young children inherently lack the cognitive capability to effectively recognize and defend against televised commercial persuasion in this manner, we recommend that policymakers pursue efforts to constrain advertising specifically directed to this particular age group.

In recent years, television advertisers have increased their efforts to target young child audiences. While it is impossible to protect this age group from all commercial exposure, it is

pragmatic to restrict efforts by advertisers when they focus primarily, if not exclusively, on this uniquely vulnerable segment of the child population. Programs clearly intended for very young child audiences should exclude advertising targeting this age group. Similar policies that accomplish this goal have already been adopted by many of the major developed countries of the world, including Australia, Canada, Great Britain, and Sweden.

All advertising to children too young to recognize the persuasive intent of such messages is by its very nature exploitative. This policy recommendation would insure that children who lack such capability are protected from being directly targeted by advertisers who seek to benefit from their naiveté. Such a policy is the only effective means to address the inherent unfairness of advertising to audiences of young children who lack the capability to evaluate biased sources of information such as those found in television commercials.

State Advertising Disclaimers So They Can Be Understood by the Intended Audience

We recommend that advertising disclaimers in children's programming be stated in language children can understand and be aired in both audio and video for a time length conducive to reading, hearing, and comprehending.

Research has demonstrated children's ability to understand simply worded disclaimers (e.g., "You have to put it together" rather than "Partial assembly required"). Yet in most advertising to children, disclaimer wording continues to be at complex levels many child viewers cannot understand. Furthermore, many disclaimers are presented in both audio and video formats for such a brief time frame that even adults cannot read, hear, and comprehend them. The task force recommends that all advertising to children utilize existing psychological data and expertise in formulating disclaimers compatible with the developmental levels of the intended child audience. The task force notes that the Guidelines of the Children's Advertising Review Unit (Council of Better Business Bureaus) acknowledge that "Advertisers should always take into account the level of knowledge, sophistication and maturity of the audience to which their message is primarily directed" (First Principle) and "should communicate information in a truthful and accurate manner and in language understandable to young children" (Fourth Principle). These principles apply compellingly to disclaimers.

II. PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Conduct Research on the Changing Contexts and Modes of Advertising Practices

We recommend that psychologists conduct research on what is new and what is different in advertising that targets children and adolescents, and consider its implications.

It is widely acknowledged that significant qualitative and quantitative changes in advertising to children and youth have occurred over the last 10 years. Yet despite these striking developments and the engagement of an ongoing public debate about the implications of these issues for child welfare, the field of psychology has provided very sparse data to inform this dialogue and address these societal concerns. Among the claims that have surfaced are: (1) The purchasing power of children has increased significantly, making children more attractive targets for advertisers. (2) The volume of advertising to children of all ages has increased markedly. (3) Advertisers are targeting younger and younger children. (4) Advertising strategies have become more invasive. (5) Advertising in schools has grown in extent and changed in nature. (6) Advertising is reaching children in ways of which their parents are unaware. (7) There are a number of ways in which technology, especially on the Internet, has altered the nature of advertising. (8) The World Wide Web has enabled new forms of advertising and instantly reflexive purchasing that raise unique concerns for children.

Although substantial descriptive data exist to address three of these trends (numbers 1, 2, 5), most of these topics have not yet been adequately explored by scientific research. Indeed, many of these topics present rich and important challenges for psychological researchers, and evidence in these areas will clearly hold important implications for future public policy and industry practice in this realm. It is essential that the strong expertise of the field of psychology be brought to bear on these important issues.

Investigate Ad Processing/Effects in Interactive Media Environments

We recommend that psychologists actively investigate how young children comprehend and are influenced by advertising in new interactive media environments such as the Internet and the World Wide Web

Substantial research has identified the developmental progression by which young children first distinguish commercial from noncommercial content on television at a perceptual level and then later come to comprehend the persuasive intent that necessarily underlies advertising messages on TV. This pattern of developmental capabilities occurs in a media environment with relatively clear demarcation between commercial and noncommercial messages. In the interactive media environment, however, many of the traditional boundaries between advertising and entertainment content are blurred in new and unique ways. For example, ads on many children's Web sites consist not only of banners and billboards, but also include cartoons, puzzles, activities, and games that prominently feature products and product-related characters. These so-called "branded environments" are a key aspect of marketing to children in the new media environment, yet little is known about how young children understand and are influenced by such commercial efforts. Given the clear evidence of young children's limited comprehension of televised commercial persuasion, there is substantial cause for concern about their vulnerability to even more complex forms of

interactive media advertising. Empirical evidence is needed to help determine whether any new policies are called for to protect children from commercial exploitation in interactive media environments.

Study the Development of Understanding of Persuasive Intent in More Sophisticated Fashion With Children Older than 8 Years of Age

We recommend that psychologists renew their investigation of the age at which children come to fully comprehend the persuasive intent that necessarily underlies all television advertising.

Children who fail to recognize the persuasive intent of television advertising are more likely to accept commercial claims and appeals as truthful and accurate and are therefore more susceptible to advertising influence. Consequently, researchers have invested significant effort over the years to identify the age at which children come to recognize persuasive intent in television advertising and to then take this consideration into account in their processing of commercial messages. Most research to date, however, has examined only a relatively limited dimension of children's understanding of persuasive intent, focusing solely on whether or not a child understands that an advertisement seeks to sell a product. In fact, such understanding is only the first and most basic of the information-processing capabilities required for a mature comprehension of commercial messages.

It is equally important to assess children's understanding of the concept that commercial messages are biased and that biased messages demand different interpretive strategies than unbiased messages. While existing research has established clearly that most children develop the ability to recognize that commercials seek to sell products by about age 8 years, the developmental progression of this more sophisticated level of advertising comprehension remains unclear. Such knowledge would significantly enhance our understanding of how children comprehend advertising messages, as well as provide important evidence to help policymakers weigh the appropriate protections to afford children against possible commercial exploitation.

Study the Role of Gender, Ethnicity, and Culture in Relationship to the Psychological and Social Effects of Advertising on Children

We recommend that psychologists examine whether the psychological processes involved in the understanding of persuasive intent, as well as the impact of exposure to advertising, vary in relationship to gender, race, ethnicity, and culture.

The task force was surprised by the striking absence of psychological research on children's advertising that considered issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and culture. While some descriptive information exists regarding the manner in which advertisers target children of different genders, races, and ethnicities, there is almost no research examining the ways in which gender, race,

ethnicity, and culture might influence how advertising is perceived and comprehended, or whether there are variations in sensitivity to advertising influence techniques by these variables. Given that much advertising is highly segmented by the gender, race, and ethnicity of the target audience, the absence of research looking at these issues with children is surprising.

Conduct Research on Media Literacy

We recommend that psychologists conduct media literacy research to assist in the development of effective curricula for students at different grade levels.

Research shows that children of different ages have different cognitive abilities, such as those that are needed to discriminate between commercials and other material, recognize persuasive intent, strategically process the content of media messages, weigh conceptual vs. perceptual information, and understand varying levels of vocabulary. Whereas federal and state agencies have promoted the development of media literacy curricula, little evaluation research has ensued. Research by psychologists with expertise in cognitive development, persuasion, and educational processes can improve ways of effectively teaching an understanding of the processes of advertising and, more importantly, help children resist being unduly influenced by advertising pressures. It can also explore the limits of media literacy interventions for younger children under 8 years of age, who may lack the fundamental cognitive abilities required to achieve certain media literacy goals.

III. APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY

Provide Public Education

We recommend that psychologists who are knowledgeable about the effects of advertising on children and youth be encouraged to communicate with parents and professionals who work with children and youth.

It is the sense of the task force that only a small minority of parents and professionals working with children have an appreciation for the ubiquity of advertising that targets children and the potential impact it can exert on children and their families. Psychologists, in their varied roles as educators and practitioners, can perform a valuable service in helping parents and other professionals to appreciate these effects and provide them with strategies for combating the more pernicious effects of massive advertising that targets children. Psychologists who work with children in clinical settings, for example, might assess the *media diets* of children and discuss the implications with the children and, when appropriate, with their parents. In particular, psychologists who deliver media literacy training should assure that advertising issues are an integral part of such training.

Support Continuing Education

We recommend that APA support continuing professional education (CPE) programs for psychologists on media literacy, with particular attention paid to issues related to media advertising and marketing to children.

Many psychologists are uniquely positioned to help educate children, their families, and other professionals who work with children concerning the importance of recognizing and addressing the impact of advertising on the lives of children. Psychologists work in a variety of child-service settings—schools, clinics, hospitals—and are also sought out by community groups supporting children. Unfortunately, few psychologists are trained in media literacy skills and content, particularly with respect to advertising issues. APA should seek out psychologists who can provide such training and offer media-literacy-for-psychologists continuing professional education programs on a regular basis.

Weigh Professional Practices Associated With Advertising to Children

We recommend that APA undertake efforts to help psychologists weigh the potential ethical challenges involved in professional efforts to more effectively advertise to children, particularly those children who are too young to comprehend the persuasive intent of television commercials.

Along with the growth in marketing efforts directed toward youth has come an upsurge in the use of psychological knowledge and research to more effectively promote products to young children. Given the well-documented limitations in young children's capabilities to defend against commercial persuasion, such uses of psychological knowledge may raise important sensitivities. We believe it is necessary for psychologists who work in this area to be cautious in their efforts and to weigh the ethical challenges that may be involved.

As cognitively immature individuals, children have reduced capacity for autonomy and self-determination. Psychologists should recognize this limitation and its implications for advertising practices that might capitalize on children's inability to understand the persuasive intent of advertising. In addition, psychologists are charged with carefully considering the impact of their work on the welfare of the broader population, a principle known as beneficence. Psychologists whose work involves marketing to young children should be mindful of the relevance of these broad ethical principles. We urge APA to assist in this effort by engaging in educational activities to sensitize its members, as well as others whose work is applied to children's marketing and advertising efforts, to these issues.

IV. INDUSTRY PRACTICES

Encourage More Rigorous Industry Self-Regulation

We recommend that the Children's Advertising Review Unit (CARU) of the Council of Better Business Bureaus publicize its guidelines more widely so that parents and others can call to its attention deviations from the guidelines.

CARU has seven basic principles, including the responsibility of advertisers to "take into account the level of knowledge, sophistication, and maturity of the audience" and "to protect children from their own susceptibilities." These principles further state that "unreasonable expectations of product quality or performance should not be stimulated either directly or indirectly by advertising." CARU's guidelines include such admonitions as "advertisements should not convey the impression that possession of a product will result in more acceptance of a child by his or her peers," and "all information that requires disclosure for legal or other reasons should be in a language understandable by the child audience." We enthusiastically affirm and endorse these principles while recognizing that the modest level of staffing at CARU and the practice of reviewing ads on a complaint-only basis cannot realistically accomplish these goals industry wide. The above recommendation urges CARU to provide the publicity, the staffing, and the review practices necessary to achieve its stated principles and foster adherence to its guidelines.

V. MEDIA LITERACY

Develop Media Literacy Curricula

We recommend that psychologists take a central role in developing and implementing effective advertising media literacy curricula for all school grade levels from 3rd through 12th.

As advertisers and marketers have discovered all too well, the school classroom is a unique setting in which all children can be reached and targeted. Correspondingly, it is an important if not essential setting for educating children about advertising techniques, messages, and goals.

By creating units appropriate to each grade level from 3rd through 12th, schools can provide the tools children need to develop critical viewing skills, which might help them resist advertising's negative effects on them. Developmental, educational, and school psychologists have the expertise to take the lead and work closely with educators in developing curriculum units that might assist children in becoming more sophisticated consumers of advertising and marketing.

VI. ADVERTISING AND SCHOOLS

Restrict School-Based Advertising That Targets Young Children

We recommend that advertising in all forms should be restricted in school environments serving children 8 years old and under.

As we have already established, children below approximately 8 years of age typically lack the capability to recognize and defend effectively against commercial persuasion. Despite the fact that advertising is widespread in society, we must conclude, based upon the relevant psychological evidence, that it is unfair to direct commercial content specifically to children too young to recognize the persuasive intent of advertising and to filter its messages accordingly.

As schools face serious economic pressures and challenges, advertisers are increasingly offering resources to educators in return for access to school children as audiences for their commercial messages. While the funds derived from advertising may be put to good use, local decision makers often lack any broad-based understanding of the issues this report raises, which document young children's unique vulnerability to commercial persuasion. We believe the evidence in this realm makes clear the inappropriateness of directing advertising to this young age group. This recommendation, however, is not meant to imply that the task force finds school-based advertising targeting older children either acceptable, reasonable, or without concern. Unfortunately, the paucity of research in this area does not yet allow us to understand the potential consequences of the growing commercialization of the school environment, or permit us to make sound, empirically based recommendations at any broader level.

Conduct Research on Effects of School-Based Commercial Practices

We recommend that psychologists engage in research on the impact of advertising and commercialism in schools.

Our report documents that there is very little research exploring the effects of advertising when it occurs on school grounds. It is crucial that psychologists find the answers to a variety of questions, including how the potency of advertising changes when it occurs in schools, whether advertising in the classroom adversely affects the learning environment or distracts from student learning, whether the use of brand names in textbook examples and sponsored educational materials enhances or undermines educational lessons, whether apparel ads in schools intensify consumer pressures to the point that they contribute to interpersonal hostilities and even criminal theft, and whether pouring contracts and other arrangements with food and drink manufacturers undermine child health by changing attitudes toward proper nutrition. Given the pervasiveness of advertising in

schools and the well-documented findings of harmful effects of advertising outside of school, such research is sorely needed.

Advocate Professional Collaborations

We recommend that APA collaborate with other professional and educational organizations to raise public, professional, and political awareness with respect to the increased commercialization of schools.

The issue of commercialization of educational environments has already gained some measure of public attention. Citizen interest groups have formed in a variety of locations, and some groups have successfully curtailed the more extreme forms of commercialization that have developed. Professional and educational organizations, such as the American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Parent Teachers Association, are developing public information and advocacy programs around the commercialization of school environments. The task force believes that APA should join forces with these groups to support research needed to answer the many questions concerning the impact of these practices on educational processes and outcomes, to join them in educating the public regarding the need to examine these practices more seriously, and to collaborate in efforts to educate policymakers concerning the inherent unfairness in targeting advertising and marketing to the younger school audiences.