

Helping Your Child Make Sense of Advertising

“Advertising is the art of convincing people to spend money they don’t have for something they don’t need.”—Will Rogers, American humorist

Advertising is everywhere: on TV, on pop-up ads through the Internet, in magazines and newspapers, on billboards, in your mailbox—everywhere where someone hands you a flyer or sticks one around the handle of your front door. How do you help your child make sense of all these messages? Consider these ideas.

Try it...

For all parents

- Be aware that advertising is a powerful force. If you don’t help your child make sense of advertising, your child may be influenced in ways that you don’t value. As a parent, be a guide to help your child become aware of advertising and how it affects him.
- Talk about advertising and how you interpret it. When do you pay attention to it? When do you ignore it? Overall, are you happy that there are so many advertisements? Why or why not? Start discussions with your kids to learn what they think about advertising, and talk about your thoughts on the issue.
- Know how advertisers are influencing your kids. Half of all advertising for children and teens is for food—and 34 percent of all advertising targeted to young people is for candy and snacks. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation *Food for Thought* report, “Food marketing is a predominant part of the television advertising landscape for children and . . . exposure to such messages is substantial while their exposure to countervailing health messages on TV is minimal.” Of the 8,854 food ads reviewed by researchers of this report, none were for fruits or vegetables.
- Be clear about how you spend your money and why. Advertising influences our shopping choices, and advertising may lead to overspending if you’re not careful about your budget.

For parents with children ages birth to 5

- Keep young children away from advertising as much as possible. The American Psychological Association recommends that advertising targeted to children under the age of 8 should be restricted.
- Instead of letting young children watch TV, have them watch age-appropriate, pre-recorded movies and TV shows that you can rent for free from your local library or for a small fee from your local video rental store. If you record TV shows, skip through the commercials when your child watches the show. If you are watching a TV show live with your child, mute the channel during commercials and do jumping

jacks together.

- Make shopping lists before you go shopping. Talk about what you're going to buy and why. If your child sees something in the store that he or she saw advertised, say, "That's not on our list. We can think about it for another shopping trip, but we aren't buying that today." If your child continues bringing up the topic of that item, talk through why you think it's worth buying—or not.

For parents with children ages 6 - 9

- Occasionally watch TV (or sit with your child when he or she is online) and ask questions about the ads. Ask questions such as: What is the message of this ad? How does it make you feel? What is the advertiser *not* telling us? Point out how advertising often makes people feel that something is missing from their lives, like fun, relaxation, being loved, and so on.
- Say something when you see an offensive ad. Some ads are sexist or stereotypical. Some make outrageous claims (and then try to bury pertinent information in small print). Talk about this when you see it so your kids can learn that not all advertising is helpful.
- One day, do an advertising count. See how many ads you and your kids notice as you follow your daily routine. Keep a running total but also point out all the places where you may overlook advertising, such as hearing an announcement broadcast about a sale when you're at a store, or an ad that accompanies a bill or statement you get in the mail.

For parents with children ages 10 - 15

- Talk about how advertising appeals to our emotions. Kids at this age often worry about their appearance and how others treat them, so they're very susceptible to advertising that tries to alleviate their worries. With your kids, identify the emotions and the possible "cure-all" that the advertisement may be promoting.
- Encourage kids to slow down their spending. Advertising wants us to buy something right away. Have kids think about what they want to buy and why. Then have them wait a day or two (or longer if it's a large purchase) before spending the money. Talk about how much easier it is to spend money than to earn money.
- Have your kids explore PBS's "[Don't Buy It.](#)" Web site, which teaches them to become more media savvy about advertising.

For parents with children ages 16 - 18

- Tell your teenager about a time when you spent money because of an advertisement, and it turned out to be a bad investment. If you remember the emotion the advertisement was appealing to, point that out as well. We've all had times when we thought shopping would lift our spirits or a product would have some type of magical effect.
- Introduce your teenager to the publication *Consumer Reports*, which your local library should have. Start by opening up to the back and looking at the index of items. The November issue is generally a popular one with older teenagers since it usually explores the latest technological gadgets, such as cell phones, mp3 players, digital cameras, and so on. Find an item that your teenager is interested in and read the article together to find out what the scientists at *Consumer Reports* have to say. Or visit the [Consumer Reports Web site](#).

- Together look for spot product placement in video games, movies, TV shows, and on the Internet. It's not coincidence when a character wears a branded shirt or drinks a branded soft drink or uses a branded computer. Talk about what you see and how that character can influence how you feel about a product.
- The PBS show *Frontline* did a report on how advertising affects teenagers. Check out the results on the [PBS Web site](#).