

The Children's Advertising Review Unit Presents:

A Parent's Guide to Advertising and Your Child



Produced in
collaboration with the
Toy Industry Association



A WORD TO PARENTS

Advertising is all around us. We know that advertising can tell us useful information about available products and services, and can help make sure prices remain competitive. But it's important for consumers, especially our youngest consumers, to understand the principles of advertising.

This Guide was created by experts at The Children's Advertising Review Unit (CARU), in collaboration with the Toy Industry Association, to help parents talk with their children about advertising: how to recognize an ad and understand what it says about a product. CARU is an investigative unit of the Advertising Self-Regulatory Council and administered by the Council of Better Business Bureaus.

If you're not already talking to your children about what they read and watch—or where they play and how they interact online—now is the time to start.

HELPING YOUR CHILD THINK ABOUT ADVERTISING

Advertising is usually a child's first introduction to being a consumer. Ads provide great information about products and help raise awareness of available choices, but it may be difficult for some children, especially younger children, to tell the difference between an ad and the other information around it.

The best way for parents and other adults to teach children about advertising is to experience it with them. Spend time together looking at magazines, watching television, playing online, and walking through a store ... and then talk with your children about what you've all seen.

ACTIVITIES

- **Watch a fun cartoon (but don't skip over the commercials)**
- **Read a children's magazine**
- **Play an online game**
- **Scan the text on snack packages**

The more parents put themselves into the world their children live in—what they watch and what they play with—the better they can teach their children about marketing messages and how to evaluate them.

HOW TO START: WHAT IS ADVERTISING?

While advertising can appear in different places, its purpose is always the same: to show or describe something in an appealing way, in the hopes that you'll buy the product, use the service or attend the event.

Because ads are usually short “bursts” of information, they may not always provide all the details that a consumer needs to make a smart choice. Help your child understand that consumers often need additional information before they can make an informed decision.

Examples are always helpful. Watch some online or TV commercials and find a few magazine ads with your children, and then talk about what you see.

- **What product is this ad for?**
- **How does this ad make you feel about the product?**
- **What information does this ad give about the product?**
- **What questions should you ask before buying the product?**



What is Advertising?

Advertising is a form of communication that promotes something—often a product or service that's being sold.

The best way for parents to teach children is to lead by example. Involve your children in family purchasing decisions, and show them how you weigh the pros and cons of particular products and brands.

HELPFUL TIPS

- Explain to your children that whether it's online, in print or on television, advertising turns a product into a "star." It dresses up the product, puts make-up on it and shines bright lights on it, all so that shoppers want to buy it.
- Ask your children if they have ever seen online banners that blink or are brightly colored, and point out that it's not a coincidence. Explain that just as someone wearing a brightly colored shirt is easier to spot in a crowd, advertising uses colors, sounds, and other methods to catch your attention.



TYPES OF ADVERTISING

Advertising is all around us, from food packaging to TV programs to online websites. Because it can appear in so many different forms, it can be difficult for children to recognize when something is in fact an ad. The following are some of the most common types of advertising:

TELEVISION

TV is one of the main ways that companies advertise to children. It's no surprise, then, that TV commercials are often children's first experience with advertising. To help children distinguish between a program and a commercial, stations will often announce programming breaks, i.e., "After these messages we'll be right back."

PRINT

Children’s magazines are filled with ads for video games, toys, movies, cereals, snacks—the list goes on. To help your child learn to tell the difference between ads and articles, encourage them to think about the following questions:

- **Are advertisements labeled?**
- **Does this page tell you about a product?**
- **Is this page different in style and content from the rest of the magazine?**



ONLINE ADVERTISING

The Internet is an interactive space. While on the web, children can play online games, chat with friends, enter a contest, etc. It stands to reason, then, that online advertising is also interactive.

Banner ads are displayed on some of children’s favorite web pages, and can feature text, animated images, audio and video. Pop-up ads, which appear when you open a new browser window, are designed to drive traffic to certain websites or capture your email address. Bloggers—including children—may share their views on activities and products.

Spend some time with your children online. What sites do they visit? What activities do they take part in? Are these sites appropriate for your child’s level of development? Do bloggers disclose if they get paid for talking about products?



ONLINE PRIVACY

Online marketers may collect your child's information, like a username and password, an e-mail address or a parent's e-mail address. While there can be legitimate reasons why providing that information would be necessary to allow a child to interact with the site, children should let you know about their online activities and get your permission before they share information online. Website operators are not allowed to collect personal information from your children without first obtaining your permission.

Tell your children to ask you before they share personal information online. Once that information is on the web, you may not be able to control who sees it and how they use it. Your children should always tell you the types of information they are asked to share or want to share online.

You may have heard about "online behavioral advertising" and "digital footprints." Online behavioral advertising, also known as interest-based advertising, collects information from many of the websites that you visit in order to predict your preferences. That information is then used to show you ads that are most likely to be of interest to you.

A digital footprint is a record of everywhere you go online ... including the web pages you view, the sites you shop on, the chat rooms you visit, the emails you write and the blogs you read. All of this information can be combined to create a digital profile of you and your behavior. Marketers may be able to see this profile and use your information to help make your experience better, but data may also be used in ways that your child may not understand.

To learn more about online behavioral advertising you can consult the following sources:

- **Digital Advertising Alliance’s consumer guide at www.aboutads.info/consumers.**
- **NBC’s digital e-book, *Growing Up Online*, available for free on iTunes.**
- **The Federal Trade Commission’s *NetCetera Guide*, available at www.ftc.gov/news-events/audio-video/video/net-cetera-chatting-kids-about-being-online.**

PRODUCT PACKAGING

The words and pictures on food, toy and other product packaging may also constitute advertising. Packages often contain games, ads for sweepstakes, and “premiums,” which are free products that come with your purchase. For example, a whistle that comes in a box of cereal is called a premium.

Premiums can seem like prizes, since they’re often only found in specially marked packages and available for a limited time. Premiums can encourage people to buy a product because they get something extra ... but because children are sometimes more excited about the premium than the primary product, they might be confused about which is the main purchase.

MOBILE MARKETING

Mobile phones are yet another vehicle for advertisers who are marketing to children. Forty-nine percent of children (1st-4th grade) have regular access to a cell phone.

Digital features like wallpaper options and ringtones that promote a brand are some of the types of mobile advertising your children could encounter. They might see ads for these features in text messages, on websites and in TV commercials, and might be asked to text in a code to buy the feature. Occasionally, these ads fail to mention that you’ll be charged daily or monthly fees for these features.

To learn about your parental control options, including placing limits on your children’s text messages and downloads, check with your wireless provider.

¹ Digital Advertising Alliance, *Consumers, Understanding Online Advertising, What is online behavioral advertising?* <http://www.aboutads.info/consumers#oba>

APPS

Apps are becoming more and more popular with children these days. Apps—short for “applications”—are downloaded software that can run on your computer, smartphone, tablet or other electronic device. There are apps for just about anything ... from looking up the local weather to playing games and shopping online.

So what should you be mindful of when dealing with apps?

- **Apps might collect and share personal information about your child.**
- **Apps may include ads that aren’t labeled.**
- **Apps that are free to download could include paid features. Children may not understand that they might have to spend real money on other apps or game features because the app is labeled as free to download.**

Talk to your children about what apps they download, and make sure that they check with you before buying anything, even if the cost is small, because costs can mount up. Remember to explain that if they use an app to share photos of themselves or personal information, they will need to tell you and get your permission.

Parents should also read an app’s privacy policy and terms of use. To learn how to restrict app purchases on your children’s devices, check with the phone manufacturer or your wireless carrier.





PRODUCT PLACEMENT

When your children watch a movie, they may see a character sipping a particular soft drink or eating a specific brand of snack food. They may not realize it, but if the company paid to have its products featured in movies, this is a type of advertising known as product placement. Since products are sometimes featured due to the editorial judgment of the director and producers, and sometimes they are featured because of payment, it's important to talk to children about what they see.

HELPFUL TIPS

- **Make a game out of keeping track of products placed in movies and TV shows. What products pop up most often?**
- **Ask your children: Do they crave certain products after they've seen their favorite actor use them?**

PUFFERY

Puffery is when advertisers use exaggeration to hype a product—for example, “These chocolate chip cookies will bring you back to the best moment in your life.” Most adults understand that this is an unrealistic promise, but children may not always understand the difference between truth and hyperbole.

SWEEPSTAKES

Sweepstakes are extremely popular with children, but children may not fully understand their chances of winning.

HELPFUL TIPS

If your child wants to enter an online sweepstakes, visit the website together. In the official rules and on the entry form, look for disclosures regarding the number of available prizes, the chances of winning, and the free means of entry. Explain the chances of winning to your child in terms they'd understand. A helpful exercise is to find a large tiled floor. Ask your child to stand on one tile. Explain that the thousands of other tiles represent all the people trying to win the prize, and that the single tile is your kid's chance of winning.

(OTHER EXAMPLES: Select a single kernel from a big tub of popcorn at the movie theatre ... choose one car from a crowded parking lot at a shopping mall ... pick one toy building brick from a huge pile of bricks ... etc.)

FOOD MARKETING

As a parent, your child's health is your paramount concern.

Teaching your children about nutrition, portion size and an active lifestyle are good steps to promoting your child's health. Helping your child learn to evaluate food advertising is another step forward.



Watch some commercials for food products with your child, and then talk about some of the following issues:

- **Is the advertised food part of a healthy diet?**
- **What are the portion sizes of the product featured in the commercial?**
- **Does the commercial encourage a healthy lifestyle?**
- **Does the commercial show the food as part of a nutritious meal?**
- **Are snacks advertised as a substitute for a meal?**
- **If the commercial shows a “premium” or prize (discussed more on page 4), does the ad make it clear that the food, not the prize, is the main purchase?**

MAKING IT REAL FOR YOUR CHILD

When you were a kid, you probably saw an ad for a new product and got really excited about buying it ... only to find that it didn't quite live up to your expectations.

As a parent, it's important to teach your children to

consider advertising with a discerning, questioning eye. Educators say that one of the best ways to teach children is to get them engaged ... so to help develop those critical thinking skills, try some of the following activities with your children.

JUNIOR AD AGENCY

Once your children understand how advertisements work, ask them to create their own ads for different products, like a cereal, bicycle, doll, etc. Then talk about what they came up with and why.

- **What aspects of the product did they highlight and why?**
- **Did they use facts or opinions in the ads?**
- **Did they incorporate fantasy into their ads? Why or why not?**

ANALYZING A CHILDREN'S COMMERCIAL

Together with your children, watch some children's commercials on TV. After each one, do a "reality check" with the children to help them distinguish reality from fantasy.

For example, let's say you and your child see a TV commercial for a line of dolls called "The Garden Girls." The commercial shows six dolls with matching accessories and a play set. The dolls seem to wink and dance on their own and wear winged costumes that appear to glow.

- **Can the doll really move on its own, unassisted by a child?**
 - **Do the dolls really light up?**
 - **What accessories come with the doll?**
 - **Are batteries included?**
 - **Does the TV commercial include disclosures like "accessories sold separately" or "batteries not included"?**
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CLOSING

As technology evolves, there is no doubt that advertising will evolve, too. Who knows what kind of new advertising you and your children will see in the years to come. But whatever the future has in store, your children will always need your guidance and wisdom to become savvy consumers.

ABOUT CARU



CARU is an investigative unit of the advertising industry's system of self-regulation and is administered by the Council of Better Business Bureaus. CARU was created in 1974 to make sure that marketing messages directed toward children are truthful, accurate and depict safe use. CARU monitors thousands of television advertisements and patrols the Internet for compliance with CARU's "Self-Regulatory Program for Children's Advertising." When ads appear to be noncompliant with CARU's guidelines, CARU opens cases and works with advertisers to modify advertising messages. To learn more about CARU, for a copy of its guidelines, or to place a consumer complaint relating to an advertisement, please visit www.asrcreviews.org.

ABOUT TIA



The Toy Industry Association™, Inc. (TIA) is the not-for-profit North American trade association representing all businesses involved in creating and delivering toys and youth entertainment products for children of all ages. Established in 1916, today TIA consists of more than 750 member companies who account for about 90% of domestic toy sales. Safety is the toy industry's top priority. TIA helped develop the first comprehensive toy safety standard more than 35 years ago, and continues to work year-round with government agencies, members of the industry and consumers on ongoing programs to ensure fun, safe play, and to protect the privacy and special vulnerabilities of children in the face of traditional and digital media.