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Shaping Future Generations:  
The Controversy Surrounding Children's Advertising

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Abstract

Due to the extent and variety of research available on the topic of child-targeted advertising, it was determined that an appraisal of the current state of the situation was necessary in order to determine the best course of action. After summarizing the history of children's advertising and considering the arguments on both sides of the debate – from the children's advocates and the advertising industry – the previously recommended solutions were evaluated in the paper. Each of these possible solutions were considered, and led to the proposal of a best solution. Supported by research, the best solution advocated a joint effort between the children's advocates, parents and the advertising industry that emphasized education over government restriction.

## Shaping Future Generations: The Controversy Surrounding Children's Advertising

Children are being manipulated. Before they have a chance to form their own value systems, children are being shaped by images and messages over which their parents have little control. Billions of dollars are being spent because a child has believed these messages. Advertising to children has been a topic of debate for decades. The advertisers argue that their television commercials and print advertisements are a part of everyday life that has little effect over the child other than to encourage him or her to purchase a specific product. After all, advertising delivers information, the advertisers argue. Critics question whether the effect is really so insignificant. As children between the ages of two and twelve spend greater amounts of time in front of the television, surfing the internet, and attending movies, they are subjected to a high amount of advertising, all attempting to persuade the child to demand the product featured. The present situation increases the need to understand what effect visual advertising has on young children, whether it is positive or negative. Many studies that focus on the relationship between children and the media have come to similar conclusions: that a child's behavior is changed as a result of advertising (Fox 61). In the face of increasing pressure from both the advertising industry and children's advocates, the suggestion has been made to increase government regulation or to ban advertising to children under a certain age. However, increasing government control and restricting an advertiser's right to free speech do not provide the answer to the controversy surrounding child-targeted advertising. Instead, a balanced approach, considering the concerns of all parties involved, is necessary.

## History of Children's Advertising

Advertising to children is controversial in part due to its scale. An industry this large cannot continue to exert influence over naïve individuals without careful guidelines and policies. At the same time, an industry this large is important to the economy and cannot be expunged without consequence. In order to present a clear analysis of the issues involved in advertising to children, a brief history of child-targeted advertising will be covered. From there, the current research on both sides of the issue will be examined in an effort to identify a solution that will satisfy children's advocates and the advertising industry without adversely affecting the economy or future generations. Though controversy surrounds this topic, there is no reason to ignore a practice that research shows is detrimental to a healthy childhood despite the status of advertising as a billion dollar industry. A solution must be found.

The concept of advertising has existed since long before the advent of television and the internet. Print advertising, it could be argued, began as early as the invention of the printing press in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when businesspeople suddenly had the ability to print large quantities of flyers and posters informing the masses of services or products available. Centuries later, similar printed flyers and posters were used to attract Europeans to voyage to the colonies and begin a new life in the Americas. Historian Sivulka noted that "the promoters spun fanciful tales that often tapped into the hopes and dreams of their listeners, but their stories were often far from reality" (7). While this may not have been the first incidence of deceitful maneuvers of the advertiser, it was a symbolic indication of the advertising practices to come.

In America, the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the beginnings of industrialization, and increasing consumer demand. As mentioned in the book *Advertising Progress*, the increase of new businesses led to innovative advertising strategies and the creation of “advertising specialists,” as well as the corporation’s growing reliance on the advertising trade which was focused almost solely on newspapers (Laird). The first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century introduced America to many new concepts and technologies including radio broadcasts, and movies—with sound! Radio introduced the idea of “programming” to the American public. First aimed at housewives, soap operas had corporate sponsors. This led to broader programming, including many shows aimed at children. Sivulka noted that corporations such as Ovaltine and Wheaties sponsored children’s radio shows and would often offer incentives to their audience. He recorded, “by redeeming box tops and cash, young fans could receive such prizes as a whistling ring, a hike-o-meter, a mug, or a secret decoder that deciphered the daily clues given at the end of the broadcast” (222). While the radio and other inventions of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century had an impressive impact on the public, they paled in comparison to the pastime – television – that occupied the latter half of the century.

Television began experimentally in the years before World War II, but did not become a nationwide obsession until the years after the war had ended. In 1950 alone, seven-and-a-half million television sets were sold to consumers; this number doubled in 1971 with the availability of new color sets (Rice 100). As adults and children in America tuned in more frequently, there was a call for the regulation of this new phenomenon. A dissertation presented by a Harvard student in 1950 noted that

With television, the process of innovation has proceeded under private auspices and has been undertaken for purposes of commercial exploitation, but regulatory activities have entered directly into the process, exerting an intimate influence upon it and regulatory decisions have had to be made with reference to its future social effects. (Stern 1)

Even in its infancy, television was acknowledged to have wide-ranging social effects, as well as a largely unexplored opportunity for profit. Tapping into this industry's potential, advertising took on a whole new dimension with the extreme popularity of the newest visual medium.

New guidelines and regulation meant stricter control governing the commercials aimed at children. Since 1952, the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) has adhered to its own Television Code (Dessart). The Code specifies several guidelines regarding children's advertising. The book *Creating Effective TV Commercials* quotes from the code that "advertising 'shall avoid using exhortative language' ... 'appeals shall not be used which...contend that if children have a product they are better than their peers or lacking it will not be accepted by their peers'" (Baldwin 167). The code's effects can still be heard today, as the well known phrase "batteries not included" has been utilized in children's commercials as a result of the code laid down by the NAB (Baldwin 167). While child psychologists were already concerned with the effects of advertising to children, the advertisers had yet to tap into the enormous market that children and pre-teens offered.

The baby boomers, themselves an important demographic to the advertising industry, began to have children in the 1970s and 1980s. By the mid 1980s, the baby

boomers' children presented an irresistible opportunity to marketers. Professor Joseph Turow noted in his book *Breaking Up America*:

What was unusual in the '80s, marketers felt, was how powerful children and teens had become as primary consumers and influence makers. The reason was not just that boomers, who had tended to be late in getting married in the '70s, were finally beginning to procreate in numbers that mattered to marketers...teens and children older than five years had more primary buying autonomy than ever...Moreover, the amount they were said to spend directly was impressive...In 1995, kids between six and twelve years old were projected to have direct disposable income of \$7.5 billion. (71-72)

Almost 8 billion dollars is a significant amount of money, and demonstrates that during the 1980s and into the 1990s, children enjoyed more buying power—and influence on the economy—than ever before in U.S. history.

#### The Concerns of Child Advocates

As the advertising industry became more invested in their marketing efforts toward children, child psychologists and parents became more interested in the potential effects that advertising could have on a child. The findings of the many different studies that have researched the effects of advertising on children generally come to similar conclusions, that advertising can be detrimental to young children. The most frequently cited evidence includes a child's susceptibility to influence from outside sources (such as television or other visual advertising), a child's trusting disposition and lack of discernment, and a child's fragile value system and lack of ability to analyze messages.

The evidence found by children's advocates is persuasive, and should be given considerable weight in the quest to find a solution to the advertising dilemma.

According to child psychologists and advertising researchers, children have parents because they are too young and inexperienced to make decisions regarding themselves and their future. If children had fully developed judgment systems in place, they would be functional, independent persons living on their own and making decisions about their well-being. However, children are not fully matured. They rely on guidance from the authority figures in their lives to inform them of what is best. When that authority figure is a trusted parent or relative, the child will benefit. When the sole authority figure is the television screen or computer monitor, the child's judgment could be compromised. Today, children are being flooded with messages that tell them about the newest and greatest product that will improve their lives in a dramatic way. They have not *learned* to be critical of advertising, and therefore, they have a tendency to trust whatever message the advertiser presents.

Recent studies have concluded that children inherently trust messages from people in authoritative roles (Wright 51). The findings of a study that investigated the impact of advertising on children were reported in the book *Harvesting Minds: How TV Commercials Control Kids*. The author, Fox, discovered that "kids in this study consistently judged commercials in positive, benign ways...students seldom criticized the ads" (61). In the course of the study, Fox made an interesting discovery when young participants evaluated an advertisement for Pepsi that was filmed in the style of a public service announcement. When the students were asked whether the commercial was attempting to persuade the viewer to purchase and drink Pepsi, the students said "no"

(61). Instead, the students had formed a positive view about the Pepsi Corporation due to this commercial, because the students felt that Pepsi was taking an interest in the issues that faced teenagers at that time. This positive reaction was exactly what Pepsi was attempting to generate. The commercial was successful because very few students questioned the Pepsi Corporation's motives. When children do not realize that they are being persuaded to make a certain choice, it could be argued that they are being manipulated. Children should have the opportunity to learn about advertising in a neutral environment, before they are exposed to potentially harmful messages.

The idea that advertising to children could be harmful is not a recent theory. As far back as the 1970s, when television was still gaining popularity, child development researchers questioned the effect that advertising could have on children. Many studies were conducted in an effort to discern whether the effect was positive or negative, and different results were obtained. In a study conducted by Palmer and McDowell, the results of which were referenced in the book, *Advertising to Children on TV*, researchers discovered that young children had a hard time differentiating advertising segments and the actual TV program (Gunter, Oates, and Blades 34). Specifically, this study noted that “[t]he children managed to identify only half the commercials and three quarters of the programs” (34). Given this situation, children may perceive the advertisers' message as fact, since the television program they are watching is also taken as fact. Other studies mentioned in *Advertising to Children on TV* found that children *were* able to distinguish between a program and a commercial the majority of the time. Despite these findings, the subjects were unable to communicate what differentiated a program from a commercial (34). Though the results seem to provide less than concrete proof, it still

could be argued that even if children know that what they are watching is a commercial, they do not understand what makes a commercial different. When children do not understand that the commercial or television show they are watching is attempting to sell them a new product, the advertisers are taking advantage of their naivety.

According to those arguing against advertising to young children, the greatest evidence against the practice is the way advertising can contribute to a change in behavior in two different ways. The first is intentional – persuade the child to purchase the intended product or brand. Advertising can also cause a child to change his or her behavior in an unintentional way. These unintentional messages could include beliefs about nutrition, smoking, under-age drinking, and self-image. While a commercial could be advertising a type of fast-food menu item, the visual on television shows an attractive group of friends ordering the item and enjoying time together. The intentional message is that this menu item is desirable and should be purchased. The unintentional message could be that if a child follows the lifestyle outlined in the commercial, by ordering the menu item, that child will be popular, attractive, and have fun spending time with friends.

Children are also frequently exposed to advertising intended for a general audience that could unintentionally change their behavior. Alcohol and tobacco companies often sponsor events in exchange for advertising placement. Even though the advertisements do not specifically target children, the advertisement is still seen by many people under the age of twelve. Parents of young children should also realize that not all advertising exists in a traditional, 30-second commercial format. Many popular movies and television shows are using product placement as a way to generate additional revenue. In popular movies and television shows, actors are often portrayed enjoying a

brand of tobacco or alcohol. These actions blur the line between advertising and entertainment even further. When children see a role model indulging in these carefully placed products, they may want to emulate the person. Stereotypical gender roles have also been advanced through advertising. Throughout the past decades, researchers have found that “men tend to outnumber women in televised advertising, especially in relation to authority roles speaking on behalf of a product” (Gunter, Oates, and Blades 130). While this tendency could teach children that men are the traditional authority figures and should be trusted, a more disquieting statistic exists in the portrayal of women. Wright says that “[i]n the 1970s, women were depicted disproportionately in domestic roles compared to men in advertisements” (130). While this trend has since become more balanced, the portrayal demonstrates that advertising can reflect undesirable social patterns that are being passed on to children as normal behavior. Continual exposure to these messages will undoubtedly influence the daily choices children make not only about their product purchases, but about their direction in life.

Children between the ages of two and twelve have not yet formed value systems that allow them to discern between a worthwhile message and a message that contains false information. When an advertiser with significant monetary resources chooses to market to a child utilizing the message that a certain brand of snack food will improve his or her daily life, that child is being taught that happiness is found through the purchase of a product. Most commercials running on television and published online send the message that their products will improve the consumer's life. Adults, having been educated about the advertiser's motives, have a greater ability to listen to the advertisement, consider the message, and decide whether the product is worth

investigating. Unlike adults, children do not have the capacity to filter the advertising they consume. Advertisers' advocates argue that parents will instill value systems in their children in an effort to combat the effects of commercial advertising. However, according to author George R. Wright, this counterbalance has been disrupted in recent years. Wright says that "even if parents disapprove of the implicit messages of television advertising for children, they have many fewer hours than they once did to counteract this greater volume of more sophisticated commercial messages" (158). As a parent's influence has decreased, the advertiser's influence has increased dramatically. For today's generation of young children, this lack of balance could lead to a world in which people expect material goods to fulfill them and to provide happiness.

When advertisers are given an opportunity to shape the values held by children, they teach children to desire a materialistic lifestyle. Typical commercials airing on channels that cater specifically to children include advertisements for fast food, expensive toys, movies, video games, and internet websites. Each of these advertisements is aired with the intent to persuade the child. Many of these advertisements succeed. As children watch more advertising, they will desire the lifestyle that is demonstrated within the advertisement itself. According to Wright, many advertisements encourage consumers to embrace a greed-consumed lifestyle (51). While investigating the factors that motivate a consumer to act on an advertiser's message, authors Gunter, Oates, and Blades found that "advertisements are watched to learn what products to buy to make a good impression on others" (97). Parents allow their children to become materialistic when they give in to their children's demands for the latest toy or snack food. In this way, marketers are able to persuade a parent to buy sugary breakfast cereal and junk food snacks through a third

party – his or her child. When the so-called pestering factor is used by the advertising industry, children become demanding, materialistic consumers who are not thinking for themselves. Instead of learning that hard-earned money should be spent wisely on intelligent purchases, children are learning that money is for buying products that bring happiness. Responsible parents, guardians and teachers should educate their children about the motives of advertisers before another generation of children succumbs to materialism.

Advertising will continue to shape the minds of American children unless concerned adults decide to control and monitor the influx of messages. Since advertisers are understandably unwilling to stop the production of persuasive material in order to keep their business profitable, then other adults must step in to exert a balancing influence on their children's behavior. Until recently, many people were unaware that a problem existed. When researchers began to investigate the quantity of advertising consumed by children, the results were startling. In a study conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, it was discovered that the majority of snack food companies that already advertise to children on television have launched websites to increase their market reach, and encourage children to spend a longer period of time subjected to the brand's messages ("Kaiser" 186). Many parents may be aware that their children are playing games online; however, many may not realize that the games their children play regularly are filled with advertising. Additionally, the marketer's reach does not end with one child. The Kaiser Family Foundation found that "[a]lmost two-thirds of sites in the study use viral marketing, in which children are encouraged to send emails to their friends about a product, or invite them to visit the company's website" (186). This trend

indicates that advertisers are now using children to promote their message. While a child may believe that he or she is simply sending a birthday email to a friend, in reality, the child is sending advertising for a brand. As free citizens, Americans have the right to make daily choices that will affect the outcome of their lives. However, when children do not understand the consequences of their choices, they are unable to make an informed decision. Children need to be educated about the intent and motivations of advertisers.

### The Concerns of the Advertising Industry

Taking into consideration all the research and studies done by psychologists and children's advocates over the years, it is clear that advertising is not necessarily a positive influence on developing minds. However, there is little evidence that advertisers are to be held solely responsible for the effects. Aside from the fact that the detrimental effects of television are not consistently linked to *advertising*, the advertising industry makes the argument that they have a right to freedom of speech and press according to the First Amendment. At advertising's most innocent, the commercials on television and banner ads on the internet serve to provide information about available products. Advertisers argue that censorship should not be allowed, even in the midst of the controversy that inevitably surrounds child-targeted advertising.

Advertising provides *information*. According to an article published on the Association of National Advertisers website:

As they annually spend some \$6 trillion on various goods and services, American consumers rely heavily on advertising. Why? Because advertising provides them with useful information about features and benefits; alerts them to product availability and purchase locations; helps

them differentiate among competitive choices; advises them of pricing information and promotional opportunities; and – ultimately – saves them money by encouraging competition that exerts downward pricing pressures. In addition, advertising strengthens consumer confidence, contributes to higher levels of productivity, creates job opportunities and helps raise personal incomes throughout our society. (“The Role of Advertising”)

These are lofty goals for an oft-maligned practice. In short, however, these qualities (including competition and freedom of information) are all strengths of the capitalist system. Whereas historically socialist nations such as Sweden have taken steps to ban all advertising, the U.S. recognizes the need for advertising to fund programming. As Sweden pushes the rest of Europe to adopt its strict anti-advertising measures, American companies are watching carefully. Cindy Rose, Walt Disney lobbyist, was quoted in the *Wall Street Journal*, saying “A ban on children’s advertising would be catastrophic for Europe’s television production community...They rely on advertising revenues to fund high-quality children’s programming” (Mitchener). Advertising is important to the U.S. economy. Rather than attempt to ban it in an effort to follow Sweden, concerned advocates should recognize the potential value of advertising as a vehicle for information, and perhaps add their own knowledge to the mix by assisting organizations such as the Children’s Advertising Review Unit (CARU) in an attempt to create positive commercials with little detrimental effect on American children.

While children may have difficulty discerning the difference between program content and the advertising that occurs between program segments, this does not mean

that all advertising should be outlawed. In fact, the results of a study were reported in a paper, "Effects of Television Advertising on Children and Adolescents," indicating that children did not pay as much attention to commercials in comparison to the program. The author noted that "across all product categories, times of viewing, number of companions, and so on, all children exhibited a drop in attention during commercial exposure from attention to prior programming" (Ward 303). The study also reported that this drop in attention became larger and larger in proportion to the audience's age. For children aged 5-7, the drop in attention was relatively small. By the time children were ages 11-12, the drop was significantly higher. This change could indicate that as children gained more education and knowledge about the nature of advertising, they were less likely to pay attention to the advertisements, and therefore, less likely to be influenced. Rather than focus on banning advertisements that could serve as information about certain products, children should be educated at a younger age about the motives behind the advertising so as to understand the value of advertising without being misled.

#### Investigating Possible Solutions

In this ongoing debate surrounding children's advertising, the many involved groups, including parents, businesses, the government, the advertising industry and the children themselves, have a specific motivation for finding a solution. The parents, acting on behalf of their children, want to see what is best and healthiest for the future generation without allowing them to be targeted unknowingly. Businesses, and the advertising agencies they hire, need to be able to profit, since the United States is, after all, a capitalist society. In the midst of so many different positions, several solutions are available. The most popular theories seem to advocate government limitation, the

creation of watchdog organizations, and the call for a ban on all advertising that targets children under a specific age. Each solution has its positive and negative aspects.

Since advertising to children is a multi-billion dollar industry, and therefore has a significant effect on the nation's economy, it has been suggested that the government needs to address what could become a growing problem. Instead of assuming that the advertising industry's current policy of self-checking is effective, children's advocates argue, the government should be regulating advertising that targets children. This topic has become especially divisive in the face of growing childhood obesity rates. According to a report quoted in *USA Today*, approximately "17% of U.S. kids are obese, [which is] more than triple the rate in 1970" (Elias 09D). With American waistlines expanding at such a rapid pace, government agencies were called on to establish new standards to prevent childhood obesity.

As a result of the growing demand by the public for a solution to the childhood obesity epidemic, the Federal Trade Commission partnered with the American Medical Association in an effort to research strategies that would slow down obesity rates. Due to their findings, the FTC recommended "an hour of physical activity a day, along with limits on sweetened beverages, computer and TV time, and fast food meals" (Elias 09D). Government intervention on this matter included an announcement by the Federal Trade Commission demanding that forty-four businesses report on their marketing efforts toward children. The orders were issued to companies that were clearly marketing unhealthy fare, such as The Coca-Cola Company and McDonalds, as well as companies that may have appeared to market child-friendly items, including the California Milk Advisory Board and the Fresh Del Monte Produce Corporation. The actions taken by the

FTC inspired quite a reaction from both the public and the subpoenaed companies. In August 2007, an article in *Brandweek* reported that “11 of the nation’s biggest food and drink companies (Coca-Cola, Hershey, McDonald’s General Mills, Campbell Soup, Pepsico, Kellogg, Kraft Foods, Cadbury Schweppes, Mars and Unilever) vowed to limit advertising to children 11-and-under” as a result of the FTC (Hein 4). Of those 11 companies, nine were in the top 10 brands marketing to young children.

The seeming success of this move by the FTC may cause the public to argue that government intervention is the only way that the advertising industry will stop using harmful advertisements in an effort to coerce young children into buying a product. However, is the root cause of childhood obesity really food advertising? Does advertising alone cause children to purchase and consume vast amounts of fatty, calorie-laden food, or are there other contributing factors? It would seem that the very fact that children have so much control over their personal food consumption could be contributing to higher obesity rates. While advertising may be teetering on the edge of appropriateness in relation to targeting children, the industry has never taken away a child’s or parent’s right to free choice. While guidelines should be in place to prevent overly exploitative advertising content on television, in video games and especially online, too much government limitation is a slippery slope. In light of the facts (or lack thereof), parents, advocates and the government should consider whether or not censorship – as excessive regulation could be called is the best solution. There are weaknesses in any theory advocating strict government limitations.

As the impact of advertising gains greater recognition, many people are showing concern over the quantity and quality of advertising that is being shown to children. In

an effort to combat the negative effect of advertising, several advertising industry associations created the Children's Advertising Review Unit (CARU). CARU "analyzes 1,000 TV commercials, 250 magazine ads and countless web sites each month" (Mayer F01). When analyzing these advertisements, the review unit watches for messages or images that could be deceitful, misleading, or harmful to a child. While this unit may placate critics of children's advertising, it is important to note that this unit is composed of advertising professionals who work in the industry, rather than people from outside the realm of advertising. If advertising is to be monitored effectively, it must be watched by people who are not biased in favor of the advertising. A review board that is comprised of members from various industries and differing interests is needed to control the influence of children's advertising. Additionally, journalist Caroline Mayer reported that CARU currently polices advertising on television and in print, but has no capacity to investigate new, alternative advertising mediums (Mayer F01). With the advent of the internet, and the creation of many websites featuring child-friendly content such as games and pop culture icons alongside interactive advertising, one unit that analyzes fewer than 2,000 advertisements a month cannot begin to have a changing effect on the current state of the industry.

Though the middle ground calls for some government regulation or strict watchdog organizations, some extremists support a ban on all advertising to children under a certain age. In the United Kingdom, a "ban on advertisements for junk food during television programmes [sic] aimed at children under 16 is already in force" ("Online junk food"). In Canada, the province of Quebec "has banned print and broadcast advertising aimed at kids under thirteen" and "Sweden has banned

advertisements aimed at children under 12" ("Special Issues"). In the United States, the Federal Trade Commission called for a ban in the 1970s. Among the recommendations made by the FTC were "a ban on ads aimed at young children, limits on commercials for sugary foods aimed at older children, and that advertisers of sugary foods fund nutrition and other health messages to balance their advertisements" (Wootan 2). In the end, the companies to be restricted by such rules were able to overturn the FTC's ban when Congress passed "a law to withdraw the FTC's authority to issue industry-wide regulations to stop unfair advertising practices aimed at children" (Wootan 2). Today, the idea of a ban is still promoted as a possible solution. The article "Globalization and the Commercialization of Childhood" by Dr. Allen Kanner made the following recommendation:

It is time ... to promote a worldwide ban on marketing to children. This ban would protect children from the commercialization of childhood, which not only commodifies the process of growing up, but also emotionally bonds children to the corporate monoculture. Our children deserve a commercial-free childhood, one in which they are free to play, free to determine for themselves what is cool, and free to work things out with their parents and society – without being hounded every step of the way by mighty corporations. (51)

Many charged words were used in that statement, with the overall idea being that "mighty corporations" were responsible for the demise of a free childhood. However, it is reasonable to ask whether children who are *not* subjected to commercials will still be "free to determine for themselves what is cool" because any school-aged child will attest

to the fact that “cool” is a corporate concept which is determined by the majority, not the individual. A ban on commercials will do nothing to change that concept. Kanner argued that without commercials, children will be “free to work things out with their parents and society,” but America is a *capitalist society*. Part of life in a capitalist society is an education about the workings of profit and business, along with sales and advertising. Children deserve to learn about these facts of life, under careful guidance from their parents and caretakers. Censorship can never be the answer.

America has prided itself on its commitment to freedom and denouncement of censorship. When the Federal Trade Commission attempted to ban all advertising to young children over thirty years ago, it presumably failed because the American government cannot and should not restrict private business in such a manner. Now that the childhood obesity rates are causing the public to reevaluate the advertising industry's freedom to target children, the discussion on advertising bans has once again been brought to the forefront. In an interview published in *Advertising Age*, the Federal Trade Commission Chairman Deborah Platt Majoras was asked whether or not the FTC was considering a ban, she said, “We are not going to try to go back to the 1970s and ban food advertising to kids. It's a dead letter under the First Amendment and has a host of practical difficulties. The FTC learned its lesson. That is not where we want to be” (Majoras 4). While other nations may favor banning all child-targeted advertising, this should not be the case in the United States, where freedom is prized and private business has the right to a profit.

### The Best Solution

Since government control, self-regulation from the industry and banning advertising to young children are all flawed solutions and concerned parents, industry stakeholders and children's advocates must turn somewhere else for an end to the debate. The goal on both sides of the debate should be *education*. Rather than lobbying the government to create bills limiting commercials, both advertisers and parents should join together in an effort to encourage the education of children about the nature of advertising. In the spirit of proactive action rather than restrictive control, the best solution would include a private committee composed of members from the advertising arena, concerned parents, and child psychologists. While the existing self-regulatory organization, CARU, has been moderately effective, the unit's policies are decided by a board of directors made up of advertising executives. The unit is advised by "leading experts in education, communication, child development, child mental health, marketing and nutrition," but these experts are not decision makers in the creation of CARU's policies ("Self Regulatory Program" 1). CARU needs to put child psychologists in key decision making roles, alongside advertising executives, in order to promote educational initiatives that would inform all affected parties - the parents, the children and the advertising industry. Rather than monitor existing advertising campaigns, a revised CARU should focus on equipping the consumer with knowledge about advertising.

Parents, rather than the government, should be the gatekeepers in making the choice about the media exposure their children receive. With the Internet and television readily available for almost all children in the United States, the parents or guardians have responsibilities in handling the content that these mediums bring into their homes.

First of all, parents need to limit the amount of time that their children spend in front of the television or online. In the book *Advertising to Children*, authors Gunter, Oates and Blades surmised that "...parental control is obviously weaker if children have access to television independent of their parents and in the United Kingdom, two-thirds of children aged seven to 10 years have a television in their bedrooms" (3). In the United States, that number is similar (McCall 1). Professor Jeffrey McCall reported:

Sensible, loving parents don't let their kids play in traffic. Responsible parents don't feed their kids a bowl of M&Ms each evening and call it supper. When it comes to parental oversight of kids' television habits, however, too many parents fail to see the harm in excessive screen time ... this mismanagement amounts to soft child abuse. (1)

While it is extreme to call exposure to television soft child abuse, his point remains valid; too many parents are not spending the time necessary to control the influx of messages streaming into their homes on a daily basis. Secondly, parents need to learn the value of talking to their children about the images and words they see on television. Just as the negative influence of peer pressure can be neutralized through open discussion with a parent, so too can the influence of advertising on television. As reported in Gunter, Oates and Blades, researcher Furnham believed that "by discussing products, parents can inform children about the nature of advertising" (11). This theory is echoed by Dr. Dwight Heath, who wrote in the *Brown University Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter*:

People sometimes wonder why it is that peer pressure and advertising seem to have so much impact on young people. Too often it's simply because there's a lack of other influences that might let them know

alternative ways of looking at or thinking about things...Some social scientists talk about "socialization" and others prefer to call it "acculturation," but in both instances they are referring to the long and massive process by which some of the norms, values, attitudes and understandings of one generation are passed to those of the next. In the fullest sense, it's education – but that's too often thought of as occurring only in the classroom. (8)

Rather than leave such lessons to the television and the classroom, parents should teach their children about the value of advertising as information, focusing on the idea that not everything advertising claims is necessarily true.

Educating children about the advertising content they see everyday will allow them to understand their world in much greater detail. Even if lobbyists succeeded in convincing the federal government to ban all advertising to children under a certain age, as is the case in several other developed nations, children would still be susceptible to advertising aimed at older audiences, as well as "viral advertising" from their peers in public environments such as school, church and other populated areas. Rather than sheltering children from the information broadcast by advertisers, parents and teachers should equip young children with knowledge about advertising.

The advertising industry also needs to be educated—by an organization such as a revised CARU—about the potentially detrimental effects of low quality or high quantity advertising, and realize the value of listening to child psychology experts. This education should be valuable to the industry because they will benefit from the continuing practice of self regulation rather than the invasive consequences of government control. E.B

Weiss emphasized the importance of self-regulation in his article, "How it was in advertising" when he wrote the following:

The fundamental question is whether advertising will succeed in regulating itself in the public interest, in the interest of the new, more knowledgeable, better educated, more skeptical public. If it does, advertising's future could not be rosier. If it doesn't, advertising will be regulated down to the last period, the last image. That would add to advertising's already high cost in at least two ways: Government regulation is *always* more costly than self-regulation, and government regulations will stifle advertising precisely as the Interstate Commerce Commission stifled the railroads ... Excessively regulated advertising cannot be adequately productive and that also means higher costs. (106)

Clearly, self-regulation is a goal worth fighting for, in the eyes of the advertising industry. In the past, even the government has expressed support for self-regulation. In 1990, a bill was passed limiting the number of commercials airing during a children's program as well as imposing minimum requirements for educational programming. Though President Bush allowed the bill to become law, he did so without his signature, because he did not believe it was the place of the government to impose such restrictions. *The New York Times* quoted the president as saying:

In an effort to improve children's television, this legislation imposes content-based restrictions on programming ... The First Amendment, however, does not contemplate that Government will dictate the quality or quantity of what Americans should hear. Rather, it leaves this to be

decided by free media responding to the free choices of individual consumers. (Gamarekian)

While many studies have shown that excessive exposure to advertising can have an effect on young children, the government should not apply strict limitations. Rather, a self-regulating board, such as a revised CARU board, should take the necessary precautions to ensure that their consumers (in this case, children) are protected, while at the same time protecting their First Amendment rights.

### Conclusion

It is true that excessive advertising can have negative effects on young children. However, there are many forces in this world that can have a negative effect on children. After all, children are vulnerable. Parents and guardians are in place to monitor the messages their children receive, to the best of their ability. By arming today's children with knowledge about the advertising industry, they will be able to separate the information in advertisements from the so-called hype. Knowledge is indeed power; and by equipping parents and children with knowledge about the advertising industry, they will be empowered to push the industry to better standards. This will occur not through government regulation, but because knowledgeable consumers will buy quality products, and will not be duped by advertising that is not truthful. Therefore, because this is a capitalist nation driven by the laws of supply and demand, the advertising industry will follow the needs and wants of the educated consumer. Units such as CARU ensure uniformity within the advertising industry, and support the goal of continuing self-regulation. Rather than punish businesses for desiring to make a profit, children's

advocates should work with the advertising industry to ensure the safety and bright future of America's children.

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