

# Children and Advertising on Television

## *A Survey of the Research, 1994-2000*

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Sweden and Norway have laws prohibiting TV advertising that targets children. In short, the Swedish law prohibits commercial messages that are designed to attract the attention of children younger than 12 years. Nor may commercial messages of any kind be transmitted directly before or after (or during) children's programmes. The law applies only to the channels that transmit from Swedish soil; the EC Court of Justice has determined that channels shall be subject to the law of the country from which they transmit.

The Swedish prohibition has aroused considerable interest in the rest of Europe. Within the EC various commercial interests have put a significant amount of time and energy into the issue, which may be taken as a sign that they perceive the Swedish standpoint as a threat.

A cardinal ethical principle, codified in both the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) code and in the EC's directive on television, is that advertising should be readily identifiable as advertising. This raises some important questions regarding children: At what age are children able to recognize commercial messages on television? At what age do they grasp the intent behind advertising?

The arguments put forward on the issue of children and television are often both contradictory and paradoxical. On the one hand, advertisers spend enormous amounts on television spots; on the other hand, the advertising industry claims that advertising has only a very limited effect. Both sides – proponents as well as opponents of advertising – can produce research findings in support of their stand-

point. There seems to be a study that seconds just about any political or economic stake in the matter.

One may well wonder how it is possible that research on children and television advertising can support diametrically opposite points of view. Is the research not independent and impartial? What questions have researchers asked, how have they gone about finding answers?

Questions like these formed the starting point of a study initiated by the Swedish Board for Consumer Policies. The study surveys current research, with an emphasis on European studies of children and television advertising since 1994 (cf. Jarlbro 2001). The present article briefly summarizes the report.

### *Scope and Methods*

Any survey of the literature – or metastudy, if you like – must be delimited. This study was no exception. First of all, I focused on research published since 1994. The reason for this delimitation was that an earlier inventory of research on the subject covered the period ending that year (Bjurström 1994). Secondly, I focused on the research referred to in the policy debate pro and con TV advertising addressing children. The first step in the project was therefore to identify the various protagonists in the debate during the period.

My prime sources in this survey have been the various organizations' websites and the references mentioned or represented there. My main source for identifying the actors was Advertising Education Forum in Brussels (see note 2), which serves as a sort of information central on the net. I then proceeded to collect the reports most frequently referred to. One consequence of this approach is that the literature studied stretches beyond the standard assortment of academic research to include studies

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conducted by consultant firms, reports from consumer NGOs and so forth.

### *The Actors and their Roles*

The European research on children and television advertising since 1994 mainly originates in England and Germany, and to some extent Denmark. When it comes to disseminating information on the issue, organizations based in Belgium play a significant role.

Fourteen protagonists in the debate on the European level were identified. Of these fourteen, only two represented consumers' organizations; a third may be said to be independent of commercial interests. The other eleven were affiliated in one way or another with the advertising industry, toy manufacturers or the food trade. Several of the organizations both initiate and finance studies relating to children and TV commercials.

Information about the actors was, as noted above, mainly gleaned from their websites. Interested readers should consult Jarlbro (2001) and the websites themselves (for web addresses, see under References below).

### **Bones of Contention**

The research considered in the following revolves around four central aspects:

- children's ability to recognize advertising, i.e., at what age children can distinguish advertising from other programme content;
- children's grasp of the intent behind advertising, i.e., at what age children develop such powers of perception;
- the influence advertising exerts on children's and their family's patterns of consumption, i.e., "pester power"; and
- how advertising relates to other influences, such as family and friends.

It is around these aspects, formulated as research questions, that the controversy surrounding children and television advertising essentially revolves.

### *The Ability to Distinguish between Advertising and Programme Content*

Bjurström (1994), in consonance with several other researchers, observes that there is no direct relationship between children's ability to distinguish

between advertising and programme content and their ability to perceive the underlying motive behind commercial messages (see also Jarlbro 1992). There is, however, a direct relationship in the opposite direction; children who grasp the underlying intent are able to distinguish advertising from programme content.

Tufte (1999) reports studies that show that most children have developed the ability to distinguish between commercials and programme content by age seven. Furnham (2000) contends, however, that German research has found that nearly two 6-year-olds in three can make that distinction and that they grasp the purpose and intent behind commercial messages. Goldstein (1998), for his part, throws the issue out of court:

First, there is no magic age at which someone understands advertising. Learning is a continual process that depends upon family and friends. The often-heated debate about advertising leads me to conclude that many adults do not understand advertising, either (Goldstein, op.cit.:5).

The same author, furthermore, finds no scientific evidence that individuals who are unaware that they are watching advertising are especially susceptible to its influence. If children fail to see that it is a commercial message, they cannot react to it, either, Goldstein reasons. That might sound reasonable enough, but I find two main faults in Goldstein's argument: First of all, most of us would agree that it is a basic democratic right to be able to know when you are being subjected to commercial influence; that is to say, the viewer should have the ability to decide whether or not to be exposed to the persuasive message. This right cannot be exercised if the individual cannot distinguish between the commercial message and programme content. Secondly, one can make a case for the message having an effect on the receiver, regardless of whether s/he knows it is a commercial.

We might note in this connection that several studies have found that children (up to 12 years of age) behave quite differently than adolescents and adults when watching television commercials. In a nationwide study of 8- to 14-year-olds in Norway, for example, young children did not switch channels to the same extent, nor did they engage in parallel activities during the commercial break (Borch 1996). This behaviour was constant, regardless of how familiar the children were with the advertisement in question (cf. Jarlbro 1992, Bjurström 1994). Young children seem to find repetitiveness itself entertaining. Thus, there is reason to believe

that the more often an individual is exposed to a message, the greater the effect of the message on the individual.

Gunter and Furnham (1998) report that the most commonly cited age, at which children are supposed to be able to distinguish between advertising and programmes is five years (see also Young 1990). Blosser and Roberts (1985, cited in Gunter and Furnham 1998) found that about every second 5- to 6-year-old was able to recognize commercials, both commercials addressed to children and to adults. All 10-year-olds were able to do this. An American study of 200 13-year-olds found that the young subjects frequently confused advertising with programme content, or, as Fox (1996:54) describes his findings:

“Blurring” occurs when kids mistake one type of television text for another. Students blurred one commercial with another, they mistook commercials for regular programs, such as the news; and they confused commercials with public service announcements (e.g. drug abuse warnings). Blurring was the most surprising yet most commonly observed finding of this study.

Fox also got the following response when he asked a boy (aged 13) to characterize the difference between a programme and a commercial:

Commercials don't have as much time to get their message across. Programs are really long (Fox 1996:55).

A Danish study of children and their parents' views on TV commercials for children's products (GfK 1997) found that most children perceived the difference between commercial messages and programme content, and that it was mainly the very young, i.e., those under 7-8 years of age, who found it difficult to describe the differences between advertising and other television content spontaneously (without cues). It was particularly hard for these younger children to perceive the difference when commercials were placed in the middle of programmes. In other words, commercials placed in blocks between programmes were more easily identified.

In a survey of research on the influence of TV commercials on children, Young (1997) found that even 2-year-olds were able to distinguish between programmes and commercials. On the other hand, Young points out that only some years later (age 8–12) are children equipped to grasp the intent of the advertiser.

The question naturally arises: How can research results differ so widely? How is it that some studies find that even 2-year-olds can differentiate between commercials and programmes, whereas other findings indicate that children differentiate only at age 7 and older? Can it be that German children are more alert than Scandinavian children, inasmuch as they are able to identify advertising at such tender ages (cf. Kübler 1997, GfK 1997, Borch 1996)? And what are we to think about young American viewers, who at age 13 still confuse TV commercials with other content (Fox 1996)?

There are doubtless a variety of factors that explain the differences. Goldstein (as cited in González del Valle 1999:5) offers the following explanation:

Goldstein affirms that many of the researchers of children and television advertising make clear their own preferences concerning policy and regulation, even if their research does not support them.

The interesting thing about this quote is the source. Professor Goldstein has conducted most of his research at the behest of the toy industry. He might rightly be characterized as the industry's 'senior researcher' (cf. Goldstein 1995 i.a.) Is his explanation, the intimation that researchers have sold themselves to defend one or another interest group, the answer to our questions? One can answer that question both Yes and No.

Yes, because the studies that have been commissioned by the actors who have a vested interest in preserving TV commercials to children actually do tend to conclude that the ability to differentiate between commercials and other TV content develops quite early on, whereas consumer organizations, which are critical of such advertising, rather refer to findings that show that the ability to differentiate develops considerably later – at around age 7.

But we can equally answer No inasmuch as the studies have used quite different methodologies, which also explain some of the differences. We find, for example, that studies that primarily involve verbal responses (e.g., interview studies) tend to find that only older children (age 7+) can distinguish commercials from other content (Borch 1996, GfK 1997). Studies based on observation and experiments tend to find that even very young children – about age 3 – can differentiate (cf. von Ploetz 1999, Furnham 2000).

Several studies show that characteristics of the commercials and the programmes also affect child-

ren's abilities in this regard. For example, children find it much harder to identify advertising that features the same cartoon characters as appear in the programme (cf. Young 1990, Consumers International 1996, Gunter and Furnham 1998 i.a.).

Summing up, we have to conclude that there is no consensus regarding at what age children are able to distinguish TV commercials from other content. The differences have to do with the research methods applied and, seemingly, on who has sponsored the research in that proponents of advertising directed to children tend to a greater extent to commission observational studies rather than interviews. We also find that the studies commissioned by those who favour advertising to children tend to reach the conclusion that even very young children develop media competence.

Is there any one, objective truth that can tell us once and for all at what age children can differentiate between advertising and programmes? No, of course not. But all the studies examined in this survey do conclude that children's media competence develops successively. Most assuredly there are 3- to 6-year-olds who have developed such competence, but that hardly means that all the children in this age group have developed it. Finally, there is considerable agreement that a majority of children, aged 7-8, have developed the ability to distinguish commercials from programmes, and at age 10-12 virtually all children can do so (cf. Bjurström 1994, Borch 1996 Löhr 1999, Tufté 1999).

### *Understanding the Intent*

Children's ability to recognize commercial messages when they see them and their grasp of the intent behind commercial messages are not the same thing.

Understanding the motive behind a message is a key prerequisite to being able to examine the message critically. What is meant by *grasping* or *understanding* the intent behind a commercial is not entirely clear, inasmuch as the concept of understanding has not been specified. Different researchers use different definitions of "understanding the intent behind the message". Naturally, this lack of clarity complicates the interpretation and comparison of different findings. One cannot be certain that the studies are measuring the same phenomenon.

Regardless of the definition used, there is widespread agreement that the ability to understand the motive behind commercial messages develops at a later age than the ability to distinguish commercials from programme content.

At what age, then, do children grasp the motive behind advertisements? In a small book, *Children & Advertising: The Allegations and the Evidence*, Furnham (2000:24f) observes:

Data from various sources show nearly two-thirds of six year-olds can even distinguish the intention of advertising while a third even question the credibility of advertising at this age.

The sources of the data Furnham refers to are not specified, other than that they appear to be studies conducted in Germany. Bergler (1999) is equally convinced; he goes so far as to maintain that the notion that advertising influences people has no scientific basis; it is merely "a naive theory, everyday psychology".

On the whole, we find that here, too, assessments vary as to when children are able to understand the intent behind commercial messages. The differences in research findings are mainly due to the fact that different studies have measured different things or, one might say, they have used different definitions of "understanding the motive behind the message". One finds, furthermore, that proponents of advertising that aims at children consistently use a softer, less stringent definition of 'understanding' and stress that understanding can exist on a non-verbal level (what they mean by that more precisely is not spelled out). In all cases, however, and irrespective of the researchers' affiliations, findings are consonant on one point, namely, that the older the child, the more the child seems to be able to grasp the intent behind advertising, even when it is implicit. It is a matter of the child's cognitive development.

### *"Pester Power"*

Perhaps in recognition of the difficulty of measuring TV commercials' effects – whether long- or short-term – recent European studies of effects on children have chosen to interview children's mothers about their impressions: Does television advertising influence their children? Do the children influence the family's shopping choices? Obviously, this approach more likely measures the mothers' attitude to television advertising than advertising effects.

Children's pestering their parents for a product they have just seen advertised on TV is often taken as evidence of immediate effects. Goldstein (1998) denies any such connection, arguing that playmates are the principal influence on children's wants and desires.

A study of 24 families and 59 mothers in Great Britain found that advertising had only a marginal effect on the children's and the families' eating habits (Stratton 1994). It should be noted that the findings are reported in the documentation from an Advertising Association seminar on "Food Advertising and Children". An oft-cited study in this connection is *Pester Power* (Food Advertising Unit 1999), a study based on field research in Spain and Sweden with samples of 1000 persons 18 years and older in each country. These interview studies were commissioned by the Food Advertising Unit<sup>1</sup> and, judging from some documentation, the Children's Programme<sup>2</sup>. They focus on the adult respondents' perceptions regarding what children try to persuade them to buy when on shopping tours. The choice of Spain and Sweden was dictated by the fact that the two countries represent extremes in terms of the regulation of advertising that addresses children: Spain has very few restrictions, whereas Sweden has a total ban. Very briefly, the results show that few respondents in either country experience children's pestering as problematic (7 per cent in Spain and 9 per cent in Sweden), and only a small proportion of these respondents consider a ban on advertising to children an appropriate remedy.

A relevant question here is whether 7 and 9 per cent is many or few. It would have been interesting, had the samples been defined so as to include many parents of small children. That would have made it possible to see whether the responses differed between parents and non-parents. As it is, we have no idea how many parents are included in the samples; the technical data note only resident adults, 18 years and older. Most likely, rather many of the respondents are not parents of children of the ages in question. Swedish research has found that attitudes toward television advertising – favourable or negative – vary significantly according to the variables, sex, education and whether or not the respondent is the parent of a young child (cf. Jarlbro and Sonesson 1990).

Summing up, then, we find that none of the studies included in the survey actually measures the effects of television advertising, long- or short-term. Instead they focus on parents' – chiefly mothers' – attitudes toward television advertising that targets their children. The findings are contradictory: studies commissioned by proponents of television advertising to children find that parents are favourable to such advertising; similarly, studies by opponents find that most parents are critical. The scientific value of most of these studies is question-

able, inasmuch as the methodology is ill-suited to provide answers to the questions posed.

### *The Influence of Advertising Relative to other Factors*

The advertising and toy industries often argue that advertising has far less influence over children's behaviour than family, siblings and friends have. Communication researchers agree. Messages conveyed in mass media are more effective when it come to calling attention to products and phenomena than they are at bringing about long-term changes in attitudes or behaviour. Mass communication can also stimulate interpersonal communication. In short, interpersonal communication can exert greater influence on people's behaviour, whereas mass communication – e.g., TV commercials – provides topics for interpersonal communication. Thus, Fox (1996) found that television commercials were a common topic of conversation among American schoolchildren. What is more, children also urge their parents and friends to be sure to watch certain commercials.

Also, it seems that contemporary forms of advertising – merchandising, product placement, fan clubs (e.g., Barbie clubs, Disney clubs), offers of gift merchandise, and so forth – are designed to stimulate interpersonal communication among children in kindergartens and schools even more (cf. Consumentenbond 1996, Consumers International 1999).

Proponents of television advertising are quick to point out that it is difficult to isolate direct effects of advertising from other, interpersonal influences. Goldstein (1998), for example, writes that research has consistently shown that parents and classmates exert stronger influence on children than mass media do. Children's curiosity about various products is not a result of advertising, Goldstein argues, but of interpersonal communication. Goldstein does not inquire where awareness of the products comes from in the first place.

Furnham (1996) finds it impossible to isolate the influence of TV commercials from other influences. Furnham argues, furthermore, that we have to take into account factors such as the age of the child, the family's socio-economic status, parents' level of education and cultural background as well as the product category in question when we discuss influence. But despite his conviction that it is impossible to demonstrate direct effects of TV

commercials in isolation from other factors, Furnham goes on to argue that a ban on television advertising that aims at children would have negative effects: a ban would deprive children of opportunities to learn about the world around them. Just how he manages to isolate these pedagogic effects of TV commercials is not clear.

In 1999 a study commissioned by the Advertising Education Forum surveyed parents' impressions of the main influences in their children's lives (AEF 2000). The survey was carried out in the form of telephone and personal interviews with about 300 parents of children under the age of 12 in each of twenty European countries. According to the report, the samples were representative of each country in terms of age, social class and sex. The study found that television advertising is not among the five most influential factors in children's lives. The statement is based on the fact that 86 per cent of the respondents did not mention TV advertising spontaneously (respondents were not given a list of factors to choose from) when asked to list five factors. Looking at the results from another angle, this means that 14 per cent of the respondents did mention TV advertising among the five most influential factors.

Not surprisingly, differences are noted between respondents in the different countries. Whether the differences are due to different viewing habits among children in different countries or cultural differences regarding parental roles is not discussed in the report. Another possible source of variance might be that the surveys were undertaken by different means – by telephone in some countries and face to face in others – and that sample sizes de facto varied considerably between countries.

In my estimation, the study raises more questions than it provides answers. One can also ask oneself whether 14 per cent of European parents who reckon television advertising among the five most influential factors in their children's lives is a large share or a small one. Whatever the case, it is a good number of people. Yet another reflection is that television advertising is a factor that we can do away with, and one we can do without – in contrast to classmates, for example. To sum up: There is consensus among researchers that family, siblings and friends exert stronger influence on children's lives than mass media in general and TV advertising in particular. This has long been considered an established truth among mass communication researchers. Interpersonal communication is far more effective when it comes to influencing attitudes,

conceptions and behaviour than mass communication is. The main difficulties we face when we attempt to assess the effects of media content are (1) to specify the various influences, independent from others and (2) to specify the interaction between interpersonal and mass communication. Questions that need to be answered are, for example: How do messages carried in the mass media penetrate and circulate through groups and interpersonal networks? If a friend tells me that I should buy something s/he has seen in a TV commercial, is the source of influence my friend, or the commercial?

## **In Conclusion**

Surveying the research on children and television, we find that many different actors having economic and political stakes in the issue are active in the policy debate. Proponents as well as opponents of television advertising aimed at children have initiated and financed studies, the results of which often serve their respective interests. The fact that a majority of the studies on this subject have been steered by extra-scientific interests, e.g., the policy decision, whether or not advertising to young children should be banned or regulated, means that the studies have had different starting points and perspectives. Thus, we find that those favouring TV advertising aiming at children prefer to cite research based on observations, the results of which indicate that even very young children can recognize and comprehend commercial messages. Opponents of such advertising tend, on the other hand, to cite findings based on verbal responses that show that only after some years can children distinguish commercials from other programme content and perceive its intent.

The fact that central concepts are defined differently in different studies – such as what is meant by “understanding the intent of advertising messages” – naturally makes it difficult to compare the results of the studies; they do not seem to have measured the same things. What is more, the studies do not always document their methods, which makes it impossible to judge whether the conclusions drawn are valid.

The question is whether we can draw any general conclusions from the studies of children and television advertising reported to date. Despite the critical points noted above, I maintain that we can. First of all, there is consensus that children's ability to distinguish commercials from other content and their ability to grasp the intent behind those messages both increase successively with age –

which, of course, has to do with the children's cognitive development. Even if some studies have found that 3- to 6-year-olds have a well-developed "advertising competence", there is no empirical evidence whatsoever that such competence is part of every small child's cognitive repertoire. A key question for both proponents and opponents of advertising that targets children is at what age children are able to grasp the intent behind the advertising. The answer is crucial, since it is only when such competence has developed that we can cease to treat the child as a defenceless "victim" and presume that s/he can evaluate commercial messages critically. As noted above, the concept of "under-

standing" varies between studies. Irrespective of the definition used, I have not encountered a single study that demonstrates that very young children are able to explain the intent and purpose of a given commercial message. It would seem that this ability is fully developed when children have reached 10-12 years of age.

In conclusion I should like to express the hope that future research in this area will be less steered by extra-scientific considerations than it has to date. If the influence of these factors were reduced, we might be able to gain a better understanding of the complex and multifaceted relationship between children and television advertising.

## Notes

1. The Food Advertising Unit is based in the offices of the Advertising Association (U.K.) and describes itself as "a centre for information, communication and research in the area of food advertising, particularly TV advertising to children".
2. The Children's Programme is an informal European interest group representing the advertising industry that operates under the aegis of the European Advertising Tripartite (EAT). It is headquartered in the Advertising Association (U.K.). In collaboration with EAT, the Children's Programme has set up Advertising Education Forum, a public information centre on the Internet.

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### Actors' web addresses

- [www.adassoc.org.uk](http://www.adassoc.org.uk)  
[www.fau.org.uk](http://www.fau.org.uk)  
[www.childrensprogramme.org](http://www.childrensprogramme.org)  
[www.aeforum.org](http://www.aeforum.org)  
[www.eat-europe.org](http://www.eat-europe.org)  
[www.aig.org](http://www.aig.org)  
[www.itc.org.uk](http://www.itc.org.uk)  
[www.acte.be](http://www.acte.be)  
[www.egta.com](http://www.egta.com)  
[www.eaca.com](http://www.eaca.com)  
[www.tietoy.org](http://www.tietoy.org)  
[www.beuc.org](http://www.beuc.org) <http://193.128.6.150/consumers/>  
[www.easa-alliance.org](http://www.easa-alliance.org)