

# Assessing the impact of the commercial world on children's wellbeing

A response from the Family and Parenting Institute

27 June 2008

## 1. Introduction

The Family and Parenting Institute (FPI) is the UK's leading centre of expertise in families and the upbringing of children. The impact of the commercial world on children is an issue we have been concerned about for some time: in 2003 we held a conference on marketing to children, and followed this up in 2004 with a report, 'Hard sell, soft targets?', which presented the results of focus group research with parents.

Since then, use of the internet by both children and marketers has increased, and there have been some limited restrictions on advertising to children on television. However, the issues raised by the parents in our research are still relevant and have also emerged in other research. Both younger and older children are affected by commercialisation, but in different ways.

## 2. Parents are concerned about the extent of marketing to children.

In a MORI poll commissioned by the Family and Parenting Institute, 84 per cent of parents thought that companies targeted children with advertising too much.<sup>1</sup> Two forms of marketing parents were particularly concerned about were television advertising and product tie-ins, using television or film characters. Free gifts with cereals were also seen as a problem.

There is public concern about the widespread use of characters from children's films to promote unhealthy foods, and few film or television companies have any policy restricting this.<sup>2</sup> However parents are also uneasy about the extent to which films and television programmes are turned into 'brands' used to market a wider range of products.

"So far this morning I have brushed my son's teeth with a Buzz Lightyear toothbrush, using Mickey Mouse toothpaste. Dressed him in his Power Rangers underpants and Superman vest before giving him Cheerios for breakfast – chosen not because they are his favourite cereal but because Cheerios were giving away a Finding Nemo toy."

Parents have told us that while they accept that they have a responsibility to say "no" to children, this can exact a heavy price in terms of aggravation and arguments, tears and tantrums.

“I need to ask if the advertising industry are comfortable spending millions of pounds targeting children direct and then saying it’s down to mum and dad to stand up to them?”

### **3. Marketing increasingly aims to bypass parental controls.**

Parents in our research were aware that internet and mobile phone advertising was reaching their children, but felt very uninformed about it. The internet brings many benefits to children in terms of homework, entertainment, and communicating with friends, but it is a highly commercial environment, and a frequently changing one, so parents may not be aware of what their children are likely to be doing online.

In general, children are able to ignore advertisements appearing around the main page or as pop-ups. However, they may occasionally get caught out by rip-offs and ‘free offers’ online. Not all advertising is well separated from the main page content, and there is also more sophisticated online marketing, where whole websites or games are branded, for example [www.barbie.co.uk](http://www.barbie.co.uk) or the Fanta page on Bebo.<sup>3</sup> Children may be less able to ‘filter out’ these commercial messages.

While children are usually aware of ‘stranger danger’ online and would be unwilling to give out personal information (e.g. their home address) to individuals, they are more willing to give out their email address, or that of their friends to enter a competition or to get ‘free stuff’. Parents also are less aware that commercial websites with poor data protection policies may be problematic.<sup>4</sup>

Many of the websites most popular with children are not designed specifically for them and therefore carry advertisements for gambling and other products unsuitable for children.<sup>5</sup>

### **4. Young children do not generally understand the motives behind advertising**

A literature review of marketing to children concluded that it is not until around the age of eight that children understand that advertising has an intention to persuade, therefore young children regard the information in advertisements as simply factual.<sup>6</sup>

We believe, therefore, that there should be an outright ban on all direct advertising to children under the age of seven.

### **5. Young people themselves dislike excessive or inappropriate marketing.**

While younger children may simply be entertained by advertising, older children and teenagers are more critical – but may be as likely to be persuaded precisely because they actively engage with the arguments given.<sup>7</sup>

Children, especially girls tend to enjoy shopping: 94 per cent of girls against 68 per cent of boys (aged 10-19). However, boys are more brand aware: 59 per cent of boys said that the brand name is important to them when they buy something, compared to 46 per cent of girls. The young people surveyed also said that they disliked marketing that was intrusive or inappropriate.<sup>8</sup>

The most common dislike about television among children is that there are too many adverts; 47% of 8-11s and 57% of 12-15s dislike the number of adverts they see on television. Similarly, the most common dislike among child internet users is that there are too many pop-up adverts (41% of 8-11s and 65% of 12-15s).<sup>9</sup>

## **6. Messages from the commercial world can affect children's self-image.**

Parents in FPI focus groups felt strongly that marketing shapes children's attitudes not just to specific brands and products but to the world around them, for example being less creative and resourceful in their play, and developing a 'throwaway' attitude. Research published by the National Consumer Council found links between materialism, attitude to parents, parent-child conflict and self-esteem.<sup>10</sup>

Parents also expressed concern about clothing for girls which was too skimpy and sexualised for their age. Girls in particular, can experience feelings of inadequacy and discomfort as a result of 'images of perfection' promoted by advertising.<sup>11</sup> Messages in the media that are specifically aimed at under-16s are only part of this, as children are also aware of wider adult media, which also promotes high expectations of female physical perfection, and sexualisation of women and girls.

Sexualisation has been defined by the American Psychological Association as: valuing sexual appeal or behaviour, to the exclusion of other characteristics; demanding a narrow standard of physical attractiveness; sexual objectification; or inappropriate imposition of sexuality. The concerns they raise also apply to the UK context, including: women used as sexual 'decorations' in advertisements; dolls, clothing and cosmetics marketed to girls that present images of sexy, sexualized persons; and airbrushing of celebrities to present a narrow image of physical acceptability.

## **7. Commercial interests can have an especially negative impact on poorer families.**

Parents on a low income are often conscious that their children may be teased or bullied for not having the 'right' clothes. For example research for the DWP looking at how family spending changed with an increase or decrease in income found that some parents prioritised buying branded clothes, even when the family budget was tight, to make sure their children were not bullied.<sup>12</sup>

The food brands in a child's lunchbox can also be seen as an indicator of a child's economic status. Research in primary schools found that conformity in packed lunches was important to avoid teasing. Eating imitation or cheap products is seen by their peers as a sign that a child's family can not afford the more expensive commercial brands.<sup>13</sup>

Material possessions seem to be more important to poorer children: in research 34 per cent of 9-13 year olds in deprived areas agreed that "I really like the kids that have very special games and clothes" compared to 19 per cent in affluent areas; 62 per cent that "I have fun just thinking of all the things I own" (compared to 50 per cent); and 69 per cent that "the only kind of job I want when I grow up is one that gets me a lot of money" (compared with 28 per cent).<sup>14</sup>

This difference could arise directly from more often being denied things because they are too expensive, or from whether it is socially encouraged to focus on acquiring

money and possessions. Nairn and Ormrod (2007) argue that it is linked with a greater exposure to television in deprived areas. For example, they found that 43 per cent of 9 to 13 year olds watched television every weekday in bed before going to sleep compared to 10 per cent in affluent areas.<sup>15</sup> In both deprived and affluent areas television watching correlated positively with materialism. However more research would be needed to ascertain whether this is a significant causal factor in the difference in attitudes between deprived and affluent areas.

One concern about this is that it is one of the factors encouraging young people from poorer backgrounds to leave education earlier in order to start earning money immediately.

## **8. Existing restrictions on marketing of unhealthy food are insufficient**

Over one in six children (aged 2-16) is obese in this country.<sup>16</sup> Diet as well as exercise plays a role in this. It is disingenuous to argue that intensive marketing of high fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) foods does not shift children's preferences towards these and away from less colourful healthy options. As concluded by a review for Ofcom,<sup>17</sup> there is a body of fairly consistent evidence demonstrating the direct effect of food promotion (mainly television advertising) on children's food preferences, knowledge and behaviour. It is difficult to fully capture the impact of advertising in research since it goes beyond the direct impact on the individual child; it also helps to create social norms in his or her peer group.

Research from 2004/05 found that overall, expenditure on HFSS advertising accounted for between 80-90 per cent of all food advertising expenditure on television,<sup>18</sup> comprising 81 per cent for children's airtime on terrestrial channels and 94 for children's channels.

Advertisements for foods that are high in fat, salt or sugar are now not allowed in or around programmes that have particular appeal to children aged under 16. However, this restriction is based on the proportion of the audience that are children, rather than the actual number watching, so many programmes popular with children are not covered. During a fortnight in January 2008, of the 20 programmes on commercial channels with the highest audience of under 16s, only one (The Simpsons) was covered by the ban. The others included advertising for a range of foods high in fat, salt and sugar.<sup>19</sup>

In NCC research, 36 per cent of 9 to 13 year olds listed children's programmes as their favourite type of programme to watch, and 49 per cent put either sports, music channels, soaps or comedy. Even for younger children (9-11), 24 per cent did not include children's programmes anywhere in their top three. This was higher for children from disadvantaged areas.<sup>20</sup>

The current system is therefore ineffective in restricting advertising of unhealthy foods to children and a 9pm watershed should be implemented. There should also be a review of other methods used to market unhealthy foods, for example the use of celebrities, cartoon characters on packaging, internet marketing, toy promotions by fast food chains, tokens to collect, and misleading health claims, with a view to restricting the most inappropriate.

The power of these marketing techniques to influence children's behaviour could be used in a positive way to encourage children to eat healthily, as shown by projects in schools such as Food Dudes.<sup>21</sup> Parents and teenagers from low-income families felt that this option could be used to market healthy foods more widely, but believed that

competing with other food marketing would require the same status celebrities and cartoon brands, which they were aware would be expensive.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> National Family and Parenting Institute (2004) *Hard sell, soft targets?* National Family and Parenting Institute

<sup>2</sup> Which (2007) Cartoon heroes and villains. Which.

<sup>3</sup> <http://207.7.149.50.bebo.co.uk/Profile.jsp?MemberId=4282835750&TUUID=69b283d2-2b09-4074-b494-85fc5cc2471c> accessed 15.06 20/06/08.

<sup>4</sup> Fielder, A., Gardner, W., Nairn, A. and Pitt, J. (2007) *Fair game? Assessing commercial activity on children's favourite websites and online environments*. National Consumer Council.

<sup>5</sup> Fielder, A., Gardner, W., Nairn, A. and Pitt, J. (2007) *Fair game? Assessing commercial activity on children's favourite websites and online environments*. National Consumer Council.

<sup>6</sup> Livingstone, S., & Helsper, E. (2004). *Advertising 'unhealthy' foods to children: Understanding Promotion In The Context Of Children's Daily Lives. A review of the literature for the Market Research Department of the Office of Communications (OFCOM)*. OFCOM

<sup>7</sup> Livingstone, S., & Helsper, E. (2004). *Advertising 'unhealthy' foods to children: Understanding Promotion In The Context Of Children's Daily Lives. A review of the literature for the Market Research Department of the Office of Communications (OFCOM)*. OFCOM

<sup>8</sup> Mayo, E. (2005) *Shopping generation*. National Consumer Council

<sup>9</sup> Ofcom (2008) *Media literacy audit: Report on UK children's media literacy*. Ofcom

<sup>10</sup> Nairn, A. and Ormrod, J. with Bottomley, P. (2007) *Watching, wanting and wellbeing: exploring the links*. National Consumer Council.

<sup>11</sup> Mayo, E. (2005) *Shopping generation*. National Consumer Council

<sup>12</sup> Farrell, C. and O'Connor, W. (2003) *Low-income families and household spending*. Department for Work and Pensions <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrep192.asp>

<sup>13</sup> Ludvigsen, A. and Sharma, N. (2004) *Burger boy and sporty girl: children and young people's attitudes towards food in school*. Barnardo's

<sup>14</sup> Nairn, A. and Ormrod, J. with Bottomley, P. (2007) *Watching, wanting and wellbeing: exploring the links*. National Consumer Council.

<sup>15</sup> Nairn, A. and Ormrod, J. with Bottomley, P. (2007) *Watching, wanting and wellbeing: exploring the links*. National Consumer Council.

<sup>16</sup> Statistics on obesity, physical activity and diet: England, January 2008

<http://www.ic.nhs.uk/pubs/opadjan08>

<sup>17</sup> Livingstone, S. (2004). *A commentary on the research evidence regarding the effects of food promotion on children. Report prepared for the Market Research Department of the Office of Communications*. London: OFCOM

<sup>18</sup> Ofcom (2006) *Television advertising of food and drink products to children: Options for new restrictions*. Ofcom (p21)

<sup>19</sup> Which? website

[http://www.which.co.uk/reports\\_and\\_campaigns/food\\_and\\_drink/campaigns/kids\\_food/TV\\_advertising/junk\\_food\\_advertising\\_560\\_75137.jsp](http://www.which.co.uk/reports_and_campaigns/food_and_drink/campaigns/kids_food/TV_advertising/junk_food_advertising_560_75137.jsp) accessed 10/06/08

<sup>20</sup> Nairn, A. and Ormrod, J. with Bottomley, P. (2007) *Watching, wanting and wellbeing: exploring the links*. National Consumer Council.

<sup>21</sup> Lowe, F., Horne, P. and Hardman, C. (2007) Changing the nation's diet: a programme to increase children's consumption of fruit and vegetables. Bangor Food and Activity Research Unit. Online at [http://www.fooddudes.co.uk/documents/Working\\_paper\\_no5.pdf](http://www.fooddudes.co.uk/documents/Working_paper_no5.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Food Standards Agency (2004) Food promotion and marketing to children: views of low income consumers. Food Standards Agency