

Source: Better Business Bureau

Helping Your Child to Think About Advertising

Television can be an important learning tool for your children, but it must be used with the greatest care. As part of the television "picture," advertising can provide your children with a great deal of information about the world around them. Advertising also may be a child's first introduction to what it means to be a consumer in the U.S. economy. Ads can help a child appreciate the diversity of available choices, and how to select wisely from among them. But, it must always be remembered that children need close parental guidance when it comes to advertising.

Advertising and Your Child is intended to help parents understand what may be appropriate or inappropriate advertising for their youngsters. It also provides adults with strategies for helping children help themselves to understand and evaluate advertising.

It is useful with very young children to start by talking about the general concept of advertising. For the purposes of such a discussion, parents may want to clip and then refer to magazine or newspaper ads for starters. Show your child such a print ad and ask: What do you notice first when you look at this ad? What is pretty or ugly about this ad? What product is this ad for? How does that ad make you feel about the product? What questions should you ask before buying this product? (Encourage your child to seek more information than the ad contains. How is the product used? Does it work well? Do you really need this particular product? What other comparable products are available and at what cost?)

This line of questioning is guaranteed to spark a lively discussion! More importantly, it will serve to start your child out on the path to wise consuming. Children should know that the purpose of advertising is to get people interested in buying products, not to entertain the viewer or reader. Extend these discussions to television advertising. Talk about the ways in which the product is made attractive on the television screen. Assist your child in identifying the claims made in the ad and then sort the statements into two categories: fact and opinion. Ask your child to consider which of the claims can be "proven" and which cannot.

Marking Commercials

When your children watch television, be sure that they know when the commercials start and stop. Young children may consider the commercial to be part of the program, so it is a good idea to "mark" the commercials for them. At the beginning of a commercial, say: "Oh it's a commercial. After the commercials, we'll be able to go back to the story." Help your child to recognize when the commercial starts. There will be a brief "black-out" or other indication of the shift from program to commercial. There is an announcement: "We'll be right back to our program after this."

Explaining How Ads Work

Parents should strive to keep their discussions about advertisements on a level that their children will understand. To do this, use terms, analogies and concepts with which your child already is familiar. For example, you may wish to say that:

Advertising makes a product into a "star." A commercial dresses up the product, puts make-up on it, shines bright lights on it, and makes it look larger than life. The advertiser hopes that the commercial will make consumers want to have the "star" in their home.

Advertising makes a product "stand out in a crowd." It's difficult to be seen in a large crowd; things tend to get lost and blend in together. However, if one person in the crowd is wearing a brightly-colored outfit, or a large hat, that person will stand out. An advertiser wants its product to

stand out in your mind, and, as a result, highlights the product in a way that attracts attention. One way to demonstrate this is to take your child to the supermarket. Ask your child to point to the boxes, cans or bags that feature artwork that is the most noticeable on the shelf. Packaging is one type of advertising for products.

Advertising is like a "bicycle reflector." A commercial works like a reflector on the back of a bicycle at night; it makes the product more visible, so that it can't be missed.

The Rest of the Story

Children should learn that advertising gives them some, but not all, of the information needed to make informed choices. Help your child to understand that product information does not come from advertising exclusively and that a commercial is only an "introduction," not the whole story. How can you help your child learn to investigate products before making a decision about a purchase? The best way for parents to make this point is to lead through personal example. Involve your child in the decisions about family purchases, from clothing to appliances. Let your child see how you weigh the relative merits of particular brands. Help your child in making similar decisions when it comes to even minor toy and entertainment purchases.