

# Assessment of the Impact of the Commercial World on Childhood

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A Report by Kids Industries for The Advertising Association

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## KIDS INDUSTRIES

Kids Industries is a strategic and creative agency that focuses solely on the family marketplace.

As a business and as parents ourselves, we are committed to ensuring the children for whom we create are protected and that it is they, and not just our clients, that benefit.

Kids Industries is a specialist family consultancy for the commercial world. Our work has taken us around the world for clients as diverse as The Kellogg Company, Unilever, American Greetings, BBC, GSK, Del Monte, Cartoon Network, Al Jazeera, Hit Entertainment and numerous other blue chip clients.

We research, create and implement using our unique 4ft Thinking™ Methodology. This ensures that every project we deliver is based in the developmental science and we are therefore able to qualify and substantiate all actions and decisions. Whilst this enables us to draw conclusions that can enhance products and increase sales, it also enables us to understand when children and indeed parents become manipulated and perhaps taken advantage of.

Most recently Kids Industries was appointed by The BBC Trust to look after the child focused element of the current assessment of provision. For this high profile project, as with all our projects, we have put children at the centre.




All our team members are specialist in their chosen field and all are dedicated to the family, children and young people. Our staff are drawn from Social Research, Clinical Psychology, Education, Marketing, Design and Market Research.

Kids Industries is 6 years old and a family owned company.

## THE RESPONSE: NUT & COMPASS

The National Union of Teachers (NUT) and Compass have both produced reports which critically evaluate the advertising and marketing industries impact upon children's wellbeing. Both papers make use of limited evidence bases to report on extreme data for the purpose of scaremongering. The engagement of children with the commercial world, and the actual impact of that engagement upon their wellbeing, are both areas which require further research to be conducted.

Before we examine the two reports in further detail it is worth stating the legislative changes which have taken place over recent years in relation to marketing and advertising to children. The marketing and advertising environment has changed considerably since much of the research cited by the Compass report was produced. Compass highlight the use of collectable toys, stickers or cards in products, and endorsements by TV characters on packaging, as means of promoting products to children. Legislation and self-imposed regulation mean these practices are not now undertaken.

-  From January 2007 OFCOM introduced new rules banning the use of celebrities and licensed cartoon characters of direct appeal to children under 12 from endorsing food and drink product advertisements during children's programming;
-  From April 2007 OFCOM introduced a total ban on advertisements for food deemed by the Food Standards Agency as being high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) in programmes aimed at children aged under 9, or attracting disproportionately high child audiences. As a transitional measure, children's channels were required to scale back HFSS advertising to 75% of 2005 levels. With immediate effect restrictions were introduced on advertising techniques in new promotions which may make HFSS advertising attractive to children at other times; they applied to all existing promotions with effect from 1 July 2007.
-  From April 2007 the Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) introduced new rules for food and soft drink product advertisements to children alongside the scheduling rules outlined by OFCOM. In particular these rules banned the use of celebrities and licensed characters, as well as promotional offers to children under secondary school age;

- From 1<sup>st</sup> July 2007 the CAP Code included a revised and expanded section for all food and drink advertising to children to ensure a consistent regulatory approach across media. Taking things one step further the CAP Code chose not to use the Nutrient Profiling model on which HFSS classifications are based for TV. Instead, it decided to place restrictions on all advertisements for food and drinks (except for fresh fruit and fresh vegetables);
- This was followed in September 2007 by new rules for food and drink product advertisements to children on radio announced by the Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice;
- From January 2008 OFCOM introduced new guidelines restricting the advertisement of HFSS produce to children aged under-16 during programmes specifically made for children. HFSS advertising on children's channels scaled back to 50% of 2005 levels.
- By 2009 all HFSS advertising will be banned on children's channels.

Here we present a response to each of the reports considered.

### **'Growing Up in a Material World'**

The NUT report 'Growing Up in a Material World' (NUT, 2007) presents findings from a small scale survey conducted with 268 children aged 8-15 years old. The research conducted does not provide details on its sampling strategy or give a breakdown of the demographic details of the participants which makes it impossible to generalise the findings to a wider population. Furthermore the questionnaire issued to children can be described at best as leading, casting additional doubt over the validity of its findings (see <http://www.teachers.org.uk/story.php?id=4023>).

The research purports to highlight a range of concerns children have over the marketing of food and goods. In fact it produced a number of findings which indicated (i) that the Industry's impact was not as strong as they purported, and (ii) that children were not just passive consumers influenced entirely by the media but rather were active consumers who based their choices on a variety of factors. Among the findings of the NUT which were not reported within the main text included:

- Over two-thirds of children did not feel they had to have the latest products

- Over three-quarters of children had not received any communications from companies to their mobiles
- Over 85% had not visited any websites which encouraged them to eat unhealthy food
- Over 85% did not believe that adverts showed what people really looked like
- Over 70% did not think that children were encouraged to be grown up too quickly

Some of the quotes from children responding to the NUT survey indicated that they actually felt aggrieved that people did not feel children were competent enough to make their own decisions about what they watch or buy:

*“I feel my age [group] are influenced but can discuss the meaning and decide more for ourselves what we choose”.*

*“I think that companies should definitely be able to promote their products – it isn’t fair otherwise and if people do not wish to buy the products because of the effects they have on you then they should have the will power and common sense to say no”.*

Due to the aforementioned limitations of the methodology used by the NUT and the descriptive nature of the analysis undertaken, the NUTs primary research should be treated with a high degree of caution. We are not aware of who responded and how. While this research could have advanced our knowledge it has instead provided us with only a very limited snapshot on the views of a small and possibly unrepresentative sample of children.

The NUT report also cites a number of secondary sources as supporting their claims for the negative impacts of the media. For example it cites research linking mental illness with materialism and consumption, and that television advertising impacts on children’s food choices. Unfortunately as the report does not provided details of the references for these claims it is impossible to ascertain their validity. In addition the report also makes various unsubstantiated claims such as commercial marketing directed at schools (e.g. school promotions) undermines teacher’s efforts to educate children about exploitation.

## **‘The Commercialisation of Childhood’**

The Compass paper, ‘The Commercialisation of Childhood’ (Williams, 2006), oversimplifies a limited evidence base in support of the view that children are being conditioned into young consumers with a host of resulting ill effects. Unfortunately the research cited is both misleading and outdated in its application based on the aforementioned legislative changes. Below we address a number of the key points made within sections of the Compass report.

### Broadcast Media

The Compass report cites statistics that the average child in the UK, US and Australia sees between 20,000 and 40,000 TV advertisements a year (p. 7). This equates to between 55 and 110 advertisements every day, with the average advert being around 30 seconds long. Current figures for children’s viewing habits as reported by OFCOM (2007) show that children are currently watching 15.8 hours of television per week, which is the equivalent of 2.3 hours per day. The reported figure of 20,000 advertisements is therefore based on children watching 27.6 minutes of advertising every day, with each advert lasting 30 seconds, and with channels showing the maximum number of adverts in any one hour (i.e. 12 minutes).

However, on closer inspection, the OFCOM figures actually show that children spend only 11.3 hours per week in commercial airtime (i.e. where adverts are shown). This is the equivalent of 1.6 hours per day. If the average number of minutes for adverts per hour is 8 minutes<sup>1</sup> then children would typically view 13 minutes of adverts per day – the equivalent of 26 adverts a day or 9,490 per year. It is also worth noting that OFCOM report that, on average, the amount of time children spend watching TV is in decline. Between 2001 and 2005 viewing time reduced by 1.6 hours.

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<sup>1</sup> Rules on the Amount and Distribution of Advertising actually place stricter regulations on advertising time for the Public Service Broadcaster channels of an average of 7 minutes. We have given 8 minutes as an average because rules for other services must not exceed 9 minutes. Furthermore, the European Directive, TV Without Frontiers, has long required no breaks in children’s programmes of less than 30 minutes’ scheduled duration. This Directive has been amended and a stricter rule will be introduced for children requiring no breaks at all in programmes unless they are more than 30 minutes’ scheduled duration. Ofcom is proposing to implement this by December 2009.

Furthermore, we can question what exactly is an average child? Children, like adults, are all considerably different from one another. They each have their own personalities, likes and dislikes, and viewing habits. While a few children will conceivably see upwards of 20,000 adverts a year, most will not. The UK, the US and Australia are also considerably different contexts within which to grow up. For one thing the US and Australia do not have public service broadcasting channels which contain no commercial advertising. Comparing these cultures is not necessarily of benefit to developing a fuller understanding of the varied impacts of marketing on children. We need to ensure that research which is considered has a UK focus.

The report goes on to state that children do not develop the capacity to understand marketing messages until they are aged 11 and 12. While this may be the case for some children it cannot be generalized to all.

*“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, 1998, p 5).





Gunter and Furnham (1998) report that the most commonly cited age at which children are able to distinguish between advertising and programmes is five years; some research has even found children as young as two can make such a distinction (Young, 1997). Other research (e.g. Furnham, 2000), reports that children’s level of understanding as regards advertising develops around age seven, much earlier than the ages reported within the Compass paper.

Both parents and schools can play an important part in developing children’s awareness and understanding of the media from a younger age. The ‘Media Smart’ media literacy programme, launched in 2002, aims to help children develop the ability to understand and interpret advertising effectively from an early age. Media Smart is designed for primary school children aged 6-11 years old. It is the first UK media literacy programme to run inside the classroom and the home using broadcast and written educational materials. Research suggests that factual and evaluative interventions can be successful in modifying the effects of advertising for children over the age of six (Buijzen, 2007).

## New Media

The Commercialisation of Childhood report goes on to state that ‘98% of children and young people have used the internet, 92% of children have access to the internet at school and 75% of children have access at home’ (p. 8). In recent years the number of households with access to the internet has indeed increased greatly – the Childwise Monitor Report (2008) states that 85% of children aged 5-16 years old now go online, either at home or elsewhere, up almost 10% in the last two years. The primary activity for which these children access the internet is to communicate with friends, through instant messaging or social networking sites. Purchasing products or services accounts for just 2% of usage. While figures around internet access are important they should be treated with caution as they do not necessarily always reflect actual patterns of use. Research has suggested that access to an internet connected home computer does not necessarily translate into use by children due to various practical and parenting restrictions (Holloway and Valentine, 2003).

One important aspect of research related to the internet which is not highlighted within the Compass report is what children are actually spending their time on whilst surfing online. Recent research by the LSE (Staksrud, Livingstone and Haddon, 2007) highlighted that certain online activities require further research attention. Specific aspects of usage identified for further study, all of which can be seen to have considerable benefits, included:

-  civic participation (important for redressing the supposed political apathy of youth)
-  the interpretation and evaluation of online content (important for media literacy)
-  content creation (important for identity, expression and creativity)
-  certain kinds of search (e.g. for advice).

It is also little understood how aware children are of advertising on the internet. Previous Kids Industries research projects have found that children do not like advertising pop ups, do not click on them for fear of viruses or costing money, and have also been told by concerned adults not to click on them.

Another figure cited is that between January and March of 2005 alone more than 12.2million children visited commercial websites promoting food and drinks (p. 8). This is almost equivalent to every single child in England and Wales between the age of 0 and 19 accessing these websites. As the likelihood of this is virtually nil one potential

explanation is that a much smaller number of children are accessing these websites repeatedly. This may be for a number of reasons which could be explored through further research.

The Compass report states that on average, children get their first mobile phone at 8 years old (p. 8). As with internet access, the number of children owning a mobile phone is increasing, but again the figures from Compass are misleading. The Mobile Life Youth Survey from The Carphone Warehouse, conducted by YouGov (2006), of more than 1,250 young people in the UK found that ‘very few children have a mobile phone before the age of nine’. The ChildWise Monitor Report illustrates that it is after the age of nine, and predominantly age eleven and upwards, that the majority of children own a mobile phone. Further to this, the Mobile Life Youth Survey found a number of identifiable benefits of such ownership – for example safety “Owning a mobile phone makes 80% of young people feel safer when out and about”.

### Children’s Mental and Physical Health

Mental health issues are seen to be more prevalent now than ever before. However, we are not in a position to say that actual mental health problems have increased, only that the identification of mental health issues has improved to the extent that more accurate diagnoses are being made of symptoms which may in the past have gone unnoticed or misdiagnosed. Hypothesised links between amount of advertising consumption and feelings of unhappiness have not been borne out by the research (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003).

The growth of materialism is not limited to adolescents but is part and parcel of the development of western society as a whole. Research suggests that while advertising does have an impact on levels of materialism this can largely be mediated by children’s awareness and understanding of the media, and through the input of parents (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003).

‘Burger Boy and Sporty Girl’ (Ludvigsen and Sharma, 2004), which is quoted by the NUT research, found that the main influences on children’s food choices were not advertising or friends, but actually the taste of the food and it’s price. While many do opt for junk food this is not because they are unaware of its health implications (in fact they demonstrated a keen awareness of the negative outcomes of consuming junk food), it is

because it contains more fat, salt and sugar which makes it taste good. As one child reported, *'if you don't like the taste you are not going to eat it'*. While children could not agree whether adverts influenced their food choices, they did agree that it may make them want to try a new product. Nevertheless, if the children didn't enjoy it they wouldn't continue to buy it.

In a report for OFCOM around the advertising of foods to children, Livingstone (2006) reported that while advertising may have some impact on food choices and health, the actual effect, as compared to other factors, "remains little discussed and difficult to determine". Among the evidence considered was a US study by Bolton (1983) which found that television advertising is likely to contribute to 2% of the variance of children's eating habits. Greater influences included: parental diet, product price, family meal habits or exercise.

Hastings et al (2003) carried out a systematic review on the evidence around food promotions influence on children. The review concluded that there is evidence that food promotion is likely to have an effect in children's preferences, purchase behaviour and consumption. However, as Ashton (2004) notes, two of the most cited studies within the review report the influence of food advertising on food consumption as being small, particularly in relation to other factors. Therefore links between media advertising and obesity are unfounded, particularly in a cultural context in which people in general are more sedentary than ever before.

## Conclusions

The two reports which we considered can be seen to present an oversimplified and biased overview of the research evidence around the impact of the media on children and young people. As much of the research acknowledges, the links between media consumption and actions such as product purchase is unclear, let alone their effect on such complex constructs as mental or physical wellbeing.

Children typically want to be accepted by their peers, as do adults. Being seen to be cool may be part of this but children are not just passive consumers of commercial messages. Yes they will be influenced to try new products by advertisements, but less so than by other factors, in particular parental behaviour. Even when they do try a new

product they will not continue to purchase it unless they enjoy it. Foods high in fat, sugar and salt taste good which is why children develop a taste for it from a young age. Children do not purchase things because adverts tell them too, most are critical and demonstrate a keen awareness of the purpose of adverts.

OFCOM itself concluded that the impact of television advertising on food preferences and choices was “*modest*” and that more important were children’s own taste preference, price, familiarity, peer pressure, healthiness and convenience. This effect was seen to warrant amendments to the rules and these have since been made. It is crucial that further research is carried out to accurately determine UK children’s media consumption across all mediums, and that the impact of this consumption on their well being is explored in detail through academic studies which employ appropriate measures.

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