



CANADA'S CENTRE
FOR DIGITAL AND
MEDIA LITERACY

Talking to Kids about Advertising

Today's kids have become the most marketed-to generation in history, due to their spending power and their future influence as adult consumers. By talking to kids about advertising - how it works and how they're targeted - we can help them to become more savvy as consumers and more resistant to the pressures to be "cool."

Here are some tips on talking to kids about advertising.

- **Start young.** Until the age of six or seven, children have difficulty distinguishing advertising from reality and may not understand that ads are there to sell something. In fact, children watching TV often find the commercials more engaging than the programs! Talking to children about advertising from an early age encourages them to become active - not passive - consumers of commercial messages.
- **Explain how advertising works.** Talk about how the job of marketers is to play on human insecurities by creating ads that imply their products will improve our lives and bring us happiness. Have kids make a list of the good things in their lives (the things they value) and then make a list of the things they wish they could buy. Have them compare the "real life" list with the "wish" list. Do they think the things on the wish list will bring them happiness? If so, why?
- **Help your kids spot ads around them.** Public spaces, stadiums, schools, even our clothes often have branding on them. Sensitize your kids to the ads they see that promote brand awareness, so they can spot them in more subtle contexts like product placements in TV shows and movies.
- **Point out the tricks of the trade.** Explain that advertisers use many methods to get us to buy their products. Some common "tricks of the trade" include pulling on our heartstrings by drawing us into a story and making us feel good; using misleading words, such as "the taste of real . . .," "studies have shown" and "for a limited time only"; making exaggerated claims about a product; and using cartoon characters or celebrities to sell products or brand names.
- **Explain how marketers target young people.** Look for examples of how marketers try to build brand loyalty in young children. Talk about cross-marketing - show how the release of a new kids' movie is usually preceded by a huge marketing campaign involving tie-in toys, fast food, clothing and books. Explain how marketers target image-conscious pre-teens and teens with messages about being "cool" and attractive.



- **Separate media and merchandising.** A lot of TV shows aimed at children exist mostly to sell toys. Steer your kids towards programs with the fewest merchandising tie-ins, and be firm about not buying tie-in toys.
- **Discuss stereotyping, gender and body image issues in advertising.** Ads often have more racial or gender stereotyping than other media, and frequently promote unrealistic and unhealthy body image in both girls and boys. When you see stereotyping in ads, point it out to your kids and help them to understand how it might be hurtful to the people being portrayed and how it can limit how we see them – and how they see themselves. When it comes to body image, make sure you're your children understand that what they're seeing is a fantasy, something that was made to sell a product and that camera tricks and photo manipulation are often used to make models conform to the "ideal" body shape.
- **De-construct food advertising.** Most food advertising aimed at kids is for fast food, candy and pre-sweetened cereals. Point out misleading language in food commercials, such as a description of a sugary cereal that is "part of a nutritious breakfast" or "natural fruit roll-ups" that don't contain any fruit. Explain how food is prepared by special artists to look perfect in ads. Talk about how fast food restaurants use tie-ins with popular movies and TV shows in order to attract kids.
- **Talk about the value of money.** One of the most important lessons we can teach our children is how to be smart about money. Our consumer culture promotes spending over saving, so we have to counter that message on a regular basis by discussing purchasing decisions and money-management skills with kids.
- **Discuss how to be a wise and responsible consumer.** Show kids how to comparison shop, read reviews and investigate warranties. Talk about the effect of mass consumerism on the environment. Encourage them to think about ways they can cut down on buying non-essential consumer products.
- **Encourage your kids to speak out** when they see offensive, deceitful or inappropriate advertising. Our website section [Taking Action](#) tells you whom to contact for complaints about ads in different media.

