

Information or Manipulation ?

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Regulators Urged to Further Limit Ads Aimed at Children

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Federal regulators should restrict television advertising aimed at children 8 and younger because research shows youngsters lack the skills to question a commercial's claims as anything but fact, the American Psychological Association said yesterday.

The association said extensive studies found that young children are unable to comprehend televised advertising messages and, as a result, are likely to consider commercials as "truthful, accurate and unbiased. This can lead to unhealthy eating habits as evidenced by today's youth obesity epidemic," the group said in a news release.

The Federal Trade Commission tried to ban television advertising to young children 25 years ago, but Congress overruled it. The psychologists said the situation is worse now because the advertising is more aggressive.

The psychologists' group was vague about what specific restrictions the government should take, but suggested a variety of options. They included a ban on all ads on television shows aimed at children 8 and younger, a more limited ban on ads for specific products (sugary foods and salty snacks), a tighter limit on how many minutes of advertising could be aired during children's shows and a firmer rule requiring TV shows to more clearly distinguish between programming and commercials.

The association said that advertisers spend more than \$12 billion a year on messages aimed at the youth market, including children over 8. The average child -- no matter what age -- watches more than 40,000 television commercials a year, it added.

"All advertising to children too young to recognize the persuasive intent of such messages is by its very nature exploitative," said the report by a special task force. It added that advertisers should also put disclaimers in words children can understand. Instead of "some assembly required," the

commercial should say, "You have to put it together," the report said.

Advertising industry officials and kids marketing consultants immediately criticized the recommendations, saying the industry already has a special voluntary code for children's ads and that the courts would look dimly at attempts to regulate commercial speech.

Additionally, they said, parents have a responsibility to advise children on an ad's truthfulness. "These ads are generally not targeted to young kids alone; clearly the adult has to be part of this process," said Daniel L. Jaffe, executive vice president for government relations for the Association of National Advertisers, which represents national brands.

"This is a dangerous precedent," said Paul Kurnit, president of the kids-marketing firm KidShop. "The idea of putting restrictions to kids 8 and under is unenforceable, because how do you specifically target 8-year-olds and under when 9- and 10-year-olds watch close to the same media?"

When the FTC proposed a ban in 1978, the concern was tooth cavities, not obesity. The agency was labeled "the national nanny" and Congress temporarily halted all funding for the FTC, forcing it to shut down. Congress also passed a law barring the agency from implementing any such rule or similar rule in the future.

Congress would have to change the law or the FTC could still challenge individual ads on a case-by-case basis, to establish the same principle, but that is unlikely given its Republican majority as well as the Republican majority in Congress, Michael Pertschuk, chairman of the FTC when it proposed the ban in 1978, said yesterday.

The Federal Communications Commission also regulates children's ads on TV, limiting commercials to 10.5 minutes per hour on the weekends, 12 minutes per hour during the week. But the task force said those limits need to be reduced.

By relying on parents to say no, advertisers "overlook the psychological difficulties parents face to constantly be responding negatively to their child's requests," added another task force member, Dale L. Kunkel, a professor at the Washington office of the University of California at Santa Barbara. "Parents give in too much and that's why you have childhood obesity. Over half the ads are for junk food, sugared cereal, sodas, candies, potato chips."