

# The Commercialization of Children's Television

Committee on Communications

The principal goal of commercial children's television is to sell products to children. Advertisers use two approaches to sell their products. The traditional method intersperses commercials in programs that are attractive to children to promote products unrelated to the program. Foods and toys constitute the two most frequently advertised product categories. The second approach, instituted in 1982, features toy action figures as the main characters of a program. Because these programs promote specific toys and are often developed by the marketing divisions of toy companies, they are known more appropriately as "program-length commercials."

Young children are unable to distinguish between programs and commercials and do not understand that commercials are designed to sell products.<sup>1,2</sup> This observation suggests that any advertising directed at young children is inherently unfair. Program-length commercials make distinctions between programs and commercials even more difficult.

In the past, broadcasters followed the commercial time limits developed by the National Association of Broadcasters. In 1984, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) declared that commercial time would be regulated by the marketplace. Subsequently, commercial time during children's programs increased dramatically. In addition, voluntary guidelines established by the toy industry suggesting that characters or products associated with a program should not appear in advertising within or adjacent to a program<sup>3</sup> have been stretched.

The use of commercials and programs to sell products now forms a tight ring of commercialism around children's television from which young viewers cannot escape. Television programs promote toys. The same toys are used to promote cereals and other foods. Commercials for the cereals, named after the toys, indirectly promote the toys and the toy-based program, as well as the cereal and other related products. Each product promotes the other.

In 1990, retail toy sales constituted a \$13 billion industry.<sup>3</sup> Despite recent declines in broadcasting revenues, children's programming has continued to be extremely profitable. The development and promotion of toys by movies and television<sup>4</sup> supports the likelihood that the commercialization of children's television will continue into the next century. It is also noteworthy that a marketing executive from the toy industry was appointed recently as director of children's television programming for a major network.<sup>5</sup>

The commercialization of children's television exploits children. Although the number of program-length commercials appears to have declined recently, too few alternatives exist for parents concerned about what their children watch on television. Cable television has been cited repeatedly as a source of alternative programming. However, 40% of the United States population does not have access to cable television.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, many stations available on cable carry syndicated programs previously broadcast on the major networks.

The Children's Television Act of 1990 mandated that all broadcasters carry children's educational or instructional programming as a condition for license renewal. However, the FCC has concluded that stations can meet this requirement by citing public service announcements or short vignettes in fulfillment of their programming requirement rather than developing and broadcasting their own programs. Local oversight will be required to monitor how stations meet the new guidelines.

The Children's Television Act of 1990 also limited the commercial time on children's programming to 10½ minutes per hour on weekends, and 12 minutes per hour on weekdays. Although the bill directed the FCC to consider whether children's programs based on toys constitute program-length commercials, the Commission concluded that only those shows that included paid advertisements for the toy featured in the program could be classified as program-length commercials.

It is the Academy's position that a program-length commercial can be defined as a program that markets a toy based on the program within 2 years after the program begins. The latter definition would exempt programs such as *Sesame Street*, which depends on the sale of its licensed products to support its programs. However, this definition would apply to all programs in the future.

Commercials broadcast during children's programming also promote foods that may have an adverse influence on children's health. Obesity and elevated cholesterol levels are two of the most prevalent nutritional diseases among children in the United States, and television viewing has been associated with both.<sup>7,8</sup> Food commercials broadcast during children's programming often promote high-caloric density foods that may contribute to the energy imbalance that results in obesity.

Since 1978, breakfast cereals have been the first or second most frequently advertised product on Saturday morning children's television.<sup>9</sup> This pattern still persists. For example, in 1987, food commercials ac-

counted for 71% of network ads; breakfast cereals accounted for almost 30% of food commercials; and cookies, candy, or other snacks accounted for another 34%.<sup>10</sup> Because young children cannot understand the relationship between food choices and chronic nutritional diseases, advertising food products to children promotes profit rather than health.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS

1. Parents must educate children to become responsible and informed consumers. A variety of resources should be developed to help parents teach children that commercials are designed to sell products. These resources could be made available to parents through schools, libraries, and pediatricians' offices. The development of curricula to teach media literacy that can be used in schools and a variety of other settings should be encouraged and supported.

2. In an era of continuing deregulation, parents, interested groups, pediatric committees, and communities should monitor local television broadcasts to ensure adherence to existing limits on commercial time and the broadcast of programs consistent with the mandate of the Children's Television Act of 1990. Pediatricians should promote and lead these activities.

3. The Academy should continue to support the development of more programming alternatives for children and efforts to eliminate program-length commercials.

4. Food advertisements aimed at children should be eliminated. Parents rather than children should determine what children should eat. Children are unprepared to make appropriate food choices and do not understand the relationship of food choices to health maintenance and disease prevention.

5. Research regarding the long-term consequences of purchasing habits initiated in childhood should be encouraged.

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