



# Parent Pages



Resources for Christian Parents in the 21st Century

Vol. 12 No. 4 December 2012

## Got Influence?

From milk to milkshakes and tacos to toys, the advertising world sees your children as prime targets for increasing their sales. When previous generations were growing up, exposure to advertising was limited to television, magazines and roadside billboards. Today's children are bombarded with more advertising. In addition to the 3,000 or more ads they see on television every day, they are exposed to ads on websites, product placements, kids clubs, promotions and toy tie-ins. Companies have the goal to create brand awareness and loyalty at a very early age. Their efforts are apparently successful, as children as young as 3 years old can readily identify fast food, soda, store and toy logos.

Advertising is everywhere, and for many of us it is something to ignore. For children, the issue is more complicated. Young children cannot evaluate advertising for its real purpose. They are not likely to see how advertising tries to influence them into accepting all they see as fact. For older children, the strong emotional connection created by advertising can cloud their judgment.

The repetitiveness of advertising makes use of classical



©istockphoto

conditioning to train children to develop a preference for what they see. This teaches children to crave unhealthy foods, since there are far more ads for fast food than for vegetables. It can also convince them that they need things such as toys and video games. For older children, there is an added danger of creating an unrealistic expectation regarding appearance, which can contribute to body image problems. The real world is full of people with less-than-perfect skin, normal weight and muscular physiques. The advertising world does not feature these people.

In the face of all of this advertising influence, what is a parent to do? First, remember that God gave these children to you — not to the world. The strength and wisdom you need to accomplish this task is yours for the asking. Keep this issue a topic for prayer, and His Spirit will guide you.

One of the easiest things you can do is to limit the amount of time your child spends with a screen: television, computer, video games and the like. Setting a limit of two hours a day will go a long way to reducing the repetitive advantage of advertising. Make sure that you talk with your children more often than advertisements talk to them. Be sure to discuss the difference between what we need and what we want. You can repeat this conversation for many different situations: at the store, when watching advertisements together or when your child asks for something. These conversations could also naturally lead to discussions regarding the blessings of saving money and giving to the church.

In addition to the ability to read and write, children also need to have media literacy skills. Media literacy is the understanding that advertisers have an agenda and that it is important to detect that agenda to evaluate what is seen. The first part of this type of literacy is to be aware of the amount of time spent with media. School-age children should be encouraged to keep track of the hours spent surfing the web or watching TV. This helps them to see the extent of the influence of media. Help them to make lists of alternative activities.



©istockphoto

As children age, they learn to analyze media. This skill can be taught when you experience advertising while watching television or online media with your child. You can point out what advertisers are trying to do. Teach your children the how of advertising. Help them see how advertisers want to create a particular feeling that compels people to buy the product. Teach your child to ask questions such as: “Do I really need this toy or does this commercial want me to think it would make me feel good?” Also ask: “Will I really be the only person at my school without this toy?” and “Is this product good for me?”

The next step in media literacy is to examine the who and why behind advertising. This is the process of understanding that an advertisement for a restaurant wants you to eat there; it is not concerned with nutrition. Similarly, the video game company wants to make a sale; it is not concerned with education. This detective work is important when examining websites that seem to be a fun place to play but that actually have the intent of selling something. This discernment will help children make good decisions regarding advertisements and media usage.

One additional step toward media literacy is to remember your family values. The more you talk about what your family considers important — including sharing your faith, talking about God’s Word and worshiping together — the stronger the influence you will have on your child. This is a foundation carefully built from the first days of your child’s life to the point he moves out of the house. Your child’s faith will create a filter through which she views the influences of advertising. Hearing God’s Word and participating in the Sacraments strengthens faith given by God. This is a constant and abiding influence.

### For further study

Here is what pediatricians have to say about children and advertising: <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/118/6/2563.full>.



©istockphoto

## Parent Pages

Vol. 12 • No. 4  
December 2012

*Parent Pages* is published by LCMS School Ministry (Office of National Mission)  
1333 S. Kirkwood Road, St. Louis, MO 63122-7295  
314-965-9000 • [www.lcms.org](http://www.lcms.org)

**Writer:** Kim Marxhausen **Editor:** Ed Grube **Designer:** Carolyn Niehoff

**To Reprint:** Permission is granted to reprint articles from this newsletter with the line “Reprinted with permission of “LCMS School Ministry.”

