

Understanding Advertisements

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Every day we are surrounded by advertisements on TV, in magazines and newspapers, on signs and billboards, and on the Internet.

Advertising has a relentless influence on kids. How many ads do you think the average kid sees on TV in a given year? Would you believe 40,000?

What is most troubling about all this advertising exposure is that young kids are not so good at telling fact from fiction. They don't understand that the ad's purpose is to sell, and they often accept advertising claims and images as the truth.

We know from experience that teaching kids how to look at advertisements with a critical eye for the truth can be very effective in reducing some of the negative effects of advertising. You can help your kids get better at assessing ad messages by encouraging them to talk with you about what the ads are really trying to say.



When To Do It

While watching television with your kids

What To Do

(Note: After the basic steps that follow, you'll find two variations to use if your kids are more comfortable with some advance preparation.)

For the next month, when viewing TV with your kids, watch for commercials for goods that they are familiar with; this will make it easier for them to assess the real message.

After one of these commercials, ask your kids the following questions:

- What do you think that commercial is selling?
- Who do they think is watching the commercial?
- How does the advertiser try to get your attention?
- Do you think the advertiser is being completely truthful? How can you tell? Do you think that the product (toy, food, other item) would be as much fun in real life as it looks like on TV?
- If you were advertising a competing product, what would you say?

Consider recording some commercials if you have TIVO or a DVD or video recorder. Seeing an ad a second or third time can help you point out parts of the messaging with your kids that offer answers to their questions. (When you're watching TV "live," your kids may be more interested in watching the program than talking about the commercials.)

Variations

Kids who like to know about an activity in advance will appreciate your telling them you're all going to be taking a close look at commercials together.

If you have a kid who always wants to be well prepared, offer to go through the questions you'll be asking — and answer any questions they have — before you start watching TV.

What You Need

- TV

Talk About It

As you explore the underlying messages with your kids, see if they have their own questions or ideas on how to evaluate the truth of the ads you are watching. Are some advertisers more truthful than others?