

SKILL BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

Influence of Commercials

Question: It seems like every time my child watches videos and television she starts asking for the things she sees advertised. How can I curb this behavior without getting rid of media all together?

Advertisements present many opportunities for you to help your daughter be aware of the influence of media while promoting the life skill of Critical Thinking.

Critical Thinking is the ongoing search for valid and reliable knowledge to guide beliefs, decisions and actions.

1

Watch together as much as possible and have “just in time” conversations about the commercials you watch together.

David Anderson of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, a researcher on children's television, emphasizes the importance of using television to trigger conversations:

If a parent is wise, they can use a television program as a launching point for an important discussion about the world, about the child or about how the child is interpreting the world.

As an adult, you know that the purpose of commercials is to sell you something, but children need help in recognizing that purpose—commercials can seem like entertainment, just like the shows. As you watch commercials with your child, talk about the products and the strategies the advertiser is using. You can ask her things like:

- “What is this ad trying to sell?”
- “How is this ad trying to sell things to children?”

These conversations, as we describe in greater detail below, will help develop your child's awareness of the impact of commercials as well as help her to improve her ability to take in information, think about it, reflect on it and analyze it.

2

Encourage your child to question and think scientifically about the ads and products.

According to a study conducted by Judy DeLoache at the University of Virginia, young children tend to believe much of what adults tell them, even if it differs from their experiences in the real world. But, as they enter the school-age years, they can make even greater use of Critical Thinking skills.

You can model and promote scientific thinking by asking your daughter to question the claims, uses and purposes of products. This will also encourage her to pursue the truth and find out more, an essential building block for later learning. Ask her:

- “How can you find out if this information is true? What are the advertisers trying to make us feel or do with this commercial?”

3

Turn your child’s requests into games and activities that will promote critical viewing skills.

David Considine, writing for the Center for Media Literacy, suggests that when parents view television with their children, they can guide their children to think about the content, the presentation, the external forces shaping the ads and their connection with reality.

Children progress in their ability to evaluate the accuracy of information from others, moving from an understanding that others might not know something to an understanding that others may be intentionally or unintentionally deceitful. You can help your child hone these abilities by promoting critical viewing skills in fun and engaging ways.

- **Pros and Cons.** While watching television, ask your child to create a list that includes the pros and cons of the products she wants. This strategy promotes Critical Thinking as it asks her to reflect on the difference between her wants and her needs. She must also think about the effect of outside sources on what she wants.
- **Commercial Critic.** Your child can be a commercial critic and ask questions that promote the skills of analyzing and evaluating like:
 - “Why did the advertising company choose that way of selling the product?”
 - “How were they doing it? Were they trying to say all the cool kids wear this brand of clothes? Were they trying to use peer pressure or sex or adventure or humor to sell this product?”
 - “Does this ad work? Does it make you remember the name of the product?”
 - “Do you want to buy it? Why or why not?”
- **Facts versus Opinion.** Encourage your child to be a detective and find out what is true and what is only opinion within the commercial asking questions like: “Is this ad accurate? Are the claims they are making true?”