

BYE BUY  
CHILDHOOD



A report into the commercialisation of childhood

September 2010

# **Bye Buy Childhood**

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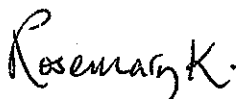
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## **Foreword**

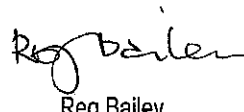
Mothers' Union is a worldwide organisation that works to support family life through its grassroots membership. We believe in the value of the family, in its many forms, as a source of love and support for individuals and the basis for a caring community. Our members care passionately about the commercialisation of childhood. Without wishing to sentimentalise childhood, our members want children to be free from the commercial pressures that promote materialism, affect wellbeing and add to stress in family life.

Whilst we are concerned about the impact of the commercial world on childhood we know that not only children are influenced – adults can also be susceptible. Without awareness of and alertness to how and why the commercial world is selling to us, we are at risk of allowing ourselves to be over-influenced. However, children and adults do not have to be passive recipients of commercial messages. We can choose what to accept and what to filter out. In this way, the commercialisation of childhood is the responsibility of all.

Mothers' Union has compiled this report based on our research, that was carried out by ComRes, into the opinions and experiences of 1000 parents; a review of existing research and literature on the commercialisation of childhood, and on the thoughts and experiences of over 1000 Mothers' Union members. From this we have launched our *Bye Buy Childhood* campaign to raise awareness of the issue and push for change.



Rosemary Kempbell  
Worldwide President



Reg Bailey  
Chief Executive



# Executive summary

*"As mum to a 16 year old boy and 19 year old girl I have had to deal constantly with the effect that marketing and advertising has had on our family lives. When they were young a simple 'no' and using distraction to other products while shopping was my main strategy. As teenagers, saying 'no' simply aggravated the situation."*

Mothers' Union member, UK

We believe that children should be valued as children and not targeted as adult consumers. Childhood has become a marketing opportunity worth £99 billion in the UK<sup>1</sup> and £350 million is spent in the UK each year on persuading children to consume.<sup>2</sup> Manipulative techniques exploit children's natural credulity and use them as a conduit to the household purse. The materialism this encourages has negative effects on children's physical health, mental and emotional wellbeing, on their values, educational development and relationships with families and peers. The use of sexualised content to sell to children and the imposition of sexuality on children to market goods is particularly abhorrent.

Our research has found that the majority of parents agree that media content and advertising seen by children can be harmful to them. In particular, parents feel that media content and advertising makes children more sexually aware at a younger age than they would have been otherwise, and that it makes them feel that they have to act older than they really want to. Parents are also concerned that films and video games with sexualised and violent themes are too accessible to children and that the 9pm watershed is not adhered to. Parents believe that responsibility for media content and advertising that children are exposed to should lie with regulatory bodies, along with media companies, government and parents themselves, but that for films and video games in particular regulatory bodies do not do enough to protect children. There is more divided opinion over whether advertising in general aimed at children is age appropriate or well regulated.

Whilst the debate is moving further towards action, particularly with the coalition Government promising to 'crack down on the irresponsible advertising and marketing, especially to children' and 'take steps to tackle the commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood'<sup>3</sup>, this cannot be achieved through any one single measure. Rather, it requires a number of constituents to assess where their responsibilities lie and to work together - families to reflect on their consumer habits and to take positive action; civil society, academics and NGOs to continue raising awareness and pressing for change; industry to manufacture, market and sell responsibly; and government to intercede where it can, especially in protecting children from the 'sex sells' approach.

<sup>1</sup> Ed Mayo and Agnes Nairn, *Consumer Kids: How Big Business Is Grooming Our Children for Profit*. Constable, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> David Plachaud, *Freedom to be a Child: Commercial Pressures on Children*, Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, July 2007 (ref taken from Advertising statistics Yearbook, Advertising Association).

<sup>3</sup> *The Coalition: our programme for government*. Cabinet Office, May 2010.

## 1. Target market: childhood

*"What is most troubling is that children's culture has become virtually indistinguishable from consumer culture over the course of the last century. The cultural marketplace is now a key arena for the formation of the sense of self and of peer relationships, so much so that parents often are stuck between giving into a kid's purchase demands or risking their child becoming an outcast on the playground."*

- Dan Cook, Assistant Professor of Advertising and Sociology, University of Illinois

The term 'commercialisation of childhood' is now a well recognised phrase in the UK, Republic of Ireland and other parts of the world. It refers to the 'grooming' of children for consumerhood, and the treatment of childhood as a marketing opportunity. It is helpful to define what is meant by 'commercial influences' and distinguish between marketing and advertising. Marketing is the broad term used for selling products or services, including the packaging, pricing, placing and promotion of the product or service. Advertising is one form of promotion, although there is more to promotion than advertising, such as the use of promotional toys, websites and PR campaigns.<sup>5</sup> These, together with other messages from media and industry can be described as commercial influences.

As a social construct, or 'social artifact', rather than a biological category,<sup>6</sup> childhood is, and has been throughout history, susceptible to change and influence - including economic influences. It is nothing new for children to be economically active but children's economic role within the developed world is now predominantly as consumers rather than producers.<sup>7</sup> In the UK, children between the ages of four and 15 receive on average £5.80 per week pocket money<sup>8</sup> plus another £16 of ad-hoc handouts.<sup>9</sup> Children in Ireland receive on average €9.69 at primary school age and €18.51 at secondary school age.<sup>10</sup> Combined with the earnings that 40% of 11-16 year olds make from paid employment<sup>11</sup> a lucrative market is ripe for the picking, especially for those who market and sell food, drink, clothes, footwear, personal care items, magazines, books, stationery, music and entertainment, games, toys and mobile phones.<sup>12</sup>

Research into the impact of the commercial world on children has coincided with the growth and diversification of mass communication, and children's access to it.

<sup>4</sup> Dan Cook, *Lunchbox hegemony; Kids and the Marketplace, Then & Now*. LiP Magazine, August 2001.  
[http://www.lipmagazine.org/articles/featcook\\_124.shtml](http://www.lipmagazine.org/articles/featcook_124.shtml)

<sup>5</sup> BizCommunity.com <http://www.bizcommunity.com/Article/196/423/1742.html>

<sup>6</sup> Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood*. Vintage Books, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> David Piachaud, *Freedom to be a Child*.

<sup>8</sup> Dr Elizabeth Kilbey, *Every Little Helpers*. Tesco Bank, July 2010.

<https://mediacentre.metafaq.com/resources/mediacentre/news/everylittlehelpers>

<sup>9</sup> *The Impact of the Commercial World on Children's Wellbeing: Report of an Independent Assessment*. Department for Children, Schools and Families, December 2009.

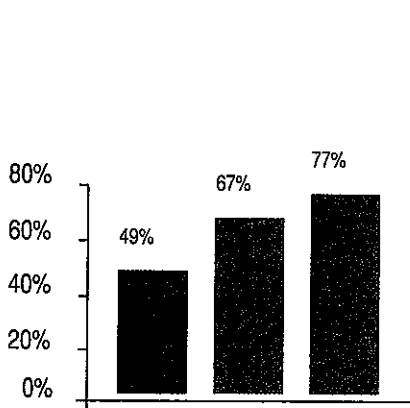
<sup>10</sup> Research conducted by Schooldays.ie on behalf of Bank of Ireland Life in June and July 2008.

<http://www.bankofirelandlife.ie/Latest-News/Average-cost-of-educating-your-child-can-add-up-to.aspx>

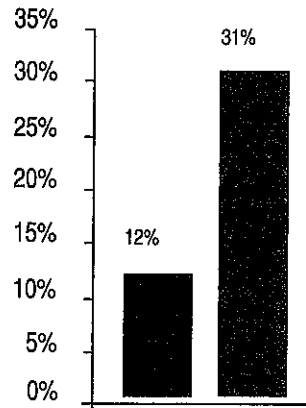
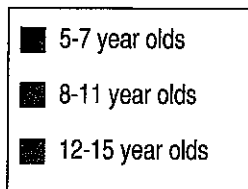
<sup>11</sup> Ed Mayo, *Shopping Generation*. National Consumer Council, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Office for National Statistics, *Children's Spending*. June 2005.

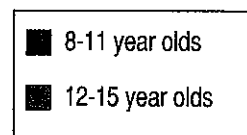
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Presence of TV in bedroom (UK)



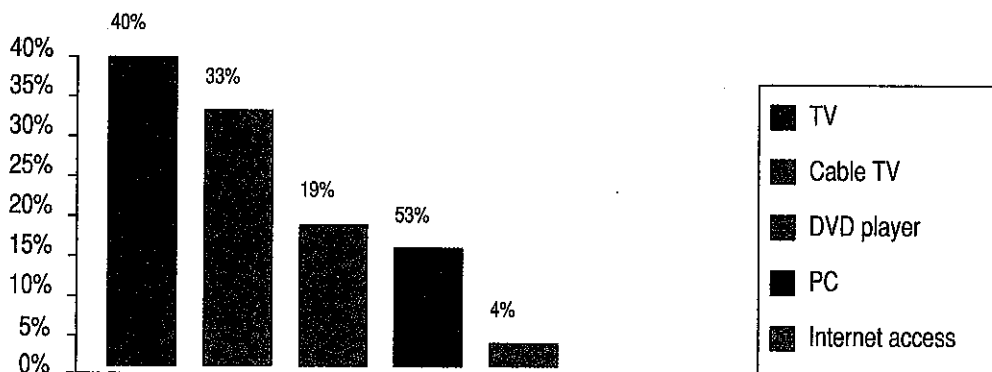
Presence of internet in bedroom (UK)



Source: Ofcom<sup>13</sup>

In the UK many children have televisions and PCs in their bedrooms and most use the internet regularly.<sup>14</sup> On average, British children aged five to 16 now spend nearly six hours a day in front of a screen.<sup>15</sup> Mobile phones are increasingly important to children, not just as a communication tool but also as a multimedia device, with 77% of eight to 15 year olds owning one.<sup>16</sup>

Children in Ireland spend more than four hours per day per day watching television.<sup>17</sup> They also have access to a variety of media in their bedrooms, although not as much as British children.<sup>18</sup>



Ownership of media in children's bedrooms, all ages (Ireland)

Source: Broadcasting Commission of Ireland<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> UK children's media literacy. Ofcom Research Document, March 2010.

<sup>14</sup> 99% of 12-15 year olds, 93% of 8-11 year olds and 75% of 5-7 year olds use the internet regularly UK children's media literacy. Ofcom Research Document, March 2010.

<sup>15</sup> BBC News, 19 January 2009 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7837848.stm>

<sup>16</sup> Childhood and family life: Socio-demographic changes. The Social Issues Research Centre, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> RedBranch School Health [http://www.red-branch.com/tv\\_news.htm](http://www.red-branch.com/tv_news.htm)

<sup>18</sup> Children's Advertising Code: Research into children's viewing patterns in Ireland. Broadcasting Commission of Ireland, April 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

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In our research, parents reported that they felt they had a fair amount of control over the media content their children see. Parents feel that they have the greatest control over their children's film and television viewing but the least over their children's use of social networking websites. This is important to note because, as section 2 will outline, online peer to peer marketing – including through social networking sites - is a powerful tool for developing a brand's reputation and profits.

## How much control do you feel you have over the content your child/children view in each of the following?

	Social networking sites e.g. Bebo	Video games	Television	Films	Magazines	Internet
A lot / some control	57%	68%	78%	81%	68%	71%
No / little control	24%	20%	18%	14%	22%	19%

Source: ComRes for Mothers' Union  
 Telephone interviews conducted from 18<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> August 2010 based on 1004 parents with children under 18 out of 4108 respondents. Regions covered: South East, Midlands, North England, Wales and South West Scotland.<sup>20</sup>

These results show parents' perceptions about their control over their children's viewing habits. However, we note these perceptions are somewhat incommensurate with other findings from our research. Section 4 shows that a high percentage of parents are concerned about the ease with which children can access violent or sexualised media content. This may suggest either a different feeling about the viewing habits of one's own children compared to children in general, or a lack of consistent parental concern or control.

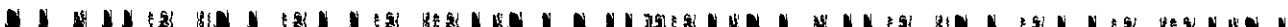
In this debate children cannot be viewed in isolation from their families. Parental values, attitudes and habits shape those of their children, and the changes in family consumer habits are reflected in those of children. Household spending on consumer goods has increased over the past 60 years and the television is now central to how many families organise their time and space. Moreover, the Social Issues Research Centre argues that consumerism is part of the family ideal. Adults seek to improve family life and the wellbeing of children through consumer goods – 'it is in the last fifty years or so that consumption has become the primary means for representations of the family and, importantly, of childhood within the context of family life.'<sup>21</sup>

Alison Pugh, of the University of Virginia, asks the question: 'how is the commercialization of childhood shaping what it means to care and what it means to belong?' She argues that parents demonstrate care for their children by helping them to fit in with society, particularly within their peer group – what she terms the 'economy of dignity'. The way in which many children seek to 'belong' is to share experiences, particularly of modern culture as shaped by the media and marketers. Some parents, because of their desire for their children to have dignity and not be excluded by others, buy into the prevailing trends and latest products. Reaction to children's 'consumer emergencies' can also be a result of the desire to connect with their children, guilt for not having time to spend with them and a response to memories of their own childhood anxieties.<sup>22</sup> In effect, parents can perpetuate the belief that owning equals value and belonging – a marketer's dream.

<sup>20</sup> ComRes, on behalf of Mothers' Union, interviewed 1004 parents of children aged under 18 online between 18th and 24th August 2010. The sample was representative of all parents in Great Britain. Regions covered: South East, Midlands, North England, Wales and South West, Scotland. ComRes is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules. Full data tables available at [www.comres.co.uk](http://www.comres.co.uk).

<sup>21</sup> *Childhood and family life: Socio-demographic changes*. The Social Issues Research Centre, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Alison Pugh, *Longing and Belonging: Parents, Children, and Consumer Culture*. University of California Press, 2009.





## 2. Smart cookies: recruiting young brand ambassadors

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Of course, marketing is a legitimate industry, an important part of commercial survival and part of the creative landscape. In the UK, £14.5 billion was spent on advertising in 2009<sup>23</sup> and it is estimated that £350 million of this is spent on advertising directly to children.<sup>24</sup> The spending on television advertising aimed at children has decreased over the past ten years to around £200 million in 2007, but there has been an accompanying rise in children's exposure to advertising of 'neutral' products or those aimed at adults.<sup>25</sup> Around €130m is spent on food and drink advertising in Ireland, much of which is seen by children.<sup>26</sup>

However, the purpose of marketing is to sell, by creating an incentive to purchase. It is some of the incentives and techniques used, as well as some of the products themselves, that cause concern, especially those which appear to take advantage of, or exploit, children's natural willingness to trust. Young children are influenced by marketing from as young as 18 months and at this age can recognise a corporate label. At about two and a half they can associate items with specific brand names.<sup>27</sup> Up to the age of seven, children will generally accept television advertising at face value.<sup>28</sup> Children do not develop the capacity to understand that marketing messages are trying to sell them something until they are about 11 or 12.<sup>29</sup>

Key methods of persuading children to buy or ask adults to buy products or services for them, include the use of premium offers, such as competitions and give-aways, and the use of promotional characters such as cartoons and celebrities. Children's purchase requests are influenced by these methods and, in particular, the use of promotional characters is positively associated with children's recognition of, and attitude towards, a product.<sup>30</sup> 'Advergaming' on the internet draw children to a product or brand through interactive entertainment, taking advantage of the fact that younger children in particular are less able to distinguish between what is advertising and what is core content. These advergaming will try to initiate children into a brand and create a 'brand habit' for when they are older, if the product is more likely to be used by adults rather than children.<sup>31</sup>

Magazines also advertise in a seamless manner – for example *Mizz* magazine featured a 'true story' of a 17 year old girl's battle with an undiagnosable skin condition, which has only been alleviated through the use of *Simple* products. This was adjacent to a competition to find a 'Teen Simple Star' who will 'be rewarded with all sorts of exciting prizes, including a year as the 'Official Simple Video Blogger'.' Whilst the girl's story may be true, the article does not indicate that it is advertising a product, as do adverts in magazines aimed at adults.<sup>32</sup>

In *Consumer Kids: How Big Business Is Grooming Our Children for Profit*, Ed Mayo and Agnes Nairn analyse the ways in which marketers recruit children to become 'brand ambassadors'. The internet is a key tool, with websites collecting information from children and young people either directly or through tracking cookies, which then help marketers target children more effectively. Websites such as Dubit ([www.dubitchat.com](http://www.dubitchat.com)) recruit young people directly to take part in questionnaires and market products to their friends for payment. This technique works

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<sup>23</sup> Advertising Association <http://www.adassoc.org.uk/aa/index.cfm>

<sup>24</sup> David Piachaud, *Freedom to be a Child*.

<sup>25</sup> *Assessment of the Impact of the Commercial World on children's Wellbeing: TV Media Review 1997 to 2007*, Neilsen.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.independent.ie/business/irish/food-giants-serve-up-a-836412bn-dish-to-children-1773255.html> (2009)

<sup>27</sup> Martin Lindstrom, *BRANDchild: Remarkable insights in the minds of today's global kids and their relationships with brands*, Kogan Page, 2003.

<sup>28</sup> Findings from the US Surgeon General, in Sharon Beder, *Turning Children into Consumers*, Medialens, 2009.

[http://www.medialens.org/alerts/09/090629\\_turning\\_children\\_into.php](http://www.medialens.org/alerts/09/090629_turning_children_into.php)

<sup>29</sup> Sue Palmer, *Toxic Childhood*, Orion, 2006.

<sup>30</sup> Kelly, Hattersley, King and Flood, *Persuasive food marketing to children: use of cartoons and competitions in Australian commercial television advertisements*, Health Promotion International, Vol.23 No.4, August 2008.

<sup>31</sup> Ed Mayo and Agnes Nairn, *Consumer Kids*.

<sup>32</sup> *Mizz* magazine, No.658, 5th - 18th August 2010.

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because 68% of consumers trust the advice of peers.<sup>33</sup> In effect, children are encouraged to take advantage of their friendships and family relationships to earn money for companies with whom they have no relationship, other than an economic one.

In his acclaimed book, *BRANDchild*, marketing expert Martin Lindstrom outlines how companies can foster loyalty within young consumers. Tried and tested techniques include making the brand 'cool', 'fun' and 'popular'; using toy and cartoon characters, pop stars and celebrities; creating a product 'story' or a sense of community; offering a loyalty programme or using product placement. Other methods, however, go beyond cultivating loyalty into the realms of manipulation. These include capitalising on children's fears of being perceived negatively if they do not have up-to-date/on trend stuff and tapping into the 'pack leaders' who others are likely to follow.<sup>34</sup> Nancy Shalek, an experienced marketer, was quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* saying: 'Advertising at its best is making people feel that without their product, you're a loser... Kids are very sensitive to that. If you tell them to buy something, they are resistant. But if you tell them that they'll be a dork if they don't, you've got their attention. You open up emotional vulnerabilities, and it's very easy to do with kids because they're the most emotionally vulnerable.'<sup>35</sup> The governments of the UK and Ireland have concluded that some of these methods are inappropriate for marketing to children and have prohibited their use in relation to children in certain media (see section 5).

As well as targeting children directly and promoting 'peer to peer' sales strategies, marketers also target parents through their children, to sell them both children's and adult goods and services. Children report that they do influence their parents' purchasing decisions and that parents will buy them what they want as a direct result - six out of ten children report using pestering techniques.<sup>36</sup> Some marketers target parents through appealing to beliefs about good parenting, suggesting that purchasing the goods will demonstrate how good a parent they are.<sup>37</sup> Marketers also target children because children often have higher levels of consumer and technological awareness than their parents and can therefore act as 'conduits from the consumer marketplace into the household, the link between advertisers and the family purse'.<sup>38</sup>

Children's opinions of the commercial world have been collected in a few studies. In 2005 the National Consumer Council found that children are responsive to marketing, enjoy shopping and care about possessions. 75% of 10 to 12 year olds like shopping, two thirds like popular clothes labels and half think that brands are important. However, some children do feel under pressure to have the 'right' stuff; that methods of selling can be intrusive and inappropriate, that they are ripped off and that retailers treat them badly and unfairly.<sup>39</sup>

Interestingly, our research found that parents have mixed feelings about the way advertisers treat children.

<sup>33</sup> Ed Mayo and Agnes Nairn, *Consumer Kids*.

<sup>34</sup> Martin Lindstrom, *BRANDchild*.

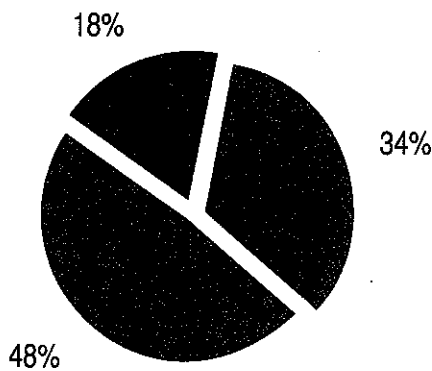
<sup>35</sup> Ron Harris, *Children Who Dress for Excess: Today's Youngsters Have Become Fixated with Fashion. The Right Look Isn't Enough - It Also Has to Be Expensive*. *Los Angeles Times*, 12 November 1989.

<sup>36</sup> Ed Mayo and Agnes Nairn, *Consumer Kids*.

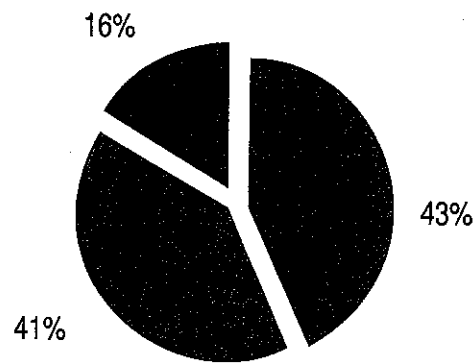
<sup>37</sup> *The Impact of the Commercial World on Children's Wellbeing: Report of an Independent Assessment*. DCSF and DCMS, 2009.

<sup>38</sup> Juliet Schor, *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture*. Scribner, 2004.

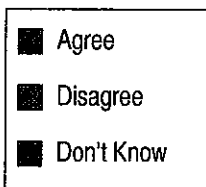
<sup>39</sup> Ed Mayo, *Shopping Generation*.



Advertising aimed at children treats them like adults



Advertising aimed at children is appropriate to their age



ComRes for Mothers' Union<sup>40</sup>

The Advertising Association argues that 'commercially-related factors are powerful enablers of wellbeing'. Children's wellbeing (defined in terms of how they connect with friends, relax and enjoy entertainment) is enabled through the internet, mobile phones, television, advertising, computer games and magazines.<sup>41</sup> This technology also provides a source of creativity, escapism, help and advice and there is no reason why children should not be able to have fun through the commercial world. However, marketers target these forms of media precisely because they are popular with children, in order to sell to them.

*"...as a teacher I see many parents who put themselves in debt to provide expensive items for their children, simply because they do not know how to deal with constant demands for the latest styles, phones etc."*

Mothers' Union member, UK

<sup>40</sup> See ref. 20

<sup>41</sup> *Children's Wellbeing in a Commercial World: A contribution by the Advertising Association to the DCSF enquiry*. Advertising Association, 2009.

## 3. The impact of commercialisation on children

If advertising had no impact on children, \$447.5 billion would not be spent globally on advertising as a whole each year.<sup>42</sup> The impact of the commercial world goes beyond influencing children's consumer behaviour, whether intentionally or not. Many studies and observations have been made into how the commercial world affects all areas of a child's life. These include their physical health, mental health and emotional wellbeing, values, educational development and relationships.

Nearly three-fifths of parents with children under 18 believe that advertising seen by children can be harmful to them.

Source: ComRes for Mothers' Union<sup>43</sup>

### Physical health

Childhood obesity has become a matter of grave concern in the developed world. More than 2.3 million children in Britain are estimated to be overweight or obese, which has contributed to many under-12s already showing signs of high blood pressure and cholesterol, diabetes and liver disease.<sup>44</sup> In Ireland 19% of children are overweight, with seven per cent being classified as obese.<sup>45</sup> Sedentary lifestyles, whether through preference for computer games, fear of the outside world or lack of outdoor play areas, plus a love of junk food have largely been blamed. One study has found that for every additional hour of television a child of two-and-a-half watches, 13% less time is spent doing weekend physical activity, nine per cent less time doing activities involving physical effort, and 10% higher consumption of soft drinks and snacks; leading to a five per cent increase in body mass index.<sup>46</sup>

Whilst health professionals and governments rightly argue that parents need to ensure their children eat healthily and take exercise, the World Health Organisation has concluded there is a 'probable causal link' between persistent unhealthy food and drink marketing and weight gain and obesity. In a study carried out by Yale University in 2008, it was found that children significantly prefer the taste of food with popular cartoon characters on the packaging compared with exactly the same food without the cartoons. The effect is particularly strong for energy dense, nutrient poor food.<sup>47</sup> It is not surprising, then, that both the UK and Irish governments have prohibited the use of licensed characters and celebrities in advertisements for unhealthy (high in fat, sugar and salt) food and drink.

### Mental health and emotional wellbeing

As with the obesity statistics, an unhappy picture of children's mental health has been painted. One in ten children suffers a mental health disorder in the UK<sup>48</sup> and one in 20 in Ireland.<sup>49</sup> Whilst some doubt a causal link between commercialisation and mental health problems, there is an association between high media use,

<sup>42</sup> Zenith Optimedia

[http://www.etaiwannews.com/etn/news\\_content.php?id=1324567&lang=eng\\_news&cate\\_img=logo\\_world&cate\\_rss=WORLD\\_eng](http://www.etaiwannews.com/etn/news_content.php?id=1324567&lang=eng_news&cate_img=logo_world&cate_rss=WORLD_eng)

<sup>43</sup> See ref. 20

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/7103587/Fat-parents-to-blame-for-childhood-obesity-epidemic-by-over-feeding-under-fives-study-finds.html>

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.growingup.ie/>

<sup>46</sup> Pagan, Fitzpatrick, Barnett and Dubow, *Prospective Associations Between Early Childhood Television Exposure and Academic, Psychosocial, and Physical Well-being by Middle Childhood*. 2010. *Archive Pediatric Adolescent Medicine*. 2010;164(5):425-431.

<sup>47</sup> Roberto, Balk, Harris and Brownwell, *Influence of Licensed Characters on Children's Taste and Snack Preferences*. Health Promotion International, 2008.

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.youngminds.org.uk/ym-newsroom/media-resources/fast-facts>

<sup>49</sup> [http://www.letsomeoneknow.ie/what\\_is\\_mental\\_health/whats\\_going\\_on\\_around\\_Ireland/](http://www.letsomeoneknow.ie/what_is_mental_health/whats_going_on_around_Ireland/)



materialism and dissatisfaction, leading to poorer self-esteem.<sup>50</sup> Certainly within all age groups, those who place a high emphasis on material goods and wealth report higher levels of stress and anxiety, lower satisfaction with themselves and poorer relationships with others.<sup>51</sup> Several explanations are offered for the cause of this but many centre around the importance of a sense of belonging to enhance wellbeing. If belonging is based on what a child owns but they (or their family) cannot afford to (or will not) buy it, they may lack that sense of belonging<sup>52</sup> or even experience feelings of inadequacy, leading to less confidence.<sup>53</sup> The Advertising Association argues that 'most children seem to be able to balance the pressures of consumerism with their sense of value and self worth' and of course children do have resilience – but just how much 'pressure to consume' is it fair to inflict on children? Another key area of concern is the emphasis placed on physical appearance by the media in general. Children in the UK report that having the right clothes is the third most stressful part of being a child. Half of girls believe that it is important to be attractive to the opposite sex and the UK is the country where girls find it the hardest to feel beautiful when surrounded by the images projected by the marketing industry.<sup>54</sup> Toys such as *Moxie Girlz*, aimed at girls aged six to 15, link slimness to other aspirational traits – 'I am smart, clever, slim' proclaims the packaging of the *Lexa* doll. Whilst factors other than external stimuli contribute to poor self image and associated manifestations such as eating disorders and self-harm, academic Jean Kilbourne argues that 'advertising does promote abusive and abnormal attitudes about eating, drinking and thinness'.<sup>55</sup> However, how do marketers get it right, between not promoting overeating and inactivity, yet not promoting an ideal of unhealthy thinness?

### Values

Linked to emotional wellbeing are the values we hold, especially about what we think will make us happy. The very purpose of marketing is to manufacture want, whether for a particular brand of everyday necessity or for the image that is associated with a particular brand. Whilst parent's role-modelling of consumer habits has been found to have the greatest influence on young people's habits, children do develop their own values and adopt those of wider society.<sup>56</sup>

The development of materialism tends to occur in children around the ages of seven to 11, when they begin to understand how others see them. The desire to accumulate can develop as compensation for feelings of insecurity or unhappiness, and/or through socialisation in the quest to belong (through owning the 'right' things). This, Barrie Gunter of the Department of Media and Communication, University of Leicester, and Adrian Furnham, of the Educational Psychology Unit at University College London, argue, can lead to a value system of self-centredness, ambition and greed.<sup>57</sup> In one study 61% of children reported wishing that their parents gave them more money to spend, and 59% of 'brand-aware' children reported being dissatisfied (in general) compared with 47% of less brand-aware children.<sup>58</sup>

Fr Christopher Jamison, a leading Roman Catholic monk, comments that: 'Having saturated the world of our material needs, consumerism is now taking over our need for cultural goods such as music, entertainment and even moral purpose... Disney stories carry all sorts of moral messages such as good triumphing over evil, but that is not the story that matters as regards activating my greed. The story that touches my greed is that Disney is educational and helpful so we go on buying Disney products in order to be a good and happy family... This is the new pilgrimage that children desire, a rite of passage into the meaning of life according to Disney. Where once morality and meaning were available as part of our free cultural inheritance, now corporations sell them to us as products.'<sup>59</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Agnes Nairn and Jo Ormrod, *Watching wanting and wellbeing: Exploring the links. A study of 9-13 year olds*. National Consumer Council, 2007.

<sup>51</sup> *Commercialisation of Childhood*. Compass, 2006

<sup>52</sup> Allison J Pugh, *Longing and Belonging: Parents, Children and Consumer Culture*.

<sup>53</sup> David Plachaud, *Freedom to be a Child*.

<sup>54</sup> Ed Mayo and Agnes Nairn, *Consumer Kids*.

<sup>55</sup> David Plachaud, *Freedom to be a Child*.

<sup>56</sup> Barrie Gunter and Adrian Furnham, *Children as Consumers*. Routledge, 1998.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Ed Mayo, *Shopping Generation*.

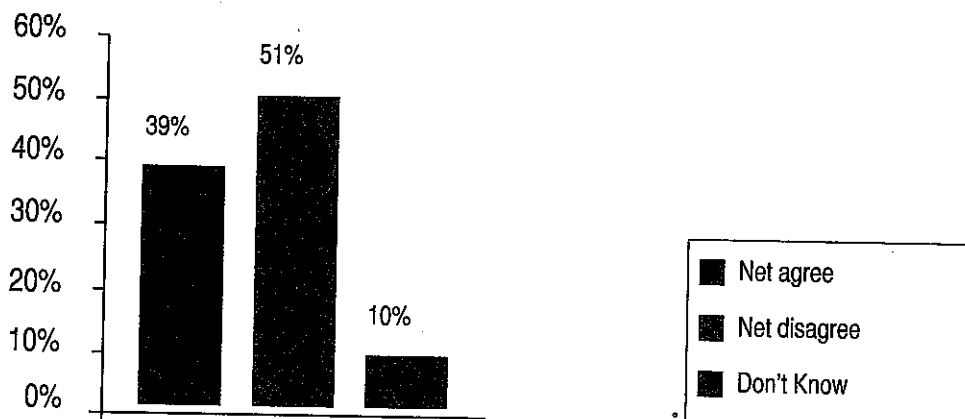
<sup>59</sup> Christopher Jamison, *Finding Happiness*. Phoenix Press, 2009.

# BYE BUY CHILDHOOD

## Understanding and educational development

The media and commercial goods do provide developmental and educational opportunities for children and indeed most schools function with their use. Many books, games and toys are created with a developmental or educational aspect, and many positive messages are sent out through children's media. However, these positive values are also used as their selling point, for example by brands such as *In the Night Garden* and *Baby Einstein*.

However, parents don't necessarily agree that the media give children a good idea of what the world is really like.



The media (advertising, films, TV and the internet) gives your children a good idea of what the real world is like

Source: ComRes for Mothers' Union<sup>60</sup>

In the research that has been carried out into the effects of the media on children's educational development and performance, one recent study found that 22% of boys and 13% of girls have trouble developing speech and understanding others because of a television being on either most or all of the time.<sup>61</sup> Another study has found that the more television a toddler watches, the poorer academic measurements he or she will have at age ten.<sup>62</sup>

As an educator with over 30 years of experience, Sue Palmer has witnessed an 'alarming escalation' in developmental disorders in children at school. Whilst some of this may be due to better levels of diagnoses, she has also seen a coincidental increase in the proportion of children who were just 'distractible, impulsive or badly behaved' due to the unintended side effects of technological and cultural change.<sup>63</sup>

## Relationships

'Pester power', the persistent nagging from a child to buy things, has the potential to put stress on the parent/child relationship. Purchase requests made by children can result in disappointment when parents or guardians refuse. Refusal can lead to arguments and disappointment and arguments increase when refusals increase. Such family conflict can lead to a lower opinion of parents. This makes life particularly difficult for families who have recently gone through divorce where, according to studies, 'adolescents tend to place more value on material objects, perhaps to compensate for disruption.'<sup>64</sup> Whilst somewhat ambivalent about the existence of the commercialisation of childhood, the Department for Education<sup>65</sup> found that 'parents consider that their authority and capacity to manage their children's behaviour is compromised by (among other things) children's desires

<sup>60</sup> See ref. 20

<sup>61</sup> Jean Gross/YouGov, 2010. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/8436236.stm>

<sup>62</sup> Pagan, Fitzpatrick, Barnett and Dubow, *Prospective Associations Between Early Childhood Television Exposure and Academic, Psychosocial, and Physical Well-being by Middle Childhood*. 2010. *Archive Pediatric Adolescent Medicine*, 2010. 164(5):425-431.

<sup>63</sup> Sue Palmer, *Toxic Childhood*.

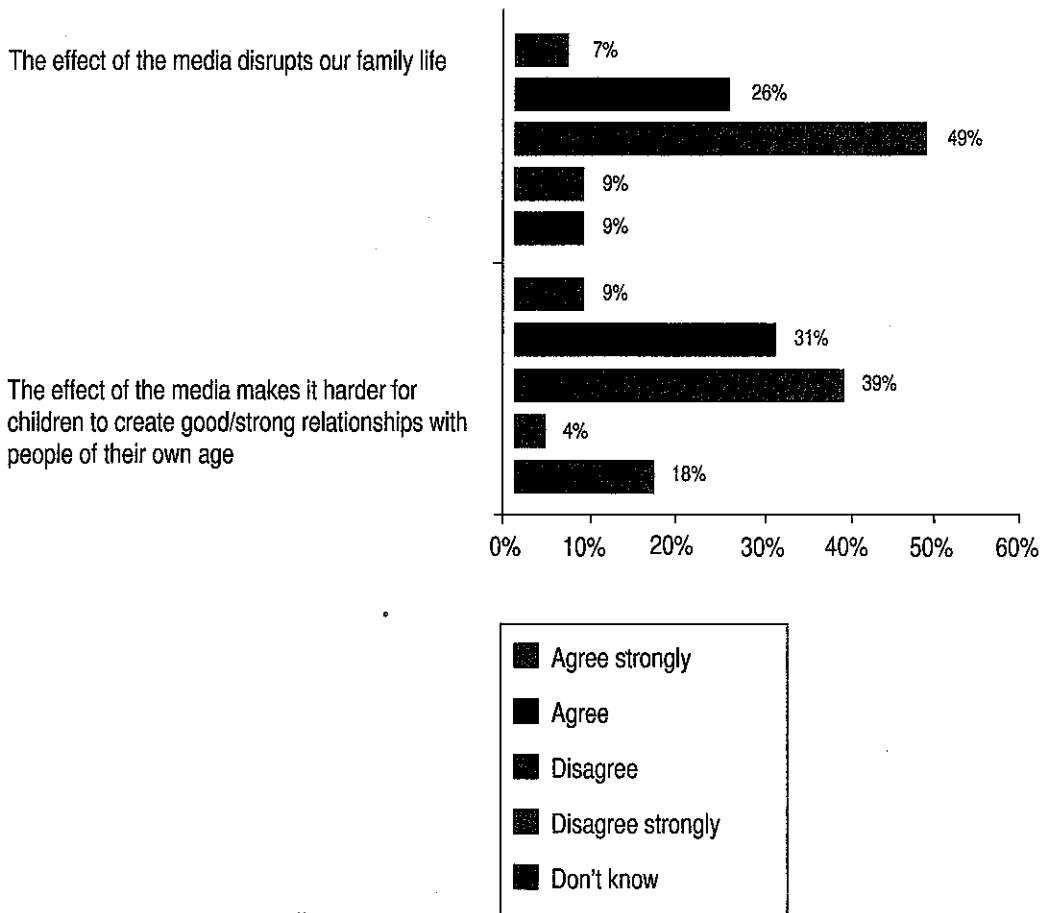
<sup>64</sup> Agnes Nairn, *Business thinks family*. Family and Parenting Institute, 2008

<sup>65</sup> When it was the Department for Children Schools and Families



and increased expectations which they see as fuelled by marketing'.<sup>66</sup> However, pester power is not a result of advertising alone – children's interactions with each other also spur the desires for certain products, for which children will then 'pester' their parents.<sup>67</sup>

Nearly half of parents feel that the media do not disrupt family life but are more uncertain about the impact of the media on their children's relationships with peers.



Source: ComRes for Mothers' Union<sup>68</sup>

So whilst marketing to children does not of itself damage family life and friendships, its shiny packaging can add stresses to the everyday negotiations between children and adults, and between children.

<sup>66</sup> *The Impact of the Commercial World on Children's Wellbeing: Report of an Independent Assessment*

<sup>67</sup> Barrie Gunter, Caroline Oates and Mark Blades, *Advertising to Children on TV Content, Impact, and Regulation*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005.

<sup>68</sup> See ref. 20

## 4. The bottom line: sex sells

Sex is used in most forms of media - whether a semi-clad 'lovely' on page 3, pictures of couple romping on a beach or the *Playboy Bunny* brand logo – in order to sell us an array products entirely unrelated to sex or love. Stereotypical images, predominantly of women but sometimes of men, are used to grab our attention and concern about the effect of this on children unites a broad spectrum of people, from conservatives to feminists. Although many refer to the effect as the *premature sexualisation of girls*, Mothers' Union argues that we should be concerned about the effects of imposing sexuality on girls *and* boys; and that it is not right to sexually objectify a person or base their value solely on their sexual identity at any age. Hence, this report refers to the *sexualisation of children*.

Parents are especially concerned about the scale and impact of sexualised media and advertising upon children: 80% of parents believe that films and video games with sexual or violent themes can be accessed too easily by children; and 80% also believe that television, films, magazines and the internet make children sexually aware at a younger age than they would be otherwise

Source: ComRes for Mothers' Union<sup>69</sup>

The Home Office Review into sexualisation carried out in 2010 found that as well as 'a dramatic increase in the use of sexualised imagery in advertising... there has also been a significant increase in the number of sexualised images of children.'<sup>70</sup> There is also a sexualisation of media content, for example in magazines. Those aimed at teen girls (but often read by younger girls) focus heavily on appearance and include messages on how to attract boys. However, these magazines do reflect the interests of many a teenage girl and provide helpful advice on growing up. There have also been recent, well reported instances of retailers removing from sale goods aimed inappropriately at children, such as pole-dancing kits, *Playboy* branded goods and padded bikini tops, which are often cheaply priced and therefore affordable across a range of incomes.

The most common use of the internet for eight to 11 year olds in the UK is the playing of online games.<sup>71</sup> There are a wide variety of internet games aimed at children – including those of a sexualised nature. For example, [www.girlsandgamez.com](http://www.girlsandgamez.com) is 'the free source for online games for Girls'. Games include 'Beach Catfight' where the purpose is to 'beat your opponents in a sexy beach catfight game and score as high as you can'; and 'Classroom' where the purpose is to 'use your wicked mind at work and fulfil your childhood fantasy... your objective is to see her [the teacher] in compromised positions to fulfil your adolescent dreams...'. The Home Office review also found that the virtual world draws children and young people into displays of sexualised behaviour, reporting that: 'Girls... report being under increasing pressures to display themselves in their 'bra and knickers' or bikinis online, whereas boys seek to display their bodies in a hyper-masculine way'.<sup>72</sup>

Parents are right to be concerned. Sustained exposure to sexualised imagery can reinforce stereotyping of women, men and sex. Longitudinal research into the impact of viewing sexual imagery has shown that watching higher levels of sex on television may accelerate the initiation of sexual activity. A one year study, carried out by the American Academy of Pediatrics in 2004, found that 'adolescents who viewed more sexual content at baseline were more likely to initiate intercourse and progress to more advanced noncoital sexual activities during the subsequent year'. Whether the content was actual sexual behaviour or only talk about sex made no

<sup>69</sup> See ref. 20

<sup>70</sup> Linda Papadopoulos, *Sexualisation of Young People Review*. Home Office, 2010.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.



difference. The researchers speculated that watching high amounts of sexual content leads to beliefs that sex is more central to daily life than it actually is, which thus hastens participation in sexual or sexualised activity.<sup>73</sup>

The American Academy of Pediatrics reported another study in 2006 on the impact of music, film and magazines as well as television. Researchers found that 12-14 year olds with a media diet high in sexual content were more likely to have engaged in sexual activity by the end of the two year study than those with lighter diet, 'because media portrayals of sexuality tend to be so consistent, frequent media users may begin to believe the world view portrayed and may begin to adopt the media's social norms as their own.'<sup>74</sup>

There are other consequences of the sexualisation of children. Girls who absorb sexualised messages may 'internalize and reproduce within their own self-schemas this objectified perspective, an effect referred to as "self-objectification".' This has been shown to detract from the ability to concentrate on other things because: 'Chronic attention to physical appearance leaves fewer cognitive resources available for other mental and physical activities.' Self-objectification can be accompanied by feelings of shame and anxiety about one's body, whether it matches up to expectations, and several studies highlight instances where self-objectification is associated with low self-esteem, depression and eating disorders.<sup>75</sup>

Frequent exposure to media content that sexually objectifies women has a drip-drip effect on both girls' and boys' conceptualisation of femininity and sexuality: 'Girls and young women who more frequently consume or engage with mainstream media content also offer stronger endorsement of sexual stereotypes that paint women as sexual objects... The sexualisation of girls can also have a negative impact on boys and men. Exposure to narrow ideals of female sexual attractiveness may make it difficult for some men to find an "acceptable" partner or to fully enjoy intimacy with a female partner'.<sup>76</sup>

Whilst the sexualisation of children is of grave concern to many adults, *Young People, Media and Personal Relationships*, a study commissioned by the media industry and regulators, found that young people are less concerned and find the media a useful source of information about sex. However, the study also found that children 'frequently' encounter sexualised material, whether they chose to or not, in children's media as well as adult media; and that young people can find it difficult to identify what messages about sex are being given by the media, with younger children not necessarily understanding sexual references or connotations.<sup>77</sup> Ofcom has also accepted that 'young people are still coming across a significant amount of unsolicited sexual material' on the internet.<sup>78</sup>

It is easy, perhaps, either to overstate the issue or to dismiss it as a moral panic. There are regulations and guidelines in place, in both the UK and Ireland, prohibiting the portrayal of children in a sexualised manner (see section 5) and the Scottish Parliament also found that 'relatively few' sexualised products were aimed at children. Yet it is, as the Home Office review stated, the 'drip drip' effect of sexualised marketing and media content in general, and the blurring of lines between children's and adult media that are the greater cause for concern.

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<sup>73</sup> Collins, Elliott, Berry, Kanouse, Kunkel, Hunter and Miu, *Watching Sex on Television Predicts Adolescent Initiation of Sexual Behaviour*. Paediatrics 2004; 114:e280-e289.

<sup>74</sup> Brown, L'Engle, Pardun, Guo, Kenneavy and Jackson, *Sexy Media Matter: Exposure to Sexual Content in Music, Movies, Television, and Magazines Predicts Black and White Adolescents' Sexual Behavior*. Pediatrics 2006; 117; 1018-1027.

<sup>75</sup> *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls*. American Psychological Association, 2007.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

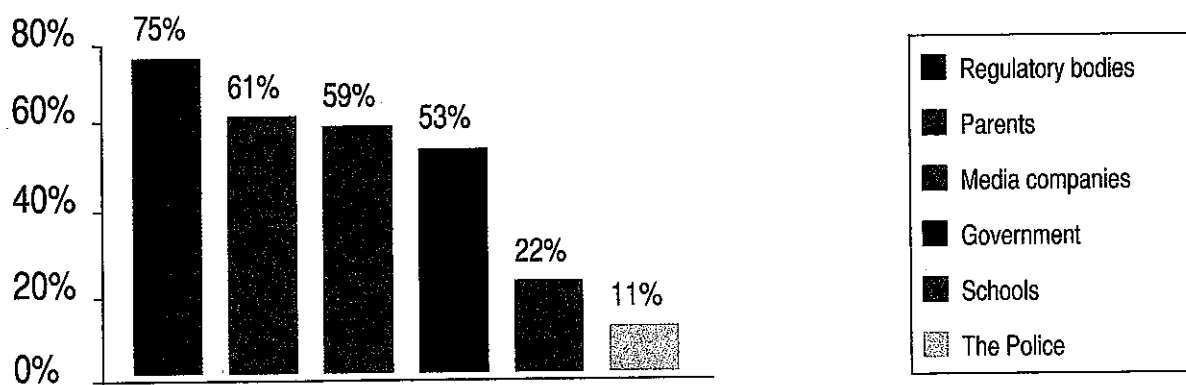
<sup>77</sup> David Buckingham and Sara Bragg, *Young People, Media and Personal Relationships*. ASA, BBFC, BBA, BSC, ITC, 2003.

<sup>78</sup> *Ofcom's Submission to the Byron Review. Annex 6: Literary Review*. Ofcom, November 2007.

## 5. Current regulations

There are of course regulations and codes that govern media content aimed at children. Some, such as those governing broadcast and non-broadcast advertising, are statutory, whilst other forms of advertising, marketing and media content are self-regulated.

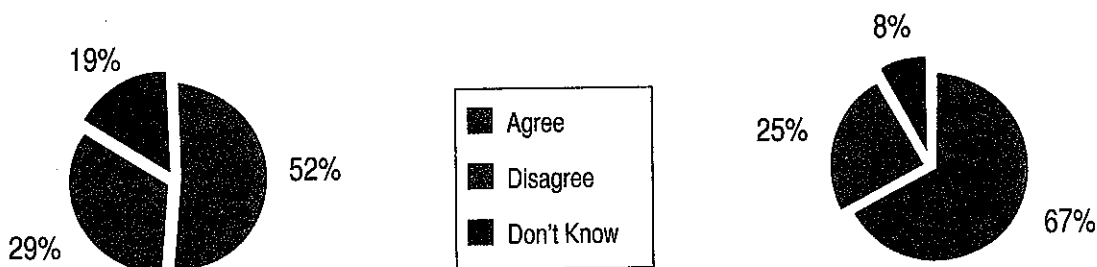
Our research found that parents believe regulators have the greatest responsibility for the media content and advertising that children are exposed to, followed by parents themselves, the companies that produce the advertising and the Government.



Which of the following, if any, should have responsibility for the content of media and advertising that your child is exposed to?

Source: ComRes for Mothers' Union<sup>79</sup>

Parents also feel that regulatory bodies could do more to protect children from inappropriate content in films, video games and on television.



Regulatory bodies responsible for rating films and video games do not do enough to protect children

TV programmes that are inappropriate for children are often shown before 9pm

Source: ComRes for Mothers' Union<sup>80</sup>

<sup>79</sup> See ref. 20

<sup>80</sup> See ref. 20



## UNITED KINGDOM

### Broadcast and non-broadcast advertising

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) is the UK's independent watchdog of advertising across all media, including print, press, posters, television, radio, cinema, internet (banners and pop-ups etc), email and text, sales promotions and direct marketing. Its role is to ensure that adverts are 'legal, decent, honest and truthful' by applying the Advertising Codes and working with regulatory bodies such as Ofcom. In relation to children, advertising must not:

- Take advantage of their natural credulity
- Encourage pester power
- Imply inferiority if they do not buy a product or service
- Appeal to emotions such as fear or pity
- Use 'hard sell' techniques
- Understate the price
- Portray them in a sexually provocative manner.

Advertisers must use licensed characters and celebrities popular with children with a due sense of responsibility. Additionally, high fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) foods are not be permitted to be advertised on children's channels or in and around programmes made for children.

Commercial radio stations also have to comply with the British Committee of Advertising Practice (BCAP) Radio Advertising Standards Code, which requires advance central clearance of 'special categories' of advertisement and sponsorship credits. All adverts aimed at children must pass through central clearance, and to pass must comply with the regulations above.

### Magazines

Advertising in magazines is also governed by the ASA, with guidelines stating particular care must be taken when marketing to or depicting children. The sexual content of teen magazines is self-regulated through the Teenage Magazine Arbitration Panel (TMAP), which aims to ensure 'that the sexual content of teenage magazines is presented in a responsible and appropriate manner' for magazines where 25% or more of the readers are girls below the age of 15. Their guidelines state that:

- Readers be encouraged to take a responsible attitude to sex and contraception
- Safer sex be highlighted and encouraged wherever relevant
- Under-age sex or sexual abuse be clearly stated as illegal
- Readers be encouraged to seek support from parents or other responsible adults wherever relevant
- The emotional consequences of sexual activity be highlighted where relevant.

Additionally, publishers should advise distributors and retailers of the appropriate display category of their magazines and ensure that displays of magazines reflect the perceived age of purchasers.

### Computer games

The Pan-European Game Information (PEGI) age rating system was created by the Interactive Software Federation of Europe in 2003. It is now the sole classification system for computer games in the UK and is also used throughout most of Europe. Any disagreement with the rating of a game can be taken to an independent Complaints Board, which makes the final decision about an age rating. PEGI S.A. (the body that manages the PEGI system) also monitors games' advertisements to ensure that they comply with the age rating system and in 2010 found that 83.2% of advertisements across Europe were compliant. Online advertising was more likely to be non-compliant.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> PEGI Advertising Compliance Report, April 2010. <http://www.pegi.info/en/index/id/media/pdf/332.pdf>

# BYE BUY CHILDHOOD

## REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

The Broadcasting Authority of Ireland is the independent regulator for radio and television broadcasters in Ireland. Its scope includes the Children's Commercial Communications Code, which governs any advertising and commercial promotion aimed at, or that might be of interest to, children. Children's commercial communications must not:

- Cause harm of any sort to children
- Take advantage of their natural credulity
- Encourage pester power
- Imply that owning a product or using a service will make a child superior
- Portray children in a sexually provocative manner or provoke anxiety in children over their bodily appearance
- Encourage children to engage in anti-social behaviour
- Include violence or scenes that will cause distress
- Encourage an unhealthy lifestyle
- Use celebrities or sports stars to promote food or drink products, unless part of a public health or education campaign.

Additionally, communications should: present only factual information about the product or service; protect children's personal information; promote general safety and clearly separate adverts from programme content.<sup>82</sup>

There is a mixture of opinion within the marketing industry as to whether the commercialisation of childhood is an issue, and if so, how the industry should respond. Some believe that brands should be responsive to customers and remove from sale/advertising products that causes concern whilst others believe that independent regulators rather than public opinion should direct these decisions. Some retailers operate a voluntary code of practice – for example Co-op does not advertise food and drink products high in fat, sugar or salt during children's television hours; and several advertising, marketing and sales bodies are signed up to the self-regulatory British Code of Advertising, Sales Promotion and Direct Marketing, which includes guidelines on advertising to children. It also appears that there is discontent on both sides as to how the government should act – parents and lobbying groups are anxious that government should take further action, whilst some in the industry feel that lobby groups are setting the agenda and 'winning' on the back of a moral panic on several occasions.<sup>83</sup>

Clearly there are guidelines that, if adhered to, can ensure responsible advertising to children - but it does rely on people to notice noncompliance and make the effort to complain. If, as parents feel, current regulations could do better, either there needs to be more rigorous enforcement or a change to the current guidelines.

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<sup>82</sup>[http://www.bai.ie/publications\\_codestandards.html](http://www.bai.ie/publications_codestandards.html)

<sup>83</sup>Collection of editorials from Brandrepublic <http://www.brandrepublic.com>



## 6. Unsubscribing: bye bye commercialisation

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There is no one neat answer to 'ending the commercialisation of childhood'. As our research shows, parents believe that a range of people need to take responsibility for ensuring that advertising seen and heard by children and young people is appropriate for their age and experience. Families enjoy much of what the commercial world has to offer yet do not always know how to contain or manage it. Consumerism is entrenched firmly within many societies and large scale cultural change does not evolve quickly, nor can it be manufactured. Commercial industries do take positive action such as removing products from sale when complaints have been made or adopting corporate social responsibility, but in other instances deny culpability and place responsibility at parents. Finally, governments have set up regulatory frameworks to govern media output and advertising aimed at children. While this is effective for some media, it has less impact on others such as website content; but governments are cautious about enacting further legislation that could be considered unnecessary censorship or interference in the free market.

In order to ensure that childhood is not treated as simply another marketing opportunity, many agree that action needs to be taken by various players.

- Firstly, children and their families can reflect on their consumer habits and identify where commercialisation detracts from their wellbeing as individuals and as a family unit. As well as making any necessary changes within the household, families can challenge marketers and manufacturers they feel are targeting children irresponsibly, and raise the issue with their political representatives.
- Secondly, civil society, academics and NGOs can raise awareness, support children and families and put pressure on political representatives.
- Thirdly, the manufacturing, marketing and retail industries can take an ethical approach to selling to children, whether through adherence to current regulations and guidelines or implementing new codes of practice, especially in relation to sexualised material.
- Lastly, national and regional governments of the UK and Ireland can keep the issue on the agenda, promote awareness, act as mediator where necessary and ensure that regulations are sufficiently robust. In particular, governments can take further action to prohibit the "sex sells" approach being aimed at children under 16, and prevent children from being exposed to sexualised media, goods and services.

Mothers' Union is just one of many organisations seeking to challenge the role of consumerism in childhood and beyond. Our pledge is to:

- Challenge children, their parents or guardians and wider family to think about their consumer habits.
- Empower families to address the influence of commercialisation within the home.
- Engage with the commercial world and take positive action to challenge instances of inappropriate marketing or selling.<sup>i</sup>
- Hold the UK Government accountable on the pledges made in the coalition's Programme for Government to address the commercialisation and sexualisation of children; and raise awareness amongst other political representatives across the UK and Ireland.<sup>ii</sup>

For further information please go to [www.byebuychildhood.org](http://www.byebuychildhood.org)

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<sup>i</sup> Anything that breaks existing regulations or codes of conduct; anything that imposes sexuality on children under 16 or suggests a child's worth is based on their sex appeal.

<sup>ii</sup> Mothers' Union has 4 million members across 81 countries. Our members in both the UK and Republic of Ireland are part of our Bye Buy Childhood campaign.

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BYE BUY  
  
CHILDHOOD



**Mothers' UNION**  
Christian care for families

# BYE BUY CHILDHOOD



## I can make a difference to childhood by:

- ✎ Applying the Bye Buy Test to my purchases
- ✎ Challenging retailers and advertisers who sell and advertise inappropriately to children
- ✎ Lobbying my political representatives to prohibit the 'sex sells' approach aimed at children under 16
- ✎ Lobbying my political representatives to ensure that children under 16 are not exposed to the marketing and display of sexualised products

[www.byebuychildhood.org](http://www.byebuychildhood.org)

SIDE ONE

Join us at  
[www.byebuychildhood.org](http://www.byebuychildhood.org)



## Bye Buy Test

Use this test when shopping to help you think about what or who is influencing your choices:

- ? Why do I want to buy it?
- ⚙️ How often will I use it?
- £ Can I afford it?
- ✕ What will happen if I don't buy it?

SIDE TWO

## **Industry Pledge**

**I can make a difference to childhood by:**

- ✎ Not taking advantage of children's natural inexperience to sell to them
- ✎ Not marketing or selling goods of a sexualised nature to children under 16
- ✎ Ensuring that children under 16 are not exposed to the marketing and display of sexualised products

Join in at [www.byebychildhood.org](http://www.byebychildhood.org)

## **We believe children should be valued as children, not consumers.**

Yet marketers target children's natural inexperience in order to reach the household purse.

These commercial pressures encourage materialism which negatively affects children's wellbeing, family life and peer relationships. In particular, sexualised marketing aimed at children is abhorrent.

So how can families feel empowered to challenge big marketing initiatives?

By joining Mothers' Union's Campaign to say 'bye bye' to the commercialisation of childhood.

Join in at [www.byebychildhood.org](http://www.byebychildhood.org)