

## **Coping with the Marketing of Media Violence: The Promises and Limitations of Media Literacy\***

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The overabundance of advertising to children in our culture is harmful for many reasons, independent of what's being advertised. However, when the products being advertised are detrimental to children's physical or mental health, the harms are even greater. Research confirms that exposure to media violence promotes aggressive behaviors, attitudes more accepting of violence, and increased hostility<sup>(1)</sup>; it also often causes intense fears, anxieties, and sleep disturbances.<sup>(2)</sup> Yet, not only are intensely violent media portrayals readily available to children,<sup>(3)</sup> violent products labeled as appropriate only for adults are actively marketed to them.<sup>(4)</sup> The advertising of violent products not only lures more children into unhealthy forms of entertainment; the advertising itself has effects -- even on those children who would not choose to consume these products.

A specific problem with advertising on television is that children can stumble into just about anything that's advertised -- no matter what they're watching. In my book, "Mommy, I'm Scared," I chronicle how frequently children have repeated nightmares from stumbling into a promo for an upcoming violent program or an ad for a violent movie.<sup>(5)</sup> We need to recognize and understand that young children are especially vulnerable to even brief exposures to gory, grotesque or otherwise threatening visual images of violence. The Nike ad shown during the 2000 Olympics involving a chainsaw-wielding horror-movie villain is a good example of the power of these violent images to frighten young children. Enough parents immediately complained about their children's trauma that the ad was withdrawn from being shown during the Olympics.<sup>(6)</sup> Advertisers and television stations need to recognize the vulnerabilities of children and to avoid inflicting abusive images when children are in the audience.

Media literacy education may be part -- but only part -- of the solution. Recent research on media violence shows, for example, that asking children to think about the feelings of the victim of violence while viewing a program can reduce that program's aggression-promoting effects.<sup>(7)</sup> It is difficult to calm young children's media-induced fears, but I have recently written a children's book, *Teddy's TV Troubles*, that shows parents and children the best ways to reassure preschoolers.<sup>(8)</sup> There have also been some efforts to teach children the techniques advertisers use to persuade them, in order to combat the influence of advertising. Although some research shows that children can become more media-savvy from these educational efforts, there is very little evidence as yet that such efforts actually help them resist the influence of advertising.<sup>(9)</sup> Such efforts are especially likely to fail with children under 8, who have difficulty understanding that commercials are designed to sell them something,<sup>(10)</sup> who are much more likely to believe what they see than what they are told,<sup>(11)</sup> and who have difficulty holding one thought in mind while processing something else.<sup>(12)</sup> A written or even spoken disclaimer explaining that how it seems in the ad isn't exactly what you will get is especially ineffective.

We need to teach children all we can about protecting themselves from the influences of advertising. However, there are distinct limits to their ability protect themselves. We, as a society, need to help them by reducing their exposure to advertising overall, by reducing especially manipulative and misleading advertising practices, and especially by limiting their exposure to advertising for harmful products.

### Footnotes

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