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Peter O'Keeffe

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# View of advertising practitioners

Peter O'Keeffe

Peter O'Keeffe is the Managing Director of CDP Associates, Ltd., Advertising and President, Institute of Advertising Practitioners in Ireland.

## Approach to advertising

I am concerned to make the case for the rights and liberties to communicate commercial advertising messages to children. Consequently, I am amused by the identification of advertising with witchcraft; witches ceased to be burned a long time ago. However, this comparison, illustrates the excessive concern shown about how strangely influential advertising is.

I will outline the views of advertising practitioners, on behalf of IAPI, the clients we represent, the people working in the industries who make and sell the ads, and the fathers and mothers of the children to whom we communicate. It is important to take on board, in the context of the generality of this discussion, that there is a consciousness throughout the industry of our ethical responsibility at every level. This is governed by the Code of Advertising Standards for Ireland, copies of which are readily available. It specifically deals with advertising to children and is highly conscious of the fact that a special situation exists with relation to children. I will return to the method, methodology and results of that voluntary regulation later in this paper.

Firstly, there has always been a two-minded approach to advertising, condemning its call to purchase products while at the same time appreciating its information and entertainment value. There is a stereotyped view that children's advertising is a bad thing because children are naive and, therefore, vulnerable to advertising. Advertising is said to create undesirable wants and result in parent-child conflict. Is that true? There is a constant argument about the supporting evidence. However, I would say that the evidence does not support the position that children are particularly vulnerable or that advertising is inordinately influencing. To quote a few examples: Cabbage Patch dolls, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Pogs all began without the influence of advertising. Youth fads begin, not with advertising, but through imitation of opinion leaders and spread through word of mouth. Many of you may not be familiar with Pogs, but they are currently the most popular toy for children under twelve years in this country and possibly in the world. They have never been advertised but six Pogs can be bought for £1.50; there is no parent and child conflict about the cost.

The stereotypical view of children and advertising is based on what I believe is faulty reasoning and questionable research. This may seem a sweeping statement, but the reliability of the research is open to question. Children are notoriously unreliable in research projects. They see the world in quite a different way to that to which the researchers would like them to respond. The process of actually interviewing and researching children is a difficult one. It ignores the powerful effects of peer and family influence, and fails to consider the complexity of media effects, such as selective attention to media and commercials. The influence of culture is also overlooked. Children are highly selective in their viewing; they are far more knowledgeable about advertising and the media process than most critics assume. The concept of advertising literacy is part of our terminology; it means that children see through these ads. They know that they are advertising and what they are for, although there would be a question of age profile to be considered.

I 'interviewed' my own ten year old last night about advertising; in relation to one particular ad, he said 'It's a crap ad, Dad, and that would be a crap product because it's a crap ad'. I asked, 'Why is it a crap ad?' 'It's just crap,' he said. 'Why then is the product going to be crap?' 'Because the people who made the ad made the product. If they made such a bad ad, when you open the box, all the pieces might not be there.' This is a ten-year old. Therefore, do not underestimate the ability of children to actually

observe the accuracy of the statement that is being made to them and their ability to discern the nuances in it.

I suggest there are four overall contexts in which we should consider the rights and wrongs of advertising and children. Firstly, there is the peer context. I contend that children are fundamentally influenced by parents and their peers; these influences are much more fundamental than advertising communication. Secondly, there is the family context. Family viewing patterns and economic attitudes determine what, if any, influence advertising will have. Family discussion of purchasing decisions can neutralize the influence of advertising. I will refer to one example, even though I have said the research is questionable. This is a child development study undertaken by the Department of Psychology, University of Leeds, 1994, on the question of major influences in family food choices relative to children's food. The study claimed that the level of influence from television advertising was extraordinarily low relative to the other levels of influences that surround the event (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

**MAJOR INFLUENCES ON FAMILY FOOD CHOICES**

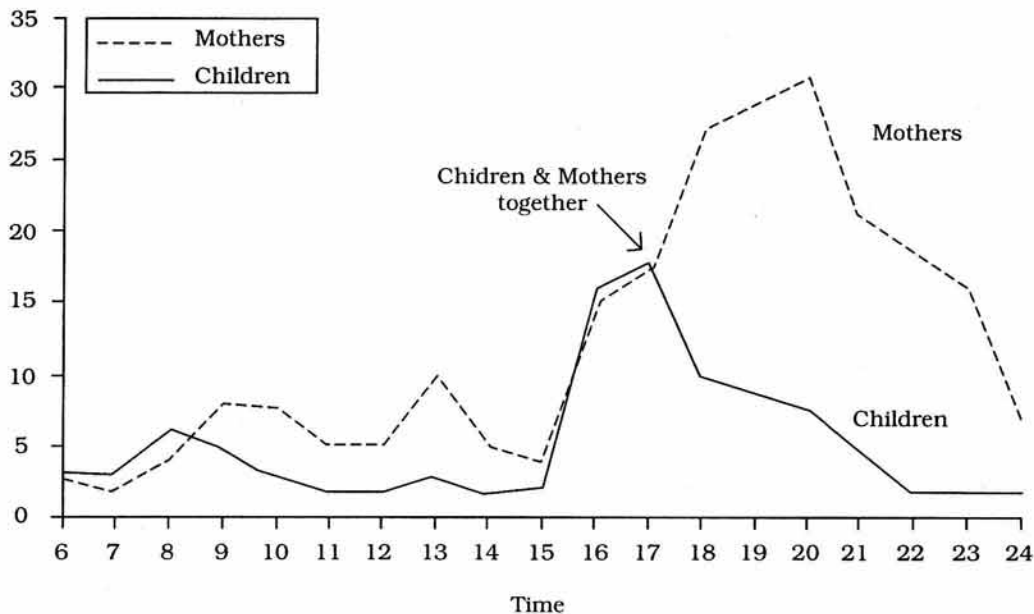
<b>Proportionate influences on family food choices</b>	
Mum	20%
The Children	13%
Dad	12%
Oldest child	12%
The family	7%
Friends	6%
Younger children	6%
Time of meal	5%
TV advertising	5%
Convenience	4%
Price	4%
On pack	3%
Shelf/checkout	3%

Base = 3004

Source: Child Development Study, Department of Psychology, University of Leeds, December 1994

Thirdly, there is the cultural context. We do not have nor do I think anybody should believe that there is a universal child; there are children of different cultures and these children are influenced differently. For example, compare our culture with that of the United States or United Kingdom which are more developed economies. Only a small portion, less than 0.8 per cent, of our Gross Domestic Product is spent on advertising; this is the equivalent of 1.47 per cent in the UK. If we extrapolate, Irish children are encountering half the real level of advertising encountered by children in other cultures. In addition, we have close parental supervision and a lower incidence of mothers working outside the home which, perhaps, does not exist elsewhere. This can be an important influence on children. I refer to information about a typical day's viewing by mothers and children of fourteen years and younger, and the coincidence of them viewing together. While they will not always be viewing together, there is a pattern of viewing for a typical day (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**  
A TYPICAL DAY'S VIEWING



Fourthly, there is a product market context. An ad for Coca-Cola highlights the brand but it also raises awareness and interest in the product category: carbonated soft drinks. It is a fundamental 'truth' that an ad for a product category, for example toys, will generate a higher degree of interest, desire, possession and ownership of toys.

But commercials should not be viewed in isolation. They appear on television in the context of entertainment and other commercials for similar products and services. The child learns from an early stage to choose, although it would be more appropriate for a psychologist to determine how that actually works. I recall that after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, I saw a news item about an East German housewife in a West German supermarket; she was virtually in tears looking at the display of coffee. The interviewer, mistaking what he thought was her dilemma, asked, 'Have you not got enough money?' She replied, 'No, I have no problem with money, but how do I choose?' This woman had not been subjected to the myriad of influences of Western society where we have great opportunity to choose. We also have a lot of product knowledge, but she was encountering thirty five different brands of coffee and did not know how to differentiate between them. Our children are learning to choose from a very early age.

### Positive effects

Are there positive effects? I suggest that there are several. There is the effect on personal behaviour because television commercials are usually pro-social. They are optimistic and contain virtually no aggression. They are effective in creating positive images, and there is evidence that commercials can break down harmful race and gender stereotypes. Regarding health and nutrition, much advertising is for beneficial products, like toothpaste and public health service campaigns which promote anti-smoking and anti-drug attitudes. These commercials also contain useful economic information. Thus, advertising is a valuable source of information about available products and services. The child is the consumer.

There is also the question of social involvement; regardless of the commercial's intent, and I acknowledge that there is a commercial intent, young people use

advertising for their own needs. Advertisements play a large part in the formation of identity, helping young people identify with family and the society to which they belong. Young people also learn to become more intelligent and discriminating users of products.

I believe that the evidence is insufficient to justify the fears that advertising is unduly influential or harmful to children. The best available evidence shows that children are discriminating users of mass media and commercials. There is certainly no evidence to support the view that advertising must be kept from children. Indeed, to deprive them of access to commercials would serve neither their social nor their economic needs. To restrict advertising would have not only undesirable economic consequences but also psychological effects. One such effect would be to enhance the desire and credibility of restricted information.

### **Self-regulation**

I come finally to the issue of regulation. Self-regulation has proved to be an effective mechanism for guiding children's advertising. As evidence, I asked the Advertising Standards Authority to examine three years of complaints and to ascertain the number of complaints relating to advertising to children. These are previously unpublished figures (see Table 2). The figures show that there were only two complaints in the past three years on this matter. Neither of the complaints were upheld. I present these figures not to rest the case but to open up discussion and debate.

**Table 2**

**COMPLAINTS TO THE ADVERTISING STANDARDS AUTHORITY FOR IRELAND**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total No. of Complaints</b>	<b>Cases involving Advertisements to Children</b>
1992/3	425	1
1993/4	490	NIL
1994/5	415	1

Source: Advertising Standards Authority for Ireland