

The **eReview** provides analysis on public policy relating to Canadian families and marriage. Below please find an assessment of who is best able to halt the commercialization of kids: parents or regulation.

The buck stops with parents

By Peter Jon Mitchell, Research Analyst, Institute of Marriage and Family Canada

When the bakery division of an international grocer, Saputo, recently attempted to market 'Igor'—a muffin Gorilla curriculum complete with posters, nutrition booklet, original music CD and of course samples and coupons for the kids, the company drew heat from Quebec's consumers union (*Union des Consommateurs*) and an anti-obesity group. The union blew the whistle at the campaign aimed at day care centres, claiming Igor contravened Quebec's Consumer Protection Act, "which forbids advertising to children under 13." [1]

Commercials aimed at kids have been around since before Barbie met Ken, and parents are right to be concerned. But just how legislation banning advertising aimed at certain age groups actually helps is not clear. It's likely that with or without legislation, parents need to be more involved in directing the media traffic in their children's lives as the commercial culture is indeed growing, alongside the evidence that too much media can harm young kids. [2]

In face of this, some countries are attempting to cut off the commercial activity aimed at kids at the source. In 1996 Sweden banned advertising to children under 12, Norway followed suit in 2001. Greece bans television advertising of toys between 7 am and 10 pm. [3] Closer to home, the Quebec government passed the Consumer Protection Act in the 1980s. [4]

On the industry self-regulating side, there are three industry bodies in Canada that monitor and restrict advertising to children. The Broadcast Code for Advertising to Children reviews advertising targeting children. Created in 1971, the code was initially voluntary but now the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) requires adherence as a condition for licensing. There are a series of restrictions; it forbids marketing products toward children that are not meant to be used by children, as well as marketing drugs or drug related products to kids, with the exception of kids' toothpastes. But at the same time it also recognizes "it remains the primary responsibility of parents "to instruct a child in the way that he/she should go"." [5]



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The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) has self imposed rules restricting advertisements during certain programs for the purpose of limiting viewing of harmful advertisements by kids. And the Canadian Marketing Association's Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice restricts weekday morning advertising directed at pre-schoolers. [6]

Yet it remains difficult to assess how limiting commercial activity helps—when it may be that television itself is the first problem: A 2001 study published in the *Journal of Developmental and Behavioural Pediatrics* found that a general reduction in television viewing in grade three and four led to a 70% reduction in toy purchase requests. [7]

And a U.S. Census Bureau study in 2003 showed that children from married parent families were more likely to have established rules regarding television viewing, spend more time reading with parents and share more meals together than other family forms. [8] While this doesn't eliminate advertising it reduces the time spent engaged in unfiltered television time and increases family time: things like sharing meals together.

In Sweden, despite the ban, advertisers have increased other forms of marketing to children while offshore broadcasters have continued to provide unrestricted advertising to Swedish children. That means that advertising to children is still flowing, just through other mediums. Their law was based partly on the research of Erling Bjurström, a professor of communications at Stockholm's National Institute for Working Life, who now admits openly that the ban does not work. [9]

Astonishingly, parents appear to have been relegated to the role of helpless bystander in combating child commercialization. A 2001 CBC news item referenced that kids "aged 2-12 spent \$1.5 billion of their own money and influenced an additional \$15 billion of family purchases," [10] as if kids aged two to five were responsible for the family finances. Assessing the purchasing power of three-year-olds illustrates the profound loss of common sense in the child commercialization debate. If kids have money, parents control how it should be spent. Some web sites have sprung up to help parents with this. [11]

Parents are not, after all, helpless. When toy maker Hasbro developed plans last year to market a new line of dolls featuring the risqué pop group the Pussycat Dolls to eight year olds, a parental backlash generated 2000 letters collapsing the Hasbro project before it started. [12]

Finally, laying all the blame on corporations for the commercialization of kids may merely deflect personal responsibility. A different take on the problem suggests family fragmentation may actually contribute to corporations commercializing kids. While further study is warranted, there is evidence to suggest family fragmentation as the reason for corporations approaching children as a direct target audience. "With the changing socio-economic structure of a typical urban family,

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marketers are shifting their marketing strategies and focus on the kids," one report on the role of children in advertising from the Indira Institute of Management, a business school in India, reads. [13] They go on to say that parents are more likely to bow to consumer pressures because they have "more guilt for not spending enough time with the kids." [14]

When parental consumers put their money where their mouth is, the fun and games cease. Public policy may be a marginal asset in a market saturated culture, but it's too difficult to measure the successful outcomes. The reality is when it comes to child consumers, the buck stops with parents.

[1] Danny Kucharsky (2007, February 20) Consumer groups demand end to Vachon gorilla campaign. *Marketing Magazine*. Retrieved March 5, 2007 from <http://www.marketingmag.ca/daily/20070220/topstory.html>

[2] Brian Wilcox et al. (2004, February 20) Report of the APA task force on advertising and children: recommendations, p3. Retrieved March 8, 2007 from http://www.apa.org/releases/childrenads_recommendations.pdf

[3] Miriam Zoll (2000, April 5) Psychologists challenge ethics of marketing to children. *American News Service*. Retrieved March 5, 2007 at <http://www.mediachannel.org/originals/kidsell.shtml>

[4] Government of Quebec (updated 2007, February 5) Consumer Protection Act. Retrieved March 6, 2007 at http://www2.publicationsduquebec.gouv.qc.ca/dynamicSearch/telecharge.php?type=2&file=/P_40_1/P40_1_A.html

[5] Advertising Standards Canada (Revised 2004, April) The broadcast code for advertising to children. Retrieved March 9, 2007 from <http://www.adstandards.com/en/clearance/clearanceAreas/broadcastCodeForAdvertisingToChildren.asp>

[6] Bill Jeffery (2006, May) The Supreme Court of Canada's appraisal of the 1980 ban on advertising to children in Quebec: Implications for "misleading" advertising elsewhere. *Loyola of Los Angeles Law Review* vol.39 no.237, pp.271-72. Retrieved March 7, 2006 from <http://www.cspinet.org/canada/pdf/jeffery.pdf>

[7] Thomas Robinson (2001) Effects of Reducing Television viewing on children's requests for toys: a randomized controlled trial. *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics* vol.22 no.3

[8] Terry Lugaila (2003, August) A child's day: 2000. U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved March 2, 2007 from <http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/p70-89.pdf>

[9] Erling Bjurström a professor of communications at Stockholm's National Institute for Working Life told the Economist: "In reality, Sweden's ban hasn't worked." *Economist* magazine Kid Gloves (2001, January 6) *Economist* vol.258, no.8203, p.60.

[10] Jacquie Perrin (2001, November 14) Ads aimed at kids. *CBC Marketplace* Retrieved March 5, 2007 from <http://www.cbc.ca/consumers/market/files/money/kidsads/index.html>

[11] See <http://www.activeallowance.com/>

[12] Dave Goldiner (2006, May 25) Hasbro axes dirty dancer toys for girls. *Daily News* Retrieved March 8, 2007

[13] Chinar Dudani, Kapil Chandak, Ambrish Soni. (2004) Role of children in advertising. Indira Institute of Management. p.1. Retrieved March 9, 2007 from http://www.indiaonline.com/content/bschool/Students_Corner/2006/05/30052006/role.pdf

[14] Dudani et al. Role of children. p.1

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