



Toy advertising

This topic covers:

- What is toy advertising
- Where does toy advertising occur
- What forms does toy advertising take and what are the rules
- Some problems for children from toy linked television series and movies
- What parents can do.

What is toy advertising

Toys are promoted very heavily to children through a wide range of media. They are presented in such a way as to make them look very attractive and great fun to play with. The children shown playing with them are cute, pretty or “cool”.

Many such toys are very expensive. Toys advertised on TV or otherwise linked to movies tend to dominate children’s “wish lists” for presents. Early childhood educators have expressed concern that many of the media-promoted toys do not extend children’s play, but limit it. Children can get much enjoyment from other simpler and cheaper toys. These days, many mass produced toys are not designed to meet the needs of children, but more to meet the objectives of a range of industries who are jointly marketing to children. (Varney, W, 1995)

Where does toy advertising occur?

Toys are promoted on television, by promotional segments within television programs, spin-offs from movies, and links with fast food chains. Other methods include “virus marketing”.

On television

Children are exposed to toy advertising on television. Children watching commercial children’s television see up to 15 minutes per hour of commercials (that is, about 30 commercials per

hour) for a range of products including toys (and especially in the pre Christmas season).

Toys are promoted to children via television in a variety of other ways as well. These include links with fast food chains (as premium offers), via toy-linked cartoon series, spin-off products from children’s programs, and via hosted segments within television programs.

Cinema films

Children are exposed to spin-offs from cinema films.

Most films made for a child or family market, and even some classified M15+ are linked to toys or to other products, advertised in association with the film. Many children are made to feel deficient if they can’t buy one of the spin-offs.

Some spin-off toys seem to be designed to make the child want to see the associated movie, for example Spiderman toys designed for young children, even when the movie is classified M15+.

Virus marketing

This method involves the selection of the most “cool” kid in the school or club, and supplying him or her with a free new toy or gadget. The child’s prestige as a leader provides the stimulus for other children to want the toy or gadget as well.

What form does toy advertising take and what are the rules

Paid television commercials for toys

These commercials are supposed to adhere to the Commercial TV Australia (CTVA) (formerly FACTS) Code of Practice [<http://www.aba.gov.au/tv/content/codes/commercial/index.htm>] guidelines for advertising directed to children under 14 years of age. Section 6.20 to 6.22 of the FACTS Code of Practice includes adherence to part of the Australian Broadcasting Authority’s Children’s Television Standards (CTS)

[<http://www.aba.gov.au/tv/content/childtv/standards/index.htm>].

In summary these guidelines require that:

- no advertisement may mislead or deceive a child (CTS 17)
- advertisements must accurately represent the advertised product (CTS19(1))
- toy advertisements must fairly represent the performance which a child of the age depicted can obtain (CTS 19 (3)(a))
- if the size of the a toy being advertised is not clear in a live action advertisement, it must be made clear by reference to something which a child can readily recognise (CTS 19(3)(b))
- if accessories (e.g. batteries) are needed, then this must be able to be understood by children, and any reference to price must clearly differentiate between the price of the product and the price of the accessories (CTS 19 (4)(b)).

Toys linked to fast food commercials

Toys and trinkets are very frequently advertised as part of a commercial for another product (for eg fast food outlets). An example would be the fast food meal offer which includes a toy for the child. The trinket or toy is called a “premium offer”. Parents often get pressured to go to a fast food chain in order for the child to get the offer.

The Commercial TV Australia (CTVA) (formerly FACTS) Code of Practice [<http://www.aba.gov.au/tv/content/codes/commercial/index.htm>] Section 6 Appendix CTS 20, requires that “A premium offer should not stimulate any unreasonable expectation of the product or service advertised. If a premium is offered, then:

- any reference to the premium must be incidental to the main product or service advertised
- any conditions that must be met before obtaining the premium must be clearly presented.

Cartoon programs linked to toys

In many cases, children’s television cartoon series are devised principally as vehicles for “bringing to life” a toy or range of toys. The toys existed first and the cartoon series was produced afterwards. Examples include Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Transformers, Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, Action Man, Pokemon. The list is endless.

The move to produce toy linked cartoon series began in the US in 1984 when the USA Federal Trade Commission deregulated children’s television and discontinued a prohibition against toy linked cartoon series. *He Man* and the *Masters of the Universe* was the first such series produced and began an avalanche of such series all over the world. (Kunkel, D et al, 1988) These series are cheap for Australian television stations to obtain, being either subsidised, or screened with the promise of associated toy advertising.

Promotion of toys by hosts or characters in a children’s program

There are some rules that limit the ability of hosts or characters in children’s television programs from promoting products within the program. The Commercial TV Australia (CTVA) (formerly FACTS) Code of Practice

[<http://www.aba.gov.au/tv/content/codes/commercial/index.htm>] para 6.23 requires that in any program mainly directed to children:

- the host or other regular presenter or character in the program must not sell or promote products or services
- products that have names or packaging featuring the host or any other regular presenter or character within the program must not be recommended or promoted within the program
- material within the program which recommends or promotes products or services, must be presented as discrete segments, and its sponsorship must be clear
- references to prizes for competitions must be brief.

Spin-offs from cinema films and television programs

Toys are commonly part of the spin-off merchandise from many children’s shows (including those on the ABC), and cinema films these days. Most such spin-offs are planned as an integral part of the cross media promotion for the movie or program. (Varney, W, 1995) In some rare instances, the money generated by the spin-off goes back to keeping the program on air (such as Sesame Street, or some Australian Children’s television Foundation programs).

There are no rules that prohibit or limit toy-linked cartoons series, or the spin-offs from movies.

Some problems for children from toy linked television series and movies

- these series increase the difficulties that young children under the age of five already have in

distinguishing between programs and commercials. (See related topic: *Overview of effects of advertising*). In toy linked television series, the program and “advertising” content are intertwined.

- the child is encouraged to want the toys associated with the characters in the series. It’s usually a whole team of toys rather than just one, and play is not seen as satisfactory unless the child has the whole team.
- the toys are frequently related to violent cartoon series (due to the ease of making spectacular action and effects), and via the plots, the child is encouraged to play with them violently.
- findings from research (Schooler, C and Flora, J A, 1996) indicates that the amount of time that a child spends fantasising about violent acts he or she has seen by playing with the toys, wearing the T shirt etc, is likely to increase the impact of the violence.
- the “hyper-commercialisation” of children’s toys, through the collaboration of several industries to use children to promote their products, often results in toys which do not meet children’s real play needs.
- the pressure to create series that meet toy manufacturers needs rather than children’s, often results in stereotyped story lines, and the consequent limiting of children’ story worlds.

What parents can do

- minimise young children’s exposure to commercial media
- choose the ABC (though there are toy spin-offs there as well), or borrow or build a selection of non-toy related videos
- be an active media educator. Show children the real toy when you’re out shopping and point out differences between the television ad and the real thing. Talk about the tricks used in advertising (with older children).
- choose age specific toys that meet children’s real play needs. The TRUCE Toy Action Guide [<http://www.truceteachers.org>] is a good place to start.