

Too Much Junk in the Trunk: Food Advertising to Children in Canada

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In the Western world, children are susceptible to marketing messages. Studies show children under the age of eight lack cognitive abilities to objectively assess marketing messages (Board of Health, 2008, p. 1). To provide focus on a policy regarding children and television, Advertising Standards Canada's (ASC) *Broadcast Code for Advertising to Children* (Children's Code) will be analyzed.

The *Children's Code*, created in 1971, is a self-regulated advertising industry policy in Canada. It acts as a mediator between advertisers and children, and was created to complement the principles for ethical advertising outlined in the *Canadian Code of Advertising Standards* (Advertising Standards Canada, 2010, p. 1). Moreover, the purpose of the *Children's Code* is to direct advertisers and agencies in how to ethically prepare commercial messages for audiences consisting of children (ASC, 2010, p. 1). Additionally, all advertising must correspond to the guidelines in the *Children's Code*, gain clearance by the procedures set out by the ASC, and have the requisite ASC clearance number (ASC, 2010, p. 2). It is important to have a code such as this in place because it provides guidelines for advertisers while ensuring protection of children from marketing messages they are not readily able to decipher, given their young age.

Furthermore, the code recognizes that children "live" in imaginary and real worlds, and sometimes have trouble distinguishing between the two. To protect their imagination, the code enforces that advertisers should respect a child's imagination when preparing commercial messages (ASC, 2010, p. 1). However, the code becomes contradictory as it later states that it allows advertisers to use elements of fantasy in their advertisements because, "childhood

possessions become meaningful when incorporated into a child's fantasy world" (ASC, 2010, p. 1). Directly taken from the *Children's Code*, this line appears problematic. Through the noticeable interchanging of "imagination world" to "fantasy world", the code is obstructed. It would appear as though the code suggests that these worlds are two separate entities. However, these worlds are both part of the imaginational sphere of a child. It is harmful to allow advertisers the chance to incorporate fantasy in advertisements, as children are not fully media literate. By enabling elements of fantasy in television advertisements, children will not be able to tell the difference between the imaginary and real world, but rather blur the two into one.

The *Children's Code* covers all aspects of advertising to children. However, an interesting section of this code, clause 11 – social values, covers guidelines on how to advertise food to children. First, advertisements should depict snack foods as part of a balanced diet and not as meal substitutes (ASC, 2010, p. 3). Second, every food product message should encourage healthy development of the child (ASC, 2010, p. 3). Third, advertising of food products should not discourage healthy lifestyle choices or the consumption of fruits and vegetables (ASC, 2010, p. 3). Lastly, the amount of food displayed in an advertisement should not be excessive to what a child is capable of consuming, as the quantity of food displayed should depict serving size based on the labelled nutritional facts panel (ASC, 2010, p. 4). Although these guidelines are stated within the *Children's Code*, they are not part of the written code (ASC, 2010, p. 4).

I feel that these guidelines should be part of the code and not simply stated because advertisers would abide by these rules and not overlook them. A study by Dhar and Baylis (2011) displayed that child obesity is on the rise due to junk food advertisements (p. 799). Fast food is among one of the heavily advertised product categories targeting children (Dhar & Baylis, 2011, p. 799). In addition, children watch up to 7 ½ hours of television per day (Hutton,

2012). It is evident that children are bombarded with commercial messages of fast food each day, and these messages are promoting unhealthy lifestyles and choices. During a 38-hour review of kids' programming, it was found that 24% of advertisements were food-related (Hampp, 2011, p. 3). It is essential to regulate the media in terms of food advertising to children. Young children cannot readily differentiate between healthy and unhealthy foods. Overall, this is detrimental to their health, as children, through their purchasing power, will influence parents to purchase "fun" food instead of healthy food (Elliott, 2012, p. 304).

In 2007, the Council of Better Business Bureaus (USA) launched the *Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI)* (Hampp, 2011, p. 2). The purpose of *CFBAI* is to have participating advertisers promote better-for-you products in at least 50% of their media targeted to children (Hampp, 2011, p. 2). Similarly, in Canada, the *Canadian Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CAI)* was launched in 2007, with the same purpose as the American initiative (ASC, 2011, p. 2). However, as of 2010, the promotion of better-for-you advertising has risen from 50% to 100% in Canada (ASC, 2011, p. 5). The *CAI* ensures that its 19 participating advertisers remain committed towards non-direct advertising to children under 12 (ASC, 2011, p. 2). Although the ASC administers the initiative, it is clear that it is not a part of the *Children's Code*, thus showing that it is not an industry standard.

Overall, I believe the *Children's Code* is a great document to have in the Canadian advertising industry. However, I feel that revision is necessary to ensure the mandate of this code is met. The industry is not abiding by rules and regulations outlined in the code because we see with recent studies that child obesity is still on the rise (Dhar & Baylis, 2011, p. 799). The advertising industry is aware of these studies, but continue to input the bare minimum of industry standards into children's advertising. However, with the *CAI*, it appears as though the industry is

beginning to change for the better. But, it is important to note the *CAI* remains an initiative since its introduction in 2007, and has not been included in the *Children's Code* as of yet. I find this problematic because this initiative is the solution needed to ensure that children make healthier choices and stay away from junk food. The ASC should turn this initiative into an industry policy.

At this point, government intervention is necessary. I feel the government would provide better regulation of marketing messages and turn the *CAI* into an industry policy. The government would provide better policing than the self-regulating advertising industry, which refuses to excel to the best of its potential.

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