

# Dear santa: the effects of television advertising on young children essay sample

[Media](#), [Advertising](#)



Every day children are exposed to the selling messages of advertisers via the television. There is some debate in the literature over the age at which young children can distinguish television advertisements from programmes, when they can remember and want what they see and when they are able to understand that the advertiser's motive is to sell a product. Resolution of the debate has been hampered by methodological difficulties and paradigms which fail to fully capture and explain children's responses to advertisements. This study uses a novel and ecologically valid method of exploring how toy advertising affects children by studying their requests to Father Christmas, monitoring toy commercials and collecting television viewing data. Eighty-three children aged from 4. 8 to 6. 5 years, who had written letters to Father Christmas, were interviewed regarding the extent and nature of their television viewing. Letters and similar data were also analysed for 16 nursery school children, aged 3. 8 to 4. 8 years, using questionnaire responses from their parents.

Overall, children who watched more commercial television were found to request a greater number of items from Father Christmas. These children also requested more branded items than children who watched less. However, the children's requests did not correlate significantly with the most frequently advertised toy products on television in the build-up to Christmas. Almost 90% of the toys advertised did not feature once in the children's letters, suggesting that recall for specific brand names is poor in the under-7s. A positive correlation was found between watching television alone and number of requests. One interpretation of this may be that lone viewing renders children more susceptible to advertising. A comparison

group of children from Sweden, where advertising to children is not permitted, asked for significantly fewer items. It is argued that English children who watch more TV, and especially those who watch alone, may be socialised to become consumers from a very early age.

## Introduction

Television is a major part of children's lives in the Western world today. In the UK children spend an average of 2½ hours each day watching TV and 63% have their own TV set (Livingston & Bovill, 1999). Three of the five terrestrial channels carry advertising and, within certain limits, advertisements can be aimed directly at children. What effect is increasing exposure to television advertising having upon children in the UK today? This paper is concerned particularly with younger children, below the age of 7 years, and aims to explore how receptive they are to the commercial messages of toy advertisers

It has been argued that, due to their limited memory capacity, young children may not recall advertisements and therefore will be relatively immune to advertisers' messages (Macklin, 1994). Others claim that having a lack of cognitive mechanisms to defend themselves actually renders children more susceptible to persuasive messages. Furthermore, there is a question mark over whether very young children can distinguish advertisements from programmes. Levin, Petros, and Petrella (1982) found that children as young as 3 years were able to make the distinction but had no understanding of the selling motives of advertisers. Levin et al. say that it is not until 8 years of age that children begin to

understand the selling purpose of an advertisement. Prior to this children regard advertisements as simply announcements designed to help, entertain, or inform viewers.

In making the decision not to allow advertising aimed at children, the Swedish government relied on evidence from sociologist Erling Bjurström that it is not until 12 years of age that all children can distinguish advertisements and understand the selling motives of the advertiser. Being able to recognise that advertisements differ from programmes appears to emerge early on in development, whereas the kind of healthy scepticism needed to resist commercial pressure requires far more sophisticated levels of understanding. The cognitive skills that children lack, i. e., understanding of persuasive intent, consumer literacy, and perception of realism, are discussed further here. Understanding of persuasive intent Young children do not realise that a message can portray only positive information, whilst withholding negative information, in order to manipulate another's mental state (Aloise-Young, International Journal of Behavioral Development # 2002 The International Society for the 2002, 26 (6), 529-539 Study of Behavioural Development

Correspondence should be addressed to Karen J. Pine, Psychology Department, University of Hertfordshire, College Lane, Hatfield, Herts. AL10 9AB, UK; e-mail:

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