

**Letter to the
Editor**

Advertising to Children- Ethical Aspects

Aisha Mehnaz¹

¹ Chairperson KONPAL, Child Abuse Prevention Society & Focal Person, PPA, CRG, Sindh.

Author's Contribution

¹ Conception of study

¹ Experimentation/Study conduction

¹ Analysis/Interpretation/Discussion

¹ Manuscript Writing

Corresponding Author

Dr. Aisha Mehnaz,

Chairperson KONPAL,

Child Abuse Prevention Society &

Focal Person, PPA, CRG, Sindh

Email: draisha_mehnaz@yahoo.com

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A number of advertisements being aired these days either involve children or are shown to children which is unrealistic and often unethical. Advertising agencies allure children to demand from their parents, items they neither understand nor needed to buy in the first place. Unable to differentiate between reality and fantasy, children start believing in what is shown to them.

On average young children and youth watch more than 30,000 to 40,000 adv. per year on television, in addition, they are further exposed to advertisements through print media like magazines, dailies, pamphlets, etc. Attractive advertisements on billboards and posters on public vehicles are in addition. Internet and social media sites are enticing more children with their slick promotional strategies.

This mammoth exposure is significantly contributing to poor health and nutritional issues in children like obesity and emotional problems. In most countries selling to children and youth is a business strategy. Since it is easier to lure children toward branded items, advertisers find innovative and creative ideas that instantly appeal to young minds. Research has shown that young children are cognitively and psychologically immature and cannot differentiate right from wrong; hence they are defenseless and thus are an easy target. In a number of countries like Sweden and Norway advertising to children, less than 12 years of age are forbidden by law. In some countries, Children Television Act (1990) allows only 10.5min/hour on weekends and 12 mins./hour on weekdays. No such TV act exists in Pakistan. In the USA in 1998, the children online privacy protection act (Publ no.105-277) states that commercial webs cannot

collect information from children <13 years and are directed to provide notice on the sites to parents about the collection, use, and disclosure of children personal information and must obtain parental consent prior to advertisement,

Of the number of advertisements, children are exposed to more than 50% are about highly processed food, sugary cereals, fast food, and high caloric snacks and beverages. A good example is an advertisement that promotes a type of spaghetti. All nutritionist agrees that it has no nutritive value but the attractive advertisement is so alluring that children compel their parents into buying the product often throwing tantrums if their desire is not full filled. In most circumstances, parents succumb to their persistent demands.

These instant foods are highly processed because they are made to last a longer shelf life. Their nutritive content is low but fat, calories and sodium are high. Most items are coated with artificial colors, flavors, and preservatives.

The salt used is mostly monosodium glutamate (MSG) which is a chemical preservative derived from the petroleum industry and is added for its taste-enhancing properties. Regular intake of these food items can cause health issues including dependency.

The justification most parents give for buying and giving non-nutritive food is that children refuse to eat home-cooked food and remain hungry until their demands are met, so they have no option but to give in to their demands. This paves for more such demands from the children. Often this leads to Mal(bad) nutrition which can lead to weight loss or obesity. The essential micronutrients like vitamins and minerals

necessary for optimal growth of the body are largely missing in a tinned or packaged food item.

Children especially in our country are suffering from various kinds of malnutrition and related micronutrient deficiencies, insufficient knowledge of parents regarding balanced food and unhealthy food advertisement are playing a major part. Often ready to prepare tinned food was shown to be superior to home-cooked food. The manufacturing companies are spending more than twice on marketing as compared to what they should spend on research about their product and their impact on children.

Advertisers need to be careful not to send wrong messages targeting children to indulge in unhealthy eating habits

Another devastating effect of advertising is emotional trauma to children, promoting a certain hair oil or shampoo, or skin product claiming that it will increase their popularity among their peers often leads to a lack of confidence and self-esteem among children who unfortunately do not possess a silky hair or flawless skin. Children in their innocence and ignorance make fun of their peers prompted by the false claim made by the product owners. Thus advertising to children at an impressionistic age has a downside which is considered unethical by most child rights activists.

Well-advertised products attract everyone even adults. Often the product advertised is so appealing that one ends up buying the product, most of the time it may not be a necessity. Children especially do not have the capacity to process the information in their minds and weigh the necessity of obtaining the product.

Advertisements are often so fascinating sometimes that children and youth form an opinion based on what is being portrayed. Soft drinks, for instance, are shown to be the reason behind the growing strength, vitality, and happiness. They start to believe that those who drink a particular soft drink or vitality drink are going to gain more strength, will perform better in exams and sports, and will make them more popular among friends. Little do they know that on the contrary over-indulgence in such energy-dense drinks can lead to obesity and other health issues.

Another detrimental effect of advertisement is the risk of infection. Our advertisers promote children playing with dirt as a sign of healthy recreation and later promote their products to easily wash off the dirt. Little that they realize that children could get sick while playing with dirt and are exposed to infections including worm infestations. Such advertisements do not issue a warning that washing hands thoroughly

after playing and or wearing protective gloves is essential before indulging in such activities.

Another category of advertisement particularly appealing to adolescents are where their famous hero is shown to be playing stunts like jumping around on bicycles or taking a dive from a cliff, a number of accidents and even deaths have occurred in adolescents while trying these stunts. There is often no warning at the end of the adv. (like in smoking advertisements.) as a result kids are restless to show off the aerobatics to their friends. Adolescents' health is also directly affected by advertisements. Which promotes smoking and drugs, especially so in our country where almost any drug is available over the counter.

The responsibility primarily lies with the government and the regulatory authorities to scrutinize the product advertised for children or products with an impact on children's physical and or emotional health but parental guidance is equally important. In order for children to understand and differentiate between reality and fiction, the guidance of the parents is of utmost importance. Parents need to talk to their children and made them see through the content of the advertisement. With good reasoning, they can make children understand the gimmick of the advertising industry. Parents need to explain to the children to differentiate between healthy and unhealthy food and teach them basic values in life. Making fun or ridiculing other children for not wearing the proper attire or a physical shortcoming like a dark complexion or fizzy hair can damage their relationship and others' self-esteem which is far more harmful than using the particular product. This way the child will learn to be more empathetic, considerate, and responsible.

Parents are definitely accountable for what their children need, but more important is teaching their kids true values in life.

The advertisement companies need to be more responsible especially when advertisements are targeting children.

It is imperative that advertisements that are unethical be removed and banned completely. Only the products that impose no harm should be allowed to be advertised. A committee comprising of Pediatricians, Nutritionists, and Child Psychologists besides technical persons should be constituted to screen the advertisement before any product with untoward effects on children is aired on electronic media or printed in print media.

The constant rise in the number of fast-food restaurant chains, junk eating, and decrease in healthy cooking at

home has a drastic effect on our lifestyle. Obesity, heart diseases, diabetes, and renal problems are on the rise. More and more children are becoming obese. Obesity is closely linked with PCOS in young girls which may lead to infertility with its ensuing emotional and marital issues. Obesity in children often leads to obesity in adults with its ensuing health problems like coronary heart diseases, diabetes, and hypertension which are expensive to treat and lead to an increase in the medical budget.

If the current trend of unhealthy eating among kids and a sedentary lifestyle is not checked, childhood obesity and the prevalence of type 1 and 2 diabetes will rise, which will lead to major health problems later as they grow. Already, adult-onset diabetes has involved a considerable population of Pakistan, and obese children will add to the already dangerous prevalence of DM.

A number of countries like Hungary have imposed a fat tax on food high in sugar and fat. It will be highly beneficial to a country like Pakistan if we impose taxes on food products that are known to be dangerous to health.