

# Position of Family, School and Advertisement in the Creation of Children's Eating Habits

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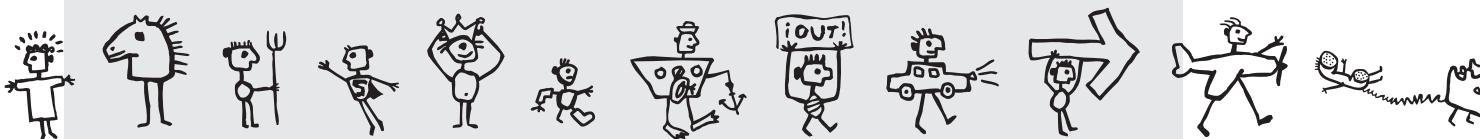
*Media advertisement aimed at children is a sensitive issue because the majority of children until ages of three or four are not able to differentiate (e.g. in a television commercial) between reality and fantasy, nor are they able to understand when parents try to explain it. Children do not have enough experiences to judge from, and their value system is just beginning to develop. Even though their discernment develops better later, initial perceptions from earlier ages remain deeply embedded in their minds. In this manner, the child spectator gradually becomes the consumer.*



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## Advertisement and Specific Target Groups — Children and Youth

Many arguments support the separation of children and youth into a specific group. One of the arguments arises from the reality that children and youth are not able to properly analyse and judge information spread by media or through advertisements. Children and youth compose approximately one third of society and they belong to very sensitive group. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the content of commercial messages.

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The creation of a fictitious world indirectly leads to the conviction that the feeling of satisfaction is met only in the desire “to have.” The satisfaction acquired by making a purchase, however, does not last long, and therefore initiates the need for another purchase. The impulse to purchase grows through repetition and a child reacts to products in advertisements which she/he does not need with desire to buy them, often under the pressure of peers.

At the age of eight, children are better able understand the advertisements. They use distinguishing criteria to evaluate the advertisement, especially into categories like “good – bad” or “interesting – not interesting.” At the age of nine or ten, children often begin to compare advertisements to their experiences as they are now more sensitive to the contradiction between imagination and reality. They are inclined to the judgement of “the advertisement lie.”

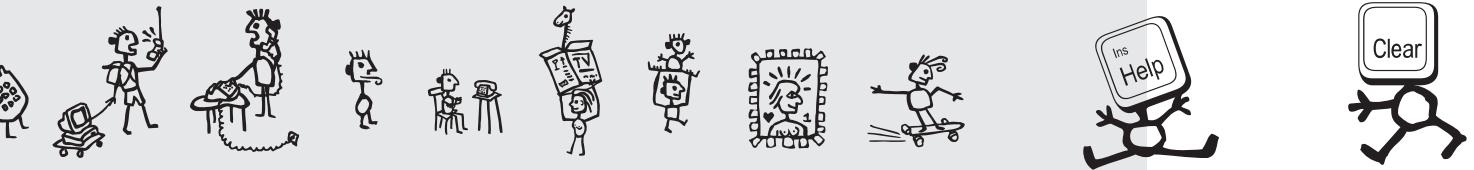
The awareness of trademarks develops intensively between the ages of ten and thirteen. During this time, a recipient of commercial messages becomes a consumer.

Children between seven and fourteen years belong to the most important target group for the advertisement creators. This group is called “skippies”—School Kids with Income and Purchasing Power. These kids are propagators of commercial information between their contemporaries and they are important consumers of some types of goods.

The repetition of advertisements in a known programme context and at the same time make-up the advertisement popularity supporting factors. In this manner, television commercials become a daily part of a kid’s schedule, like games, sleep and food.

## School and Education

If we look at definitions of school and various current school revival efforts, we can denote a school as a place of realization of versatile scholars’ formation through systematic and critical acquirement of cultural values. School is in fact a privileged place of flexible development because it can mediate life and vigorous meeting with cultural treasures. Schools educate with



the purpose to build a human from inside and relieve her or him of internal stress. Education helps to increase the quality of human life.

## Effects of the Family

Among natural means of education, the family has a special significance in the development and education of younger generations. The child acquires basic education within the family long before she/he begins to attend school. When compared to the influence of the family, the role of schools in education is limited.

The members of a family live together and create one household that consists of two or three generations. Relationships within members of a family are given by their attitudes, feelings and traditions acquired through education, but also given by law, environment and religion. The family creates a specific cultural background that forms the attitudes and personalities of children together with external factors (politic, social, cultural, ecological, etc.).

## The Research: Objective And Methodology

This study deals with the influence of advertisement on a specific target group—children between the ages of ten and twelve. The objective of the study is to recognize which factors influence children's eating habits and attitudes towards commercial messages (e.g. family, communication, type of school). This article gives selected results of the study.

The methodology is based on questionnaires prepared for children within the target age. The constant for this group of children is uniform (basic school) education, but their behaviour is also determined partly by the kind of school and considerably by their family backgrounds.

One hundred and ten questionnaires were distributed to the different types of schools (private, church, public). Respondents (children) filled in the questionnaires in cooperation with a researcher and a teacher.

Questionnaires were distributed within three basic schools:

- Private basic schools, Ružomberok
- St. Dominic basic schools, Zvolen (church school)
- 1<sup>st</sup> basic schools in Zvolen, (public school)

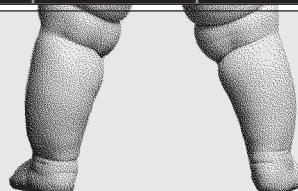
Distribution of questionnaires extended from February until March 2007. One hundred percent of the questionnaires were returned because of the direct asking method.

**Figure 1 – Age structure of respondents**

Sex	Age				%
	10 years	11 years	12 years	Σ	
Girls	19	8	19	46	44 %
Boys	18	24	17	59	56 %
Σ	37	32	36	105	100 %
%	36 %	30 %	34 %	100 %	

The questionnaire dealt with the following issues:

- how many hours children spend watching TV?
- what are the children doing during television commercials?
- are the children interested in the advertisements about food?





- do they buy (or ask their parents to buy) food from the advertisements?
- do parents buy food from the advertisements for their children?
- how much pocket money do children spend for sweets per week?
- do children talk about healthy and unhealthy foods with their parents?
- do children talk about the healthy and unhealthy food/nutrition with teachers in school?
- do the children realize that there are some healthy and unhealthy foods in advertisements?
- demographic data (age, sex, region of residence)

## Selected Results of the Research

The target children found television commercials to be the most interesting (30 percent), followed by advertisements on the internet and in magazines. The television remains the most popular (and time demanding) mass medium for this generation.

As a result, the influence of advertisements on the eating habits of children also depends on the amount of time which children spend watching television. According to the questionnaire, 49 percent of the polled children watched TV from one to three hours daily. Almost 47 percent of children stated that they change the channel during television commercials. Another group, about 24 percent, always watch television commercials. The rest of the children (almost 30 percent) do not watch TV during advertisements and usually go to do something else (to eat, go to the restroom). One girl from church school gave the answer: "I'm going to pray or brush my teeth."

The amount of pocket money spent for sweets from the advertisements is generally low. Up to 46 percent of children do not get any pocket money from parents and 32 percent of children spend less than fifty Slovak crowns per week (approximately one and a half euro). The research was gathered in smaller towns (Zvolen and Ružomberok), generally with higher rates of unemployment and lower family incomes when compared to bigger cities. We could assume that parents spend the money mainly for standard commodities and services.

It could be interesting to do similar research in the schools in larger cities (like Bratislava), with lower rates of unemployment, where generally parents are busier and have higher incomes but less time for communication with their children.

Family and communication in the family is one of the important factors creating the eating habits. If the advertisement is interesting for the children, 59 percent of

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them ask their parents to buy the product. According to the answers of children, 56 percent of parents do not buy the asked product (and explain why not), especially parents of children from church school (more than two-thirds of them).

## Type of School

The type of school (private, public, church) proved to be a significant factor in the responses of children to the question “What do you do if you see/hear an interesting advertisement for food?” According to responses, advertisements have a different influence on the students in state and public schools than on students in church schools.

Almost one third of children from private and public schools ask their parents to buy a product from an interesting advertisement. On the other hand, almost one-half of the children attending church schools do not care about the advertisement.

## Family and School

There is a coherence between communication in the family and awareness of what is healthy and what is unhealthy in advertisements for food. The biggest group of respondents (64 percent) talk with parents about this topic *occasionally*, but they (children) are aware of what is healthy and what is unhealthy. Only 16 percent of children talk with their parents *often* about healthy and unhealthy food. The rest of the children (20 percent) claim that their parents *do not talk* about this topic at all. Following the results, communication in the family is not strong, but still enough to help to children differentiate between healthy and unhealthy food.

On the other hand, research indicates that communication with a teacher or





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classmates about healthy and unhealthy food in advertisements for food is weak. Up to 66 percent of children never talk with their teachers about this topic. According to these results, the communication in the school is less effective when compared to the communication in the family.

## **Conclusion and Ideas for the Future**

This trend for the future seems to be negative—parents will be busier (paradoxically thanks to economic growth) and have less time for communication with their children. Consequently, better communication at school has an increasing importance.

This should lead to the positive solution of introducing a new subject—Media Education—into the curriculum of basic schools. The objective of the subject should be the development of students' abilities to critically judge commercial messages and be able to use media and their products actively. This should help them to have better orientation in a reality influenced by media and at the same time actively use media as a tool for positive influence in their lives.

### **REFERENCES**

Bellová, Stanislava. *The Advertisement and Eating Habits of Children. KMOSL DF, Technical University in Zvolen, 2007. 58 p. Diploma thesis (supervisor: asos. prof. Eva Drličková, PhD.)*

