

The Impact of Toy Advertising — Focus Groups with Children 4-12

Final Report

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Executive Summary

- According to the children in these three focus groups, television was their most important source of information about toys and games. The influence of television diminished in older children who were more likely to be sceptical about advertising and to be influenced by their peer group as well as television advertising.
- While the participants had difficulty recalling any advertisements for toys or games, when shown a reel of recently-aired toy and game commercials, most had seen the ads previously.
- The intent of television commercials – to convince and sell - was evident to the 10-12 year olds but totally transparent to the 4-6 year olds. The youngest children did not appear to make a clear distinction between the program and the commercials in a broadcast, even though they understood the content of the programs and the ads.
- While the 4-6 year olds were very open to influence by television advertising for toys, this was less true for the two older age groups. Among the 7-9 year olds there was more awareness of the sales intent of advertising, but still developing tastes and brand loyalties.
- The use of older children in commercials than would normally play with a certain toy gave a commercial the air of an “endorsement” by older, and presumably “cooler” children.
- Several examples of commercials were presented which bordered on factual misrepresentation. Where these commercials involved the functioning of a toy even the oldest children were unable to evaluate the likelihood that a toy would function as shown.
- Commercials demonstrating inappropriate social behaviour were shown, but prompted little reaction. The younger children with still-strong views of right and wrong were more likely than the older ones to criticize a commercial because the subject was “acting wild” or using a toy to steal from others.
- When the older children were given the task of creating their own television commercials their lack of appraisal skills was demonstrated. Although they were very familiar with many commercials, and could understand and “play back” the communication elements of commercials, they were not able to *abstract* from the ads or see the *techniques* of persuasion being used.

- Among the older children there was some awareness that important information might be communicated in the “fine print” at the end of the commercial. The most commonly recalled caveat was “Batteries not included,” many other important conditional statements were not understood by the children due to delivery that was too fast, print that was too small and too difficult for children, and use of intonation that masked the true meaning of the message.
- These three focus groups with a range of children confirmed several hypotheses about the influence of advertising on children. First, that pre-schoolers and those in the early grades are impressionable and can be heavily impacted by television advertising. Second, that “consumer caution” messages are largely ineffective in communicating to the target audience of children. And finally, that although children become aware of the underlying sales motivation of television ads as they grow older, many are not aware of *how* they might be misled.

Introduction

This report describes a series of focus groups carried out on behalf of The Canadian Toy Testing Council. The groups were one element of a multi-part research project to investigate current practices in advertising of toys to children, and to explore the effects of that advertising on children.

The objective of the focus groups was to understand children's perceptions of advertising for toys and games, particularly television advertising. Specifically:

- To explore the ability of children of different ages to identify, comprehend and evaluate advertising for toys and games.
- To understand whether, and at what age children become aware of the commercial purpose for toy advertising.
- To broadly assess the impact of television advertising on children's "intention to purchase".

Methodology

Three groups of six to nine children were held during the winter of 2000 and spring of 2001. Participants were grouped by age to avoid opinion-leading by older children.

- Nine 4-6 year olds; 5 boys, 4 girls
- Six 7-9 year olds; 4 boys, 2 girls
- Six 10-12 year olds; 3 boys, 3 girls

Participants were screened to ensure that all watched some commercial television, but the amount of time spent watching ranged from just one or two hours a week to at least 10 hours per week. (Time spent watching videos was excluded).

Groups lasted 1 hour with the 4-6 year olds, and about 1½ hours for the older groups. The discussion guides for each age group are shown in the Appendix. In each group there was an age appropriate activity aimed at judging the participants' understanding of commercials and in each one a selection of age-matched television commercials were shown as a stimulus for discussion. These commercials were selected from tapes of all commercials for toys and games aired in the pre-Christmas season (October and November 2000). The commercial reel was compiled by Ad Watch, an independent media monitoring agency.

Detailed Findings

The Role of Television

As the popular press frequently reminds us, Canadian children watch a great deal of television. According to Statistics Canada, Canadian kids watch, on average, 16.8 hours of television a week (*Variety* magazine, January 3, 1999). The kids participating in these groups were no exception. In fact it was not difficult to recruit children with plenty of television experience. The participants in these groups, by in large, were moderate TV watchers. A few watched just one or two hours of television per week, most watched less than 10 hours per week. However, when we presented our reel of commercials, their level of familiarity with the commercials suggested that self reports and parental reports may have underestimated the total hours spent watching television.

Kids watched at all times of the day, when they were not in school. Before and after school were the most common times. There was less TV-watching on Saturday and Sunday mornings than might have been expected. Several children noted that they had lessons and activities on the weekends that precluded watching much television.

Television Commercials versus other Advertising

According to these children, television was their most important source of information about toys and games. Some mentioned seeing ads in flyers or catalogues, or in the stores themselves, but these were not major influences. Since the research was carried out around the Christmas season, some store flyers were presented.¹ While these were recognized, none of the respondents indicated great familiarity with the contents, suggesting they do not have the influence of the Sears catalogue of time gone by.

Recall of Advertising for Toys and Games

When asked to recall any commercials for toys or games, most of the children in the groups were at a loss. Very few, even among the oldest age group were able to think of a type of toy, or particular brand name which they had seen advertised. However, it became clear through the course of discussion that the children had, in fact, seen and understood many commercials. It seems that they simply did not organize their thoughts and memories for recall in this way.

¹ Flyers were from Zellers, Radio Shack, Eatons and Mrs Tiggy Winkles, an Ottawa toy store.

Even among the group of four to six year olds, all were aware of what commercials were. Interestingly, some associated commercials with cartoons, possibly because animated shows tend to have frequent advertising breaks.

When asked about the purpose of television commercials, the youngest respondents said that commercials were "*for kids*" and "*to tell people about things*". At the other end of the spectrum, the 10 to 12 year olds were very savvy. They understood that commercials were trying to attract and sell to kids. One remarked that "*kids under eight see the toy and want it.*" Another noted that the tag line from a computer game ad, "You'll do anything to play" was true. "*It works on younger kids*".

Distinguishing Advertising from Programming

The youngest group, of four to six year olds was asked to play a game that involved identification of commercials within a children's program. This was based on the conjecture put forward by some critiques of advertising claiming that young children are unable to distinguish between program content and advertising.

Each child had a piece of paper with a stoplight coloured on it. They were asked to watch the program and put up the stoplight whenever the program ended and a commercial came on. All practiced doing this before the tape was played. The children were shown about two minutes and twenty seconds of a Pokemon program, followed by a commercial for a Little Sniffles doll. On seeing the doll commercial, one of the youngest participants immediately shouted out "*I want that*", but most just kept watching the television. No stoplights went up. The tape was stopped, the children were reminded of the task, and then about four minutes of a musical variety show (Olsen Twins) were shown. At the point where the program ended and switched to a commercial for an ice cream eating doll, only one of the 4-6 years olds put up his red light. The same child who had spoken earlier, announced "*I like this one. I might get that.*"

Clearly, the children were seeing and hearing the message of the commercial, as indicated by the voiced desire to have the dolls. But most were not able to consciously acknowledge or indicate the break between the program and the commercial. This was quite surprising since the excerpts were from YTV which shows a short station identifier, featuring its mascot, between the program and the commercial. Our concern before the group had been that the station identifier created a break between the program and the commercial which was too obvious. Our conclusion from the exercise and subsequent discussion with the four to six year olds, is that ***the children did not appear to make a clear***

distinction between the two elements of a broadcast, even though they did understand the content of the programs and the ads.

This distinction was not a concern among the groups of 7-9 year olds or 10-12 year olds. By this stage of development the children were much more aware of what commercials were and when they occurred.

Suggestibility

As already illustrated, the 4-6 year olds were very open to influence by television advertising for toys. This was not true for the two older age groups. In fact, it appeared that the older children, who had of course been exposed to more television advertising, were quite resistant to the selling pressures in commercials. This began to be evident in the group of 7-9 year olds and was very clear among the 10-12 year olds.

In the case of the 10-12 year olds, interest in traditional toys and games had begun to wane, with more interest in electronic games, audio electronics, CDs and so on. So despite the fact that the commercials shown to this oldest group contained children of their age, the participants complained that they were "not interested" in those types of toys. In fact, the 10-12 year olds remarked that the kids playing with the toys and having fun in the commercials were probably too old for the toys shown. The toys would appeal to a younger age group. One respondent remarked that actors in the commercials looked older, but were acting immaturely.

This comment pointed to a device used in many of the television commercials we screened for use in the focus groups. Often the kids shown playing with the toy in the commercial were substantially older than the actual age that might be interested in the toy in real life. As a result, the ***commercials may have had the air of an "endorsement" by older, and presumably "cooler" children.*** An example of this was the "Generation Girls" ad which featured pre-teen girls playing with dolls described as "high-school girls" who are snowboarders, artists, singers and so on. The CTTC's work with toys of this type indicates that they would most likely appeal to five to eight or nine year olds, rather than the much older girls shown playing in the ad.

A commercial for Fib Finder presented a similar situation: the girls shown in the commercial were at least 10-12. They were shown in a "sleepover" situation and talked about crushes on boys, suggesting that the toy would appeal to older girls. But our participants said it was for younger kids – "nine to ten year olds". This again suggested that the advertiser had used older children to act as role models for younger children who might wish to have such a game.

Misleading Depiction of Functionality

There were a number of commercials identified from recently-aired commercials which seemed to misrepresent the functions or exaggerate the capabilities of various toys. These included:

- Action Man, an action figure demonstrated in extremely elaborate jungle and arctic sets by kids in costume and guerrilla face makeup
- Beast Machine Transformers that showed exaggerated transformation and combat speed
- Fib Finder that implied the toy could actually detect lies

The Fib Finder advertisement, as noted above, was shown to 10-12 year olds who took the demonstration at face value. Our participants assumed that the toy could determine whether the girls in the ad were telling the truth or not. The participants were not aware that the yes-no decision was mostly likely randomized, a fact which could lead to troubling social outcomes if the toy were purchased and taken to be a real "lie detector".

Demonstration of Inappropriate Behaviour

Also selected from previously aired commercials were some which showed questionable behaviour:

- Pokemon Grabber Ball - A boy used the toy to grab small articles from others.
- Beast Machine Transformers – Two boys were seen in a confrontation over who would get a plate of fries at a fast food restaurant. A battle between their transformers resulted.
- Pokemon – A young boy used a front-end loader to haul away toys and furniture from the family home in order to "make room" for new Pokemons. He subsequently locked his family in the back yard.

When the 7-9 year olds were shown the Pokemon Grabber Ball advertisement and asked to describe the action only one participant noted that "he was stealing". The remaining participants focused on other aspects of the commercial.

Participants who viewed the hauling away of toys with the front-end loader said they didn't like the commercial because it was silly or unbelievable. But none mentioned the idea that the behaviour was destructive or wrong.

Interestingly, it was the 4-6 year olds that seemed to have a greater sensitivity to inappropriate behaviour. A relatively benign animated

commercial advertising Family Game Night was shown to the youngest group. Asked to describe what was going on, one five-year-old boy said it was about a little boy talking about his family and "being wild". This comment raised a point that had not been considered when the commercial was selected.

Legal Text About Bundling and Accessories

A number of the ads shown to our group participants had visual and aural messaging regarding what was packaged with the toy. This text was always presented at the end of the advertisement, often in very small type at the bottom of the screen, usually with a speeded up voice over. For example:

- Viewers of the Generation Girls ad were warned "Each sold separately. Dolls don't move on their own".
- After showing an elaborate play scene, the Kelly Princess Palace commercial noted "Carriage set and dolls sold separately" and "Blanket not included".
- The final message in the McDonalds Play-Doh commercial concerned inedibility of the Play-Doh food.

While these messages were difficult to make out on many of the commercials, all but the youngest participants were aware that such messages did exist. Unfortunately, if they could not make out a message they typically assumed that it said "Batteries not included". Putting the text in small type at the bottom of the last screen was clearly an ineffective gesture since many of the younger children could not read well enough or quickly enough to read such complicated wording. Overall, it appeared that ***the children paid very little attention to the "consumer information" messages***, many of which were almost unintelligible to them due to complicated wording and brief presentation.

With the 4-6 year olds we explored whether "each sold separately" was understood. This appeared to be the case as one voiced the idea that "each one comes in a different box."

Internalizing Television Advertising

As a way of understanding the extent to which kids internalize the messages and style of television advertising, the older two age groups were asked to create commercials of their own. They were shown rough storyboard sketches for a commercial they had already viewed and asked to sketch a few scenes and make up text to go with the pictures. It was suggested that the ads could be for a toy or game that they enjoyed, or for a new toy of their creation. The objective was

to “make the toy appealing to kids”, but without being misleading. Although the exercise was presented to a relatively small number of children, some preliminary observations can be made.

Despite watching hundreds of commercials, the participants found this activity to be very challenging. This seemed to be because they were not able to abstract the persuasive elements present in many commercials: such as showing many kids enjoying the toy, presenting many examples of the toy, showing impressive results, and so on. We might conclude that although the kids were very familiar with many commercials, and could understand and “play back” the communication elements of commercials, they were not able to *abstract* from the ads or see the *techniques* of persuasion being used. (Perhaps this exercise simply demonstrates what a developmental psychologist would take as a given: that this is a higher order task barely within the grasp of a 12-year-old, and certainly beyond a seven-year-old.)

Some of the older or more creative participants did produce excellent storyboards, which are reproduced in the Appendix. The subjects of the advertisements ranged from a popular board game to a fictitious Robo-Kitty and a sibling-replacement doll. The common thread in the advertisements (aside from impressive creativity in a short time period) was presentation completely without guile. The capabilities and functionality of the toys were shown, much more than crowds of actors enjoying the product. No one thought to include consumer awareness statements, such as “batteries not included” even though these had been discussed earlier in all the groups. Our conclusion was that despite their apparent sophistication with the medium, the motives or underlying intent of television toy commercials were not top of mind for most, and not even understood by some.

Impact of Television Advertising by Age

Clearly the **4-6 year olds were the most impressionable** of the children participating in these groups. They were quick to form a “want” once they saw a commercial that appealed. Furthermore, they did not differentiate between the content of a television show and the commercials that accompanied it. This impression was encouraged by the fact that some commercials included fantasy much like the programs, and others made use of animation, as did many cartoon shows. It was our impression that for a four- or five-year old a commercial for a new toy was as much of an entertainment as a portion of their favourite program.

Six- and seven-year olds, who spanned two of our focus groups were not as much influenced as the pre-schoolers. They appeared to be a bit more selective

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in their uptake of commercial information, likely because they had already seen so many commercials.

Seven to nine year olds were aware of commercial advertising but to some degree were "hooked". They were developing tastes and loyalties, for example for Barbie or Pokemon. They were very interested in sets of toys or collectibles. At this age they were clear that each toy was sold individually, but they were very likely to subscribe to the "more is better" philosophy.

By age 10-12 the kids in our focus group appeared more knowledgeable, somewhat sophisticated, and slightly sceptical about advertising claims. They were fairly self-assured about what they might want, but, this was more likely to be determined by a combination of peer group influence and television ads.

Appendix

- 1. Discussion Guides**
- 2. Examples of Participants' Storyboards**

Revised Discussion Guide 4-6 year olds

Introduction and Warm Up (15 minutes)

Doing research – finding out what kids think. Topic is toys and advertising
Ask questions, but no right or wrong answers, just want your own opinion
Everyone might not agree, that's okay
Rules – only one person talking at a time
Let me know if you need to leave the room
Tape recorder to help me remember what you said when I write a report.

Introduction – first name, your favourite toy or game
What are your favourite TV shows?
What times of the day do you watch TV?
Are you usually by yourself or with other kids? At home or someplace else?

1. Introduction to television advertising (5 minutes)

When you watch television do you see commercials or advertising? What exactly do commercials do? Why are they on television?

What kinds of ads do you remember seeing that are specially for kids? What are they about? Do you like them, or not? Why?

2. Recall of TV Commercials (5-10 minutes)

What ads do you remember that are about **toys or games**?
Do you have a favourite television commercial **for a toy or game**?
What does the ad say? What does it show?
What does it make you think about the toy? Why?

Is there an ad for a toy or a game that you don't like?
What does the ad say? What does it show?
What does it make you think about the toy? Why?

3. Red Light Green Light (10 minutes)

Now we're going to play a television game called Red Light but not the same game that some of you might play at home or at school. I'm going to give each of you a red light.
What does a red light mean?

Now we're going to watch television for a few minutes. Part of what you will see will be a program and some of it will be advertising. What I want you to do is use the light to help me find the commercials. You need to show me where the program ends and the commercial starts. So if you're watching and you see the program end, you hold up your red light. When the program starts again you put down your red light. Does everyone understand? Let's practice...

After viewing the tape

Is it hard to tell when the commercial starts? How can you tell?

Are there certain words they say, so you know when it's a commercial?

Do you usually watch the commercials when you are looking at a program on TV?

4. Assessment of Two Commercials (15 minutes)

Show three sample commercials, one at a time. After each, ask:

What are they advertising here?

What did the ad say? What did it show?

Did you like it or dislike it? Why?

What did it make you think about the toy? Why?

Did it make you want to have the toy? Why?

Do you think that the toy is really the same as it was shown in the ad? Is it as much fun as shown in the ad?

5. Expectations versus Reality (5 minutes)

We've talked a lot about different ads and television commercials. Have you gotten a new toy and then found out that it was different from what you saw in the advertising? How was it different? How did you feel?

What did the ad say or show?

That's all the questions I have. Thanks for talking with me today.

Total Time 55-60 minutes

Revised Discussion Guide 7-9 year olds

Introduction and Warm Up (15 minutes)

Doing research – finding out what kids think. Topic is toys and advertising
Ask questions, but no right or wrong answers, just want your own opinion
Everyone might not agree, that's okay
Rules – only one person talking at a time
Let me know if you need to leave the room
Tape recorder to help me remember what you said when I write a report.

Introduction – first name, what school you go to, what grade
How much television do you watch (per day or per week)?
What times of the day do you watch TV?
Are you usually by yourself or with other kids? At home or someplace else?

1. Recall of Print advertising (5 minutes)

Can you recall any other ads in newspapers or magazines **for toys or games**?
What do the ads say or show?
How does the ad make you feel about the toy/game?
Do you believe the ad? Why or why not?
Can you think of any others that you particularly liked or didn't like?

2. Reaction to Print Ads (5-10 minutes)

Show example of a print ad (age appropriate).
Have you ever seen this ad before? What product is it for?
How would you describe this toy/game? What does the ad tell you or make you feel about the toy/game?
Do you believe the ad? Why or why not?
Do any of you have this toy/game? Is it like what is shown in the ad?

Show another example of print ad (age appropriate) and repeat.

3. Recall of TV Commercials (5-10 minutes)

Can you think of any advertising on television **for toys or games**?
What did the ad say? What did it show? Was it in French or English?
Did you like it or dislike it? Why?
What did it make you think about the toy/game? Why?
Did it make you want to have the toy/game? Why?

4. Assessment of Three Commercials (20 minutes)

Show three sample commercials, one at a time. After each, ask:

What product is being advertised here?

What did the ad say? What did it show?

Did you like it or dislike it? Why?

What did it make you think about the toy/game? Why?

Did it make you want to have the toy/game? Why?

Do you think that the toy/game was really the same as it was shown in the ad? As much fun as shown in the ad?

Show actual toy/game. Is this what you were expecting from the commercial? How is it different?

5. Be an Advertising Director (15 minutes)

Hand out blank “storyboards”.

Now I'd like you to make up a commercial for a real toy/game that you like. You're trying to get other kids to be interested in this toy/game. Pretend that this is the TV screen, and do a couple of quick drawings and write down a few words to show what your commercial would show and say. There is only one restriction – everything you say or show in your commercial must be TRUE.

Review storyboards of each participant, identifying toy/game, features and benefits.

How do these commercials compare with the ones you see on television? What does your commercial have that isn't on TV? What is on TV that you don't have in your commercial?

We've talked a lot about different ads and television commercials. Have you gotten a new toy/game and then found out that it was different from what you saw in the advertising? How was it different? How did you feel? Why do you think you got the wrong impression?

6. Comparison of English and French TV

Advertising to children under 12 is not allowed in Quebec. That is why you do not recall many ads for toys in French. Probably the only toy ads you have seen were in English, from American or Ontario stations. Do you think television advertising to kids like yourself should be allowed, or not? Why? Why not?

That's all the questions I have. Thanks for talking with me today.

Total Time 65-75 minutes

Revised Discussion Guide 10-12 year olds

Introduction and Warm Up (15 minutes)

Doing research – finding out what kids think. Topic is toys and advertising
Ask questions, but no right or wrong answers, just want your own opinion
Everyone might not agree, that's okay
Rules – only one person talking at a time
Let me know if you need to leave the room
Tape recorder to help me remember what you said when I write a report.

Introduction – first name, what school you go to, what grade
How much television do you watch (per day or per week)?
What times of the day do you watch TV?
Are you usually by yourself or with other kids? At home or someplace else?

7. Recall of Print advertising (5 minutes)

Can you recall any other ads in newspapers or magazines **for toys or games**?
What do the ads say or show?
How does the ad make you feel about the toy/game?
Do you believe the ad? Why or why not?
Can you think of any others that you particularly liked or didn't like?

8. Reaction to Print Ads (5-10 minutes)

Show example of a print ad (age appropriate).
Have you ever seen this ad before? What product is it for?
How would you describe this toy/game? What does the ad tell you or make you feel about the toy/game?
Do you believe the ad? Why or why not?
Do any of you have or have any of you played with this toy/game? Is it like what is shown in the ad?

Show another example of print ad (age appropriate) and repeat.

9. Recall of TV Commercials (10 minutes)

Can you think of any advertising on television **for toys or games**?
What did the ad say? What did it show?
Did you like it or dislike it? Why?
What did it make you think about the toy/game? Why?
Did it make you want to have the toy/game? Why?

10. Assessment of Three Commercials (20 minutes)

Show three sample commercials, one at a time. After each, ask:

What product is being advertised here?

What did the ad say? What did it show?

Did you like it or dislike it? Why?

What did it make you think about the toy/game? Why?

Did it make you want to have the toy/game? Why?

Do you think that the toy/game is really the same as it was shown in the ad? As much fun as shown in the ad?

Show actual toy/game. Is this what you were expecting from the commercial? How is it different?

11. Be an Advertising Director (15-20 minutes)

Hand out blank "storyboards".

Now I'd like you to make up a commercial for a real toy/game that you like. You're trying to get other kids to be interested in this toy/game. Pretend that this is the TV screen, and do a couple of quick drawings and write down a few words to show what your commercial would show and say. There is only one restriction – everything you say or show in your commercial must be TRUE.

Review storyboards of each participant, identifying toy/game, features and benefits.

How do these commercials compare with the ones you see on television? What does your commercial have that isn't on TV? What is on TV that you don't have in your commercial?

We've talked a lot about different ads and television commercials. Have you ever gotten a new toy/game and then found out that it was different from what you saw in the advertising? How was it different? How did you feel? Why do you think you got the wrong impression?

That's all the questions I have. Thanks for talking with me today.

Total Time 70-80 minutes