

Young viewers' troubling response to TV ads

Current advertising techniques may be neither effective nor responsible for use with children

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"They're all lies." That's what the ten-year-olds in the authors' recent study had to say about television commercials for children's products. And that's not unlike the responses they received from other young viewers—responses that TV ad writers may not realize they evoke. Applying the theories of Jean Piaget, a leading developmental psychologist, the authors talked with children ages 5 to 12 and found surprising trends in the development of their attitudes toward advertising. Children's skill in acquiring impressions of reality from advertising exceeds their skill in understanding them logically. Young children are not uncomfortable with the disparity between these skills and are not upset if advertising is misleading. By middle childhood, however, the conflict between the two skills becomes so frustrating that, in order to resolve it, children become absolutist—they decide, for instance, that all advertising is a sham. What is most disconcerting to marketers and parents is

that by age 11, when the two skill levels begin to coincide, most children have already become cynical—ready to believe that, like advertising, business and other social institutions are riddled with hypocrisy.

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Children under the age of 13 constitute more than a quarter of our population—that's more than 50 million people who are still learning about our society. Studies show that they spend more time watching television than they do in school and that as much as three fifths of their viewing time is taken up by commercials directed specifically to them. This means that every week TV commercials expose young children to hours of explicit information about products as well as to hours of implicit information about American business.

Some adults are worried about the impact that all this advertising is having on children. Concerned parents, teachers, government leaders, and marketers have been asking questions like the following:

- What information-processing skills do children at different age levels develop?
- Do these skills enable children to evaluate information from TV commercials properly?
- Is there any age at which children are so unskilled at processing information that they can be exploited by irresponsible advertisers?
- Do TV advertising and learning to deal with it have any harmful effects on children's attitudes toward business and society?

To explore these questions, we conducted a series of interviews with 48 children between 5 and 12 years old, grouped in two-year intervals. They came from a cross section of middle- and working-class families

The study methodology

The design of this study evolved from a preliminary set of open-ended, tape-recorded interviews conducted among 38 children from 4 to 12 years old. The preliminary study was designed to establish a framework within which children at various stages of development could respond verbally to issues about advertising. Since work with 4-year-olds was unproductive, they were dropped from the final study.

The resulting design for the final study involved the verbal responses of 48 children from ages 5 to 12, but no viewing of television commercials. The final interviews were conducted in July 1973 by Suburban Research Associates of Ridgewood, New Jersey.

We treated the children's "don't know" responses as evidence that they did not understand a particular concept. This technique may artificially lower the apparent levels of understanding among the younger children, but it is the more conservative analysis strategy.

A number of computer-based, statistical analyses were conducted on the data to verify their reliability and to develop hypotheses. These included factor, regression, and discriminant analyses. The computerized factor analysis of the study data yielded nine major factors. These accounted for 62% of the total variance and suggest that the responses have statistical reliability.

in northern New Jersey. We talked with 6 boys and 6 girls in each two-year age group. Since their conceptions of morality, fantasy, and economics determine the context in which children make judgments about advertising and hence their response to TV commercials, we asked them questions in these three areas.

To provide a basis for investigating the influence of advertising on children, we used Jean Piaget's distinction between the *operational* and the *figurative* aspects of knowledge. According to Piaget, one of today's most influential developmental psychologists, the child develops different representations of reality as he matures—a figurative model of the world and an operational model. Each model is somewhat distorted in comparison with the other.

The figurative model is based on predispositions to perceive and act in certain ways. When a child sees something he wants, for example, he is able to put out his hands and pick it up. After dropping a toy several times, he tends to expect the toy to fall whenever he drops it.

The operational model is based on reality testing and logical processes that he can apply to the world in consistent relationship to each other. For ex-

ample, to see if objects really do fall when dropped, a very young child tests the idea by dropping a plate, a spoon, food, or more toys. To see if a box is as heavy as its size makes it look, an older child will weigh it.

The development of the mind, according to Piaget, requires an integration of figurative and operational skills. That is, we begin to correlate what we tend to perceive with what we find to be logically true, as we mature.¹

Arriving at such a balance is not easy, for the figurative and the operational models often conflict with each other. As the child matures, he develops a figurative model of what he perceives, which causes him to develop certain habits of observation. The resulting impressions may differ from impressions acquired through his operational skills. Some of these habits persist throughout adulthood; others disappear as he seeks to verify his knowledge by applying operational skills. Take this illustration:



The child of 5 may see the two lines of the T figure as being approximately equal in length, as indeed they are. But at a later age he will have acquired the habit of concentrating on vertical, uninterrupted lines: this observational habit leads the older child to see the vertical line as if it were longer. This particular illusion and other distortions of this sort persist even among adults. But such figurative distortions do not affect a person's operational knowledge. If he measures the two lines with a ruler, he discovers that they are of the same length, and he can then work with them without being misled.

When the child discovers the conflict between figurative and operational processes, he intuitively realizes that he must interrelate both ways of acquiring information from the world. He discovers intuitively that figurative impressions can be misleading and that he must continually test and retest his impressions of the world by applying his operational skills. Eventually, he largely reconciles the conflict between the figurative and the operational processes and becomes skillful in using both ways to extract information from the world.

We chose to use Piaget's distinction between the figurative and the operational ways of processing information because we believe it helps us under-

stand what the child confronts when he looks at advertising.

By using this distinction, we can see that advertisers use devices that play on our figurative distortions. By arranging store displays or designing retail packages to appear imposing, for instance, advertisers can attract our attention and make products seem like desirable purchases. Marketers create models that are figuratively appealing but that cannot stand up to operational verification. Consumers can learn to compensate for such attempts to exploit their perceptual habits by checking their figurative impressions against their operational processes. If cautioned, even a child can eventually learn to estimate the contents of a deceptively large box and to read the content information on the label.

To create enhanced impressions of their products, television advertisers capitalize on our conversational habits. Making one's way through the verbal confusions in the conventions of ordinary speech requires subtle interpretation. While adults may be aware that in ordinary conversation we do not mean literally what we say, most children have difficulty discerning the difference between the literal interpretation of a phrase and its figurative connotations. "How are you?" is meant to sound like a greeting, for instance, not a request for health information. "Could you pass the salt?" is a casual way of asking for the saltshaker to be passed down the table, not for a discussion of someone's salt-passing ability.

Conversational habits are useful in everyday life because we can use them to convey our wishes politely without stating them directly. But TV advertisers can exploit these habits to convey impressions that are only implied by the literally presented information. Children have to learn to discern such implications in TV communication. The child who hears that some soap powder gets clothes "whiter than white" is unlikely to understand that the advertiser really means the whitest white possible.

Indeed, one child in our study asked her mother to "buy this cleaner because I want to see the White Tornado." Instead of understanding that the advertiser was claiming that his cleaner contained so much power that it could overcome any kind of dirt, the child took the advertiser's metaphor literally.

Advertisers sometimes evade laws governing commercial claims by means of messages that are liter-

ally true but that convey misleading impressions because of our conventional interpretations of them. For example, the claim that "Wonder Bread helps build strong bodies in 12 ways" is an accurate, logical statement. But, as the Federal Trade Commission ruled, the message implies that building bodies 12 ways is a trait unique to Wonder Bread. This claim is misleading, the FTC decided, for competitive breads have approximately the same nutritional value. Here is a case in which it was judged that even adults did not have adequate information-processing skills to protect themselves against the implications in advertising.

This example highlights the difficulty faced by children. The ultimate test of whether an advertisement is misleading is whether the "reasonable viewing adult" believes it to be misleading in the context of conventional television style. Such knowledge about language and television usually protects adults from actually being misled. But children have not fully acquired this knowledge; an advertisement that would not mislead an adult may mislead a child.

Television advertising is a commercial medium based on adult conversational and perceptual habits, but it is massively presented to young children. How do children react to this compelling adult medium and to the fact that it may mislead them? We tried to answer these questions in our study.

Using a set of topical outline questions to guide our conversation about morality, fantasy, economics, and TV commercials, we interviewed each child individually. Our main focus was on the children's conceptions of these areas, not on their responses to specific advertisements. We found that advertising confronts the child with a subtle conflict between two ways of processing information—between Piaget's figurative skills and operational skills.

Middle childhood conflict

The conflict becomes most intense in children between the ages of 7 and 10. (For this reason, we shall discuss the 7- and 8-year-olds and the 9- and 10-year-olds at the same time.) According to our study, this group is the most vulnerable to the manipulation of TV advertisers. Of all the groups tested, the 7- to

1. See Jean Piaget, *The Mechanisms of Perception* (New York: Basic Books, 1969).

10-year-olds displayed the most tension in dealing with questions about morality, fantasy, and economics. In each category, they understood the concepts figuratively, but could not make useful operational judgments about them. (See *Exhibit I*.)

Judgment about fantasy

Although the distinction between fantasy and reality is mastered by age 7, the ability to integrate aspects of the real world with private perceptions and hypotheses about it is not, even at age 10. The 9- and 10-year-olds studied showed only slightly more progress in this integrating process than the 7- and 8-year-olds.

We used three criteria to evaluate the level of fantasy/reality discrimination (or what we shall call judgment about fantasy) in the children we studied:

1 Awareness of the distinction between fantasy and reality.

2 Recognition of the distinction between make-believe, which is acceptable, agreed-upon fantasy, and "lying," which purports to be real but which is actually a form of fantasy; this distinction was measured by the child's acceptance of make-believe as being benign and by his rejection of lying as being potentially harmful.

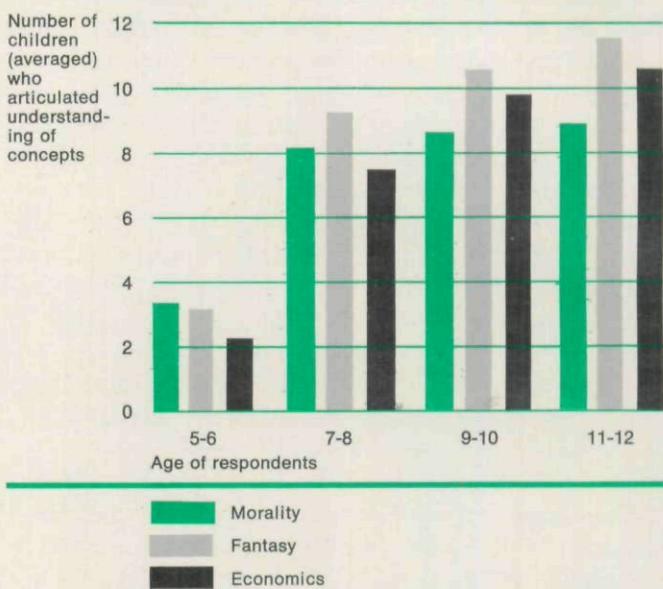
3 Skepticism toward claims made by authority figures such as parents, professionals, and advertisers.

More than three quarters of the 7- and 8-year-olds articulated reasons for distinguishing between make-believe and lying. They emphasized that lying violates religious and moral codes. A 7-year-old girl explained, "When you're lying, you're sinning against God, but when you're making believe, you're just playing." A 7-year-old boy touched on another difference: "Little Red Riding Hood is make-believe, but lying is real." He recognized that a lie may distort reality by appearing true itself, whereas an attempt at make-believe involves no such intent. A predominant response among 7- and 8-year-olds, as with older children, was that "make-believe is not meant to be false"—that is, it is not intended to deceive and thus is harmless.

Some 9- and 10-year-olds couched the difference between make-believe and lying in terms of construc-

Exhibit I

Average number of children in each age group who comprehended questions about morality, fantasy, and economics



tive and harmful effects. One 9-year-old boy stated, "Make-believe sometimes teaches you things, and lying doesn't." Other children in this age group noted that well-known fables and other make-believe stories are designed to teach morals or lessons.

The degree of skepticism toward authority figures rose sharply among the 7- and 8-year-olds in comparison with younger children, and this skepticism continued to rise among the 9- and 10-year-olds. When asked how they felt when their parents told them to eat lots of vegetables because they were "delicious" or when their dentists said, "Don't worry; this won't hurt a bit," the majority of 7- to 10-year-olds stated that they did not believe what they had been told. However, most 7- and 8-year-olds rejected the idea that their parents or dentists were lying outright. This group's most common response was that these adults were resorting to "white lies" to persuade the children to do something good. The 9- and 10-year-olds, on the other hand, were more apt to believe that professionals such as dentists were actually lying.

The levels of skepticism toward authority articulated by all the 7- to 10-year-olds studied were well below the levels of sophistication indicated in the other two measures of judgment about fantasy. This finding suggests that perceiving distinctions in principle is far easier for children of this age than actually applying them to specific situations.

Judgment about morality

To see what conception of morality the children in our study had, and how much skill they had in applying moral judgments to situations they encountered, we looked for four factors:

- 1 A belief that telling the truth is important and that lying is harmful.
- 2 A conviction that lying is acceptable under certain exceptional circumstances.
- 3 An awareness that adults sometimes lie.
- 4 Criticism of adult hypocrisy.

The 7- to 10-year-olds showed a sensitivity to all four factors. Here is how an 8-year-old explained the dangers of lying: "God is watching over you, and every time you lie, you know what happens to you? You get a black spot on your heart." Virtually all the 9- and 10-year-olds verbalized the importance of telling the truth and showed sophistication in describing the harmful effects of lying. In particular, they said that lying should be avoided "so that other people don't get blamed or hurt" and because "people won't trust you [if you lie]."

At the same time, this older group demonstrated a new understanding that lying may be acceptable when it is necessary "to keep from hurting another person's feelings," "to save a life," or "to tell a little white lie."

The 7- to 10-year-olds indicated that they had had much experience with adult lying. For instance, one child reported that his mother had often said, "Do what I say, not what I do." And other children stated that their parents smoked but advised their children not to do so.

This exposure to adult hypocrisy appeared to create growing anger and tension among children from 7 to 10. A majority of these children admitted to being "bothered" by adult lying. The 9- and 10-year-olds expressed especially strong antagonism toward it. Typical comments from them were: "What's right for adults is right for children," "You can't trust them any more," and "It makes me mad."

The experiences of the 7- and 8-year-olds were restricted to their immediate world; they cited parents

and teachers as primary offenders rather than impersonal social agents like businessmen or advertisers. The 9- and 10-year-olds, however, spoke out against politicians, store managers, and television advertisers as well as against personal targets. It appears that children's growing irritation with lying on a personal level—among friends, siblings, parents, teachers—sensitizes them to deception on a more impersonal social level by the time they are 9 or 10.

Judgment about economics

The ability to make judgments about money-related matters correlated closely with age. To determine their ability to make economic judgments, we looked for four responses:

- 1 A recognition that money can be both good and bad.
- 2 An understanding that companies advertise to sell, persuade, or inform.
- 3 A belief that advertising serves a useful function in society, despite the fact that it is sometimes misleading.
- 4 A judgment that misleading advertising is unacceptable because it can lead to harmful economic consequences.

The 7- to 10-year-olds displayed a fair amount of understanding about the functions of money and advertising. More than three quarters of them comprehended that money can serve both good and bad functions in society. One 10-year-old boy explained that money is bad "when you have to pay your taxes." Others explained that companies advertise "to sell products," to inform people because "otherwise no one would know about products," "to make money and get some business," and "to get you to buy things."

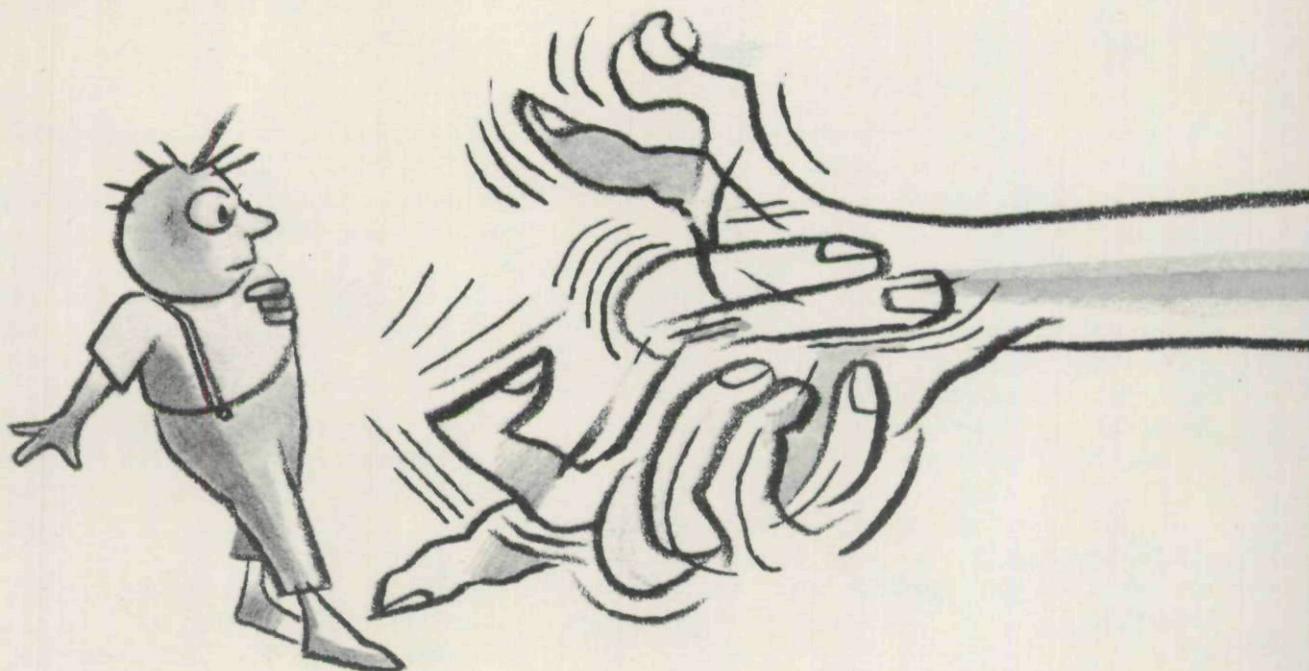
More than half the 7- to 10-year-olds indicated a belief that advertising serves useful functions in society. Only some older ones felt that advertising is "bad." Most of them said that informing people about "good new products" is advertising's most important function. These respondents also noted that advertising enables consumers "to find out about products before they buy" and helps companies to "increase their business." Few children from this group opposed the existence of TV com-

mercials per se; however, most did express belief that TV advertisers sometimes mislead, fail to tell the truth, or deliberately deceive the viewer about the value of their products.

The middle childhood group strongly objected to advertising that would be harmful personally, economically, or emotionally. The distinctively harmful aspect of misleading television advertising, they said, was that it would cause the consumer financial loss. An 8-year-old girl explained that commercials exist "because they want you to buy their products.

able form of make-believe. Noting that "it's not fair" and "it's cheating," the 7- and 8-year-olds rejected misleading advertising because it violates fair play. They commented that the specific responsibility of advertising is to give information about products. Some noted that misleading commercials "stop us from choosing the right product" and that advertising has special obligations to the viewer because "it is not merely entertainment but real."

Despite their ability to articulate fair principles of advertising in the abstract, however, many 9- and



But they aren't so good—you won't get your money's worth, and that's cheating you out of your money." Sensitivity to this issue was particularly high among the 9- and 10-year-olds, apparently because their grasp of economic reality was strongly linked to their judgment about the morality and fantasy involved in advertising. They tended to assume that all advertisements are misleading.

Advertising & 7- to 10-year-olds

A majority of children in this age group specified clear principles about what advertising "should" and "should not" do. They asserted that "not telling the truth" in television advertising is an unaccept-

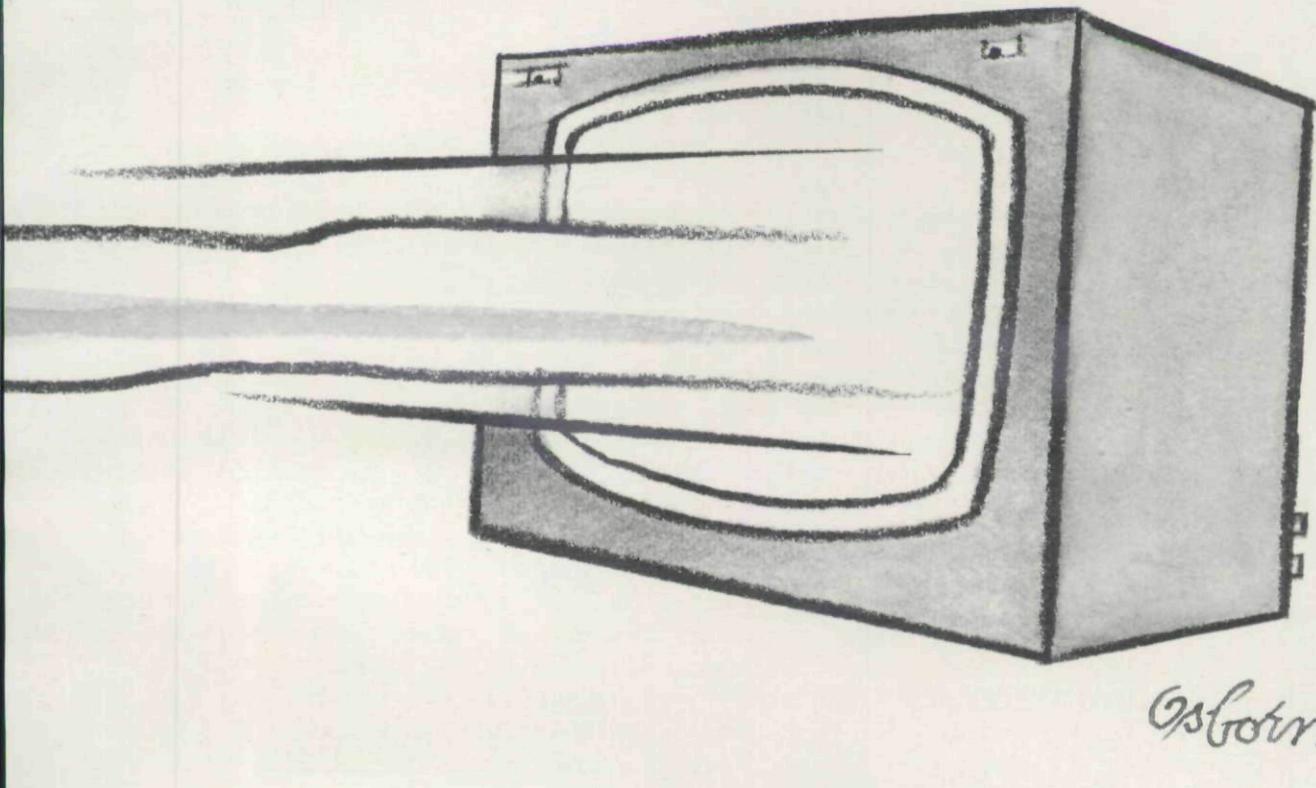
10-year-olds admitted that they could not really evaluate advertising. "[Advertisers] can fake well," they said, and "you don't really know what's true until you've tried the product." Most of these children had often been misled by advertising claims and felt that they had an excuse to reject it completely. (Our findings reinforce another researcher's report that the responses of 9- and 10-year-olds to advertising claims depend largely on their having had personal experiences with misleading advertising.²) The following responses were typical ones for this age group:

"Chicken of the Sea is *not* the best tuna!" (from an indignant 9-year-old). "No More Tangles actually gave me knots!" (from a 10-year-old girl). "Long

"Nails didn't work!" (from two 9- and 10-year-old girls). "The box didn't contain the gift it was supposed to!" (from a 10-year-old).

Despite their increased exposure to misleading advertising, however, the 9- and 10-year-olds in our study continued to have high expectations of advertising. The compelling facade of reality that advertisements often convey, coupled with the fact that many advertisements do live up to their claims, compounded the children's ambivalence. A majority of

with what they believed to be misleading advertising. Our study confirms prior empirical findings that children in this age group are particularly hostile toward misleading advertising.² We believe that this hostility reflects an unsatisfactory resolution of the conflict in previous years. The frustration children of this age feel in dealing with misleading advertising reflects the conflict they are experiencing between their strong figurative impressions of the world and their limited operational powers. They are aware that people intentionally deceive each other but are not always able to tell when; they are won



9- and 10-year-olds stated that they would want to buy certain hypothetical products we discussed even if they did not believe the claims. "There is a chance that they might do the job," the children said, and "we want to try them." Our findings suggest that children of this age are prone to be misled by advertising that appeals to them through their figurative processes, even when advertising claims sometimes turn out to be faulty when subjected to their operational processes.

Resolution of conflict

On the whole, the 7- to 10-year-olds showed tension and anger over their inability to cope effectively

over by products that appear to be very attractive but that prove to be nearly useless; and they are suspicious that something deceptive may be going on in a situation but are unable to identify it precisely. They have not matured enough to correlate their figurative skills with their operational skills.

Furthermore, they are angry because they feel forced to accept practices that they believe are immoral. A child may dismiss his personal experiences with the deceit of individual adults as bothersome though "wrong." But then he finds that misleading TV advertising is socially accepted. The 10-year-old's anger

2. See Scott Ward, "Effects of Television Advertising on Children," testimony before the Federal Trade Commission, November 1971.

3. Ibid.

appears to reflect his first realization that advertising is an accepted part of society. This shows him that society allows for institutional hypocrisy, a fact that violates moral precepts he has been taught as a young child.

Rather than attempt to use skills that they recognize are too limited to differentiate effectively between the subtleties of truth and falsehood, right and wrong, the 10-year-olds resolve the conflict by adopting a rigid moral stance and an overgeneralized view of the world. They simplify the problem by assuming that advertising, like other aspects of the adult world, always "lies."

The rigid method of resolving conflict in this age group probably represents the child's initial attempt to seriously evaluate phenomena of the adult world. For the first time, the child is refining his model of social reality as reflected in advertising. This resolution may also reflect the extreme amount of ambivalence that children in middle childhood experience because they are confused about what adult reality is. Rather than tolerate constant anxiety, they decide simplistically what will be true. Only one quarter of the children through the age of 10 could or would discriminate between truthful and misleading advertising adequately enough to arrive at the balanced judgment that "advertising sometimes tells the truth, but it also sometimes lies."

Early childhood indifference

In contrast to our subjects in middle childhood, the 5- and 6-year-olds we studied showed less response to advertising and little inner conflict. They displayed only limited development in their conceptions of morality, fantasy, and economics. They were usually unable to apply the distinction between fantasy and reality and between right and wrong to their experience in the world.

Judgment about fantasy

Studies of cognitive development have indicated that, by age 3 or 4, children sense the distinction between fantasy and reality, although they have trouble articulating it.⁴ Our study confirmed that, even by age 5 or 6, children are clearly limited in

their ability to use the distinction. A majority of the 5- and 6-year-olds were unable to give answers to questions about make-believe in television or about conventional fantasies like Santa Claus.

Most important, fewer than one third of the 5- and 6-year-olds were able to articulate or apply the critical distinction between make-believe and lying. Nonetheless, the differences between the two that this group sensed were almost identical to those our older subjects spoke of. One 6-year-old said, "You can see make-believe, but you can't see a lie." The 5- and 6-year-olds supported make-believe as something positive that "keeps us happy and prevents us from getting sad." They rejected lying as unacceptable fantasy because "lying is bad and it causes problems."

The 5- and 6-year-olds showed almost no skepticism about the statements or behavior of adult authority figures, however, and showed confusion when asked whether they believed the claims of their parents or of advertisers.

Judgment about morality

Only half the 5- and 6-year-olds stated that telling the truth is important. Almost none could cite circumstances under which lying might be acceptable. An interesting finding of the study was that young children's first and most extensive experiences with lying seemed to involve other children rather than adults. This finding explains the lack of skepticism toward adults among this youngest group.

The 5- and 6-year-olds spoke of many occasions when they had been aware that their friends and siblings were lying, but they seemed unaware that adults might lie. Asked if grown-ups ever deceive others, one 5-year-old replied, "No, only bad grown-ups, like robbers and other bad people." Nonetheless, the 5- and 6-year-olds explicitly rejected lying whenever they did perceive it because "lying is a sin," it "hurts people," and "it gets you into trouble." Many in this group stressed the presence of God as their reason for not lying. Here is how a 6-year-old girl responded to our questions:

"Are there times when it is all right to lie?"
 "You can't lie because then God will hate you."
 "God will hate you?"
 "Well, he'll like you, but he'll never love you."

4. See Jean Piaget, *Play, Dreams, and Imitation in Childhood* (New York: Norton Press, 1962.)

Judgment about economics

The 5- and 6-year-olds showed almost no understanding of the economic functions of money, business, or advertising in society. Asked what would happen if our society did not have money, a 5-year-old girl replied, "I know—people would just go broke!" A 5-year-old boy added, "Everyone would cry." Only a minority of this group showed any understanding of the functions or implications of commercials. In fact, one 5-year-old in our study explained that companies advertise on television "to give actors time to rest." The naïveté of this age group reflects their lack of exposure to real-life situations that would force them to exercise economic judgment or to deal with the economic consequences of misleading advertising.

Advertising & 5- and 6-year-olds

Because they lack the experience to verify their figurative impressions and the cognitive skills to extract information from advertising, children of 5 and 6 are somewhat vulnerable to misleading TV advertising. Most of the young children we studied appeared to regard all television content as entertainment. They often confused programs with commercials and were unable to tell the difference between fantasy and reality in either.

Despite their confusion about advertising, however, the 5- and 6-year-olds who did understand the distinction between make-believe and lying applied it to advertising. They indicated that make-believe in advertising is acceptable but that "nontruths" in advertising are not. When one 5-year-old girl was asked, "Why can fantasies lie and not advertising?" she said, "Because if you [the advertiser] lie, you'll get a big nose."

Although this group might seem vulnerable to TV advertising, they apparently expect little from television content and are forced to make few decisions that would tax their limited ability to evaluate advertising. They leave these decisions to authority figures like parents and teachers. Since it is these personal influences that mold young children's attitudes toward advertising and society, the 5- and 6-year-olds are relatively insulated from the direct influence of television advertising. Because they discriminate between figurative impressions so little and make operational judgments about advertising so seldom, TV commercials appear to have only peripheral impact on 5- and 6-year-olds.

Late childhood cynicism

The 11- and 12-year-olds we interviewed showed a sharp reduction in conflict between their figurative and their operational processes. They seemed to have made certain accommodations to the adult world and its values and to have acquired new skills in processing information. This adjustment correlated with their growth in other areas. In general, they could apply sophisticated moral judgments, make complex fantasy/reality distinctions, and understand the relationship between our economic system and advertising. They could comprehend subtle implications in advertising and use past experience to formulate judgments.

Judgment about fantasy and morality

The 11- and 12-year-olds were able to express sophisticated concepts and their implications for all levels of the fantasy/reality distinction. Our findings suggest that a balancing process was taking place among the 11- and 12-year-olds.

Almost all of them stressed the importance of telling the truth and cited some harmful consequences of lying. But they seemed to have somewhat different moral values from those of the younger children. This older group showed a sharp decrease in the extent to which they experienced or were aware of adult lying and in the extent to which adult lying or hypocrisy bothered them. Under certain circumstances, they even accepted lying. For example, a 12-year-old boy observed that "politicians are not supposed to lie, but I guess they really do." About advertisers, he commented casually, "They always lie." The apparent acceptance of societal hypocrisy by this older group may reflect their recognition of the need to conform to what they view as prevailing societal norms. However, these trends may also be signs of growing cynicism and insensitivity toward certain moral issues.

Judgment about economics

Of all the children we interviewed, the 11- and 12-year-olds articulated the most complex conceptions of how money and advertising function in society. One 11-year-old boy explained that money is an economic convention rather than something of in-

trinsic value. When asked how people could get products if they had no money, he replied, "Probably we'd use something different from money that's valuable—like if we had a lot of gold." This group readily recognized the negative as well as the positive aspects of money. A typical response came from a 12-year-old girl, who said, "People can steal it from you. I guess the crime rate would be lower if there wasn't any money."

Like the younger groups, the 11- and 12-year-olds reaffirmed the positive functions served by advertising in society, but unlike them, the oldest group showed a broad understanding of our economic system, business economics, and the effects of advertising on consumers. They credited television advertising with being "good for the economy and for jobs" and acknowledged the close relationship between persuasion and advertising. One 11-year-old girl explained that companies advertise "so they can put on more business. Then they can get more TV shows on the air, and they get more money for their product."

Most of the 11- and 12-year-olds expressed concern about the economic consequences of misleading advertising. One girl asserted that honest advertising is particularly important because "people try a product, and they find out it's not right. Then they waste their money, and money is valuable."

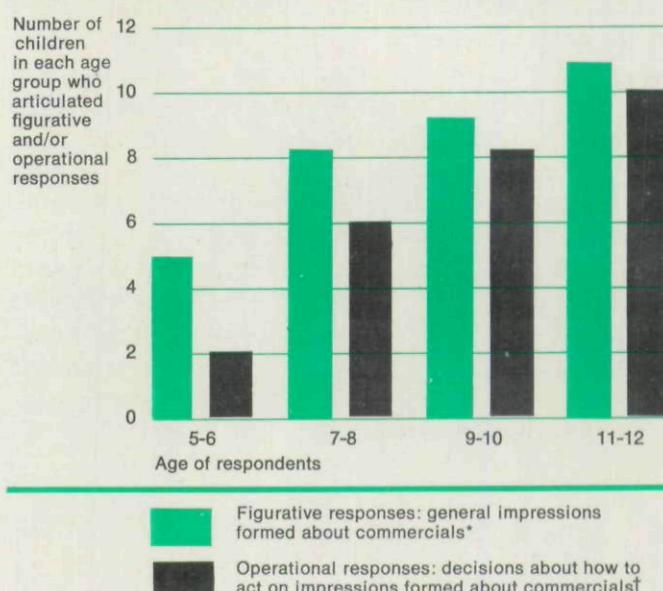
Despite their wariness, the children in this age group appeared to retain the belief that advertising is not always misleading. Moreover, they displayed some of the interpretive skills and economic knowledge required to choose effectively among competing claims.

Advertising & 11- and 12-year-olds

Most important, a majority of the children at this level showed a sharply increased ability to use figurative impressions as a basis for operational judgments. This ability gave the 11- and 12-year-olds the confidence to make operational judgments about the content of TV advertising. More than three quarters of this group actively rejected misrepresentation in advertising as economically and emotionally harmful. Expressing the view that advertising sometimes tells the truth and at other times fails to, almost all in this group rejected certain advertising claims. Three quarters of them felt that advertising is sometimes designed to "trick" the consumer, and two thirds believed that they could

Exhibit II

Average number of children able to respond figuratively and operationally to advertising



*The figurative responses averaged were:

- 1 "Advertising is designed to sell, persuade, or inform."
- 2 "Commercials at least sometimes tell the truth."
- 3 "Commercials at least sometimes try to trick you."

†The operational responses averaged were:

- 1 "I do not believe certain specific advertising claims."
- 2 "Lying in advertising is unacceptable because it leads to harmful economic consequences."
- 3 "I can at least sometimes tell when advertisements mislead."

discern misleading advertising at least part of the time.

The 11- and 12-year-olds continued to rely partly on personal experiences to make judgments about the relative truthfulness of advertising. In responding to questions about the extent to which advertising in general tells the truth, whether one can specifically determine the truthfulness of an advertisement, and how much the respondents believe in advertising's promises, a majority cited examples from personal experiences. An 11-year-old indicated that one way in which commercials trick viewers is that "when you buy the package, the product doesn't do what it promises to." Another 11-year-old noted that the only way to find out whether commercials are honest is to "learn by trying."

This continuing reliance on personal experience in revising opinions of products supports Piaget's theory that children grow by testing their own models of reality in specific circumstances and then modifying those impressions according to their experiences.

However, this group used new skills to supplement personal experience in evaluating TV advertising claims. These skills enabled the respondents to assess nuances of voice, manner, and language usage in advertising and to refine their perception of advertising claims.

For example, as clues that commercials were not telling the truth, 11- and 12-year-olds most commonly cited "overstatements and the way they [the actors] talk," and times "when they use visual tricks or fake things," "when it just doesn't sound right," and when the commercial "goes on and on in too much detail."

These examples reflect an ability to interpret the conversational habits used in advertising. With a new decoding system, many 11- and 12-year-olds appeared able to extract useful information from advertising and to discard what they considered untrue. This new ability may explain the reduced anger and frustration toward advertising among 11- and 12-year-olds.

The oldest group of children did show some indignation toward misleading advertising but also an ability to glean information from it. Instead of suffering the intense conflict of the 9- and 10-year-olds, this group seemed to accept the ways of the world by becoming somewhat cynical. They could usually protect themselves from false implications, but our evidence suggests that this self-protectiveness may have gone too far. It may eventually make them defensive and distrustful of society.

Practical implications

Our study shows that children between 5 and 12 gradually learn to interrelate their understanding of fantasy, morality, and economics. This integration appears to coincide with an increased ability to deal with advertising by verifying figurative impressions with operational skills.

In summary, we found that each age group tended to respond to advertising in a certain way:

5- and 6-year-olds: They largely ignore advertising as being irrelevant to their lives. Although they

sometimes recognize that it can be misleading, they usually enjoy it as part of the programming.

7- to 10-year olds: From 7 to 9, they attempt with great difficulty and little success to integrate advertising into their lives; at age 10, they resolve the conflict temporarily through an overgeneralization that all advertising is misleading.

11- and 12-year-olds: They resolve conflicts more satisfactorily as they refine their early impressions, and thus they can identify both the good and the bad aspects of advertising.

The time lag between figurative and operational growth is reflected in children's attitudes toward advertising. (See Exhibit II.) Even young children appear to comprehend the major functions of advertising in society and the fact that there is some social deception in the adult world, including advertising. But not until later years are most children able to use operational techniques to decide whether they believe the claims of specific commercials or whether misleading advertising is ever acceptable.

This time lag creates a period of growing tension in which the child knows that advertisements may sometimes be misleading but is unable to cope effectively with this knowledge. Reducing this tension does not appear to begin until the age of 11 or 12.

Influencing children's attitudes

The 10-year-olds' anger toward misleading advertising as well as the 11- and 12-year-olds' increased tolerance of social hypocrisy raise serious questions about the role of TV advertising in the socialization of children. In most cultures, adolescents have had to deal with social hypocrisy and even with institutionalized lying. But today, TV advertising is stimulating preadolescent children to think about socially accepted hypocrisy. They may be too young to cope with such thoughts without permanently distorting their views of morality, society, and business.

Supporters of advertising contend that a child's early experiences with it are just as essential to his development of consumer skills as crawling and walking are to his ability to run. The findings of this study call for responsible advertisers to give this argument close scrutiny. We now have evidence that young children undergo several years of conflict and ten-

sion before they can cope with the content of advertising, and there is also evidence that this conflict is harmful.

The danger signals need to be weighed carefully within broader studies to determine how much maturation time a child actually needs to master the skills necessary for interpreting advertising with a minimum of conflict and disillusionment. We question whether a child's precocious exposure to advertising is necessary (or even beneficial) to his becoming an alert consumer. In other kinds of growth, early exposure does not accelerate the acquisition of skills. For example, if one twin is immobilized with a broken leg while the other is learning to walk, the first child quickly catches up with his twin as soon as the cast is removed. In only six months, a 5-year-old child moving to a foreign country can become as proficient in speaking its language as a native-born child of the same age. It may be that a 12-year-old can learn to understand advertising without going through four years of moral conflict.

Our findings suggest another problem concerning the 11- and 12-year-olds in our study: while they appeared to be well adjusted to social values and sophisticated about advertising issues, they were less sensitive than younger respondents to key moral issues. This oldest group expressed a high level of skepticism toward authority figures but appeared less bothered than younger groups about adult deceptions and even cynical about social and economic misrepresentation. If advertising contributes to such an attitude, do we want to continue directing it to this age group?

Changing current practice

We recognize that TV advertising is only one way in which society affects the child's growth. But at some point we must decide whether we wish to reduce his exposure to apparently institutionalized hypocrisy, which is what misleading advertising represents to the child until he learns how to interpret it.

Meanwhile, an immediate question faces marketers, manufacturers, and administrators: How can current practice be modified to reduce the conflicts that TV advertising appears to impose on children? One obvious proposal is to educate children to be discrim-

inating interpreters of advertising. But as we said earlier, advertising may accidentally mislead children because it is based on communication habits that only adults can understand.

Perhaps a more practical suggestion is to pretest proposed advertisements with panels of parents. In fact, we might do well to combine this method with using panels of children to pretest advertisements. Why not make constructive use of the 10-year-olds' high level of concern about TV advertising, for instance? A panel of children of this age might be asked whether they or younger children would find a particular commercial misleading.⁵

However, considering the use of guidelines or review boards for advertising raises the serious issue of how to maintain high levels of objectivity and quality in a free-enterprise society without falling into capricious censorship.

What light does our study shed on the issues raised by concerned parents, teachers, marketers, and government leaders? Our findings suggest that all children under 11 are vulnerable to manipulation by irresponsible advertisers but that some age groups are more vulnerable than others. The 7- to 10-year-olds are strained by the very existence of advertising directed to them. Critics as well as advocates of advertising should supplement their concern about the youngest age group with attention to the children whose views of society are the most easily affected—those in middle childhood.

5. See Scott Ward, "Kids' TV: Marketers on the Hot Seat," HBR July-August 1972, p. 16.

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