



# 5 Unhealthy Ways Digital Ads May Be Targeting Your Child

Advertising aimed at children, like TV commercials, is nothing new. In today's digital landscape, however, marketing messages reach young people in less obvious but more direct ways.

Whether using the internet, social media, video games, mobile apps or Web-connected "smart" toys and other devices, children and teens are targets for marketing messages. These can be in the form of shout-outs from favorite social media influencers, for example, or "gamified" ads (also called "advergaming").



Research shows that 96% of the most-downloaded free apps for children under age 5 have commercial content. This includes hidden and pop-up ads, as well as ads that, when viewed, provide tokens or easier gameplay. Advertisers also use invisible data collection tools that let them tailor ads and other information meant to affect behavior.

## Digital ads & real-world effects on children

Targeting advertising to children may seem relatively harmless. However, a large amount of research shows how easily children are influenced by advertising. This is because their critical thinking skills and impulse control aren't fully developed.

In its policy statement, "Digital Advertising to Children (<https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2020-1681>)," the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) highlights ways online marketing can have negative effects on children's health and well-being:

**Food advertising & obesity in children.** Research links food ads--which often promote high calorie, low-nutrient food and beverages--with higher rates of childhood obesity. Celebrity and influencer endorsements can sway young people--especially teens-- toward unhealthy food and drink choices. In one study (<https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/138/1/e20153977.long>), researchers found that popular music stars endorsed 18% of ads in web videos and other platforms surveyed. Of these, 71% promoted sugary beverages (</English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/How-to-Reduce-Added-Sugar-in-Your-Childs-Diet.aspx>), and 81% endorsed unhealthy foods.

Some children may be more strongly affected by digital food ads. Researchers found that 7- to 10-year-old kids consumed more calories after playing advergames (<https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/133/6/1007.long>). This was especially the case for children who scored high on impulsivity (</English/health-issues/conditions/adhd/Pages/Common-Symptoms-of-Hyperactivity-Impulsivity.aspx>) tests. Food advertising may also widen health gaps among children in disadvantaged communities. Studies show that more fast food, candy, and sugary drinks and cereals are advertised in black, Latino, and low-income populations.

**Tobacco & e-cigarettes.** Studies have long tied cigarette ads to both current and future tobacco use by teens. That's why cigarette ads on TV and radio were banned in 1971. A similar connection has been found with newer tobacco products such e-cigarettes (</English/health-issues/conditions/tobacco/Pages/Facts-For-Parents-About-E-Cigarettes-Factbook-Nicotine-Delivery-Systems.aspx>), and ads for these products continue to appear where children see them.

In 2016, roughly 4 in 5 (20.5 million) U.S. middle and high school students were exposed to e-cigarette ads from at least one source, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/67/wr/mm6710a3.htm>). E-cigarette companies may have deleted their official social media accounts, but have used social media influencers, hashtags, music videos, and other informal social media posts to promote their products. [Back to Top](#)

**Alcohol.** Studies have found rising exposure to alcohol advertising among middle and high school youth in social media (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24284473/>), website banner ads, and video ads. More than a dozen recent studies (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27565582/>) found an association between alcohol ads and underage drinking. Black, Latino and Native American young people have higher exposure to these ads. Teens who drink alcohol are at higher risk of car crashes, suicide (</English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/ten-things-parents-can-do-to-prevent-suicide.aspx>), drug use, problems in school and future alcohol use disorder, among other health problems.

**Marijuana.** The legalization of marijuana (</English/ages-stages/teen/substance-abuse/Pages/legalizing-marijuana.aspx>) in many states has led to a rise in advertising for cannabis products seen by children. This includes increased exposure through social media, sometimes using cartoon characters that are appealing to children. Marijuana advertising exposure has been linked to heavier use of marijuana, as well as use of marijuana concentrates and edibles (</English/ages-stages/teen/substance-abuse/Pages/Edible-Marijuana-Dangers.aspx>) in young adults. Marijuana ads are also associated with higher odds of marijuana use—and plans to use it—among middle schoolers.

**Cultural biases, body appearance & teen self-image.** Some advertisements present harmful “ideals” of body appearance, such as unhealthy body weights in ads for diet products or muscle-building supplements. Ads for skin lightening and hair straightening products can convey cultural and racial biases. In addition, ads for tanning salons (</English/ages-stages/teen/Pages/Teens-Tanning-Safety-Information-for-Parents.aspx>), restricted in traditional media, often target teens on social media platforms.

## Where the AAP stands

The AAP encourages policymakers and tech companies to adopt stricter regulations and ban commercial advertising to children younger than 7 years, limit advertising to older children and teens, and ban targeted ads to those younger than 18 years. It also recommends that all advertising should be clearly labeled as “sponsored content.” The AAP also calls for new laws to reduce advertising of unhealthy foods and beverages to children and young people, and ban images of tobacco products (including e-cigarettes).

## What parents can do

Ask your pediatrician for guidance and resources to learn about and teach your children digital literacy. This means talking with them about how to identify, understand, and think critically about ads and marketing messages.

For example, if a younger child asks to buy a specific brand or product, you can explore how advertising may have motivated them to want it. Other tips:

- Turn on and monitor privacy settings on personal devices, apps, social media, virtual assistants, and wireless networks.
- Create a Family Media Use Plan (</English/media/Pages/default.aspx>) with your children to help guide them toward quality media content with fewer ads. Use this plan to talk with your children about data collection and how to be media savvy.
- Talk to school administrators and teachers about avoiding digital products with advertising and using digital privacy settings on the education technology tools they use.

## More Information

- Digital Advertising to Children (<https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2020-1681>) (AAP Policy Statement)
- American Academy of Pediatrics Provides Guidance on Digital Advertising and Children (</English/news/Pages/Digital-Advertising-and-Children.aspx>)
- How to Make a Family Media Use Plan (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/How-to-Make-a-Family-Media-Use-Plan.aspx>)
- Kids & Tech: Tips for Parents in the Digital Age (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/Tips-for-Parents-Digital-Age.aspx>)
- How Children Develop Unhealthy Food Preferences (</English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/How-Children-Develop-Unhealthy-Food-Preferences.aspx>)

- [How Cigarette Advertisements Influence Teens \(/English/family-life/Media/Pages/How-Cigarette-Advertisements-Influence-Teens.aspx\)](#)

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