

# LESS SCREEN TIME = LESS MARKETING TO CHILDREN = LESS FAMILY STRESS

**O**ne significant harm of excessive screen time is that it provides media and marketing companies direct access to children for hours each day. In fact, limiting screen time is the primary way that parents can safeguard children from being targets for corporate marketers. On average, kids see more than 25,000 commercials each year on television alone!<sup>1</sup> They are also bombarded with all sorts of other screen-based marketing, including:

- **Brand licensing:** Media characters appear as toys, as food, on clothing or on packaging designed to entice children to want a particular product.
- **Embedded advertising:** Products are often interwoven seamlessly into media programs as props or even part of a plot.
- **Advergaming:** Games built around brands so that kids spend lots of time “interacting” with products like candy and other junk food.
- **Behavioral targeting:** Companies track children’s online behavior in order to better understand what products to market to them.

Commercialism, enabled and delivered by electronic media, is a factor in lots of problems facing children today, including:

- **Childhood obesity.**<sup>2</sup> Children consume 167 more calories for each hour of television they watch.<sup>3</sup> One 30-second food commercial can influence the food preferences of children as young as 2.<sup>4</sup>
- **Eating disorders.**<sup>5</sup> When television was introduced in Fiji, within a few months

there was an epidemic of eating disorders among girls because the ultra-skinny women on television replaced indigenous standards of beauty. A pediatrician once said that for girls who watch a lot of television, bulimia becomes an adaptive behavior. It’s the only way that all of those models could consume the junk food they advertise and remain so thin.<sup>6</sup>

- **Precocious and irresponsible sexuality.**<sup>7</sup> Children turn to the media to learn about sex and sexuality and what it means to be male or female. Commercially-driven screen media and toys promote stereotypic gender roles and highly sexualized images of girls and women.
- **Youth violence.**<sup>9</sup> Violent screen media designed for teenagers and adults is heavily marketed to children as young as preschoolers.<sup>10</sup> Media violence can negatively influence children’s behavior, their perceptions of real life violence, and their empathy for victims of violence.<sup>11</sup>

Screen time, and the marketing it foists on children, also causes tension between parents and kids.<sup>12</sup> Companies routinely work closely with child psychologists to create campaigns irresistible to children.<sup>13</sup> Screens allow total strangers—well-financed and knowledgeable about children’s developmental vulnerabilities—to convince kids that toys and other products are essential to their happiness. Marketers purposely encourage children to nag their parents to buy the products they see advertised. And they are quite effective. One in 3 trips to a fast food restaurant comes about through nagging.<sup>14</sup> And, on average, older kids report nagging between 7 and 12 times for something that’s been

advertised to them. Some kids report nagging up to 50 times for a single product.<sup>15</sup>

The main reasons advertisers have so much access to children are lack of adequate regulatory policies and because, for the first time in history, children around the world spend most of their leisure time with screens.<sup>16</sup> One of the many wonderful

pleasures of screen-free activities is that so many of them—reading, playing outside, gardening, cooking, talking, dreaming—are commercial-free. Carving out more screen-free, commercial-free time and space for children will help them lead happier, healthier lives—and reduce family conflict. Screen-Free Week is a great way to begin!

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