



CREDOS



**Children
and the
commercial
world:**

**A parent's
perspective**

June 2011

About this project

Credos recruited children's research specialists 'Family Kids and Youth' to conduct a thorough study of parental concerns in the UK today. As a precursor to the project we conducted a wide-ranging review of academic literature on child development. This was to make sure we understand how children interpret and process commercial communications. We then conducted a series of focus group interviews with parents to explore their concerns about children's wellbeing. Finally, the results were validated using a nationally-representative quantitative survey of parents' views.

“The work conducted on behalf of Credos comprised a rigorous assessment of parental concerns in the UK today, and a thorough review of children’s interpretation of communications. Family, Kids and Youth worked very closely with Credos to ensure the highest professional and ethical standards were upheld in the research. The resulting work is a valuable contribution to our understanding and serves to ensure that marketing to children continues to be optimally self-regulated.”

Dr Barbie Clarke



Introduction

BACKGROUND

In December 2010, the Bailey Review was launched by Government to address the 'excessive commercialisation' and 'premature sexualisation' of childhood. The Review is part of the Coalition Government's pledge to 'crack down on irresponsible advertising and marketing'.

In response to the Review, Credos commissioned Dr Barbie Clarke to conduct qualitative and quantitative research to explore parental concerns of childhood today. The intention of this work was not only to contribute to the Review, but also to further our understanding of the impact of advertising and marketing on children.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

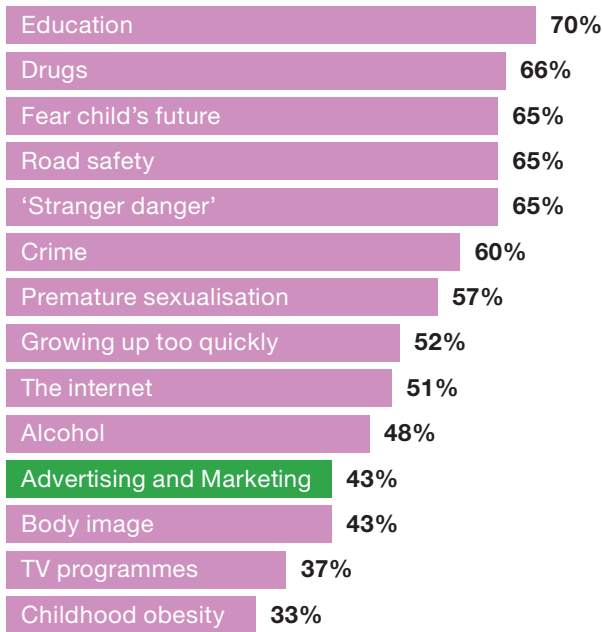
While there was concern expressed by parents on many issues affecting their children's wellbeing, advertising and marketing to children was not perceived to be a huge problem. Even when prompted, advertising and marketing ranked low in parental concerns. Instead, their primary concerns centre on their child's future, their education, crime and 'stranger danger'.

This does not mean that parents don't have any concerns at all about advertising, marketing, or the commercialisation of childhood. They are very conscious that children are exposed to a wide range of influences via the media – greater than they had when they grew up – and the reality, parents believe, is that their children have to be better equipped to deal with it.

It appears that many parents feel on the back foot when it comes to understanding fully the media children now consume. This stems largely from a lack of knowledge, creating a 'fear of the unknown'. As such, parents are very concerned about their children's use of digital media in particular, and its apparently unregulated content.

WHAT PARENTS WORRY ABOUT

There are a great many issues that concern parents today, but they are mainly about making sure their kids grow up reasonably happy, successful, fit and healthy. Accordingly, parents' hierarchy of concerns reflects this. When asked, unprompted, to give a list of potential fears about their children's future wellbeing, parents ranked them as follows:



Although advertising and other aspects of the commercial world concern parents, it is important to view these concerns in the broader context. Overall, parental anxiety is primarily focused on the factors affecting their child's future, like education. Such issues are far removed from advertising and marketing.

POTENTIAL CAUSES OF COMMERCIALISATION

Parents are most likely to cite adult themes and content that surrounds children from a very early age, notably in soaps and in other television programmes. Exposure to non-children's TV and music channels is an oft-cited source of concern. This can be exacerbated by the content available via catch up TV, i-player, and other means of accessing TV programmes online.

Parents also point to the internet as a source of significant concern. While many children go online via a fixed PC, which can be the Internet on smart phones, DSi, an iPod, Xbox Live or PS3. This can mean children are exposed to inappropriate content without parents' knowledge.

All of this adds up to an overwhelming sense that children are being exposed to adult themes far too early.

'More than 90% of UK children use the internet, with the average child doing so more than five times a week, and spending two hours a day online. Access is increasingly in their own room, on their own laptop, and a growing number now use mobile phones or games consoles to go online'.

Digital Lives 2010, Childwise



TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

Generally, parents seem to be quite relaxed about the advertising their children see. Most recognise that, ultimately, it is their responsibility to protect their own children from unsuitable media content, and to teach them to cope with it. They recognise that children are accessing media in an unsupervised way and they do not know what content their children are seeing. This causes them concern.

Overall:

- They feel that it is very much their duty, as parents, to set boundaries and, as far as possible, control what their children are doing, particularly under the age of 12.
- Children are perceived by most parents to be quite vulnerable from between the age of 7 and 12. This is because there is a general belief that advertising to children younger than 7 is well-regulated.
- From the age of 12 plus, most consider that children are quite attuned to advertising and its purpose.
- In addition, advertising that older children are exposed to is said to be mainly during family viewing and, therefore, watched by the whole family. This gives parents a sense of some control over the content their children view.

- Parents project much of the blame for children being allowed too much freedom, getting older younger, and having access to unsuitable media content, onto other parents.

There is general acknowledgement among parents that advertising is part of the world they live in, and that children have to accept it as part of their normal world. It is not an issue that parents spend too much time worrying about, particularly when there are far more tangible concerns in their children's day to day lives, such as personal safety and education.

'It's the other kids' parents; they let them do things and watch things I wouldn't allow.' C2DE mum of 7-11 year old, Manchester



PARENTS RELY ON REGULATION

While parents endeavour to protect and guide their children.

As digital media and the internet develop, parents find themselves confronted by the unknown.

Parents face a difficult dilemma: how to allow their children the freedom to develop and learn, while protecting them from potential harm. This has always been the case, but parents find it is becoming even more challenging. As digital media and the internet develop, parents find themselves on the 'back foot' and confronted by the unknown.

However, parents are pragmatic. They are aware they cannot protect their children entirely from the world today, including any commercial influences. They also recognise that commercialisation is part of the world in which their children live and, indeed, they claim that a world without advertising or marketing would not adequately prepare their children for adulthood.

Today's parents look to the regulatory system to support them and hope that advertisers, and indeed regulatory bodies, will act in the best interests of them and their children.

'When prompted with the current advertising codes, 59% of parents think the current amount of advertising regulation is about right'. Parental Attitudes Survey, IPSOS, March 2011

Conclusion

On 6 June 2011, the Bailey Review, 'Letting Children be Children', made numerous recommendations for the advertising industry to demonstrate progress over the next 18 months or risk government legislation.

However, the Review also concedes that excessive regulation is not the answer and would only further dilute the responsibility of parents.

Parents undoubtedly have a crucial role to play, yet our research shows that parents find it difficult to keep up with their child's interaction with the digital and the online world.

More needs to be done to help empower parents as regulators of their children's media consumption. Credos therefore supports the Review's recommendations which aim to encourage greater awareness and engagement with the views of parents.

Credos has welcomed the opportunity to contribute to the Bailey Review. We intend to continue our work in this field in order to ensure the industry has the evidence base from which to advertise responsibly and regulate optimally. Finally, we look forward to working closely with the newly established AA's Children's Panel to provide the necessary research to help implement the Review's recommendations.



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