

How To Help Your Child Understand Media-Marketing, Advertising And Body Image



Have you ever wondered how to help your child navigate the media minefield of advertising and body image? Do you find it difficult to teach your daughter about self-acceptance when society appears to preach a different message? How do you teach your kids to critically appraise the marketing messages promised to them?

Children of all ages are presented with advertisements on a daily basis, produced by a billion dollar industry that is highly skilled at influencing the way we think and behave. It is impossible to raise our children in a protective ad-free bubble and, with the exception of the very young, perhaps we shouldn't try - some of our kids may yet grow up to be top marketing executives! Rather, I think it is helpful to understand some of the strategies behind advertising and to teach our children to do the same.

My favourite example of a successful advertising strategy producing large-scale societal influence (albeit in adults) is the campaign launched by the Wilkinson Sword company in 1915. Up until that year, Wilkinson Sword had made razor blades for men but, wanting to increase sales, it launched a sustained marketing campaign targeting women. The aim of this advertising blitz was to convince women that underarm hair was both unhygienic and unfeminine - essentially to create a problem that women had previously been unaware of. Within two years, the sales of razor blades had doubled and before too long, the notion that women's underarms ought to be hairless was accepted as 'fact'. This was a well executed example of the advertising strategy to (1) highlight a problem (or if necessary, create one), (2) exacerbate anxiety about the problem in the target audience and (3) offer (i.e. sell) the solution.

But this particular formula didn't stop at razors. At some point, society started to be 'sold' the notion that beauty equated with extreme thinness. Unfortunately when you try to fit such a 'problem' into this three-step advertising strategy it gets a bit complicated. For while it has been easy to foster anxiety about our body shapes, the reality is that there is no readily available 'solution' and yet our society has accepted this thin beauty ideal as 'fact'. And since so many different industries have bought into this impossible ideal (fashion, weight-loss, beauty, fitness...the list goes on...) it's easy to see why many of us experience a state of constant body image anxiety. For advertisers, all that needs to be done is to tap into this anxiety to sell us their product, be it shoes, clothing or make-up, with the promise of looking a little bit more like their similarly attired waif-like models.

I believe, that akin to the razor blade campaign, we have been 'sold' a problem. A problem that is untrue and unsolvable. But while parents continue to model acceptance of this beauty ideal at home, it's impossible for children to learn to do otherwise. Now I'm not trying to portray advertisers as the bad guys, nor do I believe that we are blameless victims. But just as it's important for children to learn to appraise the claims of advertising companies with knowledge and objectivity, they also need to learn how to similarly consider the way that the media so often portrays beauty.

So how do we teach our kids to be media-savvy, particularly in relation to body-image? Importantly, we need to consider the two ways that our children learn from us: by watching what we do and by listening to what we say. It sounds simple but for many of us, the messages that we wish to teach our children clash with our long-held beliefs about our own bodies, reinforced by decades of our own media-exposure.

1. What we do...

Model Self-Acceptance: Your body is amazing so be thankful and celebrate it. Celebrate it's function - it's ability to run, jump, dance, sing, think, love and for many of us, to grow wonderful children. Celebrate it's appearance. Perhaps you've got lines on your face from forty years of smiling. Or your skin on your belly stretched when it was making room for a growing person inside - that's amazing; And beautiful. Say so out loud so that your children can hear you. Don't be critical of your body or of those of others'. Remember, the words you use will be the same ones that your children will one day echo.

Adopt Healthy Eating and Exercise Habits: Eat healthily just as you encourage your children to do. Eat 'sometimes' food sometimes. Eat 'always' food always. Talk about energy intake, not calories. Look after your body because it looks after you. Move and exercise because it's fun and makes you feel good. Avoid diets.

Expand your own ideas about beauty: Beauty isn't just about body size. Beauty is also about internal qualities such as kindness, happiness, patience and joyfulness. And about external qualities such as strength, health and ability - qualities that we can all aspire to.

Don't support the industries that try to sell us the thinness = beauty myth. If you don't buy the glossy magazines with skeletal celebrity frames on the cover then they can't be left

lying around for little curious eyes to absorb. Be similarly mindful with toys. Children are naturally drawn to dolls of all colours, genders, sizes and occupations. They enjoy exposure to diversity, not unattainable sameness and we should not only support but celebrate that diversity.

2. What we say...

When you think your child is old enough, teach them to look critically at advertising strategies. Psychologist Melissa Johnson suggests a great activity to do with your kids which she calls “**What is the product? What is the promise?**”. You and your children can do this together when watching ads on TV or when looking at printed advertising and the key is deciding together whether the promise matches the product.

It can be quite fun, especially when it goes something like this:

You: “Okay, let’s spot the promises...”

You and your kids: “Friendship”, “Fun”, “Beauty”, “Love”, “Really shiny hair”;

You: “What is this actually an ad for? What is the product? Oh, chewing gum. Well, what do you think? Does the promise match the product?”

Of course, not all advertisements aim to sell ideals that their product cannot possibly deliver but we can certainly teach our kids how to assess this for themselves.

When your child is older you may be able to have frank discussions about body image and the “thinness ideal” but remember that your child learns far more from what you do than what you say, so unless self-acceptance has been modelled at home, then your child cannot be expected to adopt these beliefs based on your discussions alone.

More so than ever before, our children are growing up in an age of unavoidable media exposure. While there are certainly some advantages to this, there is also the never ending barrage of marketing spin, some of which is intentionally designed to induce self-doubt. And alarmingly, this starts in childhood. But consider it this way: What would you do if you bought something that was false and unworkable? You’d return it. So do it. Return the beauty myth that you’ve been ‘sold’ and exchange it for a more workable truth. And know that by modelling this for your children, you are giving them a far greater gift than anything money can buy.