Can TV remote-control our kids?

Some claim the media make children fat and violent; others argue the media can help to make children more socially responsible. Both sides should get a grip.

Wendy Earle

The media make children fat and violent - or so some would have us believe. Others argue that we should be harnessing the positive power of the media to promote healthy eating and to discourage anti-social behaviour. But how powerful are the media? Are they able to create or solve social problems?

It is widely accepted today that the media have contributed to the increase in childhood obesity. Google ‘children’ and ‘obesity’, and you would think that the media’s role in giving rise to obesity is a foregone conclusion. Much of the blame is pinned on television in particular: that medium is said to make children, who watch too much of it, sedentary and inactive compared to earlier generations, and it is also accused of showing too many tempting ads for crisps, sweets and fast food.

As a result, the government quango Ofcom - the Office of Communications - is proposing to regulate TV advertising to children of foods high in sugar, salt and other additives considered fattening or bad for children. Since March this year Ofcom has been running a consultation about options for implementing regulation on the basis that:

‘There is now a growing body of evidence of the links between television advertising exposure and children’s food preferences. It is also clear that while television advertising of food to children is declining each year, it remains significant; television is still the key medium for communicating messages about food and drink products to the widest audiences.’ (1)

Similarly, if you Google ‘children’, ‘violence’ and ‘media’, you will discover that there is something of a global consensus that violence in the media contributes to violent crime. Events such as the massacre at Columbine High School in 1999, when two boys opened fire on their classmates, or the murder of Jamie Bulger in 1993, when two 10-year-old boys lured a toddler away from his mother...
and kicked him to death, generate panics that watching violent films or playing violent videogames creates murderous children.

Children’s relationships to the media have been subject to a considerable amount of research, yet surveys of the literature on the media’s role in causing obesity or violence in children consistently reveal a lack of hard evidence of a link.

Fat and fiction

Starting with obesity. *The Role of the Media in Childhood Obesity* (2004), a report published by the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) (2), a major organisation in the US that sponsors and centralises research on children, summarised research findings both on the time children spent watching TV and the impact of TV advertising on childhood obesity.

To the question ‘Do major studies find a relationship between childhood obesity and the time children spend using media?’, the answer was ‘yes’, ‘maybe’ and ‘no’, depending on the study. The report suggests that the causal relationship may be less to do with the amount of TV children watch, and more to do with the kind of television programmes they watch. It therefore asks, ‘Do the food ads children are exposed to on TV influence them to make unhealthy food choices?’ Again, the answer is inconclusive, but overall there is a lack of hard evidence that advertising plays any role in causing obesity.

In another recent review of the evidence, *Harm and Offence in Media Content*, British researchers Andrea Millwood Hargrave and Sonia Livingstone (2006) failed to find any solid evidence for the link between advertising and obesity (3). They concluded that:

‘Research tends to show modest evidence for harmful effects of advertising, particularly on children, although this remains contested. Since the influence of advertising is not large, according to the evidence, research is needed to determine what other factors also influence these harmful outcomes.’

As this statement demonstrates, the conviction that the media have harmful effects often outweighs the failure to find evidence of such effects. Such evidence as there is suggests that advertising has a relatively minor role in influencing children, and even this is challenged by other research. As Livingstone and Hargrave point out, the exact impact of TV advertising on children is far from understood. There is little substantial research (in the public sphere at least) on how children use
advertising or how it influences them in the context of other influences.

Presumably, as advertisers continue to target children, TV ads must have some impact. The question that remains unanswered is: exactly what impact does it have, and is it necessarily harmful? As much of the research into the impact of advertising on children has been done by market research companies for the advertisers, the results have not been made public – so we don’t really know if they have any answers to these questions. The growth of agencies that specialise in marketing for children reflects the sense of potential that this market represents to consumer industries. The KFF report quotes a newsletter of marketing agency Harris Interactive:

‘This generation has become a huge consumer group that is worthy of attention from many businesses seeking to maximize their potential.’

**Pestering parents**

However, advertisers’ strategies suggest that they rely heavily on the relationship between parents and children. The KFF survey points to a number of studies that demonstrate children’s influence on their parents in supermarkets and elsewhere. Parents are more susceptible than they used to be to their children’s expressed wants and desires, and more eager to include children in family decision-making processes. Parents now tend to want their children to express an opinion on what food to buy in the supermarket or which restaurant to go to. There is also increasing evidence to suggest that parents involve their children in decisions about which car to buy - a fact recognised by car advertisements that use children or children’s toys as their central characters. According to one study, in 2000 children 12 years and under, directly and indirectly, influenced the household spending of over $600 billion (4).

Ads make children aware of products and try to persuade them to want the products, but parents have the power to say ‘no’. That parents can and do make the decisions is demonstrated in a study (quoted in the KFF report) which notes the effectiveness of a campaign to popularise dried fruit snacks, because of the coincidence of children’s influence on their parents and their parents’ belief that dried fruits were better for them than sweets.

There is no foundation to the idea that there is something harmful about the fact that ads influence children’s and their parents’ choices. In a survey of the literature, Jeffrey Goldstein points out that ‘there is no convincing evidence that advertising affects children’s values and materialism, eating habits, the use of tobacco and alcohol, gender and ethnic stereotypes, violence, socialisation, or has
any long-term effects’ (5).

Goldstein makes the point that advertising only has as much power as we allow it to have, because we make choices primarily based on our needs and wants, which are determined by a range of factors that have little to do with what advertisers tell us. He also suggests that most of the evidence indicates that children are more influenced by their peers and parents than by the mass media. Often the popularity of a particular product is developed through word-of-mouth fads, not advertising on TV - a fact reflected in marketing agencies’ desperate attempts to capture the word-of-mouth effect through viral marketing. The success of a restaurant chain like Pizza Express is an example. The restaurant strikes a clever balance: providing food that seems healthy, and catering to the tastes of both adults and children. However, it doesn’t do big advertising campaigns and toy promotions, so these have little role in its business success.

The ‘pester power’ of children can only be as strong as parents let it be. The fact that parents increasingly include their children in decision-making processes is what creates pester power - not the advertising per se. However, pester power can also be seen as part of the negotiation process. Goldstein argues that children’s early exposure to advertising, far from making them more susceptible, makes them more sceptical of what advertisers offer. This makes sense. Children may find out about the existence of a product through seeing a TV ad, but whether they end up consuming the product depends on a range of factors, including whether their friends have it and whether their parents can afford it and are prepared to buy it. My young nieces and nephews, for example, now spurn McDonald’s because their parents are hostile to the restaurant chain.

This process of negotiation itself educates children. Through talking about their choices, children learn about the persuasive tactics of advertisers, among other things. As a result, most children are surprisingly savvy about the claims of advertisers. As David Buckingham points out: ‘While younger children may be uncertain about the persuasive intentions of advertising, most children become aware of this by around the age of seven or eight; and they quickly develop a set of “cognitive defences” which enable them to resist and challenge the claims of advertisers.’ (6)

Finally, the KFF report on the media’s impact on obesity points out an interesting contradiction: if advertising is blamed for encouraging children to eat too much of the wrong food, other media messages promote the opposite of obesity - television shows, magazines and movies promote unrealistically thin body types as the ideal. The report notes that ‘after years of an imbalance towards depictions of thin characters, the true weight-related health emergency among young people is, paradoxically, obesity. This paradox has yet to be explained.’ Indeed. Perhaps this should
alert commentators to the fact that the media give contradictory messages, and the claim that the role of advertising in obesity justifies its regulation would not hold up in court.

Unfortunately, lack of hard evidence makes little difference to those who advocate regulation. The KFF in the US and Ofcom and its advisers in Britain claim that even the possibility, however unproven, that food advertising on children’s TV might contribute to obesity is sufficient cause for concern to make regulation a necessity.

Violent images, violent children?

A similar blindness exists in relation to children and violence in the media. The preoccupation with the effect of TV and film violence has a long history. The arrival of mass television in North America in the 1950s was soon followed by a dramatic increase in violent crime between 1960 and 1990. Many people - academics, politicians, journalists and social commentators - made a connection and much research has been done since to try to pin down the relationship between violence in the media and real violent crime.

In their recent review of the evidence, Hargrave and Livingstone indicate that most research does not stand up to criticism. At best, some research demonstrates short-term effects on attitudes and behaviours among a particular sample, but generalising these findings, or making assumptions about long-term effects based on them, is untenable. Of videogames they point to ‘a growing body of research...which suggests harmful effects, especially for games with violent content and especially on boys or men who play them.’ But, they add, the significance of this research for aggressive situations in everyday life remains contested.

Jonathan L Freedman is more trenchant in his criticism of the evidence of the effect of media violence on aggression (7). Examining around 200 studies - ‘virtually all the original research on the topic’ - he concludes that far from proving the hypothesis, the evidence tends to contradict the presumption that there is a causal link between media violence and aggressive behaviour.

He dissects the evidence provided by a variety of different studies using a range of methodologies, including surveys, laboratory experiments, field experiments, longitudinal studies, comparison studies (with and without television) and other methodologies. He finds the evidence that the media causes violent behaviour to be ‘weak and inconsistent, with more non-supportive results than supportive results’ (8). In fact, evidence from the US Justice Department shows violent crime has actually decreased over the past 30 years, despite the growing popularity of violent videogames,
such as *Grand Theft Auto* (9).

Freedman rightly criticises organisations that continue to claim a causal link between media violence and individual behaviour for using ‘junk science’. As he points out, many highly respected organisations, such as the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Paediatrics and the American Psychological Association, ‘are guilty of the worst kind of irresponsible behaviour’ because they make claims of a causal connection without conducting a thorough review of the research; in court they ‘could be convicted of perjury’ (10).

**Bad media, good media**

While some campaigners invoke the alleged negative power of the media in order to call for further regulation and controls, others seek to use the media to get across ‘positive’ messages about acceptable behaviour and healthy eating habits.

In the UK and in the USA, the media are increasingly deployed to encourage healthy eating and exercise. In 2004 the Food Standards Agency announced plans to encourage broadcasters to use celebrities, characters and cartoons to encourage children to eat healthier foods (11). On the basis that ‘the media have a role to play in encouraging improvements in children’s diet and exercise’, the British Medical Association has recommended that ‘celebrities and children’s television characters should only endorse healthy products that meet nutritional criteria laid down by the Food Standards Agency (FSA)’ (12).

Responding to this, BBC Worldwide has revised its policy on the use of CBBC characters, such as the Fimbles, to promote brand food products; it now ensures that the branded products are nutritionally sound. ‘By controlling the use of branded children’s characters, the BBC is taking a positive leadership role in influencing the diet of children and encouraging healthy eating’, the corporation claims (13).

In 2005, Nickelodeon and PBS started to incorporate messages in programmes like *Sesame Street*, such as ‘too many sweets can make kids feel sick’ and ‘it’s important to exercise and be active’, on the spurious basis that ‘we want to put the power back in the kids’ hands’ (14). The Disney Channel did likewise, with ‘The Wiggles’, for example, advocating ‘Fruit salad, yummy, yummy’ (15).

There is even less evidence that these tactics are effective in influencing positive behaviour than that violence or advertising on TV influence bad behaviour. The main likely outcome is that children
become increasingly suspicious of being manipulated by the media as their favourite programmes become dominated by moralistic messages about their eating habits and behaviour. Historically, children have tended to vote with their feet, choosing programmes that thumb their noses at authority. The development of children’s television in the 1970s and 80s, for example, was driven by the popularity of such programmes as British school drama *Grange Hill*, which was initially condemned for being anti-authority and anarchic, and the Saturday morning show *Tiswas*, which was ‘very anti-adult and on the side of the audience’ (16). We can only hope that programmes which start slipping in worthy messages about nutritious food plummet in their ratings as children switch to another channel.

**Resist regulation**

Why does the conviction persist that there is a causal link between the media and children’s behaviour? As both Goldstein and Freedman point out, a critical survey of the research indicates that there is virtually nothing to show that the media cause bad behaviour or obesity. But because the media are so prevalent in our lives - and increasingly so with the advent of digital media, the internet, mobile phones, etc - the fear is that they must be doing something to us, particularly to children and ‘vulnerable’ people. In a society where risk consciousness dominates, the risk of harm, however minute or uncertain, outweighs the evidence of non-harm. This sense of risk is imbued with the conception of the mass of human beings as victims of media messages, passive recipients who can’t be trusted to make rational choices.

In this context, children are seen as particularly vulnerable. Demands for further regulation are justified by the belief that, increasingly, parents are overwhelmed by the complexities of media technologies and cannot be trusted to manage their children’s media consumption, while many parents endorse the idea of regulation because they do not want advertisers to add to their difficulties by targeting their children with persuasive messages. It might suit parents not to have to argue with little Lucy about buying sweets and crisps, or an expensive brand of trainers, but this kind of negotiation is part of the rich tapestry of family life. And, as most parents are aware, advertising plays a minor role, if any, in these discussions; a far stronger influence on children is what their peers say.

But does it really matter if parents want a little help in limiting their children’s access to media content? If it makes parents and guardians of children’s welfare happier, is there anything wrong with restricting advertisers from promoting potentially harmful products between children’s television programmes? Apart from the argument made by commercial broadcasters - that such
restrictions could reduce funding for children’s programmes - there is a wider problem with accepting such regulation. It reinforces ideas about the power of the media.

By accepting that children need protecting from the media, and that parents are incapable of managing how their children access and respond to the media, we allow increasing government regulation into our private spheres and personal relationships, and endorse the belief in government circles that we can’t control our own lives.

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(1) Television advertising of food and drink products to children, Ofcom, paragraph 1.10
(2) The role of media in childhood obesity, Henry J Kaiser Family Foundation
(3) Harm and offence in media content, Andrea Millwood Hargrave and Sonia Livingstone, Intellect Books (summary version)
(4) Factsheet: Children and advertising, MediaWise
(6) D Buckingham, 2003, Media Education: Literacy learning and contemporary culture, Routledge
(8) ibid: p200
(9) Caution: children at play, Game Revolution
(10) Freedman p9
(11) Food Standards Agency agrees action on promotion of foods to children, Food Standards Agency, 6 July 2004
(12) Childhood obesity, British Medical Association, March 2006
(13) BBC tackles obesity issue through programming and children’s food, International Business Leaders Forum
(14) PBS, Nickelodeon tuck health messages into popular kids shows, *Arizona Republic*, 22 July 2005
(15) Children’s television shows have a healthy new message for kids, Carey Bryson, About.com

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