

ASA Hot Topic

Children



Protecting Children

The UK Advertising Codes are amongst the strictest in the world, particularly when it comes to protecting children. The Codes define a child as anyone under 16 years of age; though there are further restrictions in place to protect younger children such as pre-school and primary school children, from potentially inappropriate or harmful ads.

Why are the rules so strict? The way children understand and react to commercial messages depends on their age, experience and the context in which the message is delivered. Because of their inexperience, children are less likely to be as media savvy as adults and less able to fully understand and critically assess the ads they see and hear.

Reflecting this, the Advertising Codes contain additional strict rules to protect children from potentially misleading, harmful or offensive material. The rules prohibit ads from depicting children in hazardous situations or encouraging them to engage in dangerous behaviour. They also prevent ads from undermining parental authority or placing unfair pressure on children to buy products. The rules are regularly reviewed and updated in light of the latest research and advertising techniques.

The rules

Ads targeted directly at or featuring children should not contain anything that is likely to result in their physical, mental or moral harm.

In summary, ads must not:

- exploit their credulity, loyalty, vulnerability or lack of experience
- actively encourage them to make a nuisance of themselves to parents or others
- encourage children to copy any practice that might be unsafe
- portray or represent children in a sexual way
- condone or encourage poor nutritional habits or an unhealthy lifestyle in children
- collect information from children under 12 for marketing purposes without the consent of the child's parent or guardian
- feature inappropriate sexual imagery in outdoor media where children are likely to see it
- be targeted at children or likely to appeal to them if they are promoting age-restricted products like alcohol or gambling

Reflecting the views of young people and parents

Making sure we listen to the views of young people and parents is an on-going commitment. As part of that process, we've created a dedicated page on our [website](#) and a parent's guide [leaflet](#) that provides information about the ad rules around children, explains our role and how anyone with concerns about advertising and children can lodge a complaint. We also commissioned a wide-ranging piece of [research](#) into the public's views on harm and offence in UK ads. We're using the findings to help us better reflect the perspectives of children even more carefully in the future. To help children become better equipped to understand and critically assess ads we've launched [Ad:Check](#), a resource for secondary schools. We've also teamed up with other media regulators to launch [ParentPort](#), a website that informs parents who they can contact if they have seen or heard something in the media that they think is unsuitable for a child.

Sexualisation and commercialisation

In 2011 a Government commissioned report "The Bailey Review" brought concerns about the commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood into the spotlight.

Whilst some rules are open to interpretation one thing is absolutely clear: sexualising children in an advertisement is inappropriate and will lead to ASA action. Fortunately, the sexualisation of children in ads is rare. Whether ads commercialise children, and, if they do, to what extent this is harmful is currently an on-going debate across industry, Government and civil society.

We remain at the forefront of these debates and continue to work with the Bailey team, Government and family and parenting organisations to ensure parents and those with concerns about advertising and children have a voice and that we reflect the views of parents and young people in our work.

Targeting ads

The Advertising Codes require ads to be targeted responsibly and appropriately, taking into account the audience and the likely effect the image or language in an ad may have.

Ads on TV and radio for certain products (e.g. age-restricted video games or alcohol) or those that contain adult, scary or harmful themes, must be scheduled away from programmes or times when children in particular may be watching or listening.

When considering whether ads are appropriate for children in print media, the ASA will take into account the context in which they appear. A risqué ad in an untargeted space, such as a billboard, is likely to raise more concerns than if it appears in a targeted medium, such as a women's magazine, where children are less likely to see it.

Children and the online world

Ads online are subject to the same strict rules that apply in traditional media. The rules extend to marketing on companies' own websites and in other online space under their control such as on Twitter and Facebook. We haven't seen evidence that advertisers behave differently online than they do elsewhere; and we've seen very few examples of advertisers targeting children online with inappropriate content. However, with increasing numbers of children engaging with

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social media and accessing content through an array of technologies such as smartphones and laptops it's important that we keep up to date with how children interact with these media, which is why we're conducting a study to do just that.

What about ads aimed at adults, but seen by children?

As well as ensuring that ads that are targeted at or of interest to children are strictly regulated, the ASA also works hard to ensure that ads aimed at adults do not cause harm or distress to children or young people. This includes ensuring, for example, that ads for products like films do not encourage or condone gun or knife use, glamorise violence or encourage young people to copy irresponsible behaviour.

ASA action

Here are some of examples of recent ASA rulings in this area:

[American Apparel](#) – December 2012

We considered a press ad inappropriately sexualised a model who appeared to be a child and was therefore irresponsible.

[Swizzels Matlow Ltd](#) – August 2012

Sections of a confectionary website, in particular child-friendly interactive games, irresponsibly encouraged poor nutritional habits and an unhealthy lifestyle in children.

[Drop Dead Clothing Ltd t/a www.iheartdropdead.com](#) – November 2011

Images of a thin model on a clothing company website were considered socially irresponsible for being likely to impress upon a young target audience that they were something to aspire to.

Further reading

The [Advertising Codes](#) contain specific rules surrounding advertising to children.

Other ASA 'Hot Topics' on [Food and Drink](#), [Gambling](#) and [Alcohol](#) provide further information about specific protections for children that are in place around ads for age-restricted products

[Too much, too young – are advertisers sexualising childhood?](#) A summary of a stakeholder consultation event held in Manchester in 2011.

[Advertising and young people](#) - ASA engagement with young people, parents and teachers - A research report relating to the ASA's engagement work undertaken to help the ASA fulfil its commitment to better understand the views of parents, teachers and young people

[What you looking at? Drawing the line on violence in advertising](#) - A summary of an event held to consider the use of violent imagery in advertisements, held in Nottingham in 2007

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