

Background Briefing

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) works to maintain the highest standards in advertising by taking action to prevent ads from being misleading, harmful or offensive. Visit www.asa.org.uk for more information about our activities, to view the Advertising Codes or to access our database of adjudications.

Children

Protecting children

The UK Advertising Codes are amongst the strictest in the world, particularly when it comes to protecting children. The way children understand and react to commercial messages depends on their age, experience and the context in which the message is delivered. Also, research tells us that one of the public's greatest concerns about advertising is what children might see.

Accordingly, the Advertising Codes contain strict rules to protect children from potentially misleading, harmful or offensive material. The rules prevent ads from undermining parental authority or placing unfair pressure on children to buy products. The rules also mean that ads can't depict or encourage children to engage in dangerous behaviour or talk to strangers.

In recent years, the advertising rules surrounding specific products such as food and alcohol have been significantly tightened in response to public concerns about childhood obesity and underage drinking. Background briefings on these topics can be found on our website.

The rules

Ads addressed to, targeted directly at or featuring children should not contain anything that is likely to result in their physical, mental or moral harm. The Advertising Codes define a child as anyone under the age of 16 years.

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
 - condone or encourage poor nutritional habits or an unhealthy lifestyle in children
 - encourage children to copy any practice that might be unsafe
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Out of sight?

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.

Advertising under control

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 and that ads do not encourage young people to copy irresponsible behaviour.

Sexualisation

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 very rare.

Children and the digital world

The ASA has always regulated marketing in digital space such as commercial text messages, e-mails, paid-for search, banner and pop-up ads online. But, on 1 March 2011 our online remit was extended to cover marketing on companies' own websites and in other online space under their control – such as on Twitter and Facebook. This has extended our protections and made sure children and young people are even safer in the online commercial world.

ASA action

No added sugar Ltd – February 2010

An ad, featuring children playing with or lying on or near plastic bags, was banned because children might try to emulate the behaviour, putting their safety at risk.

Department of Health t/a NHS – April 2009

An anti-smoking campaign by the Department of Health risked causing harm or distress to children by suggesting their parents might imminently die.

American Apparel (UK) Ltd – September 2009

An ad featuring a young-looking model in varying states of undress was considered offensive and inappropriate as it could be seen to sexualise a child.

Further reading

The **Advertising Codes** contain specific rules surrounding advertising to children

Event Report - What you looking at? Drawing the line on violence in advertising

Young people and alcohol advertising - November 2007