

## Kids vulnerable to ad ploys

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**Doreen Arcus, UMass Lowell psychology professor**

### **So what do you make of the BusRadio controversy?**

I think the ...the public has a responsibility to look at this, and carefully, and at the issue of age, which is critical. I might be less up in arms if it was only the high school bus because high schoolers can understand a commercial ... There still is the implicit association with school for the younger children, and (they're) viewing what's said as gospel. That's not fair.

### **But kids see something like 40,000 commercials a year, anyway. What's a few more?**

It's a complicated issue. A lot of people think it's very simple, and think that TV makes children do the things they see, modeling their behavior (after what they see). These ads are specifically designed to influence behavior. Advertisers don't spend money unless they're going to influence spending habits.

The message is always, "have it." Go out and get it because you're worth it. It doesn't say work hard and save up and get a job. When you take a commercial and look at it as an isolated event, it's reinforcing only having it, whatever it is; it's not saying you're still an OK person if you don't have the thing.

### **Do kids process advertising differently than adults?**

You and I understand when we see an ad that that's what they're (marketers) trying to do. But there's evidence that children under eight see it as a piece of truth coming at them because they don't have a context. "My teacher says one and one is two." The commercial says, "Buy Nike." Younger children don't understand the context and don't have any perspective. Whatever's piped in has the implicit endorsement of the schools. "If my school says, I need to buy these shoes, I really should, shouldn't I?" There's an implicit association.

### **But can schools really protect kids from stuff like this?**

Children in public schools are a captive audience, and parents send their children to public school to be educated. When the schools create income by selling children's attention, they're doing something parents haven't bargained for. I'm not sure it's entirely ethical. Just because a child attends public school doesn't mean a child is public property. Advertising is done with a specific purpose: to convince somebody that they're not good unless they have the items being advertised.

### **BusRadio makes for a quieter, safer ride. Isn't that a good thing?**

There are a lot of ways to get children to comply with rules. Simply because you hit on something that works doesn't mean it's not costing you in another area. We've got compliance on the bus, but the child steps off and that could now be conflict between the parent and the child.

**So, in a soundbite, what's your message to parents and school officials?**

I'm not sure this is the best answer.

*Credit: The Lowell Sun*