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Children Fail to Understand TV Commercials, Study Finds

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DAYTON, Ohio, October 28, 1980 --- It seems that parents have not yet grasped what their children do and do not understand about television commercials. Recent opinion polls have said that parents believe their kids know the difference in purpose between television programming and the advertisements. But in a survey done by University of Dayton psychology professor Dr. Elliot Butter, pre-schoolers, although they could tell when the programs were being interrupted for a commercial, did not understand that the intent of the message is to sell a product.

Participants in Butter's study were 80 pre-school children averaging four years of age and enrolled in two private nursery schools in the Dayton area.

Says Butter, "Of the younger children (average age four years) 68 per cent could not verbalize an awareness of what a commercial was, and 90 per cent did not know why they (the commercials) were shown on television."

The Federal Communications Commission ruled in 1977 that "if advertisements are to be directed to children, then basic fairness requires that at least a clear separation be maintained between the program content and the commercial message (an example is 'Captain Kangaroo will return after these messages') so as to aid the child in developing an ability to distinguish between the two." In his study, Butter found that most children were able to make the distinction between a program and a commercial without the use of such separators. And, according to Butter, "this ability has never been shown before in such a young age group."

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Information Services/Richard T. Ferguson, director/University of Dayton/Dayton, Ohio 45469/(513) 229-3241
Butter feels the job of teaching children about the difference between programs and commercials should not fall exclusively on the television networks. "They (the parents) just can't push everything off on television . . . the parents have to take a tremendous amount of responsibility here. They have to resist their kids picking up things in supermarkets and putting them in the shopping basket. They have to respond responsibly to their children."

But Butter does not disagree that advertising agencies have an obligation for what they put on the screen. "Agencies just can't inundate children with the type of commercial ads they've been running. This has a tremendous impact on the kids and then creates more problems for the parents. What advertisers should provide along with their advertisements are nutritional messages describing to the children what a well-balanced diet consists of."

The possibility, though, that such a change in television advertising will happen in the near future may be slim. But in the meantime, Butter recommends that parents sit and discuss with their children both television programs and the commercials to help counter the messages their children would otherwise receive alone.