

# ENTREPRENEURIAL ETHICS TOPICS

R. D. Walsh, Ph.D.

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## TOPIC 9

# TARGETING CHILDREN AS CONSUMERS



## Introduction

Advertising that targets young children is an important moral issue because children are vulnerable and highly susceptible to adverts aimed at them. They are unable to clearly distinguish advertising from entertainment programming. Also, this issue entails several other important moral issues, such as children's privacy, childhood obesity, the commercial 'sexualization' of children, children's consumerist value formation, the undermining of parenting and guidance responsibilities, etc. Understandably, there has been much discussion about these issues in both popular and academic literature because children are *children* and are dependent on adults to protect them.

Children [*children = persons under 13 years of age - used as an age determinant in countries having regulation, such as Canada and Germany*] are a vulnerable population because research shows that they have difficulty distinguishing entertainment programming from immersed commercial messages. Aggravating this vulnerability is the fact that the line between entertainment and advertising is steadily blurring due to the development of immersive marketing techniques and rapid changes in delivery platforms.



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The messages aimed at children are getting more sophisticated at reaching them. Content advertising is more targeted to their psychological development due to the use of sophisticated psychological knowledge and advancements in data mining and data analytics. Ads are more



ubiquitous in children's lives due to the proliferation of media outlet devices such as game machines, phones, pads, and laptops, etc. Commercial messages are more cleverly insinuated into schools, theaters, entertainment, social media, sports, clothing and other online and offline avenues of access to children than ever before. Commercial interests have unprecedented access to children's innermost personal lives these days.

On the surface of it, morally speaking, this dimension of the issue seems to be an open and shut case. If children are vulnerable and if they are being harmed by advertisements and marketing aimed at them, marketing that specifically targets them because they are a vulnerable population, then they should be protected from such powerful commercial influence as a matter of justice and fairness and caring. This is based on the 'principle of vulnerability' derived from Deontology: those who have more have a greater duty of charity than those who have less.

There is widespread, but not universal, agreement with this argument, as we will see. In fact, some countries have already enacted legislation aimed at protecting children from commercial interests. In America and the European Union many big food manufacturers have committed to following [self-imposed codes of conduct](#) regarding marketing to children. Unfortunately, voluntary, industry-created moral guidelines have been shown to not be effective in changing or guiding corporate behavior regarding the targeting of children. European countries impose stricter regulations than the U.S. Britain bans advertising on television and radio marketing food high in fat, salt and sugar to children under 16 during peak TV hours. Sweden and Norway outlaw all television advertising to youngsters. Quebec prohibits advertising of any sort directed at children.

It seems reasonable to have some regulation of commercial speech insofar as this can be harmful to children. But, on the other side, the industry believes that its *legal right* to free

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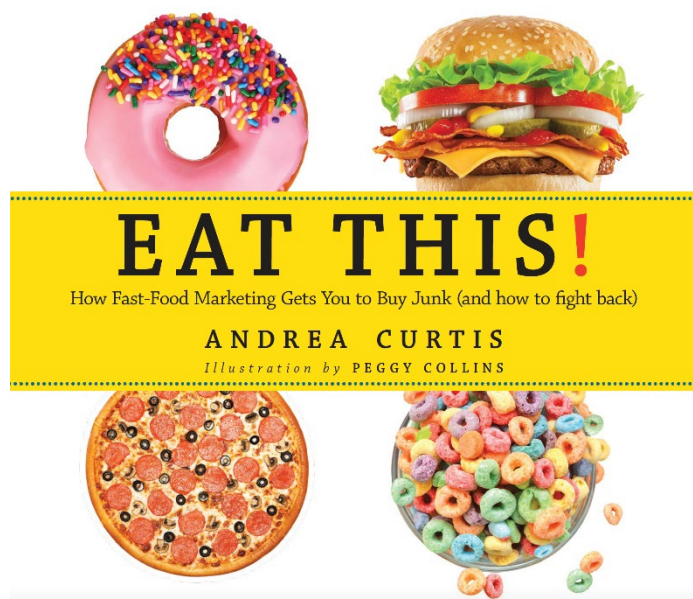
commercial speech gives it the *moral right* to advertise products that are potentially harmful to children in the U.S., as McDonald's has argued. Is this just? Or is this a violation of children's fundamental rights as *children*, an assault on their dignity and respect? Moral duty extends farther than the law, and thus cannot be determined by a legal code alone, unless you subscribe to something like Hobbes's dim view of human nature.

One of the main harms to children from advertising is from fast-food advertising. After banning all advertising, including all junk food advertising, to children, Quebec now has the lowest obesity rate in Canada. In this case, it seems as if the regulation of junk food advertising aimed at children was successful in reducing the harm of childhood obesity. But the ban was costly to the food and beverage industry.

There are continuing efforts to determine the extent to which advertising *causes* children to overeat non-nutritious and fattening foods. Yet, given the huge and well-known persuasive power of advertising and marketing to move people's desires in the commercial direction desired by the purveyors of that marketing, there should be no doubt in any reasonable person's mind that marketing is able to cause children to feel insatiable desire for something that is clearly not healthy for them. Is this manipulation and commercialization of children's desires morally acceptable? Should commercial interests have unrestricted access to children's moral value formation?

Corollary to the belief regarding the protected nature of commercial free speech directed at children is the belief that parents should be responsible for their children and it is *their* job to manage their children. Well, of course, parents *are* responsible for their children by law. But many parents these days feel they have inadequate resources to resist the well-funded, highly sophisticated and professionally researched advertising and marketing campaigns of big corporations aimed at their children. This commercial power to shape and control desire undermines the ability of genuinely concerned parents to exercise their responsibility as parents. In this case, 'bad' parenting seems to be the direct result of 'bad' corporate behavior.

It is an easy blurring of the issue to say that parents need to learn to control their children. But, in the trenches of everyday life, the parental "No" factor is hardly a sufficient defense against a well-heeled and aggressive food and beverage industry with its endless material resources. As an increasingly unhealthy society, the question we need to urgently wrestle with is should a non-uniformly delivered parental 'No' be our sole line of defense against the increasingly insinuating marketing of unhealthy food to our children?





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Self-regulation by the industry is insufficient since this has made no significant changes. CARU seems more like a cloak of social responsibility while the industry continues to act irresponsibly. Lobbying efforts by the food and beverage industry in the U.S. have been highly successful at consistently blocking any legislation limiting their ability to advertise to children. All these corporations see is that children are an extremely lucrative commercial market.

Is it morally acceptable to allow profit-motivated companies to use the incredible power of advertising and marketing, now enhanced and driven by big data analytics, to shape and influence the development of the vulnerable, budding morality of highly impressionable young children with their consumerist, materialistic, profit-motivated, commercially value-laden messages about what our children ought to desire and what they need to feel good about themselves? Is this something from which a responsible parent would want to protect her or his young child? What do you think?

Keep the following moral principle in mind as you read about and reflect on this issue:

**"Above all, we shall not harm children. We shall not participate in practices that are emotionally damaging, physically harmful, disrespectful, degrading, dangerous, exploitative, or intimidating to children. *This principle has precedence over all others in this Code.*"** "A position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children"

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## Advertising and child obesity

[Catherine Musemeche, M.D.](#)

### Ban on Advertising to Children Linked to Lower Obesity Rates<sup>1</sup>

Last weekend I met a couple whose children are not permitted to discuss movies or video games at school. The children don't watch television, have limited computer access and have only seen movies pre-screened by their parents.

There was a time when I might have viewed these restrictions as a bit excessive, but not anymore. With what's being thrown at kids through media exposure these days, I'm all in with an environment that seeks to filter some of it. As a doctor who treats children, many of whom are overweight or obese, I don't think there can be much doubt that child-directed advertising is fueling the obesity epidemic. Now, a recently published [University of British Columbia study](#) supports that theory with findings that suggest that banning fast-food advertising to children may actually curtail obesity.

Researchers found that a 32-year ban on fast-food advertising to kids in electronic and print media in Quebec resulted in a 13 percent reduction in fast-food expenditures and an estimated 2 billion to 4 billion fewer calories consumed by children in the province. While the rest of Canada has been experiencing the same explosion in childhood obesity seen here in the United States, Quebec has the [lowest childhood obesity](#) rate in Canada.

Meanwhile, in the face of our own raging obesity epidemic, child-directed advertising of unhealthful food to children continues unabated. The Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity has just released a [2012 report](#) showing that little has changed since 2009, even though the cereal industry claims to have reduced advertising to children.

Despite a slight improvement in overall nutritional quality of kids' cereals, children still get "one spoonful of sugar in every three spoonfuls of cereal," according to Jennifer L. Harris, the lead researcher on the Rudd study, and that sugar is heavily marketed: in 2011, 6- to 11-year-olds viewed more than 700 ads per year for cereals on television while preschoolers saw 595. Cereal companies spent \$264 million to promote child-targeted cereals in 2011 (an increase of 34 percent from just 2008). Other



*Catherine Musemeche, M.D.*

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<sup>1</sup> Musemeche, Catherine. "Ban on advertising to children linked to lower obesity rates." [MOTHERLODE Adventures in Parenting](#), New York Times. July 2, 2012  
<https://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/author/catherine-musemeche/>

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companies spend millions more promoting unhealthy products — and it works: television viewing and the associated advertising exposure [correlate with an increased intake of candy and sugary sodas](#).

As if pushing unhealthy food wasn't enough, pharmaceutical companies are now [rolling out ads that are designed to appeal to kids](#). Children's Claritin, an allergy medication, now includes Madagascar stickers and blogging mothers are encouraged to hold Claritin parties for all the neighborhood kids. We seem to have accepted the idea of companies encouraging children to ask for foods that aren't healthy choices; now we're accepting targeted advertising of products that children can't possibly evaluate.

It doesn't matter that children aren't necessarily the ones checking out at the grocery store and driving up to the fast-food outlet. Parents are being bombarded with requests for sugary cereals, fast food and vitamins shaped like dinosaurs. "No" fatigue is rampant, and eventually, "no" doesn't help. Other studies have shown that once children become teenagers and are able to exert more control over their food choices, [they eat less healthily](#). Years of being saturated with advertising for exactly the foods parents try to regulate can't help.

What can be done about the invasion of child-directed advertising? Parents need to be aware of the pervasive advertising their children are being exposed to, take steps to manage their child's media exposure, provide healthy alternatives to cereals and fast food and support legislation to curtail advertising to kids.

We've already seen the [Federal Trade Commission go weak in the knees](#) about reeling in food advertising to children, but it is still possible that more cities will follow New York City's [ban on outsized sugary sodas](#) and that state governments will take actions similar to Quebec's. And we can always hope that more corporations will voluntarily follow the lead of the Walt Disney Company in [setting nutritional standards](#) for products advertised on all child-focused television channels, radio stations and Web sites.

When the consequences of alcohol and tobacco consumption, particularly to young people, were recognized, ads for these products were restricted if not outright banned worldwide. We need to pay similar attention to the long-range effects of advertising obesity, and not turn our children's brains and their behavior over to those whose measure of success is not necessarily the same as ours.

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### **Report: American Psychological Association Task Force on Advertising and Children**

Research shows that children under the age of eight are unable to critically comprehend televised advertising messages and are prone to accept advertiser messages as truthful, accurate and unbiased. This can lead to unhealthy eating habits as evidenced by today's youth obesity epidemic. For these reasons, a task force of the

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American Psychological Association (APA) is recommending that advertising targeting children under the age of eight be restricted.

The Task Force, appointed by the APA in 2000, conducted an extensive review of the research literature in the area of advertising media, and its effects on children. It is estimated that advertisers spend more than \$12 billion per year on advertising messages aimed at the youth market. Additionally, the average child watches more than 40,000 television commercials per year.

**The six-member team of psychologists with expertise in child development, cognitive psychology and social psychology found that children under the age of eight lack the cognitive development to understand the persuasive intent of television advertising and are uniquely susceptible to advertising's influence.**

"While older children and adults understand the inherent bias of advertising, younger children do not, and therefore tend to interpret commercial claims and appeals as accurate and truthful information," said psychologist Dale Kunkel, Ph.D., Professor of Communication at the University of California at Santa Barbara and senior author of the task force's scientific report.

"Because younger children do not understand persuasive intent in advertising, they are easy targets for commercial persuasion," said psychologist Brian Wilcox, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology and Director of the Center on Children, Families and the Law at the University of Nebraska and chair of the task force. "This is a critical concern because the most common products marketed to children are sugared cereals, candies, sweets, sodas and snack foods. Such advertising of unhealthy food products to young children contributes to poor nutritional habits that may last a lifetime and be a variable in the current epidemic of obesity among kids."

**The research on children's commercial recall and product preferences confirms that advertising does typically get young consumers to buy their products.** From a series of studies examining product choices, say Drs. Kunkel and Wilcox, the findings show that children recall content from the ads to which they've been exposed and preference for a product has been shown to occur with as little as a single commercial exposure and strengthened with repeated exposures.



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Furthermore, studies reviewed in the task force report show that these product preferences can affect children's product purchase requests, which can put pressure on parents' purchasing decisions and instigate parent-child conflicts when parents deny their children's requests, said Kunkel and Wilcox.

Finally, in addition to the issues surrounding advertising directed to young children, said Kunkel, there are concerns regarding certain commercial campaigns primarily targeting adults that pose risks for child-viewers. "For example, beer ads are commonly shown during sports events and seen by millions of children, creating both brand familiarity and more positive attitudes toward drinking in children as young as 9-10 years of age. Another area of sensitive advertising content involves commercials for violent media products such as motion pictures and video games. Such ads contribute to a violent media culture which increases the likelihood of youngsters' aggressive behavior and desensitizes children to real-world violence," said Kunkel.

According to the findings in the report, APA has developed the following recommendations:

- **Restrict advertising primarily directed to young children of eight years and under. Policymakers need to take steps to better protect young children from exposure to advertising because of the inherent unfairness of advertising to audiences who lack the capability to evaluate biased sources of information found in television commercials.**

- **Ensure that disclosures and disclaimers in advertising directed to children are conveyed in language clearly comprehensible to the intended audience (e.g., use "You have to put it together" rather than "some assembly required").**

**Investigate how young children comprehend and are influenced by advertising in new interactive media environments such as the internet.**

- **Examine the influence of advertising directed to children in the school and classroom. Such advertising may exert more powerful influence because of greater attention to the message or because of an implicit endorsement effect associated with advertising viewed in the school setting.**

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## The free commercial speech argument

### McDonald's defends its right to advertise to children<sup>2</sup>

Emily Bryson York and Gregory Karp

The national debate on corporate responsibility played out in a microcosm at McDonald's annual meeting Thursday, when votes on shareholder proposals became a referendum on the pursuit of profit versus the question of what constitutes the public good.

Critics hammered McDonald's executives not only for offering unhealthful menu items but also for marketing fast food to kids with its Ronald McDonald character and Happy Meal toys — all while boasting eight straight years of sales growth despite a deep economic recession.



McDonald's response was powerful too, tapping into the fundamental notion of American freedom.

"This is all really about choice," McDonald's Corp. CEO Jim Skinner said at the meeting, held at company headquarters in Oak Brook, Ill. He said that while shareholders have the right to communicate concerns, the company should also have the right to advertise its menu offerings. "It's about protecting people's rights in this democratic society that we live in."

As for Ronald McDonald?

"Ronald McDonald is an ambassador to McDonald's, and he is an ambassador for good," Skinner said. "Ronald McDonald isn't going anywhere."

Critics' main beef with McDonald's is its marketing to America's children, thus side-stepping the thorny retort "If you don't like McDonald's, don't eat there."

Children are susceptible to the advertising that McDonald's spends hundreds of millions of dollars on each year, said Juliana Shulman, national campaign organizer for Corporate Accountability International.

"For adults that's one thing, but children aren't just little adults. Their brains are just forming," Shulman said. "McDonald's marketing is really designed to get around parents and get to kids directly. For nearly 50 years, McDonald's has been working to

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<sup>2</sup> York, Emily and Karp, Gregory. "McDonald's defends its right to advertise to children." Los Angeles Times May 19, 2011. <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/may/19/business/la-fi-mcdonalds-20110519>

hook kids on unhealthy foods.... Parents are exercising parental responsibility. That alone won't stop the problem."

That marketing, including the Ronald McDonald mascot, is why Steven Rothschild, director of the Department of Preventive Medicine at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago, signed an open letter published in several newspaper advertisements this week.

"You don't put a clown in front of an adult face because it's a happy association. It's aimed at children," Rothschild said. "Parents do have to say no to their children. This is not the nanny state issue. This is one of creating conditions that make it a fair fight — so parents can make good choices, so they have McDonald's working with them not against them."

Critics say they target McDonald's and its annual meetings and not those of, say, Wendy's or Taco Bell's parent corporations because McDonald's is the industry leader, and others will follow suit.

McDonald's executives say the company is working to be part of the solution. The company already allows parents to request milk or juice instead of soda in Happy Meals and offers sliced apples with caramel sauce and chicken nuggets instead of French fries and hamburgers.

"We now provide more choice and variety than anyone else in the industry," a spokeswoman said. "Fruit and walnut oatmeal is the latest example, and that complements our premium salads, apple dippers, and 1% low-fat milk."

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## Current research on children as consumers

### Children as Consumers: Advertising and Marketing<sup>3</sup>

Sandra L. Calvert (Professor and chair of the Department of Psychology at Georgetown University and the director of the Children's Digital Media Center.)

#### Summary of the article

Marketing and advertising support the U.S. economy by promoting the sale of goods and services to consumers, both adults and children. Sandra Calvert addresses product marketing to children and shows that although marketers have targeted children for decades, two recent trends have increased their interest in child consumers. First, both the discretionary income of children and their power to influence parent purchases have increased over time. Second, as the enormous increase

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<sup>3</sup> Calvert, Sandra L. "Children as Consumers: Advertising and Marketing." *The Future of Children*. Vol. 18 / 1 Spring 2008.

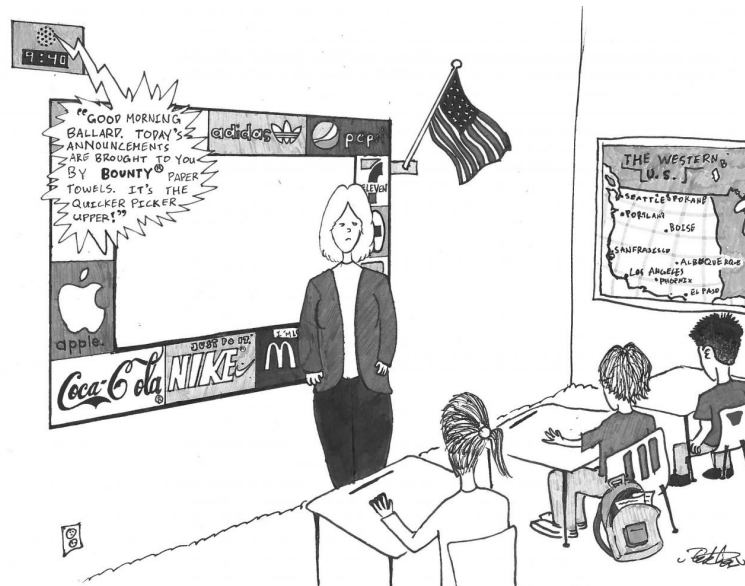
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in the number of available television channels has led to smaller audiences for each channel, digital interactive technologies have simultaneously opened new routes to narrow cast to children, thereby creating a growing media space just for children and children's products.

Calvert explains that paid advertising to children primarily involves television spots that feature toys and food products, most of which are high in fat and sugar and low in nutritional value. Newer marketing approaches have led to online advertising and to so-called stealth marketing techniques, such as embedding products in the program content in films, online, and in video games.

**All these marketing strategies, says Calvert, make children younger than eight especially vulnerable because they lack the cognitive skills to understand the persuasive intent of television and online advertisements. The new stealth techniques can also undermine the consumer defenses even of older children and adolescents.**

Calvert explains that government regulations implemented by the Federal Communications Commission and the Federal Trade Commission provide some protection for children from advertising and marketing practices. Regulators exert more control over content on scarce television airwaves that belong to the public than over content on the more open online spaces. Overall, Calvert concludes, children live and grow up in a highly sophisticated marketing environment that influences their preferences and behaviors.



## How companies learn what kids want

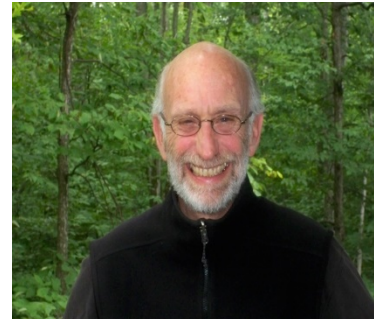
[Faith Boninger](#) and [Alex Molnar](#) - University of Colorado



*Dr. Faith Boninger*

### How companies learn what children secretly want<sup>4</sup>

If you have children, you are likely to worry about their safety – you show them safe places in your neighborhood and you teach them to watch out for lurking dangers.



*Dr. Alex Molnar*

But you may not be aware of some online dangers to which they are exposed through their schools.

There is a good chance that people and organizations you don't know are collecting information about them while they are doing their schoolwork. And they may be using this information for purposes that [you know nothing about](#).

In the U.S. and around the world, [millions of digital data points are collected](#) daily from children by private companies that provide educational technologies to teachers and schools. Once data are collected, there is little in law or policy that prevents companies from [using the information](#) for almost any purpose they wish.

[Our research](#) explores how corporate entities use their involvement with schools to gather and use data about students. We find that often these companies use the data they collect to market products, such as junk food, to children.

### Here's how student data are being collected

Almost all U.S. middle and high school [students use mobile devices](#). A third of such devices are issued by their schools. Even when using [their own devices](#) for their schoolwork, students are being encouraged to use [applications and software](#), such as



<sup>4</sup> Boninger, Faith and Molnar, Alex. "How companies learn what children secretly want." The Conversation - August 17, 2016. <https://theconversation.com/how-companies-learn-what-children-secretly-want-63178>



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those with which they can create multimedia [presentations](#), do [research](#), learn to [type](#) or [communicate](#) with each other and with their teachers.

When children work on their assignments, unknown to them, the software and sites they use are busy collecting data.

Ads target children as they do their homework.



For example, “[Adaptive learning](#)” technologies record students’ keystrokes, answers and response times. On-line [surveys](#) collect information about students’ personalities. [Communication](#) software stores the communications between students, parents and teachers; and [presentation](#) software stores students’ work and their communications about it.

In addition, teachers and schools may direct children to work on branded apps or [websites](#) that may collect, or allow [third parties](#) to collect, IP addresses and other information from students. This could include the ads children click on, what they download, what games they play, and so on.

### **How student data are used**

When “screen time” is [required for school](#), parents cannot limit or control it. Companies use this time to find out more about children’s preferences, so they can target children [with advertising](#) and other content with a personalized appeal.

Children might see ads while they are working in educational apps. In other cases, [data might be collected](#) while students complete their assignments. Information might also be stored and used to better target them later.

For instance, a [website](#) might allow a third party to collect information, including the type of browser used, the time and date, and the subject of advertisements clicked or scrolled over by a child. The third party could then use that information to target the child with advertisements later.

We have [found](#) that companies use the data to serve ads (for food, clothing, games, etc.) to the children via their computers. This repeated, personalized advertising is [designed](#) specifically to manipulate children to want and buy more things.

Indeed, over time this kind of advertising can threaten children’s [physical](#) and [psychological](#) well-being.

### **Consequences of targeted advertising**

[Food](#) is the most heavily advertised class of products to children. The heavy digital promotion of “junk” food is associated with negative health outcomes such as [obesity](#), [heart disease](#) and [diabetes](#).

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Additionally, advertising, regardless of the particular product it may sell, also “sells” to children the idea that products can make them happy.

Research shows that [children](#) who buy into this materialist worldview are more likely to suffer from anxiety, depression and other psychological distress.

[Teenagers](#) who adopt this worldview are more likely to smoke, drink and skip school. One set of [studies](#) showed that advertising makes children feel far from their ideals for themselves in terms of how good a life they lead and what their bodies look like.

The insecurity and dissatisfaction may lead to negative behaviors such as [compulsive buying](#) and [disordered eating](#).

### **Aren't there laws to protect children's privacy?**

Many [bills bearing on student privacy](#) have been introduced in the past several years in [Congress](#) and [state legislatures](#). Several of them have been enacted into [laws](#).

Additionally, nearly 300 software companies signed a self-regulatory [Student Privacy Pledge](#) to safeguard student privacy regarding the collection, maintenance and use of student personal information.

However, they [aren't sufficient](#). And here's why:

First of all, most laws, including the [Student Privacy Pledge](#), focus on [Personally Identifiable Information](#) (PII). PII includes information that can be used to determine a person's identity, such as that person's name, social security number or biometric information.

Companies can address privacy concerns by making digital data [anonymous](#) (i.e., not including PII in the data that are collected, stored or shared). However, data can easily be [“de-anonymized.”](#) And, children don't need to be [identified with PII](#) in order for their online behavior to be tracked.

Second, [bills designed to protect student privacy](#) sometimes expressly [preserve](#) the ability of an operator to use student information for adaptive or personalized learning purposes. In order to personalize the assignments that a program gives a student, it must by necessity track that student's behavior.

This weakens the privacy protections the bills otherwise offer. Although it protects companies that collect data for adaptive learning purposes only, it also provides a loophole that enables data collection.

Finally, the [Student Privacy Pledge](#) has [no real enforcement mechanism](#). As it is a voluntary pledge, many companies may scrupulously abide by the promises in the pledge, but many [others may not](#).

### **What to do?**

While education technologies show promise in some areas, they also hold the [potential to harm students profoundly](#) if they are not properly understood, thoughtfully managed and carefully controlled.

Parents, teachers and administrators, who serve as the closest protectors of children's privacy at their schools, and legislators responsible for enacting relevant policy, need to recognize the threats of such data tracking.

The first step toward protecting children is to know that that such targeted marketing is going on while children do their schoolwork. And that it is powerful.

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## Targeting children: Trump's response to Syrian chemical attack

R. D. Walsh, Ph.D. | April 9, 2017

On Tuesday, April 4, 2017, while my Business Ethics students and I were considering the important question of whether it is morally acceptable to target young children with commercial advertising and marketing, military strategists for Syrian President Bashar Assad were apparently [targeting the residents of Khan Sheikoun](#) with sarin-loaded munitions—an outlawed nerve agent that causes horrible suffering and death.



The use of sarin as a weapon is [considered a war crime](#) by the international community. The most recent death toll from the Syrian chemical attack, stands at 86, including [30 children](#). According to U.S. Secretary of State Tillerson, not only Syria but also Russia and Iran “[bear great moral responsibility](#)” for this human rights atrocity. It was good to hear Tillerson call out the moral dimension of this heinous crime.

In response to the chemical attack against civilians, [President Trump ordered a Tomahawk cruise missile attack](#) on the Shayrat air base near Homs, from which the Syrian planes loaded with sarin munitions took off. "Tonight I ordered a targeted military strike on the airfield in Syria from where the chemical attack was launched. It is in the vital national security interest of the United States to prevent and deter the spread and use of deadly chemical weapons," [Trump said](#). What can we learn from an ethical reflection on Trump's action?

To answer that question, let's go back for just a moment to the question of whether it is morally acceptable to target young children commercially. One student confronted me after class and wondered why I had presented such a one-sided picture of the 'advertising to children' question. The student claimed that I presented numerous references to experts who believe that regulation of ads to children is necessary to prevent harms such as child consumerism and obesity, but failed to present substantial opposing

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arguments, as I usually do with the moral issues we investigate in the course. I appreciated the astute student's critical feedback. Here is my response.

Many child psychologists, moral philosophers, and parenting advocates [point out](#) that the huge resources devoted to targeting the lucrative children's market with commercial messages undermines the reach and effectiveness of parental responsibility to protect children from harmful advertising. The fact is that aside from First Amendment [rights-to-free-speech claims](#) and the blaming-the-victim argument that parents are at fault for failing to supervise their children, *there are no substantial arguments on the opposing side of this issue*. Just as there are no acceptable moral arguments justifying the indiscriminate use of chemical weapons against civilians. None.

Trump's decision to attack Syria in retaliation for the chemical attack was apparently an emotional moral decision on his part. That is the first thing we should notice. Yes, his decision also had legal, political, financial, logistical, strategic international aspects, and other interests attached to it; but it was undoubtedly—and perhaps primarily—a moral decision both in its motivation and its intended utility. The exact nature of the response would be carefully deliberated and reflected upon rationally by Trump's security and defense team; but the decision to do *something* was an emotional moral judgment intuitively and tacitly reflecting the idea that the most basic of moral principles, “Do no harm,” applies categorically to all children.

President Trump's judgment to bomb Syria was a moral decision similar to the decision involved in the [“drowning child” scenario](#), introduced by philosopher Peter Singer, that we considered earlier in the text in the context of [Cosmopolitan moral theory](#). Singer's scenario is a kind of thought experiment to see where you fall on the moderate (moral duty greater for those close at hand) to strong (moral duty same for all) Cosmopolitan continuum. If you would feel obligated to save the drowning child who is close at hand, Singer argues, why would you not feel obligated to donate to Oxfam to save dying kids in distant lands? Is proximity or lack of it an acceptably significant moral variable?

Adults generally are eagerly willing to help a child in life-threatening circumstances, even at some cost to themselves, when the child is near at hand. The immediate proximity of the child produces an emotional response (moral sentiment) in most adults which leads them to act morally. One analysis and justification of this phenomenon is based upon the fact that adults have the power to act, whereas children do not. This power differential creates a moral differential which is reflected in the “Vulnerability Principle,” discussed below.

As the emotional trigger for an event becomes more remote, however, the feeling of having a moral need to act lessens. People are less likely to donate to Oxfam than to give their coat to a shivering child at a bus stop. In the famous [trolley experiment](#), people are generally more willing to pull a lever to divert a trolley from killing four people than they are to push a big person onto the track to stop the trolley, due to the emotional dimension of the personal contact. Folks might accept in a theoretical sense that all adults have moral responsibility for all children, everywhere and at all times, but the truth is that they are most likely to exercise such imperfect responsibility when moved to action emotionally by a local triggering event.

## TOPIC 9 TARGETING CHILDREN AS CONSUMERS – IS IT MORAL?

In our age of hyper-connectivity, technology makes it possible to overcome some of the reluctance people feel in relation to strong Cosmopolitanism. When the distant event is made palpably close at hand through visual representation, for example, visual learners like Trump are moved to act in regard to a distant event by a *local* triggering mechanism: the visual representation. It was the viewing of the horrific photos of the distant Syrian children that [moved the President to act](#). And, of course, he had the *ability* to act.

This illustrates what is often referred to as the “[Vulnerability Principle](#).” This idea is derived from the Deontological moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Kant asserts that those who have greater resources to do the good, have a greater, if “imperfect,” requirement to do so. For example, a wealthy person has greater moral responsibility to engage in material charitable giving than does the poor person lacking the material means with which to be charitable.

One could extend this line of reasoning to the nation state and argue that the wealthier and more powerful the nation state the greater the moral responsibility of that nation state to do good in the world and to further the moral order, especially in regard to the most vulnerable. The U.S. was, practically speaking, the only nation that *could* retaliate for the brutal attack on the innocent Syrian children. Thus, the U.S. had a greater moral duty to consider retaliating because it had the power to do so.

What is also illustrated by this incident is how a person’s moral value orientation can change in response to moral trauma. Moral trauma is when our moral value orientation is impacted by something inconsistent with it, thus requiring a re-orientation of values or other action. Trump’s value position of “America first” non-intervention in regard to Syria changed when he saw the horrific photos of the victimized children. These children whose lives had been brutally and cruelly cut short were the same age as Trump’s son and grandson, personalizing the situation even more. It was this personal moral trauma that caused an overnight re-configuration of Trump’s moral value orientation and the decision that he should take effective action on behalf of the defenseless children of Syria.

But, is Trump being hypocritical when it comes to *American* children?

Trump’s obvious care for and retaliation for the harm done to Syrian children, and his attempt thereby to prevent future harm to Syrian children, is certainly laudable. Yet there is no government protection for the many obese, ‘consumerized’ American children who are harmed every day by the [proven ill-effects](#) of advertising and marketing that targets children twelve years of age and younger.

A missile barrage of moral outrage tomahawked against the commercial field of profit-motivated enterprises flying stealthily low under the patchwork parental radar of “No!” and targeting millions of unsuspecting, innocent children with lifelong harmful marketing would save President Trump from the charge of moral hypocrisy.



## **PRACTICE**

How does the current epidemic of child obesity, on the one hand, and the idea of “free speech,” on the other, connect with the moral issue of whether advertising aimed at young children should be regulated? What is your position regarding this issue? Your response should include an understanding of the Principle of Vulnerability.