

Policy Submission

**Submission to the
Broadcasting Commission
on the Development of a
Children's Advertising Code**

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The aim of the Combat Poverty Agency is to promote a just and inclusive society by working for the prevention and elimination of poverty and social exclusion in Ireland. The recommendations in this submission are intended to advance this aim through the Agency's statutory function of policy advice to government. Combat Poverty welcomes the opportunity to comment on the development of a children's advertising code by the Broadcasting Commission.

Introduction

Combat Poverty is concerned with the promotion of children's rights; poverty is an infringement of those rights. Our submission prioritises the needs of poor children, drawing on our knowledge in this regard.¹ Combat Poverty has carried out recent research outlining the extent and experience of child poverty, *Against all Odds*.² International research would suggest that advertising leads to particular pressure on poor families.

Children's Rights

The Combat Poverty Agency endorses the adoption of a children's rights approach recognising our responsibilities under the United Nation (UN) Convention on the Rights of a Child, which was signed and ratified by the Irish government in 1992. The Convention provides an internationally agreed framework of minimum standards necessary for the well-being of every child. In 1998, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child noted that child poverty in Ireland was undermining the fundamental rights of children, including their access to education, housing and health services.

One of the underlying principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is that children should be protected from discrimination irrespective of the child's social or other status. When poverty interferes with children's health, housing, play, education and enjoyment of a decent standard of living it may be regarded as constituting a form of discrimination.³ Ireland now has a National Children's Strategy (2000) in place. Child poverty is a central concern of the strategy.

A relative income definition of poverty, generally based on 60% of median income, is accepted in public policy and allows for a focus on the outcomes of poverty, such as exclusion from or lack of participation in society, created by constraints on resources. Applying a citizenship rights perspective, one commentator describes poverty as a "condition of partial citizenship". Similarly the experience of being a child, without the supporting framework of children's rights, might be called a condition of partial citizenship.

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have a right to have their views heard in relation to all decisions and actions affecting them.

¹ Previous Combat Poverty research on families and child poverty includes child income poverty, family expenditures, indebtedness, food and nutrition intakes, lone parenthood, income sharing within household, the cost of a child and household allocation of resources.

² Daly, M. and Leonard, M., (2002) *Against all odds: Family Life on a Low Income* (Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency and IPA).

³ *A Summary of Proposals to the National Anti-Poverty Strategy Review 2001*, Combat Poverty Agency.

Reflecting the language of Article 12, the first Goal of the National Children's Strategy (2000)⁴ states that "children will have a voice in matters that affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity".

Extent of Child Poverty in Ireland

A strategic objective of Combat Poverty is to achieve a greater understanding of poverty and social exclusion. Ireland is amongst the most unequal countries in the EU, with one of the highest rates of relative income poverty.⁵ By European standards, Ireland also has among the highest rates of child poverty. In a league table of child poverty published in 2000 Ireland has the sixth highest percentage of children living in income poverty amongst 22 OECD countries. The statistics suggest that children in poor circumstances form a significant minority of Ireland's children. In 2000, about one in twelve (8%) of Irish children experienced severe or consistent poverty: that is lived in households below 70% of median household disposable income and were deprived of basic commodities and opportunities. Children carry a greater risk of poverty, being up to 50% more likely to be in poverty than adults.⁶

The risk of poverty for families is up to three times that of couples without children. Children born into poverty are disadvantaged in a number of ways which have a long-term effect on the quality of their lives. For example research shows that citizens who are disadvantaged in terms of income, education or occupational level also tend to be disadvantaged in terms of health status.⁷

Lived Experience of Child Poverty in Ireland

Combat Poverty supported research has suggested that poverty and deprivation is a pervasive feature of family life and childhood for many people in Ireland. In this context, Combat Poverty commissioned the recent study *Against All Odds*⁸ to take an in-depth look at how poverty impacts on families and children. It illustrates, in particular, how everyday life is curtailed by inadequate resources and deprivation of basic necessities. Another issue motivating this study was concern about the long-term effects of child and family poverty. It gives first-hand expression to the voice and experience of families affected by poverty. In addition, the study reveals the diverse experiences of individual family members, in particular its focus on the experiences of children as well as adults.

Against All Odds is based on a detailed investigation of the situation of 30 families. The families were chosen to reflect the broad spectrum of circumstances facing Irish families in poverty: rural and urban, one and two parents, small and large families and working and non-working. The families are illustrative of the contemporary reality of family poverty, if not representative in a statistical sense. A key purpose of this study is to make visible the lives and concerns of some of Ireland's poorest

⁴ *The National Children's strategy, Our Children-Their Lives* (Dublin: The Stationery Office)

⁶ Nolan, B. *et al.*, (2002) *Monitoring Poverty Trends in Ireland: Results from the 2000 Living in Ireland Survey*, Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute.

⁷ Wilkinson, R.G., (1996) *Unhealthy Societies* London: Routledge.

⁸ Daly, M. and Leonard, M., (2002) *Against all odds: Family Life on a Low Income* (Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency and IPA).

households. The children were asked about their views on their lives, about school, their view of the future, their social activities, what they knew about the family's finances, their clothes and ownership of possessions.

Among the concerns expressed by the children in the study *Against All Odds* was the pressure to "fit in" with their peers and the corresponding fear of feeling excluded or different. Wearing the "right" clothes emerged as a crucial prerequisite for being accepted by peers. Parents also expressed concern that their children would not be labelled as different because of their clothes. This meant that certain brands names had to be bought sometimes, despite the expense, so as to increase the chances of children "fitting in" with their peers.

Effects of Bullying on Education

In *Against All Odds* school was for some children a place of danger rather than of learning. One in four admitted that they had direct experience of being bullied at school. Two out of 28 children interviewed had left school early as a result of being bullied. It seemed that being unable to afford brand-name clothes and runners was the main factor precipitating bullying. Despite their difficulties, many children remain committed to obtaining a good education, the majority saying that they wanted to stay on at school until they had completed their Leaving Certificate. High levels of stress can be an important factor in children's educational under-attainment. This is often linked to social problems such as low income or bullying.

Pressure on Parents to Purchase Designer Brands

Research from the United States suggests that psychologists can help advertisers with all aspects of the television commercial in order to make children more susceptible to its message.⁹ This research found that children constitute the section of society that is least likely to understand advertising but is most likely to be affected by it. A participant in the research, clinical psychologist Allen Kanner, believes that advertising can also wound children by making them feel inadequate if they are unable to keep up with the latest products.

Advertisers are aware of children's need for peer approval and give children significant roles in TV commercials in order to contribute to peer conformity pressure. Knowing that TV commercial influence and peer group influence one another is important. This peer-oriented consumer culture together with advertising puts great pressure on parents, which in turn causes conflict between parent and child. Obviously parents have budgetary limitations and have to limit their children's requests which adds to family frustration.¹⁰

Implications of the Research

The pressure on children to "fit in" with their peers may also manifest itself in ownership of goods. Having the right consumer goods can help some children get peer approval, while lack of certain possessions may occasion embarrassment and

⁹ Cohn, E. *Consuming Kids American Prospect v. 11, No. 6* (Jan. 31, 2000)

¹⁰ As discussed in Summary of the paper by the working group on "Commercial Practices Aimed at Children" The Consumers Committee is a consultative committee of the Commission.

social exclusion. The research indicates that children are under pressure from peers to own certain goods and that this often translates into demands on parents, contributing to already elevated stress levels amongst low income families. The culture of consumerism may have particularly adverse affects on disadvantaged children by creating needs that are unmet. It is interesting to note that Ireland now has the greatest penetration of Sony Play Stations in the world after Japan.¹¹

There is also widespread concern about the number of advertisements on television for foods with high sugar and fat content. Food manufacturers use highly manipulative methods when advertising to the young. These include linking well-known cartoon characters with high-sugar breakfast cereals; leaving children unable to separate advertising and programming. A study in Quebec provides reliable evidence that the more television commercials a child sees for cereals marketed for children, the more likely that the product will be found in the household.¹² Poverty is linked to a poorer diet in terms of the variety of foodstuffs and the over consumption of energy-dense fats and sugars.

No figures are available for childhood obesity levels in the Republic of Ireland. However, Hilary Hoey, professor of paediatrics at Trinity College, Dublin and a consultant paediatrician at Tallaght Hospital, says that we have a huge problem with obesity here. International statistics reveal the extent of the problem. At age 6 years, 1 in 5 children in England are overweight and another 1 in 10 obese. By 15 years these percentages have risen to 31% and 17% respectively.¹³ A longitudinal detailed study of children in Louisiana, found that coronary heart disease begins in children as early as 5- 8 years. By that time it is possible to see the fatty streaks in their arteries that will lead to the lesions that may cause a heart attack.¹⁴ Interventions that prolong life and reduce morbidity among children have a far greater influence on life expectancy and quality of life, and the costs of health care, than interventions in later years.

Situation in Other Countries

Sweden, in 1991 introduced legislation to ban television advertisements that purposefully attract the attention of children under the age of 12, and does not allow advertisements before or after children's programmes. Greece, bans all toy advertising on TV between 7 a.m. and 10 p.m., while Norway does not permit advertising during children's programmes. In Flemish Belgium there is no advertising five minutes before or after programmes for children, and Australia allows no advertising during programmes aimed at pre-school children.

In the United Kingdom, the Independent Television Commission Act, 1998, has a number of provisions specifically in relation to children and advertising, as follows:

Section 1.2.3. Toys and Games

Advertisements for toys, games and other products of interest to children must not mislead, taking into account the child's immaturity of judgement

¹¹ *National Children's Strategy: Our Children – Their Lives*, (2000) Dublin: Stationery Office.

¹² Goldberg, M.E., "A quasi-experiment assessing the effectiveness of TV directed to children", *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol.27 No 4, 1990, pp445-54

¹³ British Heart Foundation, 2002, Coronary Heart Disease Statistics.

and experience. For example, the true size of the product must be made easy to judge.

Section 1.2.6 Appeals to Loyalty and Inferiority

No advertisement may imply that unless children themselves buy or encourage other people to buy a product or service they will be failing in some duty or lacking in loyalty or will be inferior in some way to other children or to be held in contempt or ridicule.

These provisions are relevant to the development of a Children's Advertising Code in Ireland.

Recommendations

The Combat Poverty Agency strongly supports the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland's intention to develop a separate children's advertising code, as it is necessary to protect children from undue pressure and exploitation.

1. Combat Poverty supports an absolute ban on advertising targeted on children as offering the most protection from the adverse consequences described in this submission.
2. Alternatively, restrictions on timing and content, based on best practice in other European countries, should be put in place. These could include:
 - A ban on advertising targeted on children under 12
 - A ban on toy advertising between 7am and 10pm
 - A ban on advertising during children's programmes
 - Advertisements must not mislead children about the size, quality or properties of the products
 - No advertisement should imply that buying a product will make parents or children superior to others and that not having it will make them inferior
 - All advertisements for toys, games or similar products must include a clear indication of their price
3. The Agency welcomes the Commission's aim to pursue both qualitative and quantitative research. It is recommended that this research be carried out in line with the Goal of the National Children's Strategy (2000) which states that "children will have a voice in matters that affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity".