Shoppers around the country say they are planning to spend an average of $854 for gifts this holiday season, up from $646 last year according to the 27th annual survey on holiday spending from the American Research Group, Inc. Of that amount, much will be spent on toys for the youngest members of our families. An online survey of 6,000 parents showed that the average family will spend $271 per child on those Christmas toys with almost 3 percent of those families spending more than $1,000 per child.

I just returned from a visit with my daughter and her family. In watching my grandson’s “channel” with him, I saw a ton of advertising that is designed to get kids asking for just the right things (and lots of things) for Christmas.

At Christmas, advertising directed towards the child becomes very persuasive — and advertising to children works. As a result of advertising, many children want and sometimes demand products. Many of these products may be too expensive, of poor quality, impractical and/or lacking in play value, and some are even health hazards. This is the time that parents can do much to help children understand the tactics of clever advertisers.

The most insidious culprit in the “buy now” cycle is television. Viewing television together and discussing the commercials can be more effective than many parents realize. Children are curious, they learn rapidly and they believe what their parents tell them. If comments are made about the commercials that parent and child are viewing together, these comments are likely to have more impact than the commercials themselves. This is especially true if the comments are made with explanations and the child is given an opportunity to express their opinion as well.

The age at which children develop the ability to tell the difference between TV commercials and programs varies from child to child. Researchers have found that children under 8 years of age generally have difficulty understanding that the commercials are designed to sell something. As a result, children are likely to think commercials are completely truthful and they are likely to want the products being
advertised. Discussions at this age should be simple: Do you like commercials? Who puts commercials on television? What is a commercial? Did the toy look as good in the store as it did on the commercial?

As a child progresses in understanding of advertising, he might suspect that advertisers try to make things look better than they really are, but he cannot tell exactly when or how this is being done. Parents can help by introducing more observation skills. They can point out when special lighting effects, close-up shots or camera angles are being used to make an item look bigger. A toy raft will look more exciting speeding down a real river in the commercial than floating around in the bathtub at home. Sound effects, such as a cheering crowd at a car race, can make a product more appealing. Also, help them notice music, cartoon characters, and catchy slogans and jingles.

Helping a child understand commercials will help him throughout his life.

Some commercials present good information and some do not. When a product or commercial is misleading, tell the child the reason why. By the same token, when the product is portrayed accurately, explain why. Encourage children to have a good look at advertising and what it presents so they will have a more realistic view of that special Christmas toy that they are looking for under the tree.

And as you are working with them to understand toy commercials, realize that these skills are transferrable when they are adults and are sorting through car commercials. You are teaching them life skills, so take time to help them understand advertising now.

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