

REAL AND PRETEND WORLDS

Children are bombarded with commercial messages and behaviors from cell phones, television, radio, magazines, other children, and even their parents.

Television is the primary source for young kids. In one hour, while watching a popular children's TV show, I saw 19 commercials. They were evenly divided between selling toys, food, and other merchandise.

How do we as parents teach our children they cannot have everything they see on TV and that much of it is delivered in a "pretend world?" Can we teach them to look at commercials more rationally? Can we even limit the number of advertisers that reach our children? And what type of message are these commercials conveying to our kids over the long term?

First, young children cannot readily distinguish between reality and fantasy. To a child television is real. The commercials they watch are simply extensions of the story like the play action toys they are trying to sell. But often, if the TV said it, it must be true. Our best bet appears to be helping our children determine what is real and what is not.

Try this. Get your children to watch two entirely different types of programs about animals—one a cartoon, the other a live show on animals in a real habitat. Children are exposed to animals at a very early age. They have a natural interest and love for them.

After they watch both types of shows take time to discuss the content on each of them. Point out that one shows real animals

and real behaviors. The action depicted happens in real life. Then, talk about the cartoon. Discuss the actions of the main characters and ask questions like; "Can dogs really talk or do you think a pony can fly?"

By discussing the two very different types of settings and behaviors, you plant the idea that not all programs are the same, and that not everything on television is true.

To do this you obviously need to be aware of what your children are watching, and discuss what they see. Point out the facts from fiction.

Public television offers commercial-free programming, but don't discount the commercial aspect of some of the programming found even here. There are entire segments of selling merchandise of Sesame Street characters, Doro, Barney, and countless others.

Children can be pretty persistent in getting their parents to buy what they see on TV. We need to watch which ones carry good behaviors and those that are sometimes too violent.

Spiderman and other hero figures are labeled as "good guys." They are good pretend characters, but certainly not roles models for children. You'll want to point out that toys often seem more attractive, glamorous, and better than real life.

Your daughter needs to know that she does not need to look like Barbie. If your child focuses on a particular toy, take him or her to a store and look at it. Does it look as good in the store as it did on television? In many cases it does not.

Children need to understand that it's the TV's business to make toys look wonderful and to make children want to buy them. There really isn't a Barbie with a Malibu condo, long blonde hair, a closet full of clothes, and a pink sports car. A question being seriously asked is whether this doll has something to do with the child's image of themselves as they grow older.

Advertising is a difficult concept to comprehend. It is easier to use the words real or not real. We can help our children become more rational viewers by helping them understand the nature of advertising by talking about what is real and what is pretend.

By discussing this with our kids, they will be able to determine, on their own, that not all toys are "totally awesome" and that not all cereals are "totally delicious." So let's help them sort through the decisions of what to buy or eat.

It's difficult to refuse to buy what has become a popular toy or a popular food. To be sure, kids have a way of manipulating us until we finally say yes. The point I am making is we can become good filters from which the child can better determine what to ask for in the first place. Providing this has a wonderful way of teaching them what is "real" and what is "pretend."

Sure, pretending can be good for children. Children acting out are using their minds to be creative and it goes a long way in helping them to stay engaged and learn much about life.

But it is not good for a child to live in a pretend world most of the day. Parents know all too well that this eventually comes to an end.