

# What are the most successful routes for advertising to children?

**While much advertising is aimed at a broad spectrum of children, it should be recognized that there are wide differences in cognitive and emotional development between younger and older children. Children pay more attention to adverts than adults, particularly when they include jingles, cartoons, humor, and elements borrowed from popular culture. This generation is Internet-savvy, and can appreciate interactive campaigns.**

While advertising is often targeted at 6- to 12-year-olds, there are wide differences in cognitive and emotional development between children across this age spectrum. For advertising communication to be comprehensible, the elements of the message must be modulated to fit the needs and skills of children at various developmental phases.

## Emotional needs

Research has shown that kids go through four basic stages of emotional needs. These overlap because different children progress at different rates.

The Nursery stage (up to 4 years) is characterized by a safe, cozy, warm, nurturing environment. Parental guidance is essential at this stage. Toward the end of this stage kids learn to shift their play style from playing side by side to sharing playtime activities with friends.

The Playground stage (ages 3–10) is where pleasure, excitement, exploration (with mom and dad) and discovery take place. It is also a time where kids become aware of advertising. Initially, when kids first understand that advertising is something that shows you things you can have, or ask mom to buy, they take everything at face value, but within six months they learn that sometimes advertising doesn't tell the truth.

The Street Corner stage (ages 9–12) is when kids start to develop a sense of identity and peer groups gain increasing influence. While children can adopt a rebellious stance at this point, it tends to be a safe stage, likely to be demonstrated by their choices in fashion and music.

The Underground stage (ages 13 or over) is about being different, and is rarely a place where adults are allowed to venture, although some brands can exist there.

## Cognitive development

When targeting children under 10 years old, messages need to be fairly direct, and time should be presented in a linear way. In the U.S., an ad was aired showing a schoolboy who acts as though it were the weekend on a weekday, because of his breakfast. The ad starts with the boy at school, then flashes back to show him breakfasting at home, and finishes with him back at school. More than one in five found the ad hard to understand. While the children could play back most elements of the story, they did not understand its progression. As a consequence only 6 percent got the message that you could now have a weekend breakfast taste during the week.

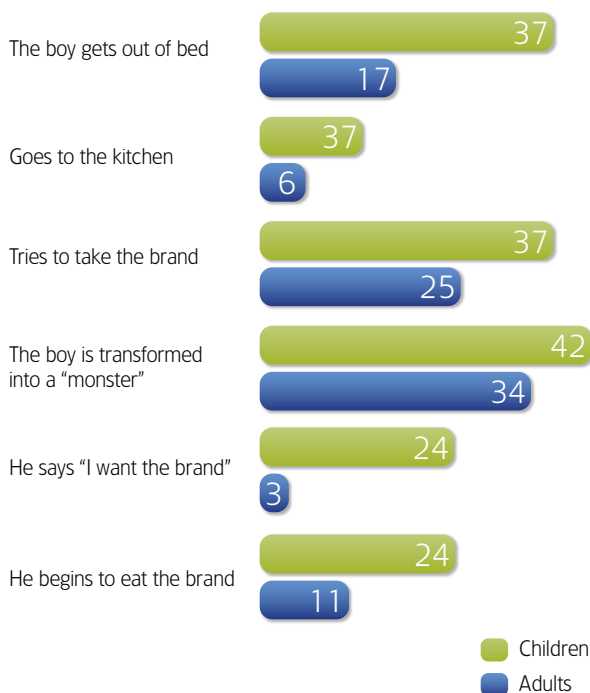
Under-10s prefer a happy story, one that is amusing, exciting or adventurous; a simple, complete story with a playful or imaginative mood. At the younger end of the spectrum, children enjoy slapstick comedy and simple verbal jokes.

Older children are better able to cope with more complex messages, and tend to prefer more intricate situations, with a realistic mood. As they grow older they are more likely to appreciate double entendres and complex lines, as well as cynical humor. For example, one German cereal brand introduced a campaign aiming to bring kids into the brand with a character who was designed to be a “friend” of the kids. The ads encouraged the children to become part of his world and his adventures. Six- to seven-year-old children had problems understanding the idea, older children did not.

### Children notice more

Children pay more attention to advertising. In general, advertising has three times the impact among kids as it does among adults. They also remember it for longer, and show greater appreciation of advertising. Similarly, they recall more detail, as the next example shows.

Kids recall advertising detail better than adults



This has implications for media planning and should be considered when making decisions about media weight and copy rotation.

Additionally, in countries where advertising is still relatively new, children can more readily assimilate it into their lives than their parents. Research in China suggests children understand advertising better than their mothers.

### Successful routes

We have seen a wide variety of advertising styles achieve success among children, in the context of our general findings about successful advertising. In particular see our Knowledge Point *What makes a great TV ad?* for our findings on the importance of an ad’s structure.

The use of jingles and slogans helps generate impact. In Mexico, a bubblegum brand launched a gum with a liquid centre. Four ads were developed and researched. The storylines were found to be hard to understand; as a consequence brand linkage and communication were weak. The variant name was not noticed, and if anything, the respondents associated the ad with the parent bubblegum brand. A completely new ad was created which gave a full description of the product, and integrated the brand name into a song that later became a ringtone. Branding and communication improved markedly, and the brand went on to a successful launch.

Some of the most impactful ads make use of established branding devices, which become the “hero” in an action story. Several of the most successful ads we have monitored feature the animated branding device saving the brand from a “baddy” so the children can then enjoy it.

Humorous ads can be very successful: over 80 percent of the most impactful ads involve humor. “Black” humor (with characters getting hurt) can be particularly popular among older children. One of the highest-scoring ads tested featured a granny being fed to lions — although this was never aired. An ad launching a confectionery brand showed the

sweets being used to make a little figure who then moves around and interacts with a pair of hands. Eventually, the figure gets annoyed with being played with and bites the hands. The ad was hugely impactful, achieving an Awareness Index of 25. Within eight weeks the brand achieved 80 percent aided brand awareness and 41 percent trial, despite severe distribution problems.

Another route that can be successful is to link your brand to aspects of popular culture. One ad that was developed for a U.K. confectionery brand targeted 8- to 15-year-olds using a popular song. It was highly impactful; ad awareness peaked at 81 percent. The ad conveyed its key message well, and claimed purchase rose from 5 percent to 22 percent. Through its use of the hit song, the brand was viewed as “cool”. However, it is also worth noting that when the ad ran for its third burst two years later, the song was no longer appreciated, and the ad suffered as a consequence.

Cartoons can be particularly effective; 52 percent of the most impactful kids’ ads use cartoons (compared with just 20 percent of the least impactful), and 34 percent of the most persuasive ads use cartoons (compared with 20 percent of the least persuasive). One brand’s launch advertising used 3-D animated characters and was somewhat darker and more mischievous in tone than most children’s ads. TV ad awareness peaked at over 60 percent, with 40 percent of recallers saying the ad made them want to ask their mom and dad to buy the product for them. Within weeks, over 15 percent of the target audience were claiming to eat the brand most weeks.

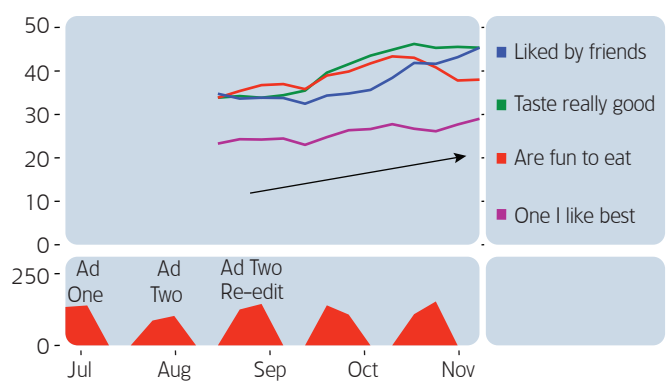
In terms of casting, it is worth noting that children see those two or three years older than themselves as role models.

**Get interactive**

In many parts of the world, today’s youth are Web natives; the Internet is as much a part of their lives as TV was in their parents’ youth. Many brands are capitalizing on this with fun, interactive Web sites. This interactivity can extend to main-stream advertising.

In the U.K., one brand used an interactive TV advertising campaign. The first ad in the campaign ended with the brand character in trouble. It prompted children to vote for their favorite out of a choice of endings shown on product packs. The follow-up ad showed part of the first ad as a reminder, then the ending that had achieved the most votes. The advertising was enjoyed and appreciated, and had a positive impact on brand metrics.

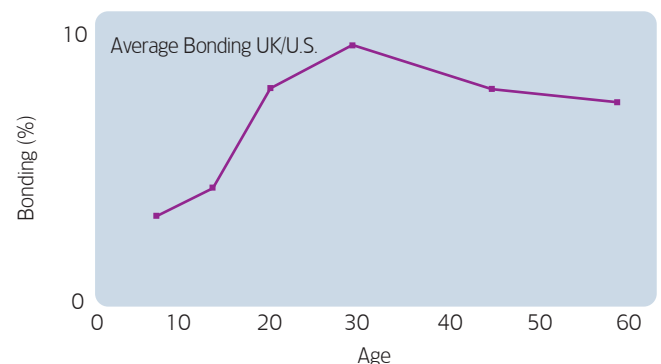
**Good impact on core image statements**



**Children do not have such strong brand relationships**

As might be expected, children tend to be in an earlier stage of their relationships with brands than adults are, as is shown by the average Bonding levels of different age groups for six categories of products and services (fast foods, soft drinks, chocolate bars, sports clothing, TV media and cereals). The graph indicates that the level of Bonding increases steadily till around age 30, then falls off slightly.

**Kids are less likely to bond to brands**

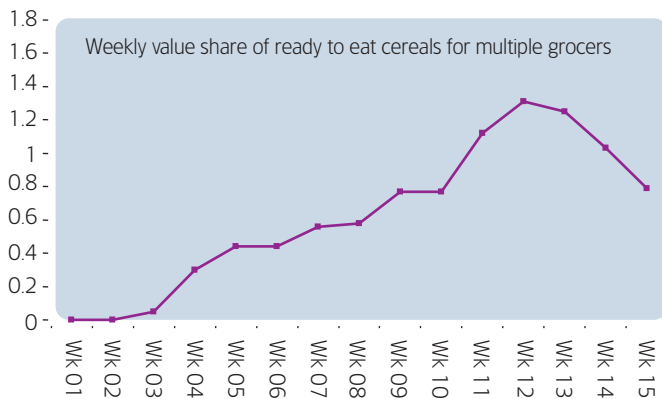


This lack of Bonding highlights the need for marketers to be particularly vigilant to ensure their brands stay relevant.

### The need for a strong product

As with adult brands, strong advertising cannot make up for a weak product. One brand was launched using well-known cartoon characters as the advertising vehicle. The ad was enjoyed, with two-thirds describing it as one of their favorites, and it generated a strong interest in trial. After three months, awareness had reached 73 percent. However, after a successful launch, trial levels soon dropped off. Questions to those that had tried the brand revealed that the product simply did not live up to the great advertising.

After a successful launch, share drops off



Knowledge Points are drawn from the Millward Brown Knowledge Bank, consisting of our databases of 80,000 brand reports and 40,000 ads, as well as 1,200 case studies, 900 conference papers and magazine articles, and 350 Learnings documents.

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