

## **Ad Decoder** (45 minutes)

### **Section**

Your Body, Your Life

### **Investigative Questions**

What techniques are used to “normalize” and glamorize a look to sell products to young people? How can media messages be analyzed and interpreted? How can media (including advertising) help shape perceptions of what girls and boys should look like, beginning at very young ages? How can these perceptions affect mental and physical health?

### **Description of Content**

Students take a quick oral quiz on television, advertising, and body image. Then they use an “Ad Decoder” (critical questions) to examine advertisements that are aimed at them. They also discuss how messages about body image can affect health.

Students are directed to the *BAM! Body and Mind*<sup>™</sup> Web site for more information on the effects of media on kids’ body image.

### **Relevant Standards**

This activity fulfills [science and health education standards](#).

### **Objectives**

Students will:

- Describe advertising techniques
- Analyze and interpret advertising aimed at them
- Describe/show how media can shape perceptions of how both boys and girls should look, and how this can affect both mental and physical health

### **Ideas and Behaviors Common Among Students**

This activity offers information from the literature on [ways your students may already think and act](#) with respect to body image and the media.

### **Materials**

- Ads from magazines that youth read—including sports and fashion magazines—that include pictures of people (you can provide the ads yourself or ask students to bring them in)
- Student Reproducible 1: *Ad Decoder*
- Student Reproducible 2: *Ad Decoder Data Sheet*

### **Safety**

Observe normal classroom safety procedures for this module.

## Teacher Background

According to Nielsen Media Research, a typical child in the United States today watches more than 19 hours of television a week. According to the non-profit organization National Institute on Media and the Family, the average American child plays computer or video games for seven hours each week. The American Academy of Pediatrics estimates that kids see 40,000 television commercials each year, and they also are exposed to ads on the Internet, in magazines, on billboards, in newspapers, on the radio, and all around them.

Media conveys powerful messages—about what is “cool” to wear, what music to listen to, which TV shows to watch. It also sends powerful messages about how people are supposed to look.

The problem is that many of the images children see in the media bear little relationship to real life. According to the National Eating Disorders Association, while the average woman is 5’4” tall and weighs 140 pounds, the average model is 5’11” and weighs 117 pounds. In addition, media techniques ranging from airbrushing to the use of “body doubles” create photographs that are visually arresting, but simply no reflection of reality.

Unrealistic body image portrayed in the media, and even by forms of entertainment such as toys, may affect both mental and physical health. Seeing thin female and muscular male models can affect kids’ thoughts about their own bodies, and may cause confusion, anxiety, insecurity, anger, or depression, especially for those who already have concerns about their body or place great importance on their appearance. Some kids may risk their physical health through unhealthy dieting or excessive physical activity. Some may begin smoking to control their appetite or develop eating disorders. Some may engage in unhealthy weight training, or use anabolic steroids or dietary supplements, for muscle growth.

Just as children need to learn how to be critical of the things they read, they also need to know how to do the same with pictures, video, and sound. *MediaSharp*<sup>SM</sup>, a media literacy education guide from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([www.cdc.gov/tobacco/mediashrp.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/mediashrp.htm)) outlines seven key questions that are critical to understanding media messages:

- **Who is communicating and why?** Every message is communicated for a reason—to entertain, inform, and/or persuade. However, the basic motive behind most media programs is to profit through the sale of advertising space and sponsorships.
- **Who owns, profits from, and pays for media messages?** Media messages are owned. They are designed to yield results, provide profits, and pay for themselves. Both news and entertainment programming try to increase listenership or viewership to attract advertising dollars. Movies also seek to

increase box-office receipts. Understanding the profit motive is key to analyzing media messages.

- **How are media messages communicated?** Every message is communicated through sound, video, text, and/or photography. Messages are enhanced through camera angles, special effects, editing, and/or music. Analyzing how these features are used in any given message is critical to understanding how it attempts to persuade, entertain, or inform.
- **Who receives media messages and what sense is made of them?** Messages are filtered through the “interpretive screens” of our beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors. Identifying the target audience for a given message and knowing its “filters” and the way in which it interprets media messages help make you media sharp!
- **What are the intended or underlying purposes and whose point of view is behind the message?** Behind every message is a purpose and point of view. The advertiser’s purpose is more direct than the program producer’s, though both may seek to entertain us. Understanding their purposes and knowing WHOSE point of view is being expressed and WHY is critical to being media sharp.
- **What is NOT being said and why?** Because messages are limited in both time and purpose, rarely are all the details provided. Identifying the issues, topics, and perspectives that are NOT included can often reveal a great deal about the purposes of media messages. In fact, this may be the most significant question that can uncover answers to other questions.
- **Is there consistency both within and across media?** Do the political slant, tone, local/national/international perspective, and depth of coverage change across media or messages? Because media messages tell only part of the story and different media have unique production features, it helps to evaluate multiple messages on the same issue. This allows you to identify multiple points of view, some of which may be missing in any single message or medium. This is typically referred to as the “multi-source rule.”

This activity will help students in your class see how media helps shape their image of a “perfect” body, and how this can affect their health. They will learn how to ask questions and think about the media messages they see and hear.

### **Procedure**

*Engagement* (5 minutes)

1. Tell students you are giving them a quick quiz on television and advertising. Read each question and the four possible answers. Then ask students to raise their hands to indicate which answer they think is correct. Have your students

keep track of how many questions they answered correctly. After the quiz, ask students if they were surprised by any of the answers.

### Quiz

- Q: If you watch TV for four hours straight (no breaks, no leaving to grab a snack), approximately how many ads would you see?
- A: 20
  - B: 50
  - C: 100 (RIGHT ANSWER)
  - D: 500
- Q: The average amount of time per week that American kids ages 2 to 17 spend watching television is...
- A: 7 hours
  - B: 10 hours
  - C: 12 hours
  - D: 19 hours (RIGHT ANSWER)
- Q: Which of the following are tactics used in the media to make people appear more perfect than they are in real life?
- A: Body doubles
  - B: Airbrushing and computer graphics
  - C: Professional make-up artists
  - D: All of the above (RIGHT ANSWER)
- Q: There is no doubt that most fashion models are thin. If an average woman is 5 feet 4 inches tall and weighs 140 pounds, what is the average height and weight of a model?
- A: 5 feet 4 inches tall, 130 pounds
  - B: 5 feet 6 inches tall, 130 pounds
  - C: 5 feet 11 inches tall, 117 pounds (RIGHT ANSWER)
  - D: 5 feet 11 inches tall, 108 pounds

### *Exploration* (20 minutes)

1. Tell students that experts estimate that kids see 40,000 television commercials each year, plus all of the ones that they see on the Internet, in magazines, on billboards, in newspapers, on the radio, and in other places. Advertisers call each time someone sees or hears an ad an “ad impression.” When advertisers are deciding which magazines, TV shows, radio shows, and Internet sites they will place their ads in, they are trying to get the highest number of ad impressions among the people who are most likely to buy their product. Ads are meant to sell

- a product. Ad makers want to make the product appeal to you. They do this in many ways. As they sell products, they also influence what people think is desirable, cool, and up-to-date.
2. Tell students that they are going to practice decoding ads. Once they have learned how to look at ads in this critical way, they will know how to read the messages that the ads contain. Divide students into groups of 4.
  3. Give each group two ads, an *Ad Decoder* fact sheet (Student Reproducible 1) and two *Ad Decoder Data Sheets* (Student Reproducible 2). Review the *Ad Decoder* fact sheet with students to be sure they understand the categories described.
  4. Tell students that first they will fill in the top part of the *Ad Decoder Data Sheet* with the description of the ad. Then they should discuss in their small group which of the Decoder Keys are present in that ad. Finally, they should discuss in their group and then write down exactly the ways in which this ad might be conveying misleading messages about body image and what is “normal” or “desirable,” or implying that purchasing a product will help them feel better about themselves. You then might want to do one of the ads you have brought in with the students so they can see how the process of decoding and analyzing an ad works.

*Explanation and Elaboration* (20 minutes)

1. After students have filled in their *Ad Decoder Data Sheets*, have them present their analyses to the class. What are the messages they saw in the ads? How effective do they think these messages are in selling products to young people their age? How might misleading messages affect mental health? (Possible answers include: confusion, stress, insecurity, anger, or depression.) How might they affect physical health? (Possible answers include: unhealthy dieting, excessive physical activity, smoking, eating disorders, unhealthy weight training, or using steroids or dietary supplements for muscle growth.) Incorporate relevant *MediaSharp*<sup>SM</sup> questions into the discussion (see Teacher Background).
2. Then have them discuss TV ads that might be better understood with the Ad Decoder. Remember that a TV ad’s impact depends not only on the copy and static visual, but also sound and movement.

*Evaluation* (Homework assignment – 30 to 60 minutes, depending on the program students watch)

1. Have students choose an ad on TV or in a favorite publication and analyze it using the techniques they have learned in this lesson. Use the following scoring rubric to evaluate students’ ad analysis:

**Performance Descriptors**

<b>Student Name:</b>		
<b>Performance Descriptor</b>	<b>Scoring Criteria</b>	<b>Teacher Score</b>
<b>Description</b> (up to 10 points)	Students describe the ad completely, including both visuals and words—plus sound if it is a radio or TV ad.	
<b>Identification of Techniques Used in the Ad</b> (up to 20 points)	Students correctly identify one or more ad decoder keys used in the ad.	
<b>Analysis</b> (up to 20 points)	Students discuss in detail how the ad might be misleading for people their age, and how this might affect mental and physical health.	
		<b>Total Points:</b>

2. Ask students whether this activity has made them more critical viewers of the ads they see each day. In what ways?
3. Alternatively, have students work in groups to create their own persuasive ads using these same ad decoder techniques, but encourage them to advertise something positive—eating right, participating in physical activity regularly, not bullying other students, even doing homework. Have the group choose the positive message they want to promote after they have discussed what they think is most important for their age group. When the group presents their ad to the class, ask them first to describe which ad decoder techniques they are using, then to explain the elements of the ad. What visual images did they choose to include? Why? What words did they choose to include? Why? Encourage students to be as creative as possible.

Student-Produced Ads Scoring Rubric		
Students in Group: 1 2 3 4		Total Points:
Performance Descriptor	Scoring Criteria	Teacher Score
Use of Ad Decoder Techniques (20 points)	Ad clearly uses one or more ad decoder techniques. Students identify the techniques they have used in their presentation.	
Elements of the Ad (20 points)	Elements of the ad, both visuals and words, are chosen deliberately and carefully. Students can explain clearly why they chose the images and words they did.	
Creativity (10 points)	Ad shows creativity and originality.	

### Extension

1. Send students to the *BAM!* Web site at [www.bam.gov](http://www.bam.gov). Look at the Ad Decoder on the site at [www.bam.gov/sub\\_yourlife/yourlife\\_addecoder\\_game.html](http://www.bam.gov/sub_yourlife/yourlife_addecoder_game.html). Then have students discuss how the ads they brought in and decoded were similar or different from the ads they saw on the site.
2. The *MediaSharp*<sup>SM</sup> (see Teacher Background) questions provide a way to look at messages from a wide range of media—not just advertising. Have students bring in a story from a magazine designed to appeal to people their age. In small groups, have students review the seven *MediaSharp*<sup>SM</sup> questions as they relate to their article.

### Web Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

CDC *BAM! Body and Mind*<sup>TM</sup>: [www.cdc.gov/bam](http://www.cdc.gov/bam) or [www.bam.gov](http://www.bam.gov)

*BAM! Body and Mind* is brought to you by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). *BAM!* was created to answer kids' questions on health issues

and recommend ways to make their bodies and minds healthier, stronger, and safer. *BAM!* also serves as an aid to teachers, providing them with interactive activities to support their health and science curriculums that are educational and fun.

CDC *Media Sharp*<sup>SM</sup>: [www.cdc.gov/tobacco/mediashrp.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/mediashrp.htm)

*Media Sharp*<sup>SM</sup> is an important tool to help middle- and high- school youth evaluate persuasive messages about tobacco and alcohol and make healthy, life-saving choices. CDC's *Media Sharp*<sup>SM</sup> kit includes an entertaining 7-minute video and an easy-to-follow teacher's guide loaded with activities, handouts, and discussion topics.

CDC Division of Adolescent and School Health (DASH)

Healthy Schools, Healthy Youth: [www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/index.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/index.htm)

This site provides descriptions of DASH's initiatives to prevent the most serious health risk behaviors among children, adolescents, and young adults. You can find information on specific health topics that affect youth, data and statistics, and details on school health programs.

CDC VERB<sup>TM</sup> Youth Media Campaign: [www.cdc.gov/verb](http://www.cdc.gov/verb)

This site includes materials for kids and adults associated with the VERB<sup>TM</sup> campaign, which encourages young people ages 9–13 years to be physically active every day. You can also find research and statistics on youth, physical activity, media, and the campaign itself.

VERB<sup>TM</sup> Youth Web Site: [www.VERBnow.com](http://www.VERBnow.com)

This Web site includes resources and information to make regular physical activity “cool” for tweens and a fun thing to do. For example, students can enter their zip code and the sport they want to play and the site will provide them with a list of places they can play.

VERB<sup>TM</sup> Parent Web Site: [www.VERBparents.com](http://www.VERBparents.com)

This Web site aims to raise awareness and provide long-term strategies to help parents of kids ages 9–13 in their efforts to improve their family's physical activity and nutrition habits.

American Academy of Pediatrics: [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)

Television, Advertising, and Children: [www.aap.org/healthtopics/mediause.cfm](http://www.aap.org/healthtopics/mediause.cfm)

A comprehensive overview about the impact of media on children, designed for parents. Sections focus on the rating system for films, Internet use, and guidelines for television viewing.

Understanding the Impact of Media on Children and Teens:

[www.aap.org/family/mediainpact.htm](http://www.aap.org/family/mediainpact.htm)

A short, research-based fact sheet on the impact of media. The guide includes specific activities for parents to use with their children.

#### Cable in the Classroom

Links to Media Literacy Organizations:

[www.ciconline.com/Enrichment/MediaLinks/default.htm](http://www.ciconline.com/Enrichment/MediaLinks/default.htm)

This site provides a comprehensive list of media literacy organizations that offer resources, research, and background information on media literacy, including tips for teachers, parents, and caregivers.

KidsHealth: [www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org)

Kids and Eating Disorders:

[www.kidshealth.org/kid/health\\_problems/learning\\_problem/eatdisorder.html](http://www.kidshealth.org/kid/health_problems/learning_problem/eatdisorder.html)

A simple explanation of eating disorders written at a level that elementary students can understand.

I'm Growing Up – But Am I Normal?

[www.kidshealth.org/kid/grow/body\\_stuff/growing\\_up\\_normal.html](http://www.kidshealth.org/kid/grow/body_stuff/growing_up_normal.html)

A brief explanation for kids that all people are different. This would be helpful for students who are worried that they are too short or too tall, too heavy or too thin.

MediaScope: [www.mediascope.org/index.htm](http://www.mediascope.org/index.htm)

Body Image and Advertising: [www.mediascope.org/pubs/ibriefs/bia.htm](http://www.mediascope.org/pubs/ibriefs/bia.htm)

A one-page issue brief including statistics on advertising and its impact on both boys' and girls' body image.

Muscle Madness: The Ugly Connection between Body Image and Anabolic Steroid Use: [www.mediascope.org/pubs/ibriefs/mmad.htm](http://www.mediascope.org/pubs/ibriefs/mmad.htm)

A one-page issue brief including statistics on men's and boys' body image and the link to steroid use.

PBS Kids: [www.pbskids.org](http://www.pbskids.org)

PBS Kids Go! Don't Buy It: Get Media Smart!:

[www.pbskids.org/dontbuyit/advertisingtricks/](http://www.pbskids.org/dontbuyit/advertisingtricks/)

This guide helps young people explore the effects of media in their lives, and stimulates family discussion on media. Talking points and activities help children and their families understand differences between media entertainment and real-life values.

### **Text Correlations**

Glencoe *Science Probe I*, pages 202-203

Glencoe *Teen Health, Course 1*, page 103, "False or Misleading Claims"

Glencoe *Teen Health, Course 2*, Chapter 2: Taking Responsibility for Your Health; page 110, "Positive Body Image"

Glencoe *Teen Health, Course 3*, Chapter 10: Your Body Image

### **Relevant Standards**

*National Science Education Standards*

Content Standard F, Grades 5-8: Science in Personal and Social Perspectives

Technology influences society through its products and processes. Technology influences the quality of life and the ways people act and interact. Technological changes are often accompanied by social, political, and economic changes that can be beneficial or detrimental to individuals and to society. Social needs, attitudes, and values influence the direction of technological development.

*Benchmarks for Science Literacy*

Chapter 6, Benchmark A, Grades 6-8, Ideas 1,2, 4-6 – Human Identity

However much people may vary in appearance and behavior, the variations are minor when compared with the internal similarity of all human beings. As great as cultural differences among groups of people seem to be, it is their languages, technologies, and arts that distinguish human beings from other species. The theme of same/different is at the core of distinguishing what is human. Often individuals are very aware of differences between themselves and their family members, between family members and neighbors, between neighbors and foreigners, etc.

At this level, students are studying the details of animal digestion, respiration, and reproduction, and so, in learning how human beings carry out these same functions, they can understand some of the commonalities between human beings and other animals. Middle-school students are interested in machines that support or enhance life functions, so they should also look at ways in which human beings use various machines to improve speed, mobility, strength, hearing, seeing, etc. Whenever students learn something about

the ways that technology helps human beings, they also learn something about human capabilities and limitations.

By the end of the 8th grade, students should know that:

- Like other animals, human beings have body systems for obtaining and providing energy, defense, reproduction, and the coordination of body functions.
- Human beings have many similarities and differences. The similarities make it possible for human beings to reproduce and to donate blood and organs to one another throughout the world. Their differences enable them to create diverse social and cultural arrangements and to solve problems in a variety of ways.
- Specialized roles of individuals within other species are genetically programmed, whereas human beings are able to invent and modify a wider range of social behavior.
- Human beings use technology to match or excel many of the abilities of other species. Technology has helped people with disabilities survive and live more conventional lives.
- Technologies having to do with food production, sanitation, and disease prevention have dramatically changed how people live and work and have resulted in rapid increases in the human population.

#### Chapter 6, Benchmark B, Grades 6-8, Idea 5 – Learning

Most students are intrigued to learn about rites of passage in different cultures and compare them to their own.

- Various body changes occur as adults age. Muscles and joints become less flexible, bones and muscles lose mass, energy levels diminish, and the senses become less acute. Women stop releasing eggs and hence can no longer reproduce. The length and quality of human life are influenced by many factors, including sanitation, diet, medical care, sex, genes, environmental conditions, and personal health behaviors.

#### Chapter 7, Benchmark D, Grades 6-8, Idea 1 – Social Trade-Offs

There are tradeoffs that each person must consider in making choices—about personal popularity, health, family relations, and education, for example—that often have life-long consequences.

## *National Health Education Standards*

### Standard 1

Students will comprehend concepts related to health promotion and disease prevention.

Relevant performance indicators for grades 5-8:

- Describe the interrelationship of mental, emotional, social and physical health during adolescence.
- Analyze how environment and personal health are interrelated.

### Standard 2

Students will demonstrate the ability to access valid health information and health-promoting products and services.

Relevant performance indicators for grades 5-8:

- Analyze how media influences the selection of health information and products.

### Standard 4

Students will analyze the influence of culture, media, technology and other factors on health.

Relevant performance indicators for grades 5-8:

- Describe the influence of cultural beliefs on health behaviors and the use of health services.
- Analyze how messages from media and other sources influence health behaviors.
- Analyze the influence of technology on personal and family health.
- Analyze how information from peers influences health.

### **Ideas and Behaviors Common Among Students**

- When asked about their experiences and perceptions of playing with Barbie, preteen girls say that they enjoy playing with her, but described her body as “perfect,” “so skinny,” and “with perfect blue eyes” (Kuther & MacDonald, 2004).
- When asked to react to drawings and photographs, females were most likely to describe body shapes with exaggerated anatomical traits—similar to Barbie’s—as the most beautiful (Magro, 1997).
- Among 9-14 year old children in a large research study, the strongest influence on whether they had concerns about their weight was the media, followed by parents and peers. In addition, those making a strong effort to look like same-sex figures

in the media were more likely than their peers to develop weight concerns and become constant dieters (Field et al., 2001).

- In a study on media influence and body image of both adolescent boys and girls, girls said they were more concerned about their body size and shape and adopted more strategies to decrease weight and restrict eating practices, while boys were more concerned about muscle tone and adopted more strategies to increase weight (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001).
- When asked about why they exercise, 9-16 year olds were likely to say that their physical activity was an “effort to look like figures in the media.” The media’s influence on adolescent exercise was stronger among older boys and girls than younger ones (Taveras et al., 2004).
- Many studies have shown that the amount of television, movies, and music videos both children and adolescents watch is related to an increased desire to be thin, dissatisfaction with their own appearance, and the onset of eating disorder symptoms (Stice et al., 1994; Harrison, 2000; Hargreaves, 2002; Presnell, Bearman, & Stice, 2004).
- In a sample of 12-13 year old boys, magazines and television appeared to have a negative effect on many boys’ body image, making them feel too skinny or that they need to exercise more. After viewing these media, boys said comments such as “I need to put on weight” and “I think I have a lot of work to do” (Ricciardelli, McCabe, & Banfield, 2000).
- Even after watching just 30 minutes of television programming and advertising, females reported a more negative perception of the shape of their body (Myers & Biocca, 1992).
- Studies have shown that over time the media’s and toys’ portrayal of the ideal male body type has become more muscular, while body dissatisfaction and anabolic steroid use among adolescent males have increased (Labre, 2002).

## References

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Student Reproducible 1:

## Ad Decoder

Designing ads is a complicated business. Everything in an ad is designed to promote a product. Advertising agencies employ creative directors, writers, photographers, and set and costume designers as well as the models. They hire researchers to find out what their target audience likes and dislikes. They test their ads with groups of people who make up the audience to which they are trying to sell. An advertising campaign can cost millions of dollars, so advertisers want to be sure their message gets across.

Here are some techniques that advertisers use.

### DECODER KEYS

**Celebrity Factor.** “Celebrity endorsements” are used to promote some products. If an advertiser wants to target a specific audience, they will choose a celebrity who is popular with that audience. What’s important here is that the celebrity gets paid for the endorsement, and also gets media exposure in the ad. Maybe the celebrity loves the product. Or, maybe not.

**Unreal Ideals.** Today’s female fashion models are much taller and much thinner than the average woman. While the average woman is 5 feet 4 inches tall and weighs 140 pounds, the average model is 5 feet 11 inches and weighs 117 pounds. Models only look the way they do in pictures after make-up artists, hairstylists, and fashion experts help them. These ads can make girls feel like they should be super-skinny. Boys get this feeling, too. Video games and some ads have heroes who look more muscular than any real person could be. Ads for many things show extremely attractive young men and women using the product. The idea they are selling is if you wear this clothing brand, or use this shampoo, or drink this soft drink, you’ll be as attractive and popular as the people in the ad.

**Creating Want From Your Worries.** Teens and young people often worry about how they look, whether their breath is fresh, whether their skin is going to break out. People who make ads and sell beauty magazines know teens will spend money to feel better about themselves. So they create ads that suggest that this toothpaste...or this skin wash...or this hair gel...will solve all your problems.

Take a look at your ad. Are there any of these misleading messages in the ad? How might the ad mislead kids your age? Why do you think the person who created the ad might want to send these misleading messages? What does the ad NOT tell you?

Student Reproducible 2:

## Ad Decoder Data Sheet

Describe the visual: \_\_\_\_\_

What's the headline? \_\_\_\_\_

Are there any other words in the ad? Write them down here.  
\_\_\_\_\_

### DECODE THIS AD:

Which decoder key is at work in this ad? There may be more than one. How strong is the message? Circle the decoder keys you think apply. Then, rate how strong you think that key is.

#### Celebrity Factor

Person Next Door

Totally Famous Celebrity

1

2

3

4

5

#### Unreal Ideals

Person Next Door

Impossibly Perfect

1

2

3

4

5

#### Creating Wants From Worries

On a "Who Cares?" Topic

On a Topic Kids My Age Really Care About

1

2

3

4

5

Talk in your group about what this ad promises that might not be true. Write a brief description of how the ad may mislead kids here: