

Commercial Alert
1611 Connecticut Ave. NW Suite #3A
Washington, DC 20009
202.296.2787 Phone C 202.833.2406 Fax
www.essential.org/alert C alert@essential.org

March 22, 2000

Pat Mitchell
President and Chief Executive Officer
Public Broadcasting Service
1320 Braddock Place
Alexandria, VA 22314
via telecopier (703) 739-7500

RE: Taking Teletubbies Off the Air

Dear Ms. Mitchell:

Last year, the Burger King Corp. executed a licensing agreement with the itsy bitsy Entertainment Co. to promote Teletubbies, a Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) television series for toddlers. According to news accounts, the McDonald's Corp. will soon conduct a similar promotion.

McDonalds and Burger King produce food laden with excess calories, fat and sodium, such as hamburgers, french fries and soda pop. When PBS allows Teletubbies -- one of its "Ready to Learn" programs for preschoolers -- to partner with these companies, it is helping to market junk food to very young children.

According to Burger King, this partnership was a magnificent success. "Teletubbies was a great promo partner," says Cindy Syracuse, Burger King's manager for youth and family marketing.¹

That is good news for Burger King. It is not good news for the toddlers who are manipulated into eating unhealthy food. Childhood obesity has become a major problem in the United States. The *Journal of the American Medical Association* recently reported that the "United States has experienced alarming increases in obesity among children and adolescents."² A report from the American Academy of Pediatrics notes that "[I]ncreased television use is documented to be a significant factor leading to obesity."¹

The AAP report also states that increased TV viewing may lead to decreased achievement in school. It observes that "[T]ime spent with media often displaces involvement in creative, active, or social pursuits." By marketing Teletubbies as educational for children as young as one, PBS is leading parents to believe, mistakenly, that watching TV is good for babies. In fact, the AAP recommends that children under two should not watch TV at all. According to the AAP,

Pediatricians should urge parents to avoid television viewing for children under the age of 2 years....research on early brain development shows that babies and toddlers have a critical need

for direct interactions with parents and other significant care givers (eg, child care providers) for healthy brain growth and the development of appropriate social, emotional, and cognitive skills. Therefore, exposing such young children to television programs should be discouraged.²

Many parents trust PBS to provide high-quality educational programming. But Teletubbies was created for our youngest children, for whom watching TV provides no known benefits and may cause harm.³ PBS is abusing parents' trust by encouraging children under two to become viewers. This is a bonanza for TV advertisers. "If you own this child at an early age, you can own this child for years to come," explained Mike Searles, then-president of Kids-R-Us, a major children's clothing store. "Companies are saying, 'Hey, I want to own the kid younger and younger.'" It is troubling in the extreme that PBS would assist advertisers in this exploitation.

Teletubbies appears to be a lucrative investment for PBS. But the cost -- to children and to PBS -- is too high. By continuing to broadcast Teletubbies in light of its partnership with the fast food industry and the AAP's recommendation to keep young children away from TV, PBS is compromising its educational mission, and violating the public trust. If PBS cares about the health and well-being of American children, it should take Teletubbies off the air immediately. We urge you to do so.

Sincerely,

William R. Beardslee, MD, Chairman of the Department of Psychiatry, Children's Hospital;
Gardner Monks Professor of Child Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School

Thomas J. Cottle, PhD, Professor of Education, Boston University

Leon Eisenberg, MD, Presley Professor of Social Medicine Emeritus, Harvard Medical School

Roy Fox, Associate Professor of English Education & Literature, U. of Missouri-Columbia;
author, *Harvesting Minds*

George Gerbner, President and Founder, Cultural Environment Movement; Dean Emeritus,
Annenberg School of Communication

Michael F. Jacobson, co-author, *Marketing Madness*

Allen Kanner, PhD, Associate Faculty, Wright Institute

Jean Kilbourne, author, *Deadly Persuasion*

Diane Levin, PhD, Professor of Education, Wheelock College; author, *Remote Control
Childhood*

Jane Levine, Co-founder, Kids Can Make A Difference

Susan Linn, EdD, Associate Director, Media Center of the Judge Baker Children's Center

Robert McChesney, Research Associate Professor, U. of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; author,
Rich Media, Poor Democracy

Jim Metrock, President, Obligation, Inc.

Mark Crispin Miller, Professor of Media Ecology, New York University

Alvin Poussaint, MD, Director, Media Center of the Judge Baker Children's Center

Gary Ruskin, Director, Commercial Alert

Juliet Schor, Senior Lecturer on Women's Studies, Harvard University; author, *The Overspent
American*

Frank Vespe, Executive Director, TV-Free America

¹ Louise Kramer, "McD's Steals Another Toy from BK." *Advertising Age*, November 15, 1999.

See also “Burger King Restaurants Teletubbies Promotion a Runaway Hit.” *Business Wire*, June 4, 1999.

² Thomas N. Robinson, “Reducing Children's Television Viewing to Prevent Obesity.” *Journal of the American Medical Association*, October 27, 1999, Vol. 282 No. 16.

¹ Marjorie Hogan et al, “Media Education.” *Pediatrics*, August, 1999.

² Marjorie Hogan et al, “Media Education.” *Pediatrics*, August, 1999.

³ Susan E. Linn and Alvin F. Poussaint, “The Trouble with Teletubbies.” *The American Prospect*, May-June, 1999.