

Commentary

# Benefits and Barriers of a Social Marketing Campaign Based on the Example of the Child Helpline



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## ABSTRACT

**The Estonian child helpline service launched in 2009 uses a free nationwide 24h Child Helpline phone number. The purpose of the service is to enable everyone to report on children in need, forward the information to specialists and, if necessary, get primary social counselling and crisis counselling for children and other people. The service is provided in accordance with the Estonian Child Protection Act that prescribes that all citizens are required to immediately notify the social services, police or other assistance-providing authorities about children in need of protection or assistance. This article is based on studies conducted between 2013 and 2015. In the course of the research, data were collected for increasing the effectiveness of the hotline's communication campaigns. In addition to the general objective of the article, the data collected includes quantitative research mixed with qualitative data that helps to understand the factors that encourage and inhibit the use of the hotline service. The focus is on indicators that illustrate the effectiveness of the diffusion of innovation, and special attention is paid to the results that highlight risk, the existence of mental barriers and trust. Finally, the study analyses the weaknesses of past hotline campaigns and makes some suggestions for future.**

## INTRODUCTION

Pursuant to the valid Child Protection Act of Estonia, everybody should report children in need to specialists with the competency to provide primary help, protection and counselling. Thus, every citizen should know how to fulfil her or his obligations. The available Child Helpline (CH) service is a major option designed for that purpose. Naturally, it would be best if nobody had to use the helpline (i.e. there were no children needing help), but unfortunately, this is an unrealistic expectation. Therefore, it is important to raise the entire population's awareness of

the helpline service to the maximum level, in order to ensure that everyone is ready to use the service and knows the assigned number. It should be taken into account that the need to report on children in need of help may arise suddenly in ambivalent and unfamiliar situations, when recalling and retrieving information may be difficult. In addition, moral dilemmas may also arise due to the sensitivity of the subject.

Various information campaigns have been conducted to raise awareness among the citizenry, and studies have been conducted to measure the efficiency of these

campaigns. During our studies, data have been collected with the purpose of improving communication, increasing the effectiveness of the message, and ensuring awareness of the phone number.

Our article is based on the analysis of studies conducted between 2013 and 2015. The objective was to map the indicators reflecting the trends in order to provide an assessment of the current situation related to the awareness of the service, the attitude toward it and readiness to use it, as well as to identify the factors supporting and hindering the use of the helpline service.

Various advertising languages have been used over the years, which have tried to promote the idea of helping children by provoking tears, shocking people or visualising the situation. Despite the amounts of money spent on advertising, the helpline number is still difficult to recall, and children do not know why they should call the helpline, and over time, people have become increasingly afraid of the problems that might arise later for the informer or the child in trouble. Thus, it can be said that the advertisers have yet to achieve their objectives.

This article reports on the combined studies (focus groups, as well as representative questionnaires) that were conducted in two sequential years, which we believe, provide a good overview of the reactions provoked in children by different advertising languages and thereby, enable this information to be viewed in a broader theoretical context.

The results of the analysis can be used to improve awareness of the CH service and to formulate and design similar public service announcement campaigns in the future.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

‘Social marketing’ is a process designed for those working to create social change that will improve the lives of others, or society in general. It is not a theory, but a practical approach to

follow in order to create and manage the needed social change. Social marketing is defined as the application of commercial marketing and communication principles to public initiatives/programs in order to achieve social goals through **behavior change**. The mission of social marketing programs is to benefit the consumer and/or society, not the host organization. (Sutton 1999: 1; emphasis in the original)

That is, social marketing uses techniques and tactical tools similar to commercial marketing, but often with a different strategy. A CH campaign relies on the so-called ‘marketing mix’, where to the 4P (Product, Place, Price, Promotion) marketing strategy a fifth category is added – P as Politics (McCarthy 1960: 17) or Policy. The fifth P is important because ‘[s]ocial marketing programs can do well in motivating individual behavior change, but that is difficult to sustain unless the environment they’re in supports that change for the long run’ (Weinreich s.a.).

There are several theoretical models that are identified and applied in social marketing, depending on which types of models are most appropriate for which types of social problems in which kinds of situations (Lefebvre 2001). In the case of CH marketing, the 4 P-s are defined as follows:

**Product – the CH service.** In case of the CH, the product is an intangible service. As such, its concept is more complicated than that of a tangible product, since it is a complex value offer starting with the phone number and then extending to the trained counsellors and subsequent support services, depending on the complexity of the problem.

**Place – the usage of a certain phone number in any possible or available circumstance.** It is important to ensure the availability of the service and to develop an understanding through communication that the expected behaviour is available in

a temporal, spatial as well as environmental sense, i.e. the solution is as close as the closest phone.

**Price/Perceived Cost – overcoming the mental barriers as non-monetary price.**

In social marketing, the price is something that a person should pay to benefit personally or socially. It could be paid in money or, for example, in time, effort, a change of lifestyle or habits, or a perceived risk (Kotler et al. 1989, Weinreich 1999, Kotler et al. 2002). In this case, we are speaking of a non-monetary price, because the CH service is free for the caller. At the same time, the perceived price of the service poses a certain risk – the caller is sharing her or his privacy, sensitive personal data or other personal information with an unfamiliar respondent. Price formation is a major part of the marketing mix – if the price (in this case, the risk of sharing sensitive data) is perceived as too high, the expected behaviour will not follow.

**Promotion – the CH campaign and other activities to achieve a behavioural change.** In social marketing, promotion and communication is aimed mainly at convincing and impacting, with the objective of changing attitudes and behaviour. This requires attracting the attention of the audience, in this case of both adults and children. This goal makes the task much more complicated as the target groups are completely different.

**Policy – the regulations in place.**

The Child Protection Act is valid in Estonia and refers directly to the need to call the CH:

- (1) All persons who have knowledge of a child in need of assistance are required to notify of the child in need of assistance.
- (2) A child in need of assistance must be immediately notified of to the local government or to child helpline service 116 111.<sup>1</sup>

1 Child Protection Act §27, <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/520122017002/consolide>.

In this article, we apply the diffusion of innovations theory (DOI) to analyse the research data and evaluate the effectiveness of the CH campaign (Lefebvre 2001). Developed by Everett M. Rogers in 1962 (Rogers 1962), the DOI originated in communications research

to explain how, over time, an idea or product gains momentum and diffuses (or spreads) through a specific population or social system. The result of this diffusion is that people, as part of a social system, adopt a new idea, behavior or product. Adoption means that a person does something new or differently than what they had previously (i.e. purchase or use a new product, acquire and perform a new behavior, etc.). (Anonymous s.a.)

The same applies in the case of the CH. According to Philip Kotler, Ned Roberto and Nancy Lee, there are different types of adopters in every target audience, who are usually represented in certain proportions and have unique motivations for adopting a new behaviour – the innovator (2.5%), early adopter (13.5%), early majority (34%), late majority (34%) and laggard (16%) (Kotler et al. 1989: chapter 7).

In the case of the CH campaign, we have to consider that this service is not for everyday use, and the goal of the campaign cannot be to use this service as often as possible. The goal is to have the existence of the service stored in one's memory, so it can be used when there is a real need – if a person sees a child in distress, if the child feels that s/he needs extra help, or if it is necessary to seek advice on a difficult child-related situation.

In the CH campaign, there were four main and interrelated communicative objectives:

- to raise awareness of the social product,
- to be aware of and remember the

- access to the hotline as a social product,
- to encourage and, if necessary, use the hotline to talk about one's concerns, which also means overcoming one's mental barriers,
- to implement state policies related to children protection.

The success of the CH and the desired behaviour depends greatly on the members of the audience who accept the provided information and the product, and are ready to use and recommend it to others (innovators, early adapters) and followers (early majority). It also means that the audience, both adults and children, needs to trust the hotline service, as the CH is meant to deal with sensitive and highly personal matters. In the DOI model, there are critical determinants of the speed and extent of the diffusion. According to Brian Frederick Oldenburg, Deborah M. Hardcastle and Gerjo Kok (see Lefebvre 2001: 512–513), some of these attributes include:

- relative advantage (is the new behaviour better, easier, simpler than what they currently do),
- compatibility (does the new behaviour fit into the audience's lifestyle, cultural/ethnic beliefs and practices, and self-image),
- trialability (can the behaviour be tried before making a final commitment),
- communicability (can the behaviour be understood clearly and easily),
- risk (can the behaviour be adopted with minimal risk and uncertainty).

As the CH is closely related to people's private life and the highly sensitive issue of sharing, the latter aspect may be considered to be a very important factor in the use or non-use of the product. In case of the

CH, there is need to focus on minimising the perceived risks that enhance the mental barriers and to create a relationship of trust between the product/service and the target group. According to Niklas Luhmann,

trust is a solution for specific problems of risk ... trust has to be achieved within a familiar world, and changes may occur in the familiar features of the world, which will have an impact on the possibility of developing trust in human relations. (Luhmann 1988: 95)

Trust is the phenomenon that supports the reduction of complexity in society (Luhmann 1979: 71). 'Trusting becomes the crucial strategy to deal with uncertain, unpredictable and uncontrollable future' (Sztompka s.a.: 1). 'Trust and context are inextricably linked. [---] Any discussion of trust must be contextualized to have meaning and relevance' (Fu 2004: 3; citing Cohen, Prusak 2001). The success of the CH campaign depends largely on whether the target audience perceives that helping children is truly a concern and there is no risk in opening up and sharing this concern.

Trust towards the CH also depends on which target group (children) trusts the advertising communication in general. How children accept commercial advertising has been studied thoroughly. However, there is little information about the acceptance of social advertising messages by children. It is commonly known that children under 8 years of age are too immature to deal with advertising messages in the course of their information processing. However when they reach the age 8 or 9, they already become sceptical, and can understand advertising techniques, influencing methods and aims. According to Esther Rozendaal, Laura Buijs and Eva A. van Reijmersdal,

an extensive and long-established body of research in both Europe and the United States has shown that most children in this [8-

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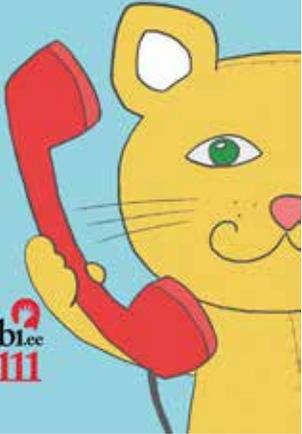


FIGURE 1. Visuals from the studies conducted in 2013 and 2014.

10-year old] age group have acquired a basic level of advertising literacy with regard to television commercials. Around the age of eight, the majority of children are able to recognize the difference between television advertising and programs and they demonstrate an increasing understanding of the intent of advertising. (Rozendaal et al. 2016)

In addition to the criteria of the DOI model, this study focused on trust indicators to detect the strengths, weaknesses and areas of improvement for further campaigns and to analyse the message formatting and construction of meaning in the social advertising aimed at children. The study also included questions on the critical factors of speed and range of diffusion related to the DOI model (relative advantage, compatibility, trialability, communicability, risk).

## METHODS

The study was commissioned by the communications company MSMedia and it utilised two methods – a web survey and a focus group. The survey was carried out by Norstat. Two focus groups were conducted: the first consisted of the parents of pre-school children; the second of youngsters aged 12 to 15 years. Norstat conducts web surveys with pre-enlisted respondents. The members of the web panel were selected based on random sampling. A sample was formed based on advertising target groups (300 children/juveniles currently attending primary or basic school, and 500 parents, whose child currently attends primary or basic school). A representative sample of population was ensured in the study, but due to the higher distribution of advertisements in the large cities, the number of respondents from Tallinn was partially increased.

The quota of the adult study was calculated based on the distribution of population by age, gender, nationality and region, thus ensuring the representability

of the study in the relevant sections. The respondents in the adult study were over 16. The main target group among the children included minors, 10 to 15 years old, but younger children (8–10 years) were also involved in the children's questionnaire. Respondents aged 16 and above were able to fill out the adult questionnaire because they did not need a parent's consent to participate in the study.

## RESULTS

The readiness to adopt the CH as an innovative service can be considered generally satisfactory. The question about the readiness to use the service (who would you notify about a child who is probably in trouble?) showed a slight increase in the positive response (from 13% to 16%). The response was notably more positive in case of the statement, 'I am ready to inform my friends of the CH number' – there were 73% positive answers in 2014 and 79% in 2015. The increase resulted mainly from the number of definitely positive ('Yes, sure') responses. The highest increase was among boys (10%), age 11–15 (9%) and ethnic Estonians (5%).

The surveys also included the semantic differential method, in order to specify emotional indications. Charles Osgood's idea of semantic differential strives to describe a multi-dimensional worldview in which the initial reaction plays a major role (Osgood et al. 1957). In our study, children and adults were asked to evaluate the advertising language and visual of the previous year based on a five-point scale. Both target groups were able to provide an assessment in the light of the semantic differential (positive vs negative adjectives), whereby the scale values of 1 and 2 indicate a rather positive adjective, 4 and 5 a rather negative adjective, and the medium assessment (3) is in between. In this analysis, the latter assessment was considered rather positive. More specifically, it was asked: 'Which keyword you would relate to the seen advertisement?' (**Figures 1, 2 and 3**)

Comparing the creative solutions of 2014 and 2015 based on the answers



FIGURE 2. Visuals from the study conducted in 2015.

provided, it can be argued that, according to the respondents, the characteristic features of the 2014 visual language were rather weak, when judged on a scale of weakness vs powerful, of lower credibility vs importance for the target group.

The focus group studies of previous years revealed that teenagers considered such advertising language to be rather 'childish'. Young people did not self-identify as a target group of the new ads.

Quotes from the 2013 focus group study:

- Erik: 'Quite useless, it feels like somebody should start buying teddy bears, it doesn't create the intended feeling.'
- Gregor: 'This is meant for really young children.'
- Viktoria: 'It doesn't go with the theme. It's rather a sweet advertisement. Doesn't match the topic well.'
- Gitta: 'I think it's more for primary school children. Those who can't read yet but see the number and understand. But something better should be done for those who are our age.'
- Kert: 'When you watch this ad on TV, you see a number and a rabbit. Well, seems like it's telling you that you can invite a mascot to your birthday. It doesn't seem good.'
- Karel: 'Not very credible. Like the number of a cartoon company.'
- Mark: 'I don't know. It's more for a second-grader.'

The visual language of the 2015 campaign was considered rather important, useful and comprehensible. The negative aspects were higher unfriendliness, coldness and distance.

Based on the indicators of the DOI theory and focusing on the determinants related to the speed and extent of the diffusion (Lefebvre 2001), the results of the web survey are described below. As mentioned before, the selected attributes in this study are relative advantage, compatibility, trialability, communicability and perceived risk.

**1. Relative advantage.** The first question related to relative advantage asked of the children was a multiple-choice question. The choices were whether such service was necessary, the call number provided quick help, or whether it provided answers to questions related to children. The comparative data (MSMedia 2014, 2015) show an increase for the argument 'The call number provides quick help'. The amount of those convinced of quick help increased **29%** in total (boys **+28%**, girls **+29%**, age 8–10 **+26%**, age 11–15 **+29%**, Russians **+27%** and Estonians **+29%**). Based on this argument, it can be concluded that, the perceived advantage for the new advertisement essentially increased in all target groups (MSMedia 2015), but mainly in the 11-to-15 age group and among Estonians. The reasons may be hidden in the advertising language. The aforementioned results of the semantic differential showed that children and young people considered the 2015 advertising language to be more important, more useful and more comprehensible.

We asked them to assess the need for the CH on a ten-point scale, and again, an increase can be seen. In 2014, 73% of children considered it worth 8–10 points, while a year later, 78% of children said so. The increase was 5%.

The argument related to the benefit for the target group decreased 5%, mainly in the 8-to-10 age group (-18%) and among Russians (-14%). The reasons may be hidden in the advertising language. In the same differential, the advertising language of 2015 was considered unfriendly, grey and cold. Unfriendliness was rated with the highest value, and this is likely to deter the readiness for use.

**2. Compatibility.** The self-image of the target group was reflected in the question about who should call the number. Both the 2014 and 2015 study provided the answer that children (93%, 90%) are the main perceived callers/users of the product. This was especially true in the responses of the children themselves. The answers show a similar result in total, but there was a decrease of -6%, -11% and -6%, exceeding

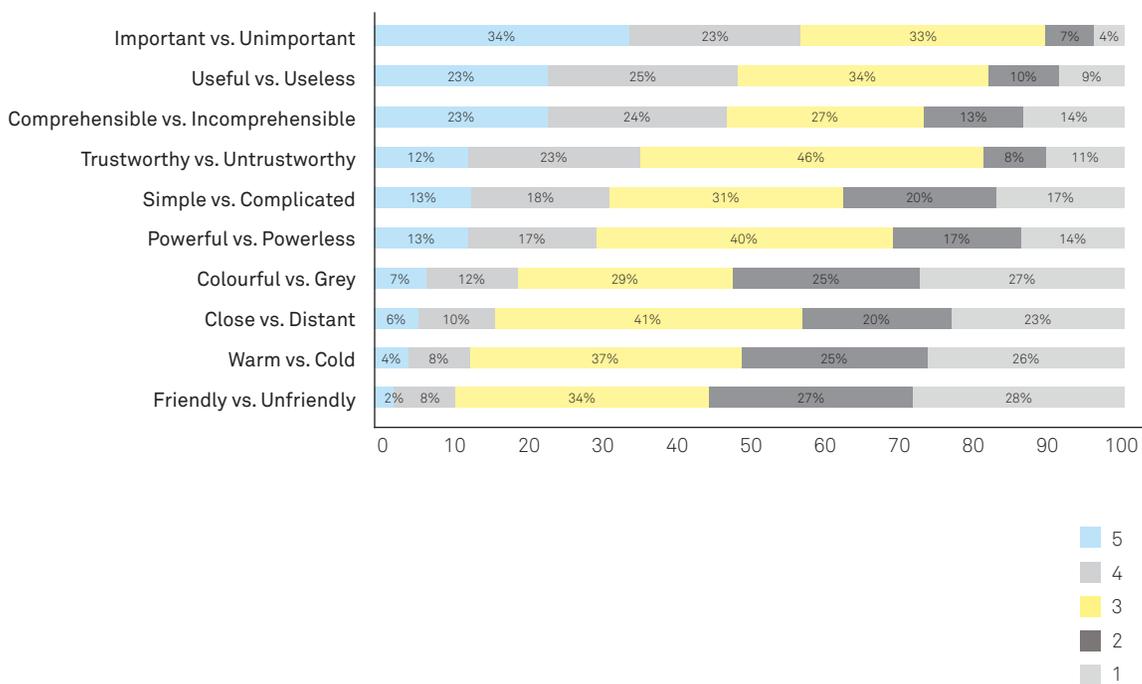


FIGURE 3. Respondents (children) in the 2015 semantic differential.

statistical error, seen among girls, the 8-to-10 age group, and the Russians, respectively. This shows that children saw the advertisement as being targeted to them.

**3. Trialability.** There are few people who have used or tried to use the service – the respondents said that they had not called themselves and knew very few others who had (95% vs 96% do not know of any such case). However, it should be added that the nature of the service is such, that it should not be tried or tested without good reason, but should be used only for providing information about a child in trouble.

**4. Communicability.** Simplicity and convenience were assessed based on the answers, on a five-point scale, to the question 'Is the free CH number a convenient way to provide information about a child in trouble?' The answers demonstrated that in 2015 a decrease occurred in this parameter. In total, 86% respondents answered positively to this question in 2014 and 82% in 2015. Thus, the decrease is 4%. The trend was noticeable mainly among boys (-6%), age group 11–15 (-6%) and Estonians (-6%). Among Russians, a slight increase occurred (+6%). The message used in the new advertisement 'Children are not at fault if someone tries to make drug dealers out of them' addresses only a small portion of the target group, and in semantic differential the complicity as indication is revealed in extent of 37% (MSMedia 2014, 2015).

In addition, simplicity and comprehensibility were measured by various negative arguments, in which the questioners mentioned different barriers to the expected behaviour. The barriers mentioned in both years included: the length of the phone number as a cause for not recalling the phone number (29% in 2015), as well as confusion about the reasons for using the service that could convince the caller that calling the CH would be the proper thing to do in the relevant situation (41% in 2015).

**5. Risk.** The study results related to trust and trustworthiness deserve the most attention. Some indicators refer to the possibility of improving these levels.

Trustworthiness was measured on a ten-point scale and there were no major differences between the two studies. In 2014, 4% chose the values from one to three on the scale (rather untrustworthy). In 2015, the results were similar, but more trustworthiness (8–10 points) was expressed in favour of the 2015 advertising language (48% in 2014 and 50% in 2015). However, this difference is within the limits of statistical error (MSMedia 2014, 2015).

The opinion that 'the specialists who help children answer the phone' is considerable – it is shared by approximately 85% of the respondents. However, in 2015, this indicator was slightly lower (82%).

The courage to make an anonymous call was assessed as part of trustworthiness of the CH. The results revealed that the number of children who wanted openly or anonymously to call the CH number, increased in 2015 compared to 2014 (2014 – 60%, 2015 – 65%). Boys +5%, girls +11%, age 8–10 +4%, age 11–15 +9%. The results among Russians were similar, and among Estonians the increase was +6% (MSMedia 2014, 2015).

A similar result is confirmed by the set of negative arguments, in which all of the percentage points remained more or less the same, while the argument 'I fear possible persecution' increased by 5%. These results may be mutually related. The study results reveal that, among those assessed by the DOI model, the greatest negative trend appears in the last factor (risk). The risk factor is related to issues of trustworthiness.

In order to make the CH as a service/product more efficient, more attention should be paid to the aspect related to risk and trust. Account should also be taken of the general context, i.e. the CH campaign cannot be isolated from the state of the society, and efficiency of the campaign, including trustworthiness, can be influenced by external factors including general social trends.

## SUMMARY AND AREAS OF IMPROVEMENT

For the future it is important to keep in mind that, irrespective of the advertising language, the CH is useful (the first indicator of DOI – relative advantage), comprehensible and trustworthy (results of the semantic differential). And for respondents this is based more on the subject (helping children is important; see also, the Child Protection Act and stable results in the study reports) than the advertisement of the specific phone number.

Therefore, when selecting advertising language targeted to children, it is important to proceed from the principle that negative semantic combinations should be avoided (distant, unfriendly, cold). That was how children perceived the 2015 campaign. Dealings with a drug dealer is too narrow a topic and affects few children; the phone number is difficult to remember; it is not completely clear under what circumstances the number should be called; and the dominant grey colour is repellent.

In the future, the structure of advertisements with a social message (such as the CH) should focus on the following aspects.

**Attention and remembering.** In the case of such a service, it is not only relevant to rely on subliminal message processing and the application of a peripheral route to persuasion, since the message is intended for understanding and remembering. Therefore, it is also necessary to pursue a high participation rate for the advertisements, by applying the central route. Interesting and complicated information sharpens the attention of the audience and increases the probability of higher efficiency (Petti, Cacioppo 1986). Figural advertising language should catch the eye, and the financial resources used for the campaign should ensure high coverage of the target group. In future campaigns, implementation of memo-technical methods could be considered, in order to promote remembering a rather difficult phone number. Maintaining the simplicity and comprehensibility principle of the DOI (the fourth indicator, communicability) should

remain a constant technique, while taking account of the ability of children to process figuratively constructed messages.

**Suitability for age and compatibility** (the second indicator of DOI) or conformity to the self-image of the target group. The 2013 advertising solution was considered 'too childish' by the children. Upon the development of design solutions in the future, account should be taken of the fact that children (as the main target group) want to be seen as older than they actually are. 'Aspirational' marketing targets their desire to be slightly older and seem more sophisticated than they are. The visual should arouse associations that support the self-image of children towards this aspiration. Pursuant to the social identity theory (Turner, Tajfel 1986), people are motivated by the circumstances that help to raise their self-esteem and contribute to the creation of a positive self-image.

**Trustworthiness and risk** (the fifth indicator of DOI). In the creative solutions of future campaigns, more attention should be paid to figurative language – this should, as much as possible, create the impression of trustworthiness. Pre-testing of advertisements is probably needed, in order to check the potential achievement of the objective. Additional studies may be necessary in order to determine which type of messenger (with which special features) children, as the main target group, are ready to trust (peer, adult, male or female, young or old, etc.). Trustworthiness is very important in case of the CH service; on a social level, the result can only be obtained when children start using the well-communicated and learned phone number, without being afraid of not getting the expected help or being persecuted. Mental barriers and potential risks related to the use of the service should be as low as possible. This can also help to improve the third indicator of DOI – trialability, which is related to trustworthiness.

A general recommendation is that the advertising language should be friendly and warm. This way the advertising language will reach children better, and helps to overcome the first barrier.

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