Putting children first, when media sets its own rules

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Professor Elizabeth Handsley says children are particularly vulnerable to the media.

In an age when a significant number of parents won't let their child walk down the street to post a letter because of "stranger danger", it's ironic that many pay little attention while media organisations spend hours of one-to-one time with even their youngest offspring.

That's the 21st Century media reality that Professor Elizabeth Handsley, a specialist in children's law from Flinders University, has been working to address by championing reform of Australia's largely self-regulated media industry.

Professor Handsley, who was a finalist in the recent national Children's Law Awards, is President of The Australian Council on Children and the Media (ACCM).

ACCM is a peak community organisation which advocates for children as media consumers and provides information for parents about how to manage their children's media use.

"Children spend more time than ever engaging with content on screens, be it television, DVDs, computers or mobile devices such as tablets and phones," Professor Handsley said.

"We know that this content is going to be influential in children's development, but how do we ensure it's a positive influence and not a negative one?

"The question is a difficult one because so much content is driven by commercial concerns, rather than the best interests of children.

"My main compulsion is to balance the media industry's power, because I realised quite early on in my career that media are one of the last bastions of unaccountability.

"My experience has been that journalists in the news media are mostly reasonable, but I think when it comes to the media in general's engagement with children, there needs to be more accountability.

"There have been moves to make almost every other institution more

accountable, but the media is way behind, so I'm interested in bringing it into line with others."

Just as sections of the media are famous for conducting research about which tactics will get them what they want from their consumers, another large body of research shows the special vulnerability of children to those tactics and supports Professor Handsley's calls for more regulation.

Because they can't tell the difference between different types of content, she says young children are most susceptible to the impacts of unregulated media.

"Younger children can't distinguish between advertisements and editorial or entertainment content," Professor Handsley said. "This makes them incredibly vulnerable.

"Even when they get older and are able to make the distinction, research shows they don't understand the intentions behind different types of content.

"Ultimately what lies at the root of the support and advocacy we provide is research on how media consumption influences child development.

"My work is about trying to bring that research to the notice of policymakers and legislators so that they provide an appropriate degree of protection."

Asked whether it should be solely a parental responsibility to recognise and regulate their children's exposure to media and advertising, Professor Handsley said that, given the resources that media companies have at their disposal to gain access to and influence over children, this wasn't reasonable or fair to expect of parents.

"The explosion of digital technology means the media are accessing children through digital devices everywhere," she said.

"We can try to teach children to be better at understanding the difference between different kinds of content, but it's fanciful to say that is the answer when we consider the young age at which brand consciousness and other kinds of media influence start seeping into children's consciousness.

"By the time they start school, it's just too late."

Professor Handsley does believe there are some things that parents can do to help.

"When children are little they often fall passionately in love with characters and TV shows," she said. "If you can harness that feeling and become a part of it, you can use the media in a way that can be quite beneficial to their development.

"Parental involvement means you are more able to influence them and balance the effects; so my advice is to learn the songs, learn the stories and make yourself part of that relationship."

It is also important, she says, to limit children's screen time and not assume that because they seem more adept than you are at handling the technology, they are also equipped to deal with the content.

"One of the most troubling things I hear is when parents say they don't know how to use the technology, so they just leave their children to it," she said.

"Some parents assume that because their children can operate the technology, they're also able to cope with the content, which is not true.

"Parents still understand the risks and other aspects of content far better than their children, and have a responsibility to monitor and protect them from it.

"We should also keep up to date with the technology and the content children are being exposed to. That should be an integral part of our parenting.

"The most important thing of all though is to engage with your child and give your perspective on what's happening on the screen when they are using it, particularly with children under the age of eight, but even up to 15 years old."

Provided by Flinders University