



# When YOU Are The Product

*Targeted advertising that feeds on user data*

- A printable conversation guide for parents & kids ([tips](#))
- Takes 10-15 minutes
- 2024 update

Produced by

**Screenable**

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# Conversation preview

*This is an overview of the conversation guide, and it's for parents to read before starting the conversation with kids. Parents, if you're already with your kids, feel free to skip this section and move straight to the guide.*

## → Intro

“If you're not paying for the product, you ARE the product.” Most of us internet users are giving our data to companies who turn around and make money by targeting ads at us. How does this affect our kids, and should we be concerned?

## → Together you will learn

- The high-tech world of online advertising, and how targeted ads work
- Ways this can take advantage of our minds and impulse purchasing, particularly when we're young
- How we might respond when we know we're being targeted

# The guide

*Read these instructions out loud. This guide should take 10-15 minutes to complete. There are 5 sections. Read each section header out loud as well as any instructions. Let's start with a quick icebreaker.*

## → 1. First reaction

*There's no right or wrong. Answer in just a few sentences, no more than 30 seconds. Kids go first. Optionally feel free to jot down any thoughts or feelings below.*

What do you know about online advertising, particularly targeted advertising? How do you feel about it?

👉 Targeted advertising is when ads are shown to us based on specific things about us, like our age, gender, interests, or purchase history.

## → 2. What's the big idea?

*Parents read this out loud, or switch readers for each paragraph. Together choose the quick read (appropriate for younger kids) or the full read.*

### **Quick read (2min)**

Ever seen an ad online for something you were just talking about? That's an example of targeted advertising.

Companies collect information about what we do online, then use it to show us specific ads. The more they know about us, the better their ads work.

Big tech companies like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Google, and Facebook make money from these ads. They keep track of what we search, the links we click, what we buy, and the videos we watch, all to show us ads from companies who want to sell us things.

Sometimes these ads can be helpful, showing us just what we need. But they can also try to sell us things we don't need or can't afford. Remember, they care about what's best for them, not what's best for us.

These companies end up knowing a lot about us, which they share with each other. Some of us won't be okay with that.

In any case, it's important that we're all aware of it, so we know what's going on and can make our own decisions. 🙌

### ***Full read (3min)***

Sometimes online we see an ad for the exact thing we were just talking about or considering buying. It can be surprising or even eerie. How did that ad know what we wanted?

This is an example of targeted advertising. It means that companies have been collecting data about each of us, and then making money by sending us very specific ads. The more data they have, the more successful the ads are.

By and large, the internet runs on advertising. Most of the biggest tech companies in the world make their money selling ads, like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Google, and Facebook. There are a few exceptions, like Apple and Amazon, which sell physical products – but even they sell ads that promote products or apps. So most of the places we spend time online are supported by advertising.

Research shows that we are more likely to make purchases when the ads are targeted based on specific things that advertisers know about us – instead of, say, seeing a billboard or online banner.

So now companies silently track everything we do online, collecting every drop of our user data that they can. Search for something? You're tracked. Tap a link? You're tracked again. Watch a video? Download an app? Buy something? You're tracked every time. Again, they do all that so they can sell ads to companies who want to target us.

Targeted ads aren't all bad. Sometimes they actually do help us discover a product or podcast or other content we end up loving.

But they can also be used to take advantage of us. If they know we're short on money, they can advertise loans to us. If we're sad, they can send us news and stories they think we'll read. If we love skateboards, they can bombard us with the coolest new one, even if we can't afford it. The bottom line is what's good for them, not what's good for us.

It also means companies have a lot of information about us that they're sharing with each other. Some of us will be okay with that, but others won't.

In any case, shouldn't we get to choose whether we want all this data about us online, and how it can be used for advertising to us? At the very least, we can start by being aware of it. 🙌

## → 3. Questions

Take turns answering a few questions, in about 5 minutes total. “Experienced” questions are for those who have encountered this topic in apps or online. Choose one of you to go first (rock-paper-scissors?).

### ***Beginner***

- Have you ever noticed that some commercials on TV seem to be for products you’re interested in? How do you think they decide what commercials to show?
- Can you think of a time when an ad or commercial made you want to buy something? What about it was convincing?
- Have you ever seen different ads in a magazine, newspaper, or TV show depending on what the media was about? Why do you think that is?
- What kinds of ads or commercials do you like the most? What do you like about them? Would you like them more if they were customized perfectly to you, based on things they knew about you?

### ***Experienced***

- Have you ever noticed that the ads you see online often relate to things you've searched for or talked about? How does that make you feel?
- Have you ever clicked on a targeted ad? How about made a purchase based on one? Was it a good experience for you?
- Have you ever felt overwhelmed or really annoyed by the advertising you see online? Why or why not? Do you ever leave social media craving a product you want to buy?
- How do you feel about the fact that tech companies track your online activity to provide you targeted ads?
- Who do you admire? What about them do you admire? How can you build more of those traits and experiences into your life?

## → 4. Activities

*Choose an activity that interests you both. If you have time, choose another.*

### ***Ad Aware***

One of you, choose a product category that appeals to you, like books, clothes, electronics, video games, etc. Use Amazon or Google Shopping to search for that category, and scroll through the results. Talk about whether they seem targeted to you or not, and how you feel about that. Tap on one or two that seem interesting. Now talk about data you've left behind that can be used to target you in the future. Switch roles and do it again.

### ***History Hunting***

Choose a social network that one of you uses, or even your email. Scroll through your history of posts and messages. As you look through them, talk through specific examples of what that app or site knows about you. Using that information, brainstorm ads they could target you with. Then brainstorm other companies they could sell your data to that might want it. If you have time, switch roles and do it again.

### ***Reverse Target***

Find ads somewhere online, whether on social media, in a Google search, on Amazon, etc. Choose one to review. Talk about who you think the ad would be good for, and what data would let the company target it most effectively to viewers (like, the viewer's age, interests, buying habits, physical body or health, etc). Then choose another few ads and do it again. Talk about how valuable you think it is to companies to have that targeting data.



## → 5. Make a family plan

*Together select the ones you agree to do going forward. Put them up somewhere so you can revisit them from time to time.*

- Remind ourselves.** When we search, post, or watch something online, we will try to remember that most companies are recording everything we do. If that makes us uncomfortable, we will avoid doing it or find other ways to achieve what we want.
- Assess ads.** When we see an ad online for something we want, we'll ask ourselves how it might have been targeted to us, and we'll be extra careful in deciding whether to tap it.
- Share targeted ads.** If we come across a particularly well-targeted ad, we'll screenshot and share it within the family to comment. On the flip side, if an ad is totally off-target, we'll share that too, to laugh together.
- Stop before we shop.** We'll sleep on any online purchase decision before going forward, and make sure we still feel the same about it the next day.
- Reduce footprint.** In order to reduce our data footprint, we will try to regularly do the following together:
  - On iPhones & iPads, make sure we have turned off "Allow Apps to Request to Track" (under Settings > Privacy > Tracking), and remove any we've allowed in the past.
  - Go through the privacy settings of our most-used apps and devices, to ensure we're comfortable with the data we're sharing.
  - Clear our browser cookies, reducing the amount of persistent data that advertisers can use.
  - Uninstall any app that we feel is asking for too much personal data or is too privacy-invasive.

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