



FOOD MARKETING TO CHILDREN: A WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING?

By Megan LoDolce, MA

CHILDREN TODAY MAY BE THE FIRST GENERATION TO LIVE SHORTER LIVES THAN THEIR PARENTS.

The diet of children today is full of sugar and fat and contains too little fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Research suggests that our food environment is largely responsible. Only 10 percent of a person's daily calories should come from "empty calories," or calories from sugar and saturated fat. Yet, 40 percent of the calories that children take in are empty, and they are consumed most often in foods like desserts, pizza, fruit drinks and soda. In fact, 60 percent of children eat too little fruit and a whopping 95 percent eat too few vegetables.

Many manufacturers of "kids' foods" argue that kids won't eat healthy foods. They argue that they are providing convenient options for parents, but consider the long-term effects of an unhealthy diet. Today, one out of every three children is affected by excess weight or obesity. These children are more likely to continue living with obesity as adults. Type 2 diabetes was once "adult onset" diabetes because it never occurred in children, but this is not an appropriate title today. According to a recent study, 23 percent of adolescents had prediabetes or diabetes in 2007 to 2008, compared with just 9 percent in 1999 to 2000.

There are other serious life-long consequences to consuming a poor diet as a child. These include heart disease, cancer, strokes and arthritis. Proper nutrition in childhood is necessary during a time of critical growth, and a poor diet can have negative outcomes, whether a child has excess weight or not.

WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH FOOD MARKETING?

Getting kids to eat healthy is much tougher than just saying "no" to junk food. Today's food environment makes it very difficult to feed children a healthy diet. Unhealthy food is everywhere, it's easy to get, and it's quick and often costs less than healthy food. So-called "kids' foods" have poor nutritional quality – they are especially high in added sugar. The most harmful feature of the food environment may be how these foods are marketed to children. This is a major public health concern.

Food marketing is everywhere. It's powerful, and it's effective. It's particularly effective for children and teens, who are a much more vulnerable audience. The food industry spent a total of 15 billion dollars in 2014 on all food, beverage and restaurant marketing in the United States. To provide a means of comparison, in the same year, the National Institutes of Health spent 12.5 billion on cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, obesity, hypertension and prevention research combined.

The truth about food marketing

\$1.8 billion
Spent per year on
marketing aimed
at children & teens



- <1% fruits & vegetables
- 9% other foods
- 40% fast food
- 51% sugary drinks, sugary cereals, sweets & snacks

The food industry spent \$1.8 billion in 2009 on marketing aimed specifically at children. Most of what the industry spends on food marketing to youth promotes unhealthy foods and drinks. Sugary drinks and cereals, candy, sweet and salty snacks and fast food make up 91 percent of spending dollars. On television alone children see about 13 food ads every single day, and teens see about 16. Nine out of 10 of these ads are for products high in salt, sugar and fat. Only one of these 10 food ads are for fruits and vegetables. There is simply no competition.

Food marketing reaches far beyond television advertising. Companies market to children in the communities where they live. They market to children in their schools. They are also turning to digital media to get their attention.

Children now spend most of their time in the digital media space, interacting with their peers, out of sight of their parents. Companies know this and market to children anywhere and everywhere they spend their time. A 2009 report showed that 11 to 14-year-olds spent about one hour and 46 minutes online every day. Nearly every food brand that markets food products to children has a Web site designed just for them. These sites are full of games, virtual worlds and other clever interactive activities. They are highly engaging and very hard to resist for a child. Children spend time on other types of Web sites as well, such as “coolmath-games.com.” Here, they are bombarded by banner advertisements on the top or sides of the page as they play games for free. These ads compete for their attention.

THE FOOD INDUSTRY SPENT A TOTAL OF 15 BILLION DOLLARS IN 2014 ON ALL FOOD, BEVERAGE AND RESTAURANT MARKETING IN THE UNITED STATES. TO PROVIDE A MEANS OF COMPARISON, IN THE SAME YEAR, THE NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH SPENT 12.5 BILLION ON CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE, TYPE 2 DIABETES, OBESITY, HYPERTENSION AND PREVENTION RESEARCH COMBINED.



Food Marketing continued from previous page

Youth also see advertising when interacting with their friends on social media. They see display ads on Facebook, for example, but they also see posts notifying them of their friends “liking” brands such as Doritos and Pepsi. In this way, youth help companies in their marketing efforts. Simply by endorsing products they like, they provide free marketing for companies.

Children see far more advertising in digital media than most parents realize. The use of social media to market foods and beverages has exploded. In 2012, six billion fast food advertisements appeared on Facebook. Starbucks, McDonald’s, and Subway ranked in the top-12 of all brands on Facebook that year, with more than 23 million “likes.” Coca-Cola, Red Bull, and Pepsi were the top-three drink brands on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube in 2013. Coca-Cola was “liked” by more than 84 million people on Facebook in 2014 (a 174 percent increase since 2011). The brand had 2.5 million Twitter followers in the same year (a 766 percent increase since 2011). Pepsi’s social media followers increased by 600 percent on Facebook and by 30 times the number of followers on Twitter from 2011 to 2014.

Children also use mobile gaming apps frequently on their mobile phones, many of which are free. Food and beverage apps are part of this picture, where the brands actually become part of the game. Fanta Fruit Slam, for example, is a dodgeball-type game featuring the soda and starring cartoon Fanta characters.

OK, SO YOUNG PEOPLE SEE A LOT OF UNHEALTHY FOOD MARKETING. WHAT’S THE BIG DEAL?

Food marketing has a direct, powerful impact on young people’s food preferences. It affects eating behaviors and influences diet, weight, and health in many negative ways. Watching food ads makes children eat more. It makes them prefer and ask for the foods they see — sugary drinks and fast food. The Institute of Medicine, World Health Organization, and others agree that food marketing works. Messages in food advertising encourage youth to pester their parents and snack between meals. They create positive emotional associations with the brands that can harm their health. Food marketers spend a great deal of

money and effort appealing to children in very powerful ways. These ways are difficult to resist; making products appear cool, fun and exciting.

“WE’RE RELYING ON THE KID TO PESTER THE MOM TO BUY THE PRODUCT, RATHER THAN GOING STRAIGHT TO THE MOM.”

**— BARBARA MARTINO,
ADVERTISING EXECUTIVE**

SO WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

We often hear from parents that they feel there’s nothing they can do to stop this. They feel that marketing is just part of our culture, and that food companies aren’t going to listen to them. However, there are ways that parents can protect their children from the negative effects of food marketing in their own homes and communities.

WHAT YOU CAN DO...

IN THE HOME

START THE CONVERSATION.

One of the most important things we can do with our children is talk to them about food marketing and encourage them to talk to us. Tell them what marketers are trying to do when they advertise. Research shows that up until the age of eight or so, children are unable to understand that marketing presents a biased point of view. They believe what they see and hear. If an advertisement for sugary cereals shows children having fun, they will believe that they will have fun too.

You are probably familiar with the following scene at the grocery store: a young child begs and pleads for a product on the shelf as a parent grits his or her teeth and often gives in to avoid conflict. Maybe this has happened to you.



This is what marketers want to happen. They actually have a name for it. It's called "pester power," and marketers talk about it at conferences and think it works. When your child asks for an advertised food, explain why you don't want to buy it. Explain how the advertiser has spent a great deal of money trying to convince them that they must have this food.

REMOVE TV'S, COMPUTERS AND OTHER SCREENS FROM BEDROOMS.

Research shows that having a television in a child's bedroom increases their screen time by one to two hours per day, increasing the risk of becoming overweight by 31 percent, and reducing the amount of time they spend reading, sleeping and enjoying their hobbies. Youth are spending more time on smart phones, computers and tablets, and this is screen time too. Make a curfew for such devices and remove them from your child's room after a given time.



CHANGE AT SCHOOL

FIND OUT HOW MUCH FOOD MARKETING YOUR CHILD SEES IN SCHOOL.

Nearly 70 percent of elementary and middle school students encounter some form of food-related marketing in school. According to a 2012 FTC report, food companies spent about \$149 million in schools in 2009. Most of this money was spent on contracts to sell foods in schools, outside the school meal program. About 93 percent of this was marketing for beverages, especially soda. Products marketed most often to children in school contain an average of 19 grams of added sugar (almost 5 teaspoons).

Marketers see schools as an opportunity to get easy access to children and a captive audience. Learn about food marketing in your child's school. Look for sales of branded food for fundraisers, company-sponsored classroom materials (like M&Ms counting books), logos on scoreboards, coolers and sporting equipment, incentive programs for food purchases (Box Tops for education, etc.), and company-sponsored events. If you notice things like this and you don't like it, talk to other parents about it and see if they agree.

There are ways to make a difference in school. There are other options for healthy fundraisers, such as fruit baskets, "walk-a-thon" type fundraisers and talent shows. Schools are now required to have a wellness policy, and it must address food marketing. You can even serve on the committee for creating this policy.



About the Author:

Megan LoDolce, MA, is a Research Associate at the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity. The Rudd Center employs a diverse group of global experts on obesity. The mission of the Center is to improve the food environment and fight weight stigma. Megan has studied the scope and impact of food marketing to children since 2008. She leads content analysis research on the food marketing team, and looks at the various techniques and messages food marketers use to appeal to children in the media.

RESOURCES:

To learn more about food marketing and find helpful resources, see the following links:

- More on food marketing to youth: www.uconnruddcenter.org/food-marketing
- More on food marketing in schools: www.ruddrootsparents.org/food-marketing-in-schools
- Model school wellness policy, with marketing included: www.uconnruddcenter.org/resources/upload/docs/what/communities/Model_Wellness_Policy.pdf

CHANGE ON A LARGER SCALE

We have enormous power as consumers. If we demand that companies market healthier foods to kids, food marketers will have to listen. If we refuse to spend our hard-earned money on unhealthy products, food marketers will have to listen. Public health officials, advocates, policy makers and legislators will continue to work hard to combat the toxic food environment. If consumers join the fight, there is no limit to the positive change we can make for children.





ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



VIBRANT COMMUNITY



NATIONAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS



ANNUAL CONVENTION



ADVOCACY



PUBLIC EDUCATION

LEARN, CONNECT, ENGAGE

The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
 - Community Discussion Forum
 - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE**



JOIN TODAY: GO TO OBESITYACTION.ORG/JOIN

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