

Unhealthy marketing to kids

From television commercials to toy promotions to vending machines in schools, intensive marketing by the fast food, soft drink and snack industries contributes to an environment promoting unhealthy eating. Billions of dollars of advertising is spent annually, primarily promoting foods high in fat, sugar and salt and low in nutritional value. A few decades ago, food and beverage companies realized that they could better reach their goal to increase sales by targeting a nearly untapped market—children and adolescents. Today dozens of tactics are used to attract kids not only to consume, but to consume too much non-nutritious food.

Children Are Vulnerable to Marketing Tactics

- Before age 12, children's cognitive development does not allow them to distinguish truth from advertising.¹ They trust and believe the persuasive statements made in commercials.
- Popular company characters establish brand loyalty at an early age; 96% of American school-children can identify Ronald McDonald. Only Santa Claus holds a higher degree of recognition among children.²
- Joint promotions linking children's entertainment characters to fast food meals and other low-nutrition foods encourages children's requests for unhealthy products.
- Dietary preferences for fatty, salty and sugary foods cultivated in childhood likely last a lifetime; childhood and adolescent obesity is linked to obesity in adulthood.
- Children under 12 spent \$23.4 billion of their own money on all purchases in 1997—a three-fold increase during the 1990s.³

Marketers Create Challenges for Parents

- Marketing strategies make it more difficult for parents to teach their children healthy habits. A child's first request for a product occurs at about 24 months.⁴
- Marketers use ads to encourage children to nag their parents. As one Heinz brand manager stated, "You want that nag factor so that 7-year-old Sarah is nagging Mom in the grocery stores to buy Funky Purple. We're not sure Mom would reach out for it on her own."⁵ These tactics set the stage for battles in the supermarket aisle or in the car while passing a fast food restaurant.
- Child-focused store displays and strategic placement of high sugar cereals, candy and other low nutrition foods at young children's eye level enhances their demand for these products when shopping with their parents or caretakers. Seventy-five percent of children's first requests for a product occur in a supermarket.⁶

Children Are Exposed to Numerous Marketing Messages

- \$13 billion annually is spent marketing food and drink to US children and their parents.⁸
- Children view up to 40,000 commercials each year; 360,000 by high school graduation.⁹

The Alliance is supported by funding from The California Endowment and The California Wellness Foundation.

STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS: The California Adolescent Nutrition and Fitness Program (CANFit) ■ California Center for Public Health Advocacy
California Food Policy Advocates ■ California Pan Ethnic Health Network ■ California Project LEAN ■ California WIC Association
Child Care Food Program Roundtable ■ Latino Health Access ■ Prevention Institute ■ Samuels & Associates, Inc

- More than 50% of television ads targeted at children are for food,¹⁰ translating to as many as three hours of food commercials each week¹¹—these commercials are predominantly for foods high in sugar and fat, and very rarely promote fruit or vegetable consumption.¹²
- Advertising through digital and internet technologies is largely unregulated and provides an opportunity for marketers to access children without knowledge or consent of parents. This data can be used to market products to children and to encourage impulse buying on-line or through interactive TV.

Schools Have Become A Vehicle for Marketers

- In a 2000 study of California high schools, nearly 72% of responding districts allowed advertising for fast food and beverages on high school campuses, while only 13% prohibited such advertising.
- In exchange for financial compensation, schools or school districts are signing exclusive marketing contracts with soda companies that open school doors to advertising through product donations, scoreboards and marquees, signage, clothing, and school supplies; the more beverages sold the higher revenue for the district and the soda company.¹³
- Food companies use educational materials as a vehicle for advertising their products to children; examples include Hershey's nutrition guide, Oreo's counting book, and Tootsie Roll's geography lesson.¹⁴
- Channel One, a news program laden with commercials mostly pushing high fat, sugary foods, is broadcast from approximately 12,000 middle school and high schools.

Health Disparities Raise Concerns About the Health Consequences of Marketing

- Efforts at market expansion have included targeted campaigns directed to children and youth of color. While these ads recognize communities previously ignored by mainstream media, they do so in a way which promotes unhealthy habits to communities facing higher risks for nutrition-related chronic disease.
- Disproportionate poverty rates for children of color may increase their vulnerability to health risks associated with the impact of food and beverage marketing.¹⁵ Low-income communities of color have higher rates of nutrition-related chronic disease such as diabetes and heart disease.
- Marketing that stimulates purchase of unhealthy foods and beverages is a particular concern and challenge for families with limited resources, as expenditures for these items utilize precious food dollars and displace healthier options.

What We Can Do About It

Take action to reduce marketing of unhealthy foods to children by supporting efforts to:

- Eliminate all marketing of unhealthy foods on school grounds, including exclusive soft drink contracts.
- Enact state and local policies that eliminate or limit junk food and soft drinks in schools.
- Encourage neighborhood food stores and supermarkets to adopt family-friendly policies that limit displays for unhealthy foods aimed at children; remove candy and low nutrition impulse items from check-out counters; and place high-sugar cereals above children's eye level.
- Establish policies for your organization to prohibit marketing of unhealthy food products to children on the premises and to not accept donations which require marketing in exchange for money or goods.
- Call upon corporations to eliminate marketing links between children's entertainment personalities and unhealthy food products. Educate and inform industry CEOs to increase awareness of the harmful effects of their marketing practices.
- Develop federal policies and regulations to restrict television advertising of unhealthy foods aimed at children and develop regulations for internet advertising aimed at children.
- Document food advertising and promotion in your school/community to see how and where residents are encouraged to eat unhealthy foods.
- Identify and reward "best marketing practices" for food, beverage and supermarket/grocery store industries.

For a list of citations, please visit www.eatbettermovemore.org