

Restricting Television Advertising to Children

This paper is part of a series of nutrition policy profiles prepared by Prevention Institute for the Center for Health Improvement (CHI).

Background

Children in the United States spend more time watching television than they spend on any other single daily activity except sleeping,¹ and the average adolescent spends more time watching television each year than attending school.² While absolute consensus has yet to be reached on the impact of advertising on children and adolescents, many experts agree that television has a unique capacity to influence children both cognitively and behaviorally. Studies of cognitive effects generally focus on a child's ability to distinguish between commercials and television programming and to understand that advertising is a tool used to sell products.^{3,4,5} Many young children, especially those under the age of six, have difficulty with this distinction; it is not until around the age of 12 that most children are able to comprehend the purpose of advertising.⁶

Behavioral studies generally focus on the extent to which children are persuaded by advertisements. More specifically, they focus on children's preferences for certain products over others and/or by the requests made for products in response to advertising. Studies on the behavioral effects of advertising find that television has a major effect on the products children ask for and that increased television watching leads to increased requests for advertised products.⁷ In addition, television advertising creates misperceptions among children about the nutritional values of foods and how to maintain positive health.⁸ Health experts believe that constant promotion of high-calorie food is contributing to the epidemic of childhood obesity in the United States by encouraging preferences for junk food⁹ and contributing to poor eating habits.¹⁰

Significant promotion of high-fat, high-calorie food during children's programming has been documented. In an assessment of food advertising during Saturday morning children's programming, 52.5 hours of viewing netted 564 food advertisements, comprising more than half of all advertisements. On average, 11 of 19 commercials per hour were for food, exposing children to an average of one food commercial every five minutes. Of these ads, 246 (43.6%) fell into the fats, oils, and sweets group, promoting foods such as candy, soft drinks, chocolate syrup/powder, chips, cakes, cookies, and pastries. Fast-food restaurant advertising was also prevalent during children's programming, comprising nearly 11% of total advertisements. There were no advertisements for fruits or vegetables.¹¹

Policy

Institute policy to regulate and/or restrict food advertising to children.

In the U.S., there are currently few restrictions or standards for food advertising and marketing aimed at children. Strong policies exist, however, in other countries. Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland do not permit commercial sponsorship of children's programs.¹² Sweden

and Norway do not permit any television advertising to be specifically directed to children under 12 and no advertisements are allowed during children's programming. Australia does not allow ads during programming for preschoolers, and the Flemish region of Belgium disallows any advertising in the five minutes immediately preceding and following children's programs.

Possible measures for regulating food advertising to children in the U.S. include either reducing the number of ads aimed at young children for foods high in fat, calories, sugar, or salt or balancing such ads with messages promoting better nutrition. If a regulatory or legislative solution is not possible, elected officials, parents, and the public health community should develop guidelines for responsible food advertising and marketing and call on food companies, broadcasters, and ad agencies to follow those guidelines.

Effectiveness

The actions taken by European countries to restrict advertising to children were initiated to reduce the increasing commercial pressure on children. While advertising is not the only influence on children's consumer behavior (i.e., the expressed preferences and requests for products generally made by children to adults), research has consistently shown its power. For example, in a study in Dutch schools, 52% of elementary school children specifically mentioned brand names when asked what gifts they wanted for Christmas.¹³ Children's recognition of Joe the Camel and the Budweiser Frogs has also been well documented.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, several attempts were made in the U.S. to institute restrictions on advertising to children and to require nutrition information in certain food ads. These efforts met with strong opposition from the food industry and eventually failed.¹⁴ However, in recent years, consumer and parent advocates have taken up this issue with renewed interest, with well known expert panels backing their efforts. In 1991, the Committee on Dietary Guidelines Implementation of the Institute of Medicine recommended the appointment of a children's television review panel in an effort to ensure that nutrition messages to children support dietary recommendations. In 1992, the American Academy of Pediatrics suggested that televised food advertising aimed at children be completely eliminated because "children are unprepared to make appropriate food choices and do not understand the relationship of food choices to health maintenance and disease prevention."¹⁵

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¹ Kotz F, Story M. Food advertisements during children's Saturday morning television programming: are they consistent with dietary recommendations? *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*. 1994;94:1296-1300.

² Powers M. Prime-time nutrition. *Human Ecology Forum*. Fall 1996;24:8-11.

³ Blosser BJ, Roberts DF. Age differences in children's perceptions of message intent: responses to TV news, commercials, educational spots, and public service announcements. *Community Research*. 1985;12:455-484.

⁴ Valkenburg PM. Media and youth consumerism. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2000;27S:52-56.

⁵ Rossiter JR, Robertson TS. Canonical analysis of developmental, social, and experiential factors in children's comprehension of television advertising. *Journal of Genetic Psychology*. 1976;129:317-327.

⁶ Consumers International. A spoonful of sugar: television food advertising aimed at children: an international comparative survey. Available at: <http://www.consumersinternational.org/campaigns/tvads/index.html>. Accessed May 22, 2002.

⁷ Valkenburg PM. Media and youth consumerism. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2000;27S:52-56.

⁸ Byrd-Bredbenner C, Grasso D. Commercials during 1992 and 1998. *Journal of School Health*. 2000;70:61-65.

⁹ Children Now. Advertising and children's health. *Media Now* [serial online]. Spring 1998. Available at: <http://www.childrennow.org/media/medianow/mnspring1998.html>. Accessed May 22, 2002.

¹⁰ American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Communications. Children, adolescents, and advertising. *Pediatrics*. 1995;95:295-297.

¹¹ Kotz F, Story M. Food advertisements during children's Saturday morning television programming: are they consistent with dietary recommendations? *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*. 1994;94:1296-1300.

¹² Consumers International. A spoonful of sugar: television food advertising aimed at children: an international comparative survey. Available at: <http://www.consumersinternational.org/campaigns/tvads/index.html>. Accessed May 22, 2002.

¹³ Valkenburg PM. Media and youth consumerism. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2000;27S:52-56.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Communications. The commercialization of children's television. *Pediatrics*. 1992;89:343-344.