

Sneaking Up on Your Kids

Unhealthy Food Marketing to Children

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You do everything you can to protect your kids. We all want our children to grow up healthy and successful. We want to protect them from harm and being led astray by bad influences. It's pretty easy to identify some threats – strangers with candy, not looking both ways before crossing the street, biking without a helmet. But what about the threats which sneak up on our kids and on us as well? What about the advertising of unhealthy foods that can lead to a lifetime of health problems and a shorter lifespan? An often unrecognized risk to our children's health is the barrage of food marketing directed at them.

Multiple Routes to Your Kids

The average child sees about 11 food-related ads per day just from television alone. Other sources include outdoor advertising (have you ever seen a sporting event without a beverage ad?), electronic media including “advergames” which are video games with embedded logos and ads hidden within handouts directed toward children.

Why is marketing to kids a problem?

Studies estimate that food and beverage marketing account for up to 18% of the obesity epidemic.



Obesity related chronic diseases can cut up to five years off the lifespans of our kids.

The problem with food and beverage marketing to kids is that young children do not understand the context of advertising. Children under age six cannot distinguish the difference between information from parents or teachers and an advertisement. If a child under six sees Beyonce or the Minions telling them pop is good, they see that as equivalent to their mom or teacher telling them pop is good.

Children up to age eight also do not understand that advertising is designed to persuade, not to inform. Food and beverage marketers know this and that is why you see so many these ads on children's entertainment.

Isn't this a country with free speech?

Yes, free speech is protected by First Amendment to the United States Constitution! However, it does not protect deceptive advertising. Due to the limited abilities of young children to understand

advertising, marketing directed at them can be inherently deceptive. A common example where the United States does not allow all forms of advertising is tobacco products. You don't see tobacco companies openly targeting children any more. Remember the Joe Camel ads from when you were young? They are gone now and there is a reason why!

What about other countries?

Some other countries are already restricting food advertising to children as the evidence behind the harmful effects of food and beverage marketing to kids becomes stronger. Because of the mounting evidence, the World Health Organization has called on all countries to restrict such marketing.

What can you do?

That's the hard part. As you look around (your television, any sporting event, even driving through downtown Lincoln) it's hard to avoid food marketing to your kids. Fixing this problem will take time, but make a conscious effort to spot all the marketing and if you think it's inappropriate at some locations, point it out to the people who manage those organizations.



Dr. Bob Rauner is the Executive Director of **Partnership for A Healthy Lincoln**, a local nonprofit dedicated to improving community health, wellness, and fitness. Partnership for a Healthy Lincoln works to improve wellness policies, conduct health research, and collaborate with community partners to promote healthy nutrition, increase fitness, and decrease obesity-related chronic diseases in our city and county. For more information visit www.healthylincoln.org