

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 which may 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 "adver-games" which are video games with embedded logos and ads hidden within handouts directed toward children. Not to mention ads tied to social media, videos and "free" gaming.

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 tell the difference between information from parents or teachers and an advertisement. If a child under six sees Beyoncé or the Minions telling them a less healthy food or drink is good, they see that as equal to their mom or teacher telling them the same message. 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.

Do you remember the Joe Camel ads?

Free speech is protected by First Amendment, 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. An 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!

Is this just a concern in the United States?

Some other countries are already restricting food advertising to children. Because of the mounting evidence of its harmful effects, the World Health Organization has called on all countries to restrict such marketing.

What can you do?

- Start noticing the messages being directed at your kids.
- Do what you can to cut their exposure to kid targeting ads. For example, instead of leaving boxes and bags on countertops, tuck them away to prevent extra advertisement to kids when possible.
- Start the conversation with kids early on about how advertising is trying to persuade them. Keep the discussions going.
- As your kids get older, make a game of spotting ads and product placement in their favorite shows and games. It will help them recognize the selling machine and prompt great conversation.
- Courteously approach managers of organizations if you see blatant advertising to kids that has gone too far. Sometimes we each need a nudge in a healthier direction.
- Vote with your dollars. Encourage businesses that are creating a healthier environment for your family by giving them your business. Thank them when you have a chance to keep up their efforts.
- http://issuu.com/lincolnpublicschools/docs/cn_december2015/14?e=9015092/31537084