Stop the Junk Food Peddlers

When I was growing up in Chicago in the 1950s, food companies encouraged me to eat their products, but their methods were primitive by today’s standards. The bells of the Good Humor truck would have me hankering for a Creamsicle. Cracker Jack boxes provided that junky plastic toy. And I’d occasionally watch a cartoon show on our new black-and-white TV set (though my friends and I were usually outside playing).

Fast-forward 25 years. By the 1970s, food companies were bombarding young children with sophisticated TV ads for sugary cereals, candies, beverages, and the like. In 1977, our little Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), in parallel with Action for Children’s Television, called on the Federal Trade Commission to protect kids from those ads.

The FTC concluded that any advertising aimed at young children was unfair, because kids don’t understand the intent of advertising. When the FTC boldly questioned whether there should be any advertising to children, The Washington Post derisively dubbed it the “National Nanny” and Congress stripped the agency of its authority to issue rules on advertising directed to children.

Fast-forward another 25 years. In the new millennium, TV was joined by Internet advergames, product placements in movies, ads on cell phones, free toys at burger joints, vending machines in schools, and other means of getting kids to buy or demand packaged and restaurant foods. It wasn’t from me that my daughter learned about Coke and McDonald’s.

In 2005, the Institute of Medicine (a unit of the National Academy of Sciences) concluded that, yes, advertising affects, and usually undermines, children’s diets and health. That helped us reach an agreement in 2008 with Kellogg to set nutrition standards for marketing foods to kids, which spurred more than a dozen other companies to do the same.

As I write this, several federal agencies—the FTC, the Food and Drug Administration, the Department of Agriculture, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—are poised to propose voluntary nutrition standards for advertising to children. (For an update, check www.cspinet.org.) Though the final standards will only be voluntary, some advertisers will abide by them.

I’m afraid to fast-forward another 25 years. I just hope that my grandchildren (should I be so lucky) and other youngsters won’t still be having to fend off the junk-food peddlers.

The food industry says that its ads are educational, because they enable parents and kids to discuss choices in the marketplace. But how can you learn from ads that deserve an F for honesty?

Unfair advantage. Huge ad budgets for junk foods target kids, who will always believe.

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See You in July
The next Nutrition Action will be a combined July/August issue. It should be in your mailbox by late July.