

Nickelodeon Markets Nutrition-Poor Foods to Children

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Background: While many factors contribute to childhood obesity and children's poor diets, food marketing affects children's food choices, preferences, their diets, and their health. The purpose of this study was to assess the nutritional quality of the foods marketed by one of the largest companies that markets food to children, Nickelodeon.

Methods: In fall 2005, the nutritional quality of foods advertised via Nickelodeon media and with Nickelodeon characters was assessed. The cross-sectional sample included food ads on the Nickelodeon television station and in *Nickelodeon* magazine, product packages with Nickelodeon characters found in one large urban grocery store, and meals at restaurants with promotions tied to Nickelodeon programs or characters.

Results: Of 168 television food ads, 148 (88%) were for foods of poor nutritional quality. Of 21 magazine food ads, 16 (76%) were for foods of poor nutritional quality. Fifteen grocery store products were identified with Nickelodeon characters on the packaging; nine (60%) were foods of poor nutritional quality. In addition, of the 48 possible children's meal combinations at restaurants with promotional offers tied to Nickelodeon programs, 45 (94%) were of poor nutritional quality.

Conclusions: Through its food marketing, the Nickelodeon entertainment company influences the diets of millions of American children. Unfortunately, eight of ten foods, beverages, and restaurant meals advertised on Nickelodeon's television station, in its magazine, or tied to its characters are of poor nutritional quality. Rather than undermining parents' efforts to feed their children healthfully, Nickelodeon should support parents by setting nutrition standards and marketing to children only foods that meet those standards.

(Am J Prev Med 2007;33(1):48-50) © 2007 American Journal of Preventive Medicine

Introduction

Currently, over 30% of American children are overweight or obese,¹ and only 2% eat a diet consistent with United States Department of Agriculture guidelines.² While many factors contribute to childhood obesity and children's poor diets, a comprehensive review by the National Academies' Institute of Medicine (IOM) concluded that food marketing affects children's food choices, preferences, their diets, and their health.³

Children receive an average of 65 messages from television advertising every day (about half are for food), along with many additional marketing messages from websites, schools, and in retail stores.³ Given how often companies communicate with children about food, those who manufacture, sell, and promote food to children have an enormous effect on parents' ability to feed their children a healthful diet. The IOM recommends that

food and entertainment companies shift the mix of marketed foods to reflect healthier options for children.

One entertainment company, Nickelodeon, a division of Viacom International Inc., has great potential to influence the diets of millions of American children. Nickelodeon is the most-watched children's television station, with 47 of the top 50 children's programs.⁴ In addition, Nickelodeon produces movies, books, magazines, records, toys, websites, and live tours, and its characters appear on food products, such as cereal, Pop-Tarts, and fruit-flavored snacks, as well as carrots, spinach, and citrus fruits, and are made into fast-food restaurant collectible toys.⁵

Nickelodeon sponsors several public service activities to address childhood obesity. Those include public service advertising with nutrition and physical activity messages, the Let's Just Play campaign, Nick characters appear on signage to promote fruits and vegetables produced in conjunction with the Produce for Better Health Foundation, and some Nickelodeon programs include nutrition and physical activity messages.

Nickelodeon representatives have stated that they "have established a set of Healthy Marketing Principles

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which now guide all of (their) decisions and actions involving food and beverages.”⁶ However, there has been no investigation of whether the nutritional quality of the foods that Nickelodeon markets is consistent with the company’s claims to be committed to child health and wellness. The purpose of this study was to assess the nutritional quality of foods and beverages marketed by Nickelodeon media and characters.

Methods

In fall 2005, the nutritional quality of foods, beverages, and restaurant items advertised via Nickelodeon media and with Nickelodeon characters was assessed. Food ads aired during 28 hours of television programming on the Nickelodeon channel (NICK1) during 2 consecutive days (Friday and Saturday, September 23 and 24) were reviewed. In addition, food ads in four issues of *Nickelodeon* magazine (September through December) and all of the products with Nickelodeon characters on the package in one large grocery store in Washington DC, were reviewed over a 3-day period that September. Restaurant websites were searched for promotions of children’s meals featuring Nickelodeon characters.

The nutritional quality of each advertised food was assessed using a set of nutrition standards for food marketing to children developed by a panel of nutrition and health experts⁷ (Table 1). The criteria are based on key nutrition concerns cited in the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.⁸ Foods of poor nutritional quality exceeded limits for total fat, saturated and trans fats, sodium, added sugars, or portion size, or did not meet criteria for fruit or vegetable servings (at least one-half serving), vitamins or minerals (at least 10% of the daily recommended intake of vitamins A or C, calcium, iron,

or fiber), or whole-grain content (whole grain listed as the first ingredient). Restaurant ads were considered to promote foods of poor nutritional quality if more than half of the restaurant’s children’s meals (or half their menu items, if they did not have a children’s menu) met the criteria for poor nutritional quality.

Results

During the 28 hours of Nickelodeon television programming, there were 652 ads (not including 82 promotions for Nickelodeon television shows and 30 public service announcements [PSAs]). Of the 652 ads, 168 were food ads, accounting for 26% of the total, and four nutrition PSAs (all encouraged children to eat breakfast) represented 13% of the PSAs. The most commonly advertised foods were sugary cereals (25% of all food ads), fast-food restaurants (19%), and pastries (12%). Of the 168 food ads, 148 (88%) were for foods of poor nutritional quality (Figure 1). Only 18 (11% of all food ads) featured foods or meals with at least one-half serving of fruit or vegetables, and 20 (13%) featured foods that met the whole-grain criterion.

Of the 21 food ads found in *Nickelodeon* magazine, 16 (76%) were for foods of poor nutritional quality. Of the 15 grocery store products with Nickelodeon characters on the packaging, nine (60%) were foods of poor nutritional quality. Nickelodeon characters appeared on graham crackers and yogurts that met our nutrition standards.

McDonald’s restaurant had a promotional offer tied to *Tak 3*, a Nickelodeon video game, and Burger King

Table 1. Nutrition criteria for food and beverage marketing to children

Foods that did not meet the following criteria were considered of poor nutritional quality	
Fat	No more than 35% of calories, excluding nuts, seeds, and peanut or other nut butters
Saturated plus trans fat	No more than 10% of calories
Added sugars	No more than 35% of added sugars by weight (added sugars exclude naturally occurring sugars from fruit, vegetable, and dairy ingredients) ^a
Sodium	No more than 230 mg per serving of chips, crackers, cheeses, baked goods, French fries, and other snack items No more than 480 mg per serving for soups, cereals, pastas, and meats No more than 600 mg for pizza, sandwiches, and main dishes No more than 770 mg for meals
Nutrient content	Contains one or more of the following: (1) 10% of the daily value (naturally or from fortification) of vitamins A or C, calcium, iron, or fiber, (2) half a serving of fruit or vegetable, or (3) whole grain as the first ingredient
Beverages of poor nutritional quality	
	Soft drinks, sports drinks, and sweetened iced teas
	Fruit-based drinks that contain less than 50% juice or that contain added sweeteners
	High-fat (whole or 2%) milk
	Beverages containing caffeine, excluding low-fat or fat-free chocolate milk (which contain trivial amounts of caffeine)
Portion sizes^b	
Individual items	No larger than the standard serving size used for Nutrition Facts labels. Portion size limits did not apply to fruits and vegetables
Meals	No more than one third of the daily calorie requirement for the average child in the age range targeted by the marketing ^c

^aTotal sugars were used when added sugars could not be determined.

^bIf the portion size was difficult to determine in an ad (e.g., a cartoon depiction of a breakfast), portion size criteria were not applied.

^cFor this study, 665 calories for meals were used.

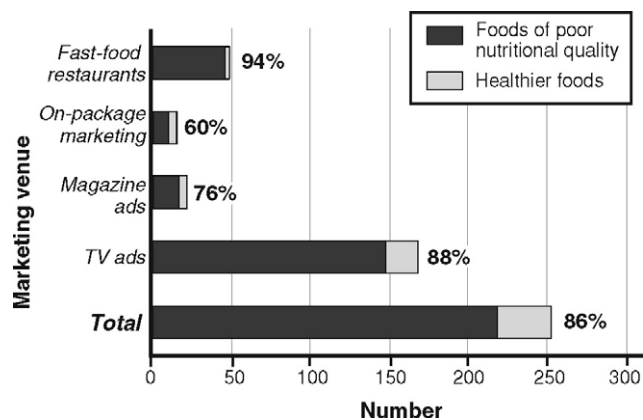


Figure 1. Nutritional quality of foods marketed by Nickelodeon. The number of television and magazine ads, the number of products with Nickelodeon characters on the package, and promotions of restaurant children's meals featuring Nick characters is indicated, as is the percentage of those ads and promotions that are for foods of poor nutritional quality.

had a promotional offer tied to *Danny Phantom*, a Nick television program. Of the 24 possible combinations for McDonald's Happy Meals, 22 (92%) were of poor nutritional quality, and of the 24 possible combinations of Burger King Kids' Meals, 23 (96%) were of poor nutritional quality. For example, a Happy Meal containing Chicken McNuggets, Apple Dippers with Low Fat Caramel Dip, and apple juice met the marketing nutrition standards, while the combination of a cheeseburger, French fries, and a soda did not.

Conclusion

Concerns about childhood obesity and the marketing of nutrition-poor foods to children are growing. In response, a number of food and broadcasting companies claim that they are changing their marketing practices and promoting healthier lifestyles to youth. This study assessed one company's food marketing practices.

On television, in its magazine, on food packages, and in restaurants, eight of ten foods, beverages, and restaurant meals that Nickelodeon markets to children are of poor nutritional quality. The vast majority of marketed foods are high in fat, saturated and trans fats, salt, or sugars, and few are fruits, vegetables, or whole grains.

As the number-one entertainment company for children, Nickelodeon's marketing undermines parental efforts to feed their children a healthful diet. Despite Nickelodeon's modest public service campaigns to address childhood obesity, the overwhelming majority of food messages that children receive from Nickelodeon promote foods of poor nutritional quality. For example, Nickelodeon's four PSAs encouraging children to eat breakfast paled in comparison to its 148 television ads promoting fast food, sugary cereals, pastries, and other foods of poor nutritional quality.

There are wide discrepancies between what parents tell their children is healthful to eat and what Nickelodeon markets as desirable to eat. In their attempts to feed their children well, many parents may find it difficult to compete with Nickelodeon's state-of-the-art market research, music, animation, attractive characters such as Sponge-Bob SquarePants, and other resources and skills. Although parents are ultimately responsible for feeding their children healthful foods, influential companies like Nickelodeon share in that responsibility and should support, rather than compete with, parents.

Although this study assessed the marketing practices of one of the largest children's entertainment companies, it is limited in that it focused on just one company. In addition, it did not include all types of marketing aimed at children, such as Internet promotions, product placement in movies or video games, and children's toys. Due to the cross-sectional nature of the sample, the findings may not be generalizable to all time periods. In addition, this type of research would be strengthened by double-coding of the data by independent coders.

Nickelodeon should establish nutrition standards and apply them to the foods that it allows to be advertised on its television station and in its magazine, as well as for food products and restaurant meals for which it allows the use of its characters. Pediatricians, parents, and others concerned about children's health should encourage Nickelodeon to stop marketing junk food to children.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest did not have any outside sources of support for this study nor did any people other than the authors listed make substantive contributions to the study.

No financial conflict of interest was reported by the authors of this paper.

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