Food Marketing to Kids

Food companies market their products to children in a variety of ways. Whether kids see food advertisements on television, in schools, or online, food marketing can impact their food preferences, choices, intake, and purchase requests. Unfortunately, much of the food marketing children are exposed to is for unhealthy food, like sugary drinks and fast food. The U.S. government must act in order to protect children of all ages from unhealthy food and beverage marketing.

How does food marketing impact kids?

- A foundational review from the Institute of Medicine found that:
  - Food preferences develop as early as ages 2-3 and can be impacted by early childhood experiences and exposure to foods, among other factors.
  - Children ages 2-3 have an awareness of food brands, and preschoolers are able to demonstrate brand recognition when cued by spokescharacters and colored packages. Children’s food requests are most often for branded products.

- A systematic review and meta-analysis of articles examining food marketing to kids found that exposure to food marketing is associated with increases in children’s food intake, choice of and preference towards the studied food items, and purchase requests (requests that a caregiver purchase an item).

- Young children ages 8 and under are unable to comprehend the “persuasive intent” of advertising, meaning they don’t understand the ad is attempting to convince them to purchase a product or ask their caregiver to do so.

- While older youth over the age of 8 may be able to understand the persuasive intent of advertising, it does not mean that they are not susceptible to its influence. Adolescents’ reduced ability to resist impulsive behaviors and immediate gratification may make them vulnerable to food marketing.

How is food marketed to kids?

Much of the food marketed to kids is unhealthy, and children encounter food marketing throughout much of their daily lives.

- Children see ads for a large range of unhealthy products on television.
  - In 2018, 23 percent of all advertisements that aired during children’s television programming were for food or beverages, an increase from 14 percent in 2012. Most of the food and beverage ads were for unhealthy food products; 65 percent of products advertised failed to meet the food industry’s self-regulatory nutrition standards.
for advertising to kids and 99 percent failed to meet standards for food marketing proposed by a U.S. federal government working group.¹⁰

- In 2019, children ages 2-5 years old viewed an average of 830 television ads for fast food, children ages 6-11 viewed an average of 786.5 ads, and children ages 12-17 viewed 774.5 ads. McDonald’s was the top advertiser to children of all ages, and Domino’s, Burger King, and Taco Bell were also among the top 4 advertisers to children of all ages.¹¹
- In 2018, eight companies advertised 23 different sugary drink and energy drink brands on television. Children ages 2-5 viewed on average 139.4 television ads for these products, children ages 6-11 viewed 135 ads, and children ages 12-17 viewed 169.3 ads for these products.¹²

- Children also contend with ads for unhealthy foods online.
  - In one study, 72 percent of children and adolescents reported exposure to food or beverage marketing on various social media apps. Forty-four percent of ads were for fast food and the most promoted brands were McDonald’s, Starbucks, and PepsiCo.¹³
  - Another study examining ads on online learning platforms found ads for Kellogg’s cereals, McDonald’s Happy Meals, and Kraft Heinz Lunchables on ABCya.com, a popular learning games website. Other food and beverage ads were also identified on children’s websites FunBrain.com and Poptropica.com.¹⁴
  - For more information on digital marketing of food and beverages to children, view our factsheet on the topic.

- Other common ways food companies market their products to children is through product placement in movies and television, spokes-characters (Image 1), celebrities, movie and television tie-ins, and product packaging (Image 2).

**What can be done about food marketing to kids?**

Despite multiple attempts to regulate food marketing to kids over the years, it remains largely unregulated. In the U.S., most food marketing to kids is regulated through the Children’s Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI), a food industry self-regulatory program. CFBAI is a voluntary program in which participating companies pledge to only advertise their products to children under the age of 13 if they meet the program’s nutrition criteria.¹⁷ This program, established in 2006, has been criticized for its limited impact and the loopholes that allow companies to continue to market their products to children.¹⁸ The evidence is clear: such voluntary programs are not effective in preventing the widespread marketing of unhealthy food products to children. The U.S. government must establish mandatory standards to regulate this harmful practice. However, progress has proven difficult due to extreme political pressure from the food advertising industry.

- In 2011, an Interagency Working Group (IWG) comprised of representatives from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Centers for Disease Control (CDC), Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and Federal Trade Commission (FTC) released preliminary proposed
nutrition principles to guide industry efforts to self-regulate food marketing to kids. Despite these being voluntary recommendations, there was intense industry pushback to the IWG proposal. In the fall of 2011, Congress included a rider in the federal appropriations bill that provides funding to the US government, blocking the IWG from finalizing its recommendations. This rider has been included in every appropriations package since. Congress must remove the rider so that the IWG can finish its work.

- Policymakers and the public need more information on how companies are marketing food to children. The FTC published two reports, one in 2008 and another in 2012, examining how much money major food and beverage companies were spending to advertise their products to children and the specific ways companies advertise their products to youth.
  - The FTC should publish an updated report on food marketed to kids. As the 2012 report is over a decade old, it is no longer an accurate representation of how food and beverage companies are marketing their products to children, particularly as children’s viewing habits have shifted from broadcast media to digital platforms, like streaming services, and given the rise of social media.
- Legislators must act. Both Congress and state governments can act to protect children from unhealthy food marketing.
  - Congress should pass legislation that:
    - Strengthens the FTC’s ability to regulate food marketing to kids.
    - Stops subsidizing junk food marketing by preventing companies from deducting marketing costs associated with unhealthy food marketing from their taxes.
  - State legislators can pass legislation that:
    - Makes it easier to prevent food companies from taking advantage of children by directing courts to consider the age of the target audience in determining whether an advertisement is false or misleading.

For more information, please contact The Center for Science in the Public Interest at policy@cspinet.org.

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7 Boyland, 2022.
8 IOM, 2006.
10 Reat, 2019.
11 Harris, 2021.
12 Harris, 2020.
13 Potvin Kent, 2019.


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