

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.¹ Unfortunately, much of the food marketing children are exposed to is for unhealthy food, like sugary drinks and fast food.^{2,3,4,5} 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:⁶
 - 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).⁷
- Young children ages 8 and under are unable to comprehend the "persuasive intent" of advertising,⁸ 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.⁹

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.



Image 1

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 1¹⁵), celebrities, movie and television tie-ins, and product packaging (Image 2¹⁶).



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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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 2008²¹ and another in 2012,²² 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.²³

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

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¹ Boyland E, et al. Association of Food and Nonalcoholic Beverage Marketing with Children and Adolescents’ Eating Behaviors and Health: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis. *JAMA Pediatr.* 2022;176(7).

² Reat A, Ribakove S, Wootan MG. *Changing the Channels: How Big Media Helps Big Food Target Kids (and What to Do About It)*. Center for Science in the Public Interest. November 2019. Accessed February 2, 2024. Available https://www.cspinet.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/resource/CSPI_Changing_Channels_Report_2019.pdf

³ Harris JL, et al. *Fast Food FACTS 2021: Fast food advertising: Billions in spending, continued high exposure by youth*. UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Health. June 2021. Accessed February 1, 2024. Available <https://media.ruddcenter.uconn.edu/PDFs/FACTS2021.pdf>

⁴ Harris JL, et al. *Sugary Drink FACTS 2020: Sugary drink advertising to youth: Continued barrier to public health progress*. UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Health. June 2020. Accessed February 2, 2024. Available https://www.sugarydrinkfacts.org/resources/Sugary%20Drink%20FACTS%202020/Sugary_Drink_FACTS_Full%20Report_final.pdf

⁵ Potvin Kent M, et.al. Children and Adolescents’ Exposure to Food and Beverage Marketing on Social Media Apps. *Pediatr Obes.* 2019;14(6):e12508.

⁶ Institute of Medicine. *Food Marketing to Children and Youth: Threat or Opportunity*. The National Academies Press. 2006.

⁷ Boyland, 2022.

⁸ IOM, 2006.

⁹ Harris JL, Brownell KD, Bargh JA. The Food Marketing Defense Model: Integrating Psychological Research to Protect Youth and Inform Public Policy. *Social Issues Policy Rev.* 2009;3(1).

¹⁰ Reat, 2019.

¹¹ Harris, 2021.

¹² Harris, 2020.

¹³ Potvin Kent, 2019.

¹⁴ Emond JA, et al. Unhealthy Food Marketing on Commercial Education Websites; Remote Learning and Gaps in Regulation. *Am J Prev Med.* 2021;60(4).

¹⁵ *Cheetos Mac N Cheese Flavor Sampler*. N.d. Amazon. Available <https://www.amazon.com/Cheetos-Mac-Cheese-Flavor-Sampler/dp/B08GZN4LN5>

¹⁶ *Kellogg's PAW Patrol Cinnamon Graham Snacks, 11 oz.* n.d. Walmart. Available <https://www.walmart.com/ip/Keebler-Paw-Patrol-Grahams-Cracker-Cookies-11-Oz/410561811>

¹⁷ The Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative. *CFBAI Core Principles, 6th Edition*. n.d. Available <https://bbbnf-bbbp-stf-use1-01.s3.amazonaws.com/docs/default-source/cfbai/cfbai-coreprinciples.pdf>

¹⁸ Healthy Eating Research. *Assessing the Public Health Impacts of the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative*. October 2021. Accessed February 8, 2024. Available <https://healthyeatingresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/HER-CFBAI-brief-101421.pdf>

¹⁹ Federal Trade Commission, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Food and Drug Administration, United States Department of Agriculture. *Interagency Working Group on Food Marketed to Children Preliminary Proposed Nutrition Principles to Guide Industry Self-Regulatory Efforts*. May 13, 2011. Available https://www.ftc.gov/sites/default/files/documents/public_events/food-marketed-children-forum-interagency-working-group-proposal/110428foodmarketproposedguide.pdf.

²⁰ Consolidated Appropriations Act 2012. P.L. 112-74.

²¹ Federal Trade Commission. *Marketing Food to Children and Adolescents: A Review of Industry Expenditures, Activities, and Self-Regulation: A Federal Trade Commission Report to Congress*. July 2008. Accessed February 8, 2023. Available <https://www.ftc.gov/reports/marketing-food-children-adolescents-review-industry-expenditures-activities-self-regulation-federal>

²² Federal Trade Commission. *Review of Food Marketing to Children and Adolescents – Follow-Up Report*. December 2012. Accessed February 8, 2023. Available <https://www.ftc.gov/reports/review-food-marketing-children-adolescents-follow-report>

²³ S. 213B, 2023-2024 Leg. Sess., 204th Leg. (N.Y. 2023)