

Alive Magazine, September 2010

Marketing to Kids How Can Parents Push Back?

Kids are constantly courted by commercials, billboards, product packaging and online promotions. How does it shape our children's lifelong relationship with food and nutrition?

By Lisa Bendall

When today's generation of parents was growing up, we weren't courted by countless commercials. Grocery stores didn't stock food packages covered in cartoon characters at kid's-eye level. Actors in our favourite TV shows didn't snack on recognizable brands of junk food.

With the possible exception of cereal ads that played during Saturday morning cartoons, we weren't exposed to many media messages that had been crafted specifically to influence our age group.

That made it easier for our parents to plunk food down in front of us that was good for us, rather than less healthy prepackaged snacks that they'd only bought because we'd dogged them to death about it.

Today it's vastly different. Now, as we moms and dads try to follow lifestyles of natural health and wellness and teach our kids the same, we're in fierce competition with a stream of messages that push our kids to consume, consume, consume.

So how can we help our children resist this pressure and encourage them instead to make healthy choices?

Our kids as consumers

The Canadian advertising industry spends billions of dollars a year on marketing to children – increasing from \$100 million in 1990 to \$2 billion in 2000. That's a colossal change over just a decade, and the numbers continue to rise.

"Historically, parents were the gatekeepers, so marketers would target the parents," says Dr. Charlene Elliott, who researches the marketing of foods to children at the University of Calgary. "But now, marketers are gate-crashing. They go straight for the children."

Marketers count on pester power

Today's kids are seen by savvy advertisers as potent influences on household purchases. Canadian children watch an average of 14 hours of TV a week, and they're hip to social media. In a single day they could be exposed to dozens of commercials, billboards, product packaging, and Internet "advergames" where they play while being bombarded with promotions.

"From the moment we wake up to the time we go to sleep, we're exposed to media messages that all say one thing: 'buy me!'" says Liam O'Donnell, a kids' graphic novelist with a background in media production. "With these messages creeping into every area

of our lives, from bus shelters to washroom stalls, it's no surprise that we're actually acting on these relentless sales pitches."

To corporations, it pays off : when modern moms and dads are stressed, time-constrained, and looking for something easy to serve that their kids are willing to eat, they're arguably more easily swayed by their six-year-old's I-want-it-now mantra. "The marketing industry calls that pester power," says Elliott.

Marketers win – kids lose

But what are they pushing our kids to put in their bodies? The cereals, snacks, and fast foods being advertised to children are packed with fat, sugar, and salt. One lunch of french fries, cheeseburger, and apple pie at a popular fast-food restaurant contains a whopping 45 g of fat – and exceeds the amount of sodium an eight-year-old should be having in an entire day. A popular kids' cereal trumpets its fibre content but is also loaded with sugar and artificial dyes.

And the fallout is fearsome. Seventy percent of Canadian kids aged four to eight do not have at least five servings a day of fruit or vegetables, as recommended by Health Canada.

Childhood obesity has skyrocketed to three times what it was 25 years ago, and culture and media are partly to blame, according to the Public Health Agency of Canada. Type 2 diabetes, which used to be a disease of adulthood, is now being diagnosed in teens and even children at an increasing rate.

What's a mom or dad to do?

Use your parent power

Don't underestimate the weight of a parent's influence, says Dr. Alison Hayford, a sociologist at the University of Regina. "Most of the evidence suggests pretty strongly that the child's primary influence, the one that matters most, is their immediate relationships."

Kids may fall under the spell of advertising spin, but "a parent or a good nanny or teacher is going to have much more influence than TV," Hayford says. So just talking to your child about the messages they see and explaining what the messages are trying to do can help mitigate the media.

Show and tell

Toronto mom Anna Lee found that simply posting Canada's Food Guide on her fridge got her family, including six-year-old Noah, discussing what should be going into their digestive systems. "The guide helps us talk about what good foods are, and why we're eating them, and that you have to have a bit of each," Lee says.

And even if you haven't taken the time to decipher an ingredients label, you can still talk about why there's a Spiderman design on the doughnuts package or why Cookie Monster is selling the chocolate biscuits.

Frank Falcone is owner and creative director of Toronto-based Guru Studio, an animated entertainment company. So he's in a unique position to teach his three children about the power of advertising. "They're naturally curious," he says. When they

ask about a project he's working on, "I show them how a commercial is crafted to appeal to people."

Graphic novelist O'Donnell, who is also a teacher, likes to use that same open-discussion approach with his class of grade-one students. "When we start questioning, we start thinking critically, and then we start challenging some of the motives and tactics behind the way certain products are marketed to us," he says.

Meenu Sikand, who is raising a nine-year-old son in Woodbridge, Ontario, has actually used media to her advantage. She has watched films with her son that put a spotlight on the marketing of unhealthy meal choices, such as *Fast Food Nation* (20th Century Fox, 2007) and *Supersize Me* (Sony Pictures, 2004).

"Obviously you can't take them away from media influence, in this day and age," Sikand comments. "But parents can sometimes pick the media."

Shape a healthy food attitude

When kids are constantly targeted by marketers, it seems parents have more to worry about than just the immediate health risks of trans fats and sugar. This kind of ad overload can also shape a child's lifelong relationship with food.

What's a kid to think when food is pushed as something that comes with toys and games, is unnaturally coloured in bright reds and yellows, has pictures on it, and even glows in the dark?

"Child-oriented food is all based on the entertainment factor of the food. It's designed to be played with," says Elliott. "You eat it for reasons that have nothing to do with nutrition."

What might that mean down the road? We know that many adults with weight problems struggle with the unhealthy habit of reaching for food when they're bored or lonely. "That's unsettling," Elliott says. "That's exactly the same relationship with food that is being marketed to children at a very young age."

Another disturbing message that's constantly promoted: "Vegetables are bad." Check out the new line of a popular macaroni and cheese dinner. Its ads boast about how well it has hidden cauliflower in the noodles.

There are even cookbooks for parents that show them how to sneak ingredients such as navy beans into dessert squares. "What that does is communicate to kids that you cannot eat vegetables on purpose," says Elliott.

We need to remind our kids instead that food is fantastic because it helps our bodies grow and be healthy. We like cauliflower and carrots and kale because they taste good – yep, even when they're not covered in chocolate batter or cheesy MSG-laced sauces—and they contain important nutrients.

Taking a positive approach to food also means not dwelling too much on what you won't let your child have, says parent educator Marty Layne in Victoria, BC. Sometimes forbidden fruit (no pun intended) is all the more enticing. Instead, focus on the foods you do eat in your family because of their nutrition.

It's difficult for parents to deny their kids when they ask for food. But Layne, a mom of four, had a working strategy: "I tried to make sure that whatever I had in my house, my children could eat at any time. That way, there was no hassle about it."

Do more at the store

Still, there may be times when your child is wholly taken in by something they've seen in an ad. "The messages can be really strong," says Layne. When she was watching a children's channel recently, she saw the same commercial 10 times. "There's constant bombardment. You see it again and again and again. After seeing it 10 times, boy, you *have to have* one of these [– whatever is being advertised]."

Six-year-old Noah Lee begged his parents to buy him a fruit candy after he saw TV commercials showing that biting into it would trigger a hugely entertaining fruit-juice explosion.

"He thought the food was going to be neat," says his mom. She finally gave in to his nagging. "He tried one and hated it immediately. It didn't squirt all over his shirt, and it didn't taste good."

Lee is actually glad she caved, because it was a perfect learning opportunity. "It led to discussions around the purpose of marketing: to make things look good, to get us to spend money. We've bought it, he's found out it's not as advertised, and Noah has learned his lesson," says Lee. Now when he nags, she reminds him about the fruit candy.

In fact, a little buying power can be a good thing. Sikand likes involving her son Manav in the food-buying decisions. "We want input into what we bring home, so we can make meals together or give them choices," she says. "But at the same time, you can't just accept their choices without giving them knowledge about why some choices are good and some are bad."

They read labels together in the store: "We will look at the sodium content, as well as the sugar and fat." When her son questions a food-buying decision, Sikand responds, "Okay, let's read the box and then you tell me if we should have it or not."

Marty Layne approves. "I think the whole thing is about discussion, both listening and talking."

Ten Steps to Steer Your Children Away from Ads

Want to reduce the impact of commercialism on your child? There's plenty that parents can do. Here are 10 tips to help your kids avoid the marketing trap.

1. Watch TV with your children

During commercials, ask: Why are they trying to make that food look like fun? What's their goal?

2. Control the commercials

You may not be able to limit everything your children see, but you can cap the amount of TV they watch or Internet games they play.

3. Expand their free-time repertoire

Do your children habitually flip on the tube when there's nothing else to do? Encourage them to play, read, develop a hobby, or create art.

4. Set an example

"Kids want to be like their parents," says sociologist Dr. Alison Hayford at the University of Regina. "If you're eating a good array of different foods, children are going to want to eat what you eat."

5. Have a family meal together

This is your chance not only to model healthy eating but to discuss family values. Try to eat together at least once a day.

6. Brush up on your food-prep skills

If you're short on time, that fast-food meal is more enticing. But it's worth exploring ways to put together healthy food fast. "Even if what you're doing for your dinner is making grilled cheese sandwiches with a side of celery sticks," says Dr. Hayford, "if you're using decent bread, decent cheese and decent celery, that's going to be a better meal than a bucket of chicken. And it's probably going to take no more time than running off to get that bucket of chicken."

7. Bring your child to the supermarket

Read the shopping list together, discuss what's needed at home, and include your child in the choices.

8. Give your kids an allowance

When they pester you for pastries, let them know that the household spending money is for healthy foods, but they're welcome to buy the treat using their own coin. "Often when children have to pay for something, they think about it differently," says parent educator Marty Layne in Victoria, B.C.

9. Find out *why* your kid wants to buy

"It might be that your child is singled out and picked on because they don't have that particular snack in their lunch," notes Layne. You may come up with an alternative that's prepared at home.

10. Expose your kids to a good read

In Liam O'Donnell's graphic novels *Media Meltdown* and *Food Fight* (Orca 2009 and 2010), the heroes learn how media can manipulate and where food comes from. "Both books aim to empower young readers to become engaged citizens and smart consumers," says O'Donnell. "My goal is to get readers to ask questions."

Protecting Kids with Policies

Many experts and parents alike question the ethics of kid-targeted ads. "I think direct marketing to children is way out of line, and really offensive," says University of Regina sociologist Dr. Alison Hayford. Not only does it promote unhealthy choices and gender stereotypes, she adds: "These ads turn food purely into an item of consumerism, so it becomes a status signifier."

It's clearly an international concern. The World Health Organization recently developed a dozen recommendations for governments to control the marketing of food and drinks to kids.

In April California's Santa Clara County passed an ordinance that bans restaurants from promoting high-fat or sugary foods using toys and other giveaways. In a news release Santa Clara Board of Supervisors president Ken Yeager said: "This ordinance levels the playing field. It helps parents make the choices they want for their children without toys and other freebies luring them toward food that fails to meet basic nutritional standards."

For years the *Quebec Consumer Protection Act* has prohibited TV commercials directed at kids. But the law is limited to advertising that originates within the province. A proposed federal private member's bill, C-324 (*An Act to amend the Competition Act and the Food and Drugs Act: Child Protection Against Advertising Exploitation*), would extend a similar ban nationwide. The bill passed first reading in March.

Are these steps in the right direction? We all know that kids aren't targeted only by TV ads or fast-food toys. Marketing to children can be as insidious as a soft-drink placement on *American Idol*.

But no one can deny that laws like these raise awareness of an important issue that desperately needs more attention. "They say parents make the decision ultimately to put the food in the basket," says University of Calgary researcher Dr. Charlene Elliott, "and that is true. However, if you're completely bombarded with this stuff, it makes it that much more challenging to control these aspects."

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