Sweet-Talking the Kids: Not-So-Hidden Persuasion

**The Issue:**

You won’t see cigarettes advertised during the Barney hour or beer pushed on Nickelodeon, but that doesn’t mean children are getting a steady diet of healthy advertising, according to a slew of new studies. Now that Big Macs have become the new Marlboros in terms of their effect on public health, researchers are increasingly concerned about advertising messages that bombard children daily.

**Are Ads Unhealthy?**

A recent report by the Kaiser Family Foundation sums up the worry, saying “it appears likely that the main mechanism by which media use contributes to childhood obesity may well be through children’s exposure to billions of dollars’ worth of food advertising and cross-promotional marketing.” [1] But researchers admit the link between advertising and children’s actual health behaviors is not yet well established. More studies are needed, they say, to determine whether advertisements directly affect children’s overall food intake, exercise patterns and smoking and drinking habits.

**Toy or Advertisement?**

Children's advertising is pervasive: McDonald’s Barbie now comes with french fries on a fast food tray. Hershey Foods Corp. publishes the book “More M&M’s Brand Chocolate Candy Math.” Stealth methods of marketing to kids have dramatically increased in the last decade, for not just food but ad-restricted goods like tobacco and alcohol.

**The Facts:**

- Children see an average of 40,000 television ads a year. The majority of ads targeted at children sell candy, cereal and fast food. [2]
- Several studies show a link between the number of hours of television watched and the number of children’s requests to their parents for specific food items. [6]
- A study of 2- to 6-year-olds found that the children who watched ads during a popular cartoon were more likely to prefer products shown in the ads than children who watched the cartoon without ads. [3]
- After analyzing a number of studies, the American Psychological Association concluded that children younger than 7 or 8 years old do not have the critical thinking skills to understand the “persuasive intent” of television commercials. [9]
- One year after the launch of a CDC ad campaign to encourage physical activity among 9- to 13-year-olds, 9- and 10-year-olds who were familiar with the campaign were more active than their peers who did not know about the ads. [8]
• In 2001, one-third of elementary schools, half of middle schools and almost three-fourths of high schools in the United States had a contract with a company to sell soft drinks on campus. [10]
• As of January 2004, Arkansas is the only state that has passed legislation banning vending machines in elementary schools. Only a handful of others have any kind of comprehensive regulation of commercial activities in schools. Legislation was pending in 22 states, however. [7]
• A 2003 study found that teens who are impulsive, take risks and seek new experiences may be more receptive to cigarette ads. [4]
• Nonsmoking teens who recognize the brand in their favorite cigarette ad and are willing to use or wear tobacco-branded products say they are more likely to start smoking than those without a brand preference. [5]
• In a survey of 35 major U.S. magazines, researchers found the rate of beer and liquor advertising increased 1.6 times for every million adolescent readers. Wine ad rates were not linked to teen readership. [11]
• A study of 1,530 eighth-graders suggests boys are more likely than girls to be aware of and remember beer ads, and may be more likely to drink as a result. [12]
• About 13 percent of visitors to 55 alcohol company Web sites were under 21, the legal drinking age. The sites most often frequented by teens marketed beer and “malternatives” — sweetened alcohol drinks. [13]

Regulating Food Advertising

In the late 1970s, the culprits were Coco-Puffs and other sweetened cereals. Armed with a lengthy research review by the National Science Foundation, the Federal Trade Commission supported banning television advertising to small children too young to understand “the selling purpose of advertising” and limiting sugar-laden food ads aimed at older kids. [14] The FTC proposal was promptly buried under furious complaints from the food industry, and Congress halted all FTC funding until it could remove the agency’s power to regulate unfair advertising practices.

Despite its inauspicious history, the movement to regulate advertising to kids is again attracting followers, thanks to startling statistics behind America’s childhood obesity epidemic. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the proportion of overweight children age 6 to 11 has more than doubled since 1980. For teens, the proportion has tripled during that period. [15]

While researchers study how food ads might influence this trend, policy makers are holding debates about whether to regulate child-targeted advertising. The issue is caught up in the larger argument over whether bulging waistlines are mostly a matter of individual responsibility or the product of a “toxic environment of low-cost, high-fat food and less exercise,” says Harold Goldstein, Dr.P.H., of the California Center for Public Health Advocacy.

“To the extent that it is the environment, new public policies are required” to fight the epidemic, according to Goldstein.

Margo Wootan, D.Sc., nutrition policy director at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, agrees. “If companies were marketing broccoli and bananas to kids, there would be no reason for concern. Marketing has a negative effect on children’s diets because virtually all of the foods marketed to children are high in either calories, salt, saturated fat or refined sugars and low in nutrients.”

In recent years, food advertising to children has leapt off the television set to less typical venues. At a recent Institute of Medicine meeting, Alex Molnar, Ph.D., of Arizona State University presented data showing that commercialism in schools, including vending contracts and educational materials sponsored by food companies, has increased rapidly since 1990.

Wootan and others have pressed for a bill that would set advertising standards limiting the kinds of food that could be marketed to children. But so far, the administration has been cool to the idea, preferring to encourage companies to voluntarily change marketing practices.

Some companies are doing that. Michael Mudd, Kraft Foods Inc. executive vice president for global corporate affairs, said his company was seeking “an outright end to all in-school ads and promotion” and will not aim future ads at preschool kids.
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