

The role of media in childhood obesity

Since 1980 the proportion of overweight children ages 6-11 has tripled. Today about 10% of 2 to 5 year-olds and 15% of 6 to 19 year-olds are overweight. During the same period in which childhood obesity increased, there was also an increase in media targeted to children. Even children ages 6 and under spend as much time with screen media as they do playing outside. Much of the media targeted to children promote foods such as sweets, fizzy drinks and snacks. It is estimated that a child sees approximately 40,000 advertisements a year on TV alone.

A few ways researchers have hypothesised that advertisements may contribute to childhood obesity are:

- The food advertisements children are exposed to on TV influence them to make unhealthy food choices.
- The cross-promotions between food products and popular TV and movie characters are encouraging children to buy and consume more high-calorie foods.

Many researchers have suggested the food advertising children are exposed to through advertising may lead to unhealthy food choices and weight gain. As the number of channels available has risen considerably in the 1990s, opportunities to advertise directly to children expanded as well. The majority of ads targeted at children are for food including snacks (31%), cereal (23%) and fast food (27%). One study recorded approximately 11 food commercials per hour during children's Saturday morning television programming, estimating that the average child viewer may be exposed to one food commercial every 5 minutes.

The effects of food advertising on children

TV ads can influence children's purchases – and those of their families. Fast food outlets spend 2 million pounds in television ads targeted to children.

Recent years have seen an increase in the number of food products being marketed to children through cross-promotions with popular TV and movie characters. A few examples are SpongeBob Cheez-its, Hulk pizzas and Scooby-Doo marshmallow cereal. Fast food outlets also make frequent use of cross-promotions with children's media characters. McDonalds and Disney have an exclusive agreement under which Happy Meals include toys from top Disney movies. In the past, Happy Meals have also included toys based on the Teletubbies, which is aimed at children under 4. One study found that 1 in 6 food commercials aimed at children promise a free toy. Many commercials also use cartoon characters to sell products to children, which research has shown to be particularly effective in aiding children's slogan recall and ability to identify the product.

Advertisements have also promoted unrealistically thin body types as the ideal, which could possibly encourage teenage girls to engage in unhealthy dieting or

eating disorders. This suggests television gives children contradictory messages about eating habits and body image: Be thin but eat fatty foods, sweets and salty snacks.

A study carried out by Becker et al into eating disorders in teenage girls aimed to use a naturally occurring setting where television was introduced to Fiji to see the effects this would have on incidence and attitudes of anorexia. Before TV was introduced a sample of girls were interviewed about eating habits and three years later were reinterviewed. The number who were had risk of disordered eating had risen from 13% to 29%. This suggests that media exposure to western methods of weight control and ideals of thinness leads to a changed attitude towards eating.

Reduce or regulate food ads targeted to children

For years people have promoted for policy measures to protect children from advertising, including ads for unhealthy food. Because of the rapid increase in childhood obesity, food advertisements aimed at children have come under increasing scrutiny. Most researchers agree that children do not understand commercials in the same way adults do. Most children under six cannot distinguish between program content and commercials and most children under eight do not understand that the purpose of advertising is to sell a product.

Children's advertising guidelines are currently regulated by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which requires compliance before renewing a station's license. Some guidelines show advertising should: not mislead children about the nutritional benefits of products; depict appropriate amounts of a product for the situation portrayed; refrain from portraying snacks as substitutes for meals; and show mealtime products in the context of a balanced diet.

Children's TV producers note that banning food advertising or underwriting would remove one of the most lucrative sources of funding for children's television, particularly given the lack of public funds available for that purpose.

Sweden, Norway and Finland do not permit commercial sponsorship of children's programs and also do not advertise directly to children under the age of 12. The BBC decided to prohibit use of its cartoon characters in fast food ads and England is pushing for stricter guidelines for advertising aimed at children.