

## Healthy lifestyle messages in advertising for unhealthy food and drinks: Not the way to teach children about good health

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Food and beverage companies use healthy lifestyle messages, such as depicting physical activity or fruits and vegetables, in child-directed advertising. Although companies claim that these messages teach children about nutrition and good health, most of this advertising promotes unhealthy food and drinks. In addition, previous research has not confirmed that these messages positively affect children's attitudes about healthy eating or physical activity. Furthermore, research suggests that such messages can increase perceived healthfulness of unhealthy food and drinks (i.e., "health halo" effects). The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of healthy lifestyle messages promoting nutrient-poor foods in child-directed advertising.

### The research

This study used a randomized controlled experimental design with children (ages 7-11) to compare effects of three different types of commercials: 1) health halo commercials (i.e., ads for unfamiliar unhealthy food and drinks with healthy lifestyle messages); 2) commercials for similar products with another message (not health-related); and 3) healthy food/drink commercials. Participating children watched three commercials for one of these types, answered questions about the advertised products, and received a snack including both healthy and unhealthy options.

### Key findings

This research found no evidence that healthy lifestyle messages and/or healthy food commercials positively affect children's health-related attitudes or behaviors.

- Children in all conditions agreed that it is important to eat fruits and vegetables and to exercise every day, and there were no differences in healthfulness ratings of either healthy or unhealthy snacks.

Nutrition and/or physical activity messages in child-directed commercials for unhealthy food and/or drinks makes these products more attractive to children.

- Children in the health halo condition rated the advertised unhealthy products, including sweet snacks and fruit-flavored drinks, as significantly healthier compared with children in other conditions.
- Children also believed that mom or dad would buy more products in the health halo condition versus products in the unhealthy food/other message condition.

**Health halo effects: Using nutrition and physical activity messages in advertising for unhealthy foods and drinks increases perceptions that unhealthy products are healthy.**

## An advertisement for an unfamiliar unhealthy food with a healthy lifestyle message

Food and beverage companies should not promote physical activity or good nutrition in child-directed advertising for unhealthy products.



## Recommendations

Food and beverage companies should not promote physical activity or good nutrition in child-directed advertising for unhealthy products. This practice likely increases children's positive attitudes about unhealthy brands, and does not teach children about healthy diets or good health. Such practices should be discouraged, including through industry self-regulatory programs such as the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI).

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The Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at the University of Connecticut is a distinguished multi-disciplinary policy research center dedicated to promoting solutions to childhood obesity, poor diet, and weight bias through research and policy. The Rudd Center is a leader in building broad-based consensus to change diet and activity patterns by conducting research and educating policy makers and the public.

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