Study: Parents wrongly think sugary drinks healthy

Bamboozled by misleading product marketing and labeling, parents have failed to get the message that sugary drinks — beyond soda — are not healthy for kids.

That's the conclusion of a new study from the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at University of Connecticut, published today in Public Health Nutrition.

Many parents believe that drinks with high amounts of added sugar — particularly fruit drinks, sports drinks and flavored water — are "healthy" options for kids, according to the report, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which focuses on improving health and health care. Never mind that the most recent federal dietary guidelines recommended limiting added sugar to 10% of total calories.

"Although many parents know that soda is not good for children, many still believe that sugary drinks are healthy options," says Jennifer Harris, who wrote the study and is director of marketing initiatives at Rudd Center. "The labeling and marketing for these products imply that they are nutritious, and these misperceptions may explain why so many parents buy them."

The findings come at a particularly difficult time for the beverage industry, which has seen sales of regular and diet carbonated soft drinks steadily decline in recent years. As those sales decline, beverage makers are increasingly turning to waters, flavored waters, juices, sports drinks and even milk products as options.

Officials at the American Beverage Association trade group slammed the study. "This is just the latest report coming out of an institution with a long history of bashing beverages, and it undermines parents' ability to make decisions themselves," says Christopher Gindlesperger, senior director of public affairs, in an e-mailed statement.

As an industry, Gindlesperger says, "We provide clear, factual information on our all of our packaging — and even go beyond government requirements — to make sure parents have the information they need to make the choices that are right for them and their families. There's nothing wrong with having a sports drink or a soda or a juice drink — it's about moderation and balance. And parents get that."

The vast majority of parents give kids sugary drinks regularly. Some 96% of parents say they gave sugary drinks to their kids in the month prior to the survey. The most common sugary drinks that parents give kids are fruit drinks — given by 77% of parents in the past month, the survey found. Some 80% of parents of children age 2 to 5 provided fruit drinks, such as Capri Sun or Sunny D.

Equally significant, nearly half of parents surveyed rated flavored waters as healthy, and more than one-quarter considered fruit drinks and sports drinks to be healthy. African-American and Hispanic parents were more likely than white parents to rate some sugary drinks as healthy, the study found.

Parents said they were particularly influenced by nutritional claims appearing on the packages — such as claims that the items are "real" or "natural" or contained vitamin C or antioxidants, or were low in sodium or calories.

That, says Marlene Schwartz, a study author, is why there's a need for increased attention to ingredient claims on product packaging, "and other marketing tools that may mislead parents to believe that some sugary drinks are healthful options for children."

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