



FOOD MARKETING TO CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS *WHAT PARENTS THINK* *Survey Results and Policy Recommendations*

Food Marketing to Children: The Problem

- Food marketing contributes to poor diet and obesity among youth.¹ Food companies spend \$1.6 billion every year on marketing specifically targeted to children and adolescents.² On television alone, children see 13 food advertisements every day on average,³ and 86% of ads promote products high in sugar, saturated fat, or sodium.⁴ Adolescents see even more: more than 16 ads per day.⁵
- The obesity crisis cannot be solved without dramatic changes in food marketing to children and adolescents, according to public health experts.
- The food industry has responded to these concerns with self-regulatory pledges that have produced some small changes, but questionable improvement. For example, children's exposure to packaged food and beverage ads on television went down by 2% from 2007 to 2011, but this reduction was more than offset by a 20% increase in exposure to fast food and other restaurant ads.⁶ From 2009 to 2012, 13 of 16 cereals advertised directly to children were slightly reformulated, but these cereals still consist of 33% sugar (down from 36%) and average fiber content did not improve.⁷
- The federal government's efforts to propose *voluntary* principles to guide companies have stalled due to industry opposition.⁸

The Survey

Parents have the consumer power to insist that food and media companies improve their youth-targeted marketing practices (spending \$58 billion on food and beverages annually), and the political power to demand government action. In order to help assess that power, the Rudd Center conducted an online survey of parents' attitudes about food marketing to children. We surveyed 2,454 parents with children ages 2-17 living at home in 2009, 2010, and 2011. The survey also assessed

- Parents' perceptions about the reach and influence of food marketing to children and adolescents;
- Parents' attitudes about environmental influences on their children's eating habits; and
- Parents' support for policies to promote healthy eating.

Key Findings

- Parents are as concerned about junk food marketing to their children as they are about alcohol and tobacco use in the media, and their concern is increasing.
- Close to 70% believe that food marketing negatively affects their children's eating habits.
 - They see TV commercials, promotions in stores, and cartoon characters on packages as the biggest problems.

- Concern about food marketing to children is high across all socio-demographic groups, including all income levels, political orientations, parents' gender, and children's age.
 - Black and Hispanic parents and parents of overweight children believe that food marketing has a greater effect on their children and perceive greater obstacles to ensuring healthy eating habits for their children.
- There is broad and increasing *bipartisan* support for nearly all proposed actions to promote healthy eating among children, including:
 - Limiting advertising and sponsorships in schools and on school buses;
 - Requiring children's media and TV advertising to promote healthy foods; and
 - Limiting new forms of advertising for unhealthy foods to children under 12, including mobile marketing, viral marketing, and internet advertising.
- Parents are more likely to support regulations to limit unhealthy food marketing to children now than they were three years ago.

Policy Recommendations to Support Parents' Efforts

State Policymakers and Agencies

- Prohibit advertising on school buses.
- In early childcare and preschool facilities, prohibit the use of branded foods, toys, books featuring branded foods, and restaurant gift certificates, as rewards.
- Require school wellness policies to limit marketing of foods and beverages in schools.

City Councils, School Districts and Local Health Agencies

- Prohibit advertising and logos
 - on school buses and all school property;
 - in curricular materials and for school fundraising.
- Regulate
 - foods and beverages sold through vending and food service contracts, including in recreational and other public facilities;
 - foods sold in retail and food service establishments (e.g., reasonable limits on portion sizes; inclusion of only healthful side dishes and beverages in children's meals);
 - product location in retail establishments; and
 - location and density of billboards and retail signage.
- Prohibit acceptance of sponsorships from food and beverage companies.

Public Health Advocates

- Address higher obesity rates among black, Hispanic, and low-income youth by encouraging companies such as McDonald's and Coca-Cola to limit targeted marketing in these communities.
- Design campaigns to inform parents about current food marketing practices to
 - increase awareness of marketing in schools and newer marketing techniques commonly used to target youth, such as mobile marketing, viral marketing, social media, advergames, and banner ads on third-party websites;
 - increase understanding of the negative influence of food marketing on children and adolescents; and
 - counteract industry efforts to convince parents that all foods are fine in moderation and that more physical activity will solve the obesity crisis.

- Inform caucuses of black and Latino legislators about the extent of unhealthy food marketing in their communities and parents' support for policies to address the issue.

Food and Media Industries

- Include healthy eating messages during children's programming.
- Restrict marketing of unhealthy foods in children's media.
- Establish meaningful limits on unhealthy marketing to children and adolescents.

Federal Policymakers and Agencies

- Industry self-regulation has not improved food marketing to children. The U.S. Congress and federal agencies should propose legislation or regulation of TV advertising and digital media primarily viewed by minors.

The full Rudd Report, *Food marketing to children and adolescents: What do parents think?* is available at www.yaleruddcenter.org/marketingsurvey

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January 2013

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- ⁷ Harris JL, Schwartz MB, Brownell KD, et al. Cereal FACTS 2012: Limited progress in the nutrition quality and marketing of children's cereals. 2012; www.cerealfacts.org/media/Cereal_FACTS_Report_2012_7.12.pdf.
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