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Short videos countering misleading marketing of children’s sugary drinks reduce parents’ intentions to serve

Messages resonated with a wide audience of parents in all racial and ethnic groups

Hartford, Conn. – Highlighting the true ingredients in sweetened drinks for young children and the misleading marketing techniques used to promote them effectively reduce parents’ intentions to serve sugary drinks, according to a new study from researchers at the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health at the University of Connecticut. The study’s findings, published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, showed that countermarketing videos focused on fruit drinks and toddler milks, two sweetened drinks widely promoted to parents of toddlers, reduced positive attitudes towards and intentions to serve these products.

In an online experiment, researchers tested the effects of viewing [two 45-second videos](#) that pointed out common misperceptions about children’s sweetened fruit drinks and toddler milks. For example, most parents do not know that children’s fruit drinks often contain added sugar and diet sweeteners, and less than 10% juice. In addition, most do not understand that product claims on toddler milks, which are sweetened powdered milk products often marketed by infant formula companies, are not supported by science. Child health experts do not recommend serving either fruit drinks or toddler milks to young children, but many parents believe that they are healthy, or even necessary, for young children.

“In previous studies, we found that parents were shocked at how marketing messages by fruit drink and toddler milk manufacturers tricked them to believe these products were healthy drinks for their young children,” said Jennifer Harris, Ph.D., MBA, Senior Research Advisor, Marketing Initiatives at the Rudd Center. “This research demonstrates that countermarketing messages aimed at parents will help offset companies’ misleading marketing practices.”

In this randomized controlled experiment, 600 diverse caregivers of older infants and toddlers (8-37 months) participated. They were randomly assigned to view either the sweetened drink countermarketing videos or two control videos. The control videos provided recommendations for children’s screentime and matched the countermarketing videos in tone and length. After viewing, participants completed a survey about sweetened children’s drinks.

Key findings include:

- The majority of caregivers (66%) reported that they had served fruit drinks to their child in the past week and 50% reported serving toddler milks.
- Viewing the countermarketing videos reduced caregivers' intentions to serve both fruit drinks and toddler milks, whether or not they had served them.
- They also significantly reduced caregivers' overall positive attitudes about fruit drinks and toddler milks, as well as perceptions that the products were convenient and a good value.
- The countermarketing messages were effective with a wide audience of caregivers, including WIC participants and all racial/ethnic groups.

The videos are currently available [online](#) and designed to share via social media and through child health providers, including pediatricians and pediatric dentists. They are also available as resources for WIC counselors and SNAP educators. In addition to addressing parents' misperceptions about sugary drinks in an upbeat, easy-to-follow manner, the videos encourage caregivers to "keep it simple, keep it real" by serving water and plain milk to their toddlers.

"These countermarketing videos are effective tools to address the health halo that companies have created around widely marketed sweetened children's drinks, including fruit drinks and toddler milks," said Frances Fleming-Milici, Ph.D., Director of Marketing Initiatives at the Rudd Center. "However, policymakers must also address misleading marketing and increase transparency of ingredients, especially on products marketed for young children."

Reducing sugar consumption is a public health priority. Early childhood is a critical time in a child's nutritional development, and sweetened drink consumption by infants and toddlers may condition long-term sweet preferences and reduce acceptance of plain milk and water during childhood.

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This paper is part of a special edition of the *American Journal of Public Health* (AJPH) in collaboration with [1,000 Days](#). The special issue explores the importance of the 1,000-day window from pregnancy to age 2 for maternal and child nutrition and health in the United States.

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About the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Health

The Rudd Center for Food Policy & Health at the University of Connecticut is a multi-disciplinary policy research center dedicated to providing high-level expertise and guidance on food marketing to children, food assistance programs, food and nutrition-related policies, and policies to reduce weight bias. Since its inception, the Rudd Center has been clearly established in both national and international circles as the place where science and public policy intersect, and where innovation linked to action is a guiding philosophy. For more information, visit www.uconnruddcenter.org, follow us on Twitter at www.twitter.com/uconnruddcenter, and on Facebook at www.facebook.com/uconnruddcenter.