Food Marketing to Children Undermines Their Health

by Susan Linn

Childhood obesity is a major public health problem in the United States, yet America's children are targeted as never before with marketing for foods high in sugar, fat, salt, and calories.[i] The advertising industry's stance is that parents should bear sole responsibility for what and how much their children eat.[ii] However, a close look at the nature, depth, and breadth of food marketing aimed at children shows that view to be simplistic.

An escalating problem

While food comprises a significant portion of what's marketed to children, food marketing occurs in the context of a myriad of commercial messages, including advertising for toys, clothing, media, accessories, and countless other consumer goods to them as well. While children have been targets for advertising since the advent of mass marketing, the intensity and frequency has escalated, as has the amount of money spent. By 1992, corporations were spending about $6 billion annually to target children[iii] and by 2003 the figure rose to an estimated $15 billion.[iv] In the late 20th century, the proliferation of electronic media, the deregulation of advertising on children's television, and the escalation of marketing in schools combined to allow marketers virtually unfettered access to children.

Children between the ages of 2 and 18 spend almost 40 hours a week outside of school consuming media, most of which is commercially driven. Children are often alone when they watch television, meaning that no adult is present to help them process the marketing messages permeating the medium. Thirty-two percent of children ages two to seven have televisions in their rooms, as do 65% of children 8 to 18[v] and 26% of children under 2.[vi]

Susan Linn is the associate director of the Media Center at Judge Baker Children's Center and Instructor in psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. She is the author of *Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood* (The New Press, 2004).

While television is the most prevalent medium in children's lives, their access to the Internet — where the lines between content and marketing can be significantly blurred — is growing.[vii] Companies lure children with "advergaming": products are incorporated into computer and video games as a means of advertising, which allows companies to keep children's attention focused on specific brands much longer than a traditional commercial.[viii] One site, called *Candystand* (www.candystand.com) consists of games featuring Kraft products such as Lifesavers, Crème Savers, and Jello Pudding Bites.[ix]

Whose responsibility is it to protect our most vulnerable citizens from corporate interests run amok? The easy answer is that it's up to parents — and parents alone — to safeguard children. Yet marketers routinely undermine parental authority, preferring to target children directly with messages honed by child psychologists to more effectively manipulate kids. Adults are depicted as absent, mean, or incompetent. Young children's love of cartoon characters is exploited to sell candy. A few years ago, one company conducted a study designed to help corporations help children nag more effectively. Today "the nag factor" is an established advertising strategy.

As experts on child rearing urge parents to "pick their battles," parents are overwhelmed with commercially created battles to fight. If they are strict about food, should they also be strict about violent toys, media, and music? What about precociously sexualized clothing? Computer, video game, and television time? Materialism?

In fact, parental disapproval is a common selling point for products. For instance, a 1999 article in *Advertising Age* begins, "Mothers are known for instructing children not to play with their food. But increasingly marketers are encouraging them to."[x] Instead of acquiescing to parents' concerns, the marketing industry often sees parental disapproval as a strong selling point with kids. When discussing the strategy for selling Kraft Lunchables®, a marketing expert put it this way:

"Parents do not fully approve — they would rather their child ate a more traditional lunch — but this adds to the brand's appeal among children because it reinforces their need to feel in control."[xi]

In 2002, McDonalds spent over $1.3 billion on advertising in the United States alone, making Burger King's $650 million seem paltry by comparison. Pepsico spent more than $1.1 billion, outspending Coca Cola by about $544,000.[xii] Kraft Foods (owned, incidentally, by tobacco giant Phillip Morris — now called Altria Group), maker of Kraft Macaroni and Cheese, Oreos, and Kool-Aid, spent about $465 million in 2001.[xiii] The year before, Burger King spent $80 million on advertising just to children[xiv] and Quaker Oats spent $15 million pitching Cap'n Crunch.[xv]

Insinuating brands into children's lives

Food marketing is effective. Children's requests for food products, misperceptions about nutrition, and increased caloric intake have been shown to be linked to television advertising.[xvi] One 30-second food commercial can affect the brand choices of children as young as 2, and repeated exposure has even more impact.[xvii] Meanwhile, food marketing to children extends well beyond television commercials. Along with most children's movies, many of the television programs for children license their characters to food companies. For instance, Nickelodeon's hit program SpongeBob SquarePants was Kraft's top selling Macaroni and Cheese in 2002 and the number one *face* shaped Good Humor Ice Cream Bar.[xviii] Once a program is associated with a particular brand, the program itself becomes an ad for that food. Visit any supermarket and you'll find shelves filled with examples of these links between the media and food manufacturers.

Take another Nickelodeon's hit program, *Rugrats* — Chucky, Angelica, and the other *Rugrats* tykes now grace packages of Kraft Macaroni and Cheese, as well as Farley's Fruit Rolls, a peanut-butter-and-jelly flavored Good Humor ice cream sandwich, and Amurol bubble gum with comics printed on the gum itself ("view & chew"). Nickelodeon itself has its own line of fruit snacks featuring Nicktoons characters.[xix]

Tie-ins like these are designed to lure children into selecting foods associated with favorite movie or television characters. They are also designed to keep children continually reminded of products. As one marketing expert says, corporations are "trying to establish a situation where kids are exposed to their brand in as many different places as possible throughout the course of the day or the week, or almost anywhere they turn in the course of their daily rituals."[xx]

Children's introduction to television linked calories often begins in earnest with juice. According to Lisa Rant, a beverage industry writer: "The beverage aisle is brimming with brews for babies, and mom can take her pick from a plethora of multi- and single-serve solutions with products packaged specifically for the pediatric set. Apple & Eve travels down Sesame Street with Elmo's Punch, Big Bird's Apple, Grover's Grape, and Bert & Ernie's Berry juices . . . . "[xxi]

Sesame Street isn't the only children's program to cash in on juice boxes for the littlest children. Libby's offers juice boxes adorned with *Arthur* characters, and "since toddlers are naturally drawn to colorful graphics and familiar characters, Mott's made its move with juice boxes that have featured Nickelodeon's *Rugrats* and, more recently, PBS' *Dragon Tales*. The innovative *Dragon Tales* promotion ran for six months, with changes in graphics every 45 days to 'refresh' the campaign."[xxii]

From a juice company's point of view — and that of many parents — little juice boxes or containers make sense: they're small enough for a young child to handle (both physically and with regard to appetite), easy to transport, and relatively unspillable. As Julie Halpin, CEO of The Gepetto Group, explained, "Companies often find it difficult to generate enough volume with a product designed only for infants and toddlers . . . . Because this is a relatively short life-stage, the product needs to encourage enough purchase frequency to make sense as a business proposition. If the line of products can be broad and appropriate for different times of day and drinking occasions, a brand for this consumer can work."[xxiii] Yet the form of juice packaging the article quoted above extols is one the public health community views with concern. The American Academy of Pediatrics has suggested that babies and toddlers may be drinking too much juice, citing as a factor its easy portability in the form of covered cups and juice boxes. In addition to providing babies with too many calories, sipping juice throughout the day may be harmful to young children's teeth. [xxiv]

It's true that parents can "just say no" to a toddler's grocery aisle requests. But it's also true that toddlers, going through the developmental phase of differentiating themselves from their parents, are prone to do that by actively and tenaciously asserting their voice, needs, and wants. For media- or brand-saturated little ones and their parents — even for families who restrict television viewing to PBS — a trip to the grocery store, which can often be fun, may turn into a struggle.

Product placement — when products are embedded into the content media — is another popular form of food advertising. Product placement can even be found in children's books, including those for babies. Scholastic publishes *The M&M Counting* book, for instance, while Simon and Schuster has one featuring Oreos.

These cardboard books are particularly troublesome because the covers often look exactly like the packaging these foods come in. Literacy experts encourage parents to read to babies and toddlers, citing gains in literacy and the promotion of positive parent-to-baby bonding. Babies and young children whose mothers or fathers read to them— especially when their parents take them on their laps or read to them at bedtime — associate warm, snuggly feelings with reading, and reading itself becomes a pleasurable experience for them early on. However, if the books they are reading include the *Hershey Kisses: Counting Board Book* or the *Skittles Riddles Math book*, one can assume that babies are gaining equally warm, snuggly feelings about candy.

Food companies also market to children through toys. Smuckers, for instance has a Cabbage Patch Doll Peanut Butter and Jelly Kid, designed to sell a product called *Goobers*. HotWheels makes toy cars sporting the M&M logo. Barbie dolls work at both Pizza Hut and McDonalds, and the latter partners with Play Doh and Easy Bake. [xxv]

Conclusion

Of course, food marketing isn't the only factor in childhood obesity. Parents concerned about inculcating healthy eating habits in their children must begin by looking first at their own food consumption. If we consume large quantities of junk food, it's likely our children will as well. We can build exercise into our family's schedule. We can work to get physical education reinstated in our children's school. We can work for safer neighborhoods and more safe, outside play space for children.

However, until we address commercialism as it targets children, our children are going to be facing a barrage of marketing designed to make them want to eat unhealthy foods. The best way parents can reduce children's exposure to commercial marketing within their own homes is to limit exposure to electronic media. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children under two watch no television at all. There is no evidence that our youngest children gain anything positive from engaging with screens — and there is plenty of evidence too much screen time is harmful.

Educators and health care professionals can take a more proactive role in educating parents to the importance of limiting screen time and eliminating television from the lives of babies. They can make it a priority to help wean parents from dependence on television as a babysitter, and to provide ideas for alternative activities. They can also alert new and expectant parents to the ways in which they and their children are manipulated by marketing. They can encourage parents to avoid videos aimed at babies, which have no known benefits and will merely encourage their kids to turn to screens for stimulation. They can also encourage parents to avoid buying toys and baby paraphernalia that feature media characters. Elmo or Bugs Bunny have no meaning for babies and will only gain meaning as the babies associate those characters with pleasure and become familiar with them through daily exposure. What the marketing industry wants is for your baby to transfer those warm feelings toward any product — including junk food — featuring that particular character. Parents can save themselves and their children some stress and conflict over food and toy purchases by keeping their babies unbranded for as long as possible. Once children are older, their exposure to media characters is just about inevitable, but there is no reason to begin that exposure at birth.

In the long run, however, it is important to remember that marketing to children is a societal issue and needs to be addressed as such. Food marketing is pervasive in children's lives, is a factor in childhood obesity, and occurs in the context of a virtual bombardment of commercial messages at home, at school, and in the community.

Parents, health care professionals, educators, and advocates concerned about childhood obesity need to work together to put the issue of child-targeted food marketing on the national agenda. They can work to eliminate junk food and soda marketing in schools. They can lobby congress to end junk food marketing to children. Marketing to children is so pervasive that it is either cynical or naïve to assume that individual parents can or should bear the sole burden of shielding children from the potentially harmful effects of a $15 billion industry. The health and well-being of children is everybody's business.

References

[i] Dalmeny, K., Hanna, E., & Lobstein, T. (2003). *Broadcasting bad health: Why food marketing to children needs to be controlled*. A report by the International Association of Consumer Food Organizations for the World Health Organization consultation on a global strategy for diet and health. London: International Association of Food Consumer Food Organizations.

[ii] Linn, S. (2004). *Consuming Kids: The hostile takeover of childhood*. New York: The New Press. See especially chapters 2 and 6.

[iii] Lauro, P. W. (1 November 1999). "Coaxing the Smile that Sells: Baby Wranglers in Demand in Marketing for Children," *New York Times*, section C, p. 1.

[iv] Barboza, D. (3 August 2003). "If You Pitch It, They Will Eat," *New York Times*, section 3, p. 1.

[v] Ibid.

[vi] Rideout, V., Vandewater, E., & Wartella, E. (2003). *Zero to Six: Electronic Media in the Lives of Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers*, Menlo Park: CA: The Henry F. Kaiser Family Foundation, p. 5.

[vii] Roberts, D. F., Foehr, U. G., Rideout, V., Brodie, M. A. (1999). *Kids & Media @ the New Millennium*. Menlo Park, CA: The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation.

[viii] Powell, C. (July 28-August 4). "Get in the Game," *Marketing Magazine*, Volume 108, Issue 27, p. 11.

[ix] www.candystand.com accessed 03/29/04.

[x] Pollack, J. (1 March 1999). "Foods Targeting Children Aren't Just Child's Play: Shape-Shifting Foods, 'Interactive' Products Chase Young Consumers," *Advertising Age*.

[xi] Neville, L. (2 November 2001). "Kids' Brand Must Exercise Pest Control," *Brand Strategy*, p. 17.

[xii] "100 Leading National Advertisers," *Advertising Age*, 74 (25) 23 June 2003, 2.

[xiii] Voight, J. (September 30, 2002). "Don't Look Back: Major Advertisers are Driving a Recovery in Media. TV's the First to Benefit." *Adweek*, Boston Edition 43(39).

[xiv] Cebryznski, G., & Zuber, A. (5 February, 2001). "Burger Behemoths Shake Up Menu Mix, Marketing Tricks." *Nation's Restaurant News*, p. 1.

[xv] Thompson, S. (22 November 1999). "Cap'n Goes AWOL as Sales Flatten; Quaker Redirects Cereal Brand's Marketing Budget to Focus on Kids," *Advertising Age*, 8.

[xvi] Horgen, K. B., Choate, M., & Brownell, K. D. (2001). "Television Food Advertising: Targeting Children in a Toxic Environment." In: *Handbook of Children and the Media*, eds. Dorothy Singer & Jerome Singer, Thousand Oaks: Sage, pp. 447-461.

[xvii] Borzekowski, D. L. G., & Robinson, T. N. (2001). "The 30-Second Effect: An Experiment Revealing the Impact of Television Commercials on Food Preferences of Preschoolers," *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 101 (1), pp. 42-46.

[xviii] Nevius, C. W. (March 9, 2003). "One extremely absorbing cartoon/ Nickelodeon's nutty 'SpongeBob SquarePants' is a surprise runaway success," *San Francisco Chronicle*, p. 37.

[xix] "Favorite Brands Team With Nickelodeon," *Professional Candy Buyer*, 7 (2) (1999): 51.

[xx] Bob Brown of MarketResearch.com, quoted in: Tiffany Kjos, "Marketers Compete Fiercely for Spending on Kids," *Knight Ridder Tribune Business News*, 15 April 2002: 1.

[xxi] Rant, L. (2001). "Baby Bottles," *Beverage Aisle*, 10 (9): 68.

[xxii] Ibid.

[xxiii] Julie Halpin from the Gepetto Group quoted in: Lisa Rant, "Baby Bottles," *Beverage Aisle*, 10 (9) (2001): 68.

[xxiv] American Academy of Pediatrics, "The Use and Misuse of Fruit Juice in Pediatrics (RE0047)," 107 (5) (2001): 1210-1213.

[xxv] Linn, S. (June, 7 2003). "What's up with food marketing to kids." Presentation for Legal Approaches to Obesity Conference sponsored by The Public Health Advocacy Institute, Northeastern University.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

A firm foundation: Considering the content of this article is the first step in thinking about the issue of marketing products and brands to children. Some teachers will have already thought about this concept; others may not have even considered it. Use the article to take the first step toward developing an understanding of the issues, challenges, and problems marketing to children presents.

Solutions, anyone?: Linn suggests we "search for solutions that will alter the commercial culture impinging on children and families." Convene a roundtable discussion to find some solutions to food marketing to children that might be effective in your program. Include parents, family members, community health professionals, and marketing experts to explore a place to start.

What are children learning?: Collect some samples of food marketing at its worst and display them for teachers. Ask teachers to identify appropriate teaching strategies (in general), such as asking critical thinking questions to explore the truth in advertising, as well as specific activity ideas, such as trying out the claims made in marketing materials. During each discussion, focus on what children are learning from the marketing materials and whether the information or actions learned are appropriate or not.

Share the concern: Share this article with families through your newsletter or at a parent meeting.