

MARKETING TO YOUNGER TASTES: Kids eat up fast-food ad blitz

Industry takes heat for children's unhealthy diets

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Like many parents, Ed Turner marvels at the job McDonald's has done selling its products to children.

"I laugh because my 2- and 4-year-old sons can pick the arches out at least half a mile away," the Detroit father said. "They can't read at all. Two and 4. But they know those golden arches. If it was up to them, we'd eat there every day."

Businesses spend an estimated \$13 billion a year marketing food and drinks to U.S. children and their parents, according to "Food Politics," a newly released book written by Marion Nestle, chair of the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies at New York University. That's an increase of \$5 billion in the last decade. Often, the stuff they're selling is not the perfect nourishment for growing minds and bodies. Many experts say unhealthy diets are partly to blame for a growing weight problem among U.S. kids.

Many experts -- and some legislators and parents -- are beginning to speak out against the marketing of low-nutrition food to children. If the courts and government can outlaw the selling of cancer-causing cigarettes to kids, they ask, why not limit the hawking of obesity-inducing food as well? Is Joe Camel really so different from Ronald McDonald?

About half of all advertising aimed at kids is for food, according to Margo Wootan, director of nutrition policy for the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a Washington, D.C., nonprofit. Four out of five of those ads are for sugary cereal, soft drinks, fast food or salty snacks, she said.

"Advertising works," Wootan said. "The food companies know it from their experience. It can influence what children choose and what kids pester their parents to buy."

Wootan cited studies showing that only 2 percent of all advertising by food manufacturers is for fruits, vegetables, grains or beans -- foods that the government and health professionals encourage.

No wonder the average U.S. child gets about half of his or her calories from added fat and sugar. One study showed that only 1 percent of children eat a diet that resembles the suggested food pyramid.

Nutritionists say that U.S. children have responded to the onslaught of ads for unhealthy foods by eating more of them -- and in larger portions. These days, about 14 percent of U.S. children and youth are too heavy, according to the surgeon general.

Michigan has more than its share of oversized kids. A quarter of the children and youth in the state -- almost twice the national average -- are over their ideal body weight, according to the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness. And 11 percent of Michigan's children and youth are obese, defined as 20 percent or more than their ideal body weight.

The extra pounds are leading to hefty health problems. According the fitness council, 39 percent of Michigan's children have elevated cholesterol, compared to a national average of 25 percent. About 7.5 percent of Michigan's kids have high blood pressure.

Type 2 diabetes, previously considered an adult-onset disease, has increased drastically among youth nationwide. And chunky kids can face social discrimination that leads to poor self-esteem and depression, according to the surgeon general.

An economics lesson

Food-industry representatives refuse to take responsibility for those trends. Textbooks on how to market to children defend the practice as a public service. A 1997 book titled "Children's Food: Marketing and Innovation" states: "Advertising to children . . . is nothing less than primary education in commercial life; the provision, in effect, of free and elementary instruction in social economics -- a passport to street wisdom. Far from being further restricted, as many suggest, this education course should in fact be supported, encouraged and enlarged."

It's wrong to blame children's increasing weight problems on certain food items like french fries or milk shakes, said Steve Grover of the National Restaurant Association. His group represents about one-quarter of all U.S. restaurants.

"I think milk shakes can be part of a well-balanced diet. So can french fries," Grover said. "Moderation is the issue."

Many schools have stopped requiring physical education and nutrition training, he added. "We don't teach people to make good food choices. Then when they don't, we blame the food."

Kids' spending power

Nestle of NYU's nutrition and food studies department acknowledged that societal shifts like the reduction in opportunities for physical play contribute to childhood weight problems. She said she encourages parents to limit children's exposure to advertising.

"I've heard parents should be strong. But if you work all day and you have very little time . . . you don't want to have a battle over food," she said. "So turn off the TV."

That's easier for some parents than for others.

Nicole Hayes, a mother from Harper Woods, said her 6-year-old daughter, Taylor Hayes, doesn't fall for fancy marketing "unless it says Barbie. Then, she wants it." But that doesn't mean that Taylor gets everything she wants. "I just say 'No,' " Hayes said. "I can handle it."

But Christina Nixon, a mother, part-time student and part-time waitress from Eastpointe, said she wishes some of that advertising would go away.

"They play too much on kids," she said. "It's hard on parents. They've got Buzz Lightyear this and E.T. that. The kids want it, and it's hard not to buy it. I try to read labels, but I can't read everything. Probably some of the things we buy aren't the best for them."

It's easy to understand why companies want to aim their ads at kids. Spending by children under 12 tripled in the 1990s, reaching \$23.4 billion in 1997, according to the Center for a New American Dream, a nonprofit organization that advocates less consumerism. Older youths, ages 12 to 19, spent about \$94 billion of their own money in 1998, the center estimates. That doesn't include the billions that children influence their parents to spend.

The ad barrage can begin with babies in diapers watching Saturday morning cartoons. Even PBS's popular "Teletubbies" show for toddlers has been underwritten by Burger King and McDonald's. The latter company distributed stuffed-toy versions of the four Teletubby characters with its Happy Meals.

Christina Rendon, a sophomore at Detroit's Southwestern High School, said she remembers being influenced by advertising and toy giveaways with fast food until she was about in fifth grade. "I just quit caring after a while," she said.

Executives at McDonald's Oak Brook, Ill., headquarters did not return three phone calls seeking comment on their marketing strategies.

In grocery stores, boxes of Count Chocula cereal splashed with Sesame Street characters are shelved near Cookie Crisp cereal, which is advertised on television by a cartoon dog who convinces a cartoon teacher to try a bite and proclaim, "Cookies *are* for breakfast!"

Wootan of the Center for Science in the Public Interest is particularly troubled by advertising to kids ages 8 and under. "They don't necessarily know the difference between the show and the ad," she said. "They also don't recognize that someone is trying to sell them something. Or that someone might exaggerate. They think Michael Jordan really does eat Big Macs all the time."

Parental responsibility

As U.S. children grow into teens, they see idols like Britney Spears hawking Pepsi in Super Bowl commercials. They see the Mars candy company offering a nutrition curriculum to schools.

There are, however, a few parents who successfully steer their children clear of high-fat, high-sugar diets.

Wren Beaulieu-Hack's two children, who are 3 and 6, watch no television and eat no sugar, wheat or dairy products. Their diets and viewing have been restricted since birth.

"They don't know what they're missing," Beaulieu-Hack of West Bloomfield said. When they go to a birthday party at a friend's house, the Hack children pack their own carob cupcakes made with rice flour.

Critics of the food industry are counting on people like Beaulieu-Hack for support as they push for legislative and regulatory changes that would limit the advertising of less-than-ideal food to kids.

Their first target: getting advertising and vending machines out of schools. Second, they would like to ban food advertising during programming aimed at young children, such as cartoons. If the ads cannot be banned, then, Wootan suggests, media should be forced to carry ads for fruits, grains and other healthy alternatives along with ads for less-nutritious processed food.

Some even talk of bringing a class action against food companies, similar to the successful lawsuits in recent years by cancer patients against tobacco companies. So far, however, no such suit has been filed.

The notion of the government stepping in to limit advertising during Saturday morning cartoons sounds good to Nixon, who has a 4-year-old daughter, Abbie, and a 15-month-old son, Jake. "They do limit advertising for tobacco, so why not for food?" she said. "It gets ridiculous."

Added Rendon, 15: "They should have Britney Spears or 'N Sync holding a banana instead of a Pepsi," she said. "Then the little kids won't be getting overweight because they're eating the wrong stuff and drinking the wrong stuff."

Would-be reformers, however, know their ideas face strong opposition. In the 1970s, the Federal Trade Commission attempted to regulate advertising to children but was prevented from doing so by Congress. Since then, obesity rates have skyrocketed.

"It won't be easy, because the broadcasters and the food companies have a lot of influence," Wootan said. "But it's important. Unhealthy eating habits, along with inactivity. kill as many people as tobacco does."

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