

Junk food advertising – aimed at children?

Contributed article

Picture this: children sitting happily in front of the telly, giving you a moment's peace. And then the adverts come on and instantly there is a passionate chorus of 'I want that', 'I need that', 'Can I have it?' This is something that will be familiar to many of us. Advertisers are not daft and have known for a long time that targeting children from a very early age is not only an excellent way – through 'pester power' – of getting parents to part with their hard-earned cash but is also a great way to ensure brand loyalty later in life. Research has shown that very young children recognise the 'Golden Arches' of McDonalds before they learn their own names.

While we adults are usually fairly good at seeing through many adverts' claims, our children's young brains are not developed enough to be able to do so. Former advertising executive Alex Bogusky writes: "Children are not small grown-ups. Their brains are fundamentally different, the big difference being that right hemisphere brain development doesn't really kick in until the age of twelve all decisions and concepts are very black and white." What this translates into is that children are much more likely to simply believe everything they see in adverts that are targeted at them.

In the past a large proportion of children's TV advertising was for foods high in fat, sugar and salt (known as HFSS foods in the industry). Research shows that advertising for unhealthy foods directly affects the foods children choose and the balance of their diet. It encourages them to go for fatty,

sugary and salty foods over more wholesome, nutritious alternatives and in the UK we now have startlingly high levels of childhood obesity. Furthermore, a UNICEF report shows that children from less well-off areas are most badly affected by advertising.

Betty McBride, of The British Heart Foundation (BHF), notes that, "On average children's diets contain too much salt, fat and sugar". Obese children become obese adults with all the health risks this involves, such as high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes. On the other hand, if children establish healthy eating patterns from a young age they will take these into adulthood, too. As far as TV advertising goes the UK Government has taken strong steps to regulate what can and cannot be shown on our television sets. Any foodstuffs identified as HFSS may not be shown before the watershed and there is a ban on the product placement of unhealthy foods in programmes.

However, no such regulations cover food advertising on the internet and companies are free to target children in the most profitable way. Over 90% of British children live in a house with internet access. 65% of 5-7 year olds regularly access the web, rising to 93% of 12-15 year olds. In addition to this 40% of 12-15 year old kids now have smartphones and 75% of them access Facebook. The internet plays an important role in young people's lives and this is only set to increase. Food companies understand this very well and, besides promoting their products, use the web to build relationships with children in a variety of subtle ways.

The majority of HFSS websites invite children to 'like them'. As a result, the child will get branded updates from that company on their news feed. A recent post from Chewits promoted free sweets and another company's magazine: "The latest issue of Toxic mag is out now! ... great FREE gifts – some brilliant blackcurrant flavour Chewits bursting with flavour. Get your claws on a copy today!" Children's friends

will also see what they've 'liked', making sites such as Facebook a cheap form of peer-to-peer marketing. Additionally, many companies require children's contact details and other personal information – allowing targeted e-mailing – and some firms even ask children to provide their friends' e-mails in order to send them branded e-cards or games. Another tactic is supplying downloadable content like apps, screensavers and wallpaper, meaning that adverts continue to work after the child has left the website. Other companies link to YouTube, where adverts banned from television can be shown perfectly legally.

Studies by the British Heart Foundation and the Children's Food Campaign have highlighted some of the worst offenders, including household names Nesquik, Kellogg's, Sugar Puffs, Cheestrings, Rowntrees and Cadbury's Buttons. In the case of Buttons, the website has animated cartoon characters which can be personalised with the child's name and features and includes downloadable branded jigsaws, mazes and puzzles. In a transparent attempt to show that they are making attempts to avoid advertising to children – and despite the child-like content – this Cadbury's site is age-restricted to 18+. Of course, it is perfectly easy to fib about one's age, regardless of how old we are!

While we are exhorted to get a balanced diet (and parents made to feel wholly responsible for children's diets) the odds are stacked against us. We can feel powerless in the face of the marketing power of these huge global food companies, especially when they manipulate our children. And it can be very difficult to police what children get up to on the internet, considering how much more technologically savvy young people can be. However, the BHF is currently lobbying government to introduce tough laws for internet content and the 'Leave Our Kids Alone' project is campaigning to end all advertising to primary school children and younger.

It has support from a wide range of healthcare professionals,

journalists, academics and politicians. The World Health Organisation has also recently challenged the UK Government and world food companies over this, demanding rigorous regulation and enforcement. If this is a subject which interests you you can find out more at the '[Leave Our Kids Alone](#)' site: George Monbiot writes: "This is a campaign about more than advertising. It's about who we are: free-thinking citizens, raised on the best information and judgment that parents and teachers can provide; or captive consumers, suckled at home and at school on subtle corporate lies." You can also download and read the British Heart Foundation report on internet advertising [here](#).

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