

FOOD MARKETING TO CHILDREN

Issue Thumbnail

There is a link between TV watching and overweight and obesity among children. While the act of watching TV—being sedentary and possibly eating snacks while taking in the favorite show—is part of the problem, experts are now looking at what kids watch as well. There is a growing debate about the effects of food marketing on the childhood obesity epidemic and what should be done about it.

Issue Background

There's a strong connection between television and childhood weight gain. Certainly, the sedentary act of watching TV—and the mindless eating that frequently comes along with it—contributes to the problem. But research suggests the commercials for unhealthy food that children are exposed to while watching TV are also part of the problem. Every day, American kids see an average of 12 to 21 TV commercials for food products, depending on their age. That's as many as 7,600 commercials a year, 98 percent of which advertise foods high in fat, sugar and/or salt.

It's these findings, and the question of whether children have the cognitive development necessary to critically evaluate a commercial's claims, that lie at the heart of the debate about marketing to children.

In 2009, Congress directed the FTC, together with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), to establish an Interagency Working Group of federal nutrition, health, and marketing experts. Congress tasked the Working Group with developing a set of principles to guide industry in improving the types of foods marketed directly to children ages 2-17, and to tap into the power of advertising to support healthful food choices. In April 2011, a set of proposed [voluntary nutrition principles](http://www.ftc.gov/os/2011/04/110428foodmarketproposedguide.pdf) (<http://www.ftc.gov/os/2011/04/110428foodmarketproposedguide.pdf>) were released. They are designed to encourage children, through advertising and marketing, to choose foods that are healthier, such as fruits and vegetables, and contain limited amounts of saturated fat, *trans*fats, added sugars, and sodium.

Parents already know they are on the front lines as it regards their children and what they see on TV and online. This work adds still more emphasis to the importance - because screen time directly affects activity, which affects a child's ability to balance calories in and calories burned.

THE WEIGHT OF THE NATION

Community Activation Kit: Topics

Key Stats

- The food industry spends \$30 billion every year on advertising.
- In 2008, the FTC produced a report that showed food and beverage companies spent \$1.6 billion to market their products to children and adolescents, of which \$745 million was for TV advertising alone.
- The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) spent \$220 million in 2004 on nutrition education, an amount equivalent to two percent of what the food industry spent on marketing to kids.
- Every day, our children see an average of 12-21 TV commercials for food products, or as many as almost 7,600 ads per kid a year, 98 percent of which are for foods high in fat, sugar and/or salt.
- Today, advertisements are appearing in multiple places, including company-sponsored Internet games designed for kids and, through product placement, in TV shows themselves.
- In 2005, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) committee on Food Marketing and the Diets of Children and Youth conducted the largest systematic review of the available research on food marketing to children, and concluded “there is strong evidence that exposure to television advertising is associated with adiposity in children ages 2–11 years and teens ages 12–18 years.”

Watch More

- The third film in The Weight of the Nation series, *Children in Crisis*, includes a focus on food marketing to children and its effect on the childhood obesity epidemic. The accompanying discussion guide provides additional information.
- *Consequences*, the first film in The Weight of the Nation series, includes a section of the prevalence and health implications of childhood obesity. The film’s discussion guide includes more information. Find all films at the HBO Weight of the Nation website (<http://theweightofthenation.hbo.com/>).

Learn More

- HBO’s [The Weight of the Nation website](http://theweightofthenation.hbo.com/) (<http://theweightofthenation.hbo.com/>) features a Marketing Food to Children section where the school lunch and breakfast program and competitive foods are discussed in detail.
- Read the Interagency Working Group on Food Marketed to Children’s [proposed nutritional principles to guide industry self-regulation](http://www.ftc.gov/os/2011/04/110428foodmarketproposedguide.pdf) (<http://www.ftc.gov/os/2011/04/110428foodmarketproposedguide.pdf>).

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Do More

- Reduce your child's exposure to screen time. Limit TV and videogames to no more than one hour a day.
- If there is a TV in your child's room, remove it.
- Get involved in [screen time reduction](#) campaigns in your community.
- Engage in the national conversation and develop your own views about marketing to kids, and what to do about it.

Find other healthy eating and active living strategies that might make sense for your organization or community by using the [Action Strategies for Healthy Communities Toolkit](http://goo.gl/2iHxm) (<http://goo.gl/2iHxm>) or the [Environmental Nutrition and Activity Community Tool \(ENACT\)](http://goo.gl/LJhuO) (<http://goo.gl/LJhuO>).