
BUY NOW, PAY LATER?

The Impact of TV Advertising on Kids' Diets

Program Support Notes

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Introduction

The practise of advertising food during children's television time is causing concern amongst many dieticians, parents, teachers and others involved in the welfare of children. But, as often happens, the situation is far from clear.

Some of the key points are proven:

1. The food being advertised is clearly lacking in nutritional quality (as defined by the Australian Nutrition Foundation) It has too little fibre and vitamins and too much sugar, fat and salt.
2. The health of Australian children has declined over the last few years. Today, 30% are overweight or obese and 50% have high cholesterol levels.
3. A poor diet contributes to these health problems. 60% of premature deaths in our society are related to poor nutrition.

However, there is no data to absolutely prove that advertising plays a significant part in causing this poor diet. Whilst some research has been conducted, the results tend to be disputed by the food industry and its supporters for several reasons:

1. There are various factors (such as family influence) which, apart from advertising, will affect kids' health. It can be difficult to isolate these factors in any studies.
2. We still need to learn a lot more about how kids respond to media at different ages and in different social groups.

Interestingly, there are some very clear parallels with the issue of smoking and lung cancer. Although the epidemiological evidence for the link between the two is overwhelming (rises and falls in cigarette consumption are closely matched by changes in lung cancer rates in population groups), the cigarette companies have claimed that we don't know the exact pathway for the disease. Why they ask, do some people smoke heavily and don't get lung cancer whilst others smoke relatively lightly and yet succumb quickly. They argue that there must be other influencing factors and, until these are known, cigarette advertising or smoking in public places should not be banned.

Cigarette companies also argue that advertising only affects the consumer's choice of brands, not the overall level of smoking. Similarly, the food industry argues that TV advertising targeted at kids affects only whether they choose, for instance, one brand of cereal over another.

Most people opposed to the advertising of cigarettes and what may be called 'fun food' argue that the truth is staring us in the face. We are, they say, allowing consumers, especially children, to be harmed by advertising. They argue we should control it as soon as possible or bear the future consequences (in terms of increased health expenditure and pain and suffering). The food industry's response is that it's not staring us in the face, and that there is much more to learn before we put major obstacles in the way of the industry.

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In this program we explore the debate by asking a group of well-informed commentators for their responses to some critical questions:

1. How many TV ads do children watch?
2. What are children's eating habits?
3. Why aren't more nutritional foods advertised to children?
4. Are breakfast cereals nutritious?
5. What are the regulations for advertising to children?
6. Can children be manipulated by media?
7. Should we advertise to children?
8. What are the benefits of advertising?

And finally, we asked the experts for their comments.

The commentators are:

- * Harris Boulton, Deputy Director of the Australian Food Council
- * Carol Gibbons, Royal Childrens Hospital, Melbourne
- * John Schwartz, lecturer in media at Swinburne University of Technology
- * Jupe, Young Media Australia
- * John Hart, Deputy President, Childrens Television Foundation

Activities prior to viewing

1. Ask students whether they believe their own diets are influenced by ads and, if so, to what extent.
2. Clarify the purpose of advertising, why certain products are advertised more than others, and why advertising is effective.

A Point to Clarify

Under the section "How many TV advertisements do children watch?", Harris Boulton implies that as the food industry accounts for 20% of Australia's manufacturing industry (a significant part of which is not involved with consumer goods, but with heavy industrial equipment). A figure of 40% for the proportion of advertisements related to food, may equate well with the importance of the food industry. That is, it may not be as excessive as it sounds. So what he is saying is that because the denominator for the 20% figure includes other irrelevant products, the real figure for comparison may in fact be close to 40%.

What we are certain of is the disproportionately large number of food ads shown during kids' TV programs. According to Young Media of Australia research conducted in 1997, food ads accounted for between 62% and 90% of all ads. The Cheez TV hour for example had 28 ads, of which 25 were for food, and all of which were for unhealthy snacks, fast foods and high-sugar breakfast foods. These figures mirror other research conducted by The Australian Consumers Association at various times.

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ACTIVITIES DURING THE VIDEO

Ask the students to complete the accompanying Student Response Sheet

ACTIVITIES AFTER THE VIDEO

Discussion Questions

1. What are the various vested interests of the participants? That is, what factors may cause them to respond in the way they do? Can you rank them in terms of their freedom to respond independently rather than how their organisation might like them to respond?
2. Do you believe your own diet is influenced by TV ads and if so to what extent? Compare your answer with your earlier one, before watching the video. If there is a change, what could be the reason(s) for it?
3. What are the main results of a poor diet on health (a) early in life and (b) later in life?
4. What are the main influences on diet, apart from advertising?
5. Do you believe the main effect of advertising is direct or indirect? 'Direct' in that it cause kids to want a certain product, 'indirect' in that it legitimates a whole class of food and makes its consumption seem more reasonable than it otherwise would be, with the effect of causing more of the whole class of food to be eaten, rather than just more on one brand. (Cigarette advertising is said to have this legitimising effect, thereby increasing the total amount of tobacco smoked by kids).
6. Why is the food advertising pyramid inverted? Why do food companies mostly advertise 'low nutrition' foods to kids and 'high nutrition' foods to adults?
7. Why might Australia have a very high rate of food advertisements per hour compared with a country like Sweden with much the same standard of living? Does this answer the food industry's claim that advertising is essential for the health of the industry, if not for the whole population? If Sweden can cope without it why can't we?
8. Do you believe the evidence for the link between advertising of food and adverse health effects is sufficiently well established for governments to take action? What further evidence, if any, would you like to see?
9. How much regulation is there in advertising products such as food and cigarettes? Is this satisfactory? How well does Harris Boulton address this issue in his comments?
10. In the final comments, Harris Boulton says more research needs to be done before we can be sure if food advertising is having a deleterious effect on kids' health. Is this statement at odds with his earlier answers? Also, many people would argue that great harm may be done to our children while we wait years for the research to be done. Even then it may be inconclusive. Should society act now or wait? What does the Precautionary Principle have to say? (This is often used in the environment debate - it says that the greater the environmental risk, the more important is it that we act now to limit possible future damage, even though the evidence is not conclusive yet.).
11. The two sides are not evenly weighted. Do you believe this is a problem? Should the government be doing more? Some people argue that a very sophisticated advertising industry is unfairly being allowed to influence children from the age of 2 or 3 upwards - kids who cannot even tell the difference between a program and an advertisement, let alone the difference between the nutritional value of an apple and a chocolate bar!

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STUDENT RESPONSE SHEETS

Section 1 - How Many TV Advertisements do Children Watch?

1. How many, according to John Schwartz? _____.
2. What are the two main areas of food advertising, according to Young Media Australia's research?

3. How many ads per hour are there in Australia and in Sweden?

Australia _____

Sweden _____

Section 2 - What are Children's Eating Habits?

4. Children are eating too much _____ and _____ and too little _____.

5. According to Fay Gibbons, what percentage of food ads go into the foods which are high in sugar and fat? _____%

6. Harris Boulton believes other factors are important. What are these?

Section 3 - Why Aren't Nutritional Foods Advertised to Children?

7. What does Harris Boulton believe is the major reason?

Section 4 - Are Breakfast Cereals Nutritious?

8. What are the two nutritional problems with breakfast cereal ads?

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9. Why is the Grinners advertisement effective?

Section 5 - What are the Regulations for Advertising to Children?

Section 17

Section 19

Section 13-2

10. What is the problem with the CCs ad?

11. Do you think Harris Boulton's response is very convincing?

12. What is the main problem with the process, according to Young Media Australia?

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Section 6 - Should there be Advertising to Children?

13. What rules would Young Media Australia introduce?

Section 7 - What are the Benefits of Advertising?

14. Which participants believe ads are entertaining?
