



Young Media Australia fact sheet

Food advertising

For many years food advertising to children has concerned nutritionists, paediatricians, nurses and community health workers. This topic covers:

- What is food advertising
- When does food advertising occur
- What are the rules
- What is the impact
- What can parents do.

What is food advertising

Advertisements for food on television occur principally as 30 second commercials within programs directed to children, or within other programs directed at a more general audience.

They can also occur by way of “product placement” within programs. Food or drink products are used by the characters in the film, video or TV program, or placed somewhere conspicuous on the set.

Advertisements for foods directed to children are most frequently for breakfast cereals, snacks, soft drinks, and fast foods. They can be described as fatty, salty, sugary and fast. (Young Media Australia, 1997)

When does food advertising occur

Advertisements at times that children are watching, can occur at the rate of:

- 30 per hour, or
- 75 per day, or
- around 22,000 per year, if the child watches the amount of television watched by the average Australian child, that is 2 hours and 30 minutes per day.

Food ads, as a percentage of total ads on television, range from 25%–48%, and average 34%. (Hill and Radimer, 1997). A 13 industrialised-nation study of advertising during children’s television viewing times found that Australia recorded the highest number of food ads per hour. (Australian Consumers Association, 1996)

What are the rules

The Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) has a set of standards for advertisements that occur in programs classified C on commercial television.

You can access the ABA publication *Content regulation: Children’s television* on the ABA website: www.aba.gov.au

In summary, the regulations require that advertisements:

- may not mislead or deceive children
- must accurately represent the product
- may not contain any misleading or incorrect information about the nutritional value of the product.

Where premium offers are included (a trinket or toy), any reference to that premium offer must be incidental to the main product being advertised.

Advertisements which are directed to children, in programs other than C classified programs, are governed by the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations (FACTS) Code of Practice. Their Code requires adherence to the above ABA standards in regard to advertisements directed to children.

You can view the FACTS Code of Practice on their website: www.facts.org.au

What is the impact

Impact on children’s health

The 1995 National Nutrition Survey found an alarming proportion of children consuming non-nutritious foods and not enough children consuming healthy foods. The non-nutritious foods consumed by children, e.g. hamburgers, pizza, confectionery, soft drinks, are also those promoted heavily during children’s TV viewing times. (Australian Bureau of Statistics and Department of Health and Family Services, Commonwealth of Australia, 1999)

At the same time, the number of Australian children who are overweight or obese is rapidly increasing. (Magarey, Daniels and Boulton, 2001)

Pester power increases

Children are very powerful influencers of family purchases of every thing from the breakfast cereals to the evening meal choices. See MacNeal, 1992.

Many products advertised on television are displayed in the supermarket at child’s eye level. Pester power works.

Young children are influenced to want

Sophisticated and aggressive techniques are used in marketing to children. Techniques used by television food advertisers include prizes, giveaways, animation, special effects, story vignettes, jingles, and popular personalities. The predominant messages directed to children are related to having fun, being cool and the food being tasty. (Hill and Radimer, 1997; Morton, 1990; Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, 1982)

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Young children (under the age of eight years) are very susceptible to advertisements (See related topic *Overview of the effects of advertising directed at children*). If an advertisement for a product attracts their interest, they will ask for it even if it is a product for which they have no need or use. (There's the story of the five year old boy who was asked what he would choose if he had just one wish. His answer was "A Tampax, because if I had that I could swim, ride a horse or do anything")

Children get the message to eat fatty, salty, sugary and fast foods

The messages for food ads on TV are encouraging children to the view that what's good to eat is "good for them". In fact, television food ads during children's viewing times disproportionately promote foods of low nutritional value—foods high in fat, sugar or salt. The proportion of ads promoting non-nutritious foods range from 50–84%, and average 72%. The largest categories of foods advertised tend to be chocolate and confectionery, fast food restaurants and sweetened breakfast cereals. (Hill and Radimer, 1997)

What parents can do

Several surveys conducted with the Australian community (including parents) have shown that they are concerned about television food advertising to children; there was consistently strong community opinion in favour of tighter controls of TV food advertising to children. (Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, 1982)

Parents can:

- limit the amount of commercial TV that their children are exposed to. Choose to watch the ABC, Pay TV or videos instead, especially in the early years.
- introduce children to a range of tasty foods that are good for them, and which can be fun to eat
- limit the consumption of foods advertised on TV to once or twice a week
- play "spot the gimmicks" in advertisements on TV: encourage your child to be sceptical about claims made in advertisements.

How to complain

Complaints about food advertisements should be directed to the station on which they appeared. See related topics *How to complain* and *How to complain—free-to-air TV* for more details.

References

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Up to date and reliable information for parents and caregivers about the impact of the media on children.

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