



Young Media Australia fact sheet

Keep your children out of the firing line: strategies for parents to counter television food advertising

The *Through Thick or Thin* series of Fact Sheets has been prepared by Young Media Australia (YMA), sponsored by the Telstra Foundation. There are three Fact Sheets in the series:

- *Television food advertising and childhood obesity*
- *Body image problems, eating disorders and media messages*
- *Strategies for parents to counter television food advertising*

This Fact Sheet discusses:

- why food advertising is a problem
- seven strategies for parents to counter television food advertising
- general strategies around the issue of childhood obesity.

Why food advertising is a problem

Many professional bodies and researchers now acknowledge that food advertising is a contributory factor to the problem of childhood obesity. Food advertising is a problem because:

- advertising agencies employ child development experts to make sure their ads appeal to children. They use jingles and humour that appeal to children, show children having fun, and imply that their product will make them special and popular.
- children under the age of seven are particularly vulnerable as they are not able to understand the persuasive intent of ads
- even older children with a greater understanding of the intent of ads, are nonetheless vulnerable to the message that their anxieties may be eased, or that they will be seen as "cool" if they own, or eat, certain things.
- advertising works by repetition and familiarity. The more often children see an ad, the more likely they are to be influenced by its message.
- most food advertisements push foods that are high in fat, sugar or salt, and of low nutritional value.

Seven strategies for parents to counter television food advertising

1. Limit children's exposure to commercial TV

Research shows that it is not just the sedentary nature of watching television that contributes to childhood obesity. It shows that the exposure to food advertisements actively impacts on eating behaviour, stimulates intake and exaggerates unhealthy food choices (Halford et al., 2004, p. 223) and this also contributes to childhood obesity.

What you can do

- don't let preschoolers watch any commercial TV at all
- set limits on older children's exposure to commercial TV
- watch the ABC
- build a library of favourite videos and / or DVDs
- borrow videos and / or DVDs from your local library
- avoid the time slots where food companies are paying big dollars to reach your children with their message.

2. Cut down total TV viewing time

Research has shown that reducing the time children spend using television, videos and computer games leads to a decrease in BMI (body mass index) (Robinson, 1999, p. 1566).

What you can do

- keep a diary of your child's television and video viewing habits, so that you know exactly how much TV your child is watching, what programs and in what situations. You may see areas where reductions could most easily be made.
- using the weekly TV guide, have your child tell you what programs they really want to watch, and have them highlight or circle them.
- work on your own motivation for change by reading up about the other advantages of watching less television, e.g. improved literacy skills from reading books and enhanced social skills and togetherness from eating meals together as a family.
- help your children make a list of activities they enjoy other than watching TV.



- read *The Berenstain Bears and Too Much TV* by Stan and Jan Berenstain (First Time Books) with your preschooler.
- put the TV 'to sleep' by covering it over with a blanket.
- use blank stickers to make colourful 'no television' stickers with your child. Place one on the calendar every time your child has a day without television.
- have a look at the US site TV Turnoff Network (www.tvturnoff.org) for some ideas.
- set a weekly limit, and say 'no' to more TV after they have reached it.

(Adapted from Dennison et al., 2004)

3. Take the TV out of your child's bedroom

Media is best experienced in public, where you can see what's happening, check reactions, impose some limits, and use the "teachable moment".

What you can do

- it is easiest not to put the television in your child's bedroom in the first place
- if it is already there, and you wish to remove it, do some research first about the potential disadvantages of leaving it there, that is, its association with poorer sleep patterns, lower academic achievement, increased likelihood of becoming overweight and so on. Check the YMA website for information (www.youngmedia.org.au) or US organisations such as the Center on Media and Child Health (www.cmch.tv) and the National Institute on Media and the Family (www.mediafamily.org)
- depending on the age of the child, explain your reasons for removing it in terms that they can understand
- be firm—they will adjust.

4. Teach your children to be critical media consumers

Research shows that the best defence your child can have to counter the negative effects of advertising is to be a critical media consumer:

What you can do

- from an early age, start saying things from time to time, like: "Not everything you see on TV is true. Sometimes they fib, to make you get your parents to buy you something, even if it isn't good for you."
- be aware that advertisers will try to create ads that will encourage your children to nag you. Make a rule in your family that you won't buy any unhealthy foods that they have seen advertised on TV.
- watch commercials with your children. Every now and then say things like: "This commercial makes me think that if you eat at McDonald's, you'll be happy. Do you think that's true?"
- when ads include celebrity endorsements, comment: "Did you know that Brittany was paid to say she likes Pepsi?" Get them to think about what they would do if someone offered them money to pretend they liked something that they didn't.

- point out the tricks of marketing, including that advertisers can use lots of visual effects to make things look a lot better than they do in real life. Compare products that are packaged with favourite TV characters with similar products packaged in plain labels. Compare tastes and prices.

(Information in the section has been adapted from Meltz, 2004)

5. Help them build their self esteem

Advertising works by making children feel unhappy with themselves, with the message that buying certain products will make them happier. Building your children's sense of self-worth will help them to counter these messages.

What you can do

- value and accept them as they are. Respond to their unique abilities and interests. Appreciate and accept both their strengths and weaknesses.
- believe they can do things and show them that you do. "You can reach the ball by yourself. Give it a try."
- treat them with respect. It is from your respectful behaviour that they will learn self-respect.
- don't compare them with others. True self worth is independent of others.
- appreciate and comment on your child's efforts and improvements. "You're getting better at remembering to wash your hands before dinner."
- comment specifically on your child's positive qualities. "Maybe if you sing to your baby, brother, he'll have an easier time falling asleep. He likes to hear you sing."
- show a genuine interest in areas that interest them, even if they are not so important to you.
- keep a sense of humour. This can help both you and your child relax.

(Information in the section has been adapted from ASG Parent Briefings, 1997)

6. Set a good example

You are still the main influence in your child's life. Think about your own media use, and the messages you are giving about healthy eating habits.

What you can do

- limit your own intake of commercial TV. Remind yourself that you too are the target of a multi-billion dollar industry and resist the influence of advertisers
- have healthy snack foods available in the house and talk to your children about the reasons for keeping salty, fatty and sugary foods to a minimum
- with your children's input, develop a healthy eating and media plan for the next month or school term
- have dinner as a family at least a few times a week, and involve your children in cooking nutrient rich foods

7. Help to shape your media environment

A growing number of individuals and organisations are putting pressure on governments and industry bodies to create a more responsible child friendly media environment. You can help too.

What you can do

- write to your local MP and tell them that action must be taken to encourage more responsible behaviour on the part of advertising and food companies
- complain to TV stations about particular ads and send a copy to the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) who administer the Children's Television Standards
- ACMA has announced a review of the Children's Television Standards (CTS) in 2006. (Reported on YMA website http://www.youngmedia.org.au/whatsnew/inthenews.htm#jan06_02). Currently the CTS prohibit advertisers from misleading children, giving incorrect or misleading information about the nutritional value of a product or putting pressure on them to ask their parents to buy an advertised product. Look for opportunities to contribute to ACMA's review to help preserve at least these safeguards.
- support the work of Young Media Australia (YMA). Become a member, or contact us to find out what else you can do to help.

General strategies around the issue of childhood obesity

General strategies put forward as solutions to the problem of childhood obesity mostly focus on one or both sides of the energy balance equation, that is reducing the number of calories consumed and increasing the energy used each day (Boon & Clydesdale, 2005, p. 512; Doak et al., 2006, p. 111). Such interventions focus either solely or in combination on:

- increasing physical activity
- limiting sedentary activities
- monitoring and limiting total food intake
- increasing intake of nutrient rich foods, and limiting intake of nutrient poor foods.

Other interventions attempt to address societal factors such as the lack of safe community play areas for children, smaller back yards and parents' reluctance to allow children to walk or ride to school.

Although these all have a part to play, the role of television food advertising in contributing to this problem is now clear. In the absence of a ban on food advertising, specific strategies to counter the impact of television food advertising are an important adjunct to more general strategies.

References

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Robinson TN (1999) "Reducing Children's Television Viewing to Prevent Obesity: A Randomized Controlled Trial", *Journal of the American Medical Association* 282(16), 1561–1567.



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Young Media Australia Helpline

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

1800 700 357

Freecall anywhere in Australia, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week or go to the Young media Australia website

www.youngmedia.org.au

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