

Children and young people: food and food marketing



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Contents

Introduction	4
Learning Outcomes	5
1 The 'advertised diet'	6
2 A child's phone as a junk food marketer	9
3 Top five things junk food marketers know about children	10
4 Ads of our time: are teens susceptible to food ads in digital media?	11
5 Looking for solutions: is making food and drinks 'sugar free' an answer?	12
6 How children's food 'choices' are affected by wider environmental factors	14
7 Food in children and young people's lives	16
8 Test your knowledge	18
Conclusion	19
References	19
Acknowledgements	19

Introduction

This free course, *Children and young people: food and food marketing*, will introduce you to some key contemporary issues regarding children's relationships with food, such as whether this should be thought of primarily as a health issue, or also as a way of expressing identities (family, class, cultural, or generational). It will also introduce you to issues about food marketing in the digital age; environmental factors affecting children's abilities to make healthy 'choices'; and how considering children's rights can help to create positive food environments.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [E808 *Children and young people's worlds*](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- identify and analyse the importance of food in various aspects of children's and young people's lives
- understand the impact of food marketing on children from pre-schoolers to teenagers
- critically discuss the idea of whether it is up to individuals to make 'healthy choices' when it comes to food
- analyse the need for a rights-based approach to children, young people and food.

1 The 'advertised diet'



Figure 1 A selection of chocolate bars

One of the defining features of the world today is a high level of obesity among children worldwide. This is not only in countries such as the UK, where nearly a third of children aged 2–15 are overweight or obese, but also in the rest of the world, where obesity is rising rapidly. This includes countries where malnutrition is also found. Obesity brings risks to health and mental health through childhood and the rest of life.

This rapid rise in obesity is thought to be caused by environmental factors. This is because obesity has risen recently and rapidly. Among these environmental factors are:

- how food is produced and processed
- poverty that makes it challenging to afford healthier foods which are more expensive
- urban planning that doesn't support physical activity or healthy food supply, such as lack of safe walking and cycling options and lack of healthy foods in some parts of cities, and near schools
- living and working conditions that promote stress, job and housing insecurity, and don't support home food preparation
- interacting with all these factors, the very widespread promotion (marketing and advertising) of unhealthy foods in the media, in shops, on transport, and in sports and entertainment venues, which has been shown to increase children's unhealthy food preferences, requests, and hence eating (look at the article [Obesity and the economics of prevention: fit not fat](#)).

Activity 1

While you watch the following video, look out for these key points:

The video features two Open University academics, Heather Montgomery and Mimi Tatlow-Golden.

- What does Mimi mean when she talks about an 'advertised diet'?

- What ages do children start becoming aware of food marketing?
- Why might this be problematic?

Video content is not available in this format.



Provide your answer...

Discussion

Mimi's research has shown that from their earliest days, children recognise more unhealthy food brand logos than healthy ones (see the article [Young children's food brand knowledge](#)), and this knowledge of food brands increases rapidly from the age of 3 years. Indeed, their knowledge of unhealthy food brands increases earlier than their understanding of which foods are not healthy to eat (see the article

['Big, strong and healthy': young children's identification of food and drink that contribute to healthy growth](#)) – suggesting that advertisers and marketers are communicating with children about food effectively in the earliest years of life.

Children's 'advertised diet' is largely unhealthy – about three-quarters of ads that even very young children see on television are for items such as fast food, sweets, chocolate and other foods high in saturated fats, sugar, artificial sweeteners, and salt, that the World Health Organization recommends should not be advertised to children (see [Creative good feelings about unhealthy food](#)). This creates the impression that it is quite the norm for children to eat such foods frequently – when in fact the opposite is what's recommended. Furthermore, these ads create powerful emotional associations with such foods, with imagery and stories that evoke delicious tastes and aromas, fun, magic, imagination, humour and powerful pleasure. They also often show children running around and playing energetically – creating the impression that these foods are associated with being active and healthy.

2 A child's phone as a junk food marketer

Recognising that food marketing influences children and young people's food preferences and their eating, the UK has introduced rules that try to reduce marketing of junk foods to children and young people. By international standards, these rules are quite strict – yet so far, their impact is still weak. How can that be?

Audits of television advertising after the first regulations were introduced in 2007 have shown that children's exposure to such advertising actually *increased*. This was because regulations targeted programmes that were made specifically for children, yet children and young people also view a lot of other programmes – and advertising for junk food increased around these, such as around sports programmes and shows after 6pm.

During the Covid pandemic in 2020, links for Covid outcomes to obesity began to be understood. The UK government announced it would reduce how children are 'bombarded by advertisements and promotions for food' ([GOV.UK, 2020](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-to-reduce-unhealthy-food-promotions-for-children)) by introducing a 9pm watershed for unhealthy advertising on television – but also online. This is due to be introduced in 2022 and it remains to be seen what kind of impact this will have.

Elsewhere in the world, regulation of unhealthy food promotion in digital media is almost completely absent (see [Tackling food marketing to children in a digital world](#)). In a world of overweight and obesity, the opportunity this presents for brands to build relationships with children and promote unhealthy foods is a concern.

So where do kids see junk food marketing online? Find out in the following video.

Video content is not available in this format.



3 Top five things junk food marketers know about children

Beware the junk food marketer with their hashtags, games and sponsored tweets! Watch the following video which shows the

[Top 5 things junk food marketers know about your child.](#)

An ongoing conversation is taking place about the kind of relationship young people have with digital media. Calls have been made for an international regime to address this by balancing children's protection and participation online. Part of this would involve limiting the ability for those selling unhealthy items to target children with advertising online. In the UK, current advertising regulations aim to restrict targeting of children and young people with unhealthy advertising online. Yet it's unclear how effective these are, as young people report still seeing many ads for fast food, fizzy drinks and other brands online – nearly half of young people aged 11-19 saw such ads online at least twice a week, and one in five saw them daily ([Critchlow et al., 2020](#)).

As digital media become ever more part of our lives, at all ages, it is essential we find ways to protect children and young people's right to health, while at the same time protecting their right to use these media to avail of information and engage in civic life.

4 Ads of our time: are teens susceptible to food ads in digital media?



Figure 2 Junk food and children

Later, in their teens, young people are expected to be able to make what is often referred to as 'better choices' about their food. Yet their views of food, and their expectations and feelings about it, are affected by the media they consume – and when using social media they largely encounter advertising for unhealthy foods, that uses immersive, entertaining, and emotionally engaging techniques that encourage users to like and share, linking in their friends and spreading marketing messages through their networks. This makes the advertising particularly powerful in ways that counteract young people's growing ability to understand what is healthy and why. Importantly, it also affects the other ways that they perceive food – as an item that expresses fun, excitement, being young, physically active and part of friendship groups. And research

[such as this paper from Public Health Nutrition](#) has shown that watching food brand video content on YouTube and seeing favourite food brands advertised online is linked to consuming more unhealthy foods and drinks in young people aged 10 to 16 years.

In the short article [Ads of our time](#) Mimi Tatlow-Golden discusses what psychology can tell us about teens' susceptibility to food ads in digital media.

Mimi Tatlow-Golden's research '

[See, Like, Share, Remember: Adolescents' Responses to Unhealthy-, Healthy- and Non-Food Advertising in Social Media](#)' also shows that social media ads for unhealthy foods have a stronger impact on teens than ads for healthier foods or for non-foods (e.g., sports, electronics, games, clothes or makeup brands). This impact is seen in multiple ways, ranging from how long they look at the ads, through how they rate others, and how well they remember them. Teens pay more attention to ads for unhealthy items; they rate people their age more positively when they see unhealthy food ads in their social media feeds, and they are more likely to share this content with their peers. Finally, they remember these unhealthy food brands more than other brands when asked about them afterwards.

5 Looking for solutions: is making food and drinks 'sugar free' an answer?



Figure 3 Sweeteners

Large amounts of sugar are added to many foods and drinks, particularly those aimed at children, to increase their appeal. One proposed solution to childhood overweight and obesity is to try and cut down the amount of sugar that children consume.

In April 2018 the UK government brought in a sugar tax which meant manufacturers had to pay a levy on fizzy drinks with a high sugar level (see [Soft drinks industry levy comes into effect](#) and [Soft drink sugar tax starts, but will it work?](#)). Many manufacturers dropped the sugar content of their drinks in anticipation of this tax (see [The untapped power of soda taxes](#)).

The UK is by no means alone in this as sugar taxes are increasingly adopted worldwide. By May 2018, 25 countries and 6 U.S. municipalities had adopted sugar taxes or were about to (see [Accelerating the worldwide adoption of sugar-sweetened beverage taxes](#)). These were countries in Europe, South and Central America, Africa, the Middle East, the Pacific and the Caribbean. Further countries are examining these options. In Mexico, two years after the tax was implemented, consumption had dropped by nearly 10% (see [Sustained consumer response: evidence from two years after implementing the sugar sweetened beverage tax in Mexico](#)). Interestingly, however, in Mexico, young people interviewed said they were not aware of the tax and that it would not affect what they bought as the price increase was too low and they felt 'addicted' to the taste of the sugar (see

[Exploring perceptions of the Mexican sugar-sweetened beverage tax among adolescents in North West Mexico](#)). Indeed, many countries are setting their tax levels too low to expect much impact – experts recommend that taxes should raise prices by 20% to

achieve substantial effects (see

[Accelerating the worldwide adoption of the sugar-sweetened beverage taxes](#)).

One frequent response to sugar taxes by companies is to reduce sugar by adding artificial sweeteners to food and drinks. Is this a good solution? The article

[Why 'sugar-free' is not recommended as a substitute for sugary drinks and foods](#) explains why it may not be.

6 How children's food 'choices' are affected by wider environmental factors



Figure 4 An example of an advertisement.

The next activity introduces you to some factors that influence the foods that children eat.

Activity 2

Before you watch a video (in the following activity), consider the reasons you believe children and families eat the way they do – you may find it helpful to make a quick note of these first.

Provide your answer...

Public media discourse about food and eating focuses almost exclusively on 'choices', placing responsibility squarely with parents and children. However, this video explores some other ways we might think about the wider, systemic factors that affect the foods that parents and children buy and eat.

In this video you will hear Anna Taylor talk about the work of the UK-based Food Foundation, an organisation that aims to change people's ability to eat healthily through policy and building public understanding about how the food we eat is affected by entire food systems rather than by individuals. You will also listen to Professor of Law at the University of Liverpool, Amandine Garde, who discusses how using the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to invoke child rights might improve children's diets and who argues that the rights to both *protection* and *participation* enshrined in the CRC need to be considered when advocating for children's rights to be healthy. Her work relates to the very widespread marketing of unhealthy food and drink that has been demonstrated to affect children's food preferences, requests, and purchases and thus the quality of their diet.

Activity 3

Before watching this video, consider these questions:

- Do you think that children have the right to engage in social life, including media and digital worlds, without encountering marketing for unhealthy foods? Or do you think they should be allowed to make their own eating choices?
- Why is the 'healthy choices' agenda problematic?
- What do you think of a 'children's rights' approach to children and food?

Now watch the video.

Video content is not available in this format.



Now consider: did anything you heard from these two experts surprise you? And do you think that children can be persuaded to pester parents for vegetables – instead of sweets and snacks?

7 Food in children and young people's lives

In the previous sections you learned about interdisciplinary research and advocacy on children and young people's well-being relating to food. The reading in the next activity will expand on these ideas, focusing in particular on the choices that children and adults are expected to make and the contexts in which they are expected to make them. It focuses on four aspects of children and young people's relationship with food.

1. The discourses, moralities and identities around food.
2. Children's and young people's control about their eating: their agency and autonomy.
3. 'Big Food', or the role of the food industry in our diet.
4. The construction of children's desires about food and eating.



Figure 5 Junk food and young people

Activity 4

You should now read extracts from ['Food in children and young people's lives: ambiguous agency and contested moralities'](#) by Mimi Tatlow-Golden. As you read, consider the following questions:

- What different moralities and identities of food are discussed?
- How do food moralities and identities intersect with notions of 'healthy' choices?
- What is 'generational positioning' regarding food and eating?

These excerpts are taken from Mimi Tatlow-Golden's chapter, 'Food in children and young people's lives: ambiguous agency and contested moralities', in Montgomery, H. and Robb, M. (eds) (2018) *Children and Young People's Worlds*, Bristol, Policy Press, pp. 231-46

Provide your answer...

8 Test your knowledge

Try the following quiz to find out what you know and what you've learned about children's relationship with food.

[End-of-course quiz](#)

Conclusion

In this free course, *Children and young people: food and food marketing*, you learned that children and young people's relationships with food are a key, lifelong aspect of their daily lived experience. Although all children have individual taste preferences, their attitudes to food are strongly influenced by the many features of the worlds they live in, including their families, friends, schools, and the marketing and sale of food all around them. Children and young people thus develop moralities and identities about food that are complex, that depend on their class, generational and cultural positioning, and that are influenced by the media and by the shops on their streets. Children and young people have rights to live and grow in environments that are nurturing and healthy, where they can easily encounter, taste and enjoy good food, and it is up to all elements of the adult world to create these environments for them.

Well done, you have now completed the course! Now that you've come to the end of the course, we would appreciate a few minutes of your time to complete this short [end-of-course survey](#).

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [E808 Children and young people's worlds](#).

References

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Text

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