



Advertising and Food Choice in Children

A Review of the Literature

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Summary

Brian Young has published a report that reviews the international research literature assessing the role of advertising in children's food choices. He had previously written a similar work for the UK Government in 1996 and the current report brings this work up to date. This latest research shows that:

Family decision making in the household is complicated. It's not based on a simple scientific evaluation of the costs and benefits of different alternatives but on participatory debate and discussion where children play an active and central role.

Looking at attitudes to food within the family, practical considerations and priorities prevail over economic or cultural considerations. The basic issues of food provision and food acceptability by all the family are paramount. Advertising as such is rarely mentioned and not generally considered by parents to be a significant influence on children's attitudes.

When specifically challenged some parents have concerns about certain features of advertising food to children but when the topic is placed in a wider context, parents do not consider it to be a major factor in their child's upbringing.

From 8 years of age, children show a good understanding of the basics of nutrition. Recent research on children's dietary practices largely confirm the conclusions of the 1996 MAFF review that children's choice of low-fat foods can be enhanced by nutritional information which does matter to children in their decisions about which product to choose.

There's good evidence that innate preferences for sweet tastes and dislike for sour and bitter tastes do exist among newly born children. In pre-school children it is families who have the strongest influence on dietary habits, but progressively the influence of friends becomes more predominant.

Children are more knowledgeable about advertising than ever before but there could be differences across different socio-economic groups.

Children under the age of 5 years have a somewhat limited understanding of advertising, seeing it essentially as entertainment. Over the next three years children do begin to understand the various functions and intentions behind advertising - that it is promotional, informative, commercial, and persuasive. Generally, an adequate understanding of advertising among children emerges by the age of 8 but some children do not apply this understanding until they are 12 years of age.

Food advertising does not dictate children's dietary patterns but it does have a role to play in food choice at the level of the brand. In addition, television programming offers a generous range of images about food and can shape food choices. Healthy and unhealthy eating with different kinds of foods are represented in all media in a host of different ways.

Analyses of ads for children show that content has remained unchanged since the 1996 MAFF Report.