

Issue: 9, 2005

Parenting in an Obesogenic Environment

AUTHOR(S): Michele Roberts

ABSTRACT

This article explores the impact of a food-marketing trend that uses fun to sell unhealthy food to children. Twenty-one mothers of young children were interviewed (nine in focus groups and twelve in in-depth interviews). The study found evidence of significant and potentially harmful changes in the food preferences and food consumption behaviours of children in response to these techniques. The findings also suggest that these techniques are increasing family conflict and undermining parental authority.

ARTICLE

The combination of food and entertainment has been referred to as 'eatertainment' by the food industry, trade press and media (BBC, 1999; Enright, 2001; Logistix, 2005; McAllister, 2002). This food-marketing trend is aimed at children and utilises several 'fun' techniques:

- * Premium offers (the offer of something free as an inducement to purchase, e.g., free toys, stickers and trading cards inside packages of snack foods, cereals and convenience foods);
- * Children's licensed characters and movie tie-ins on food packaging,
- * 'Kidz meals' combining child-sized portions of food with soft drinks and free toys or confectionery. Pioneered by fast food restaurants, this model is being widely adopted by restaurants and cafes and is now also available in supermarkets.
- * Fun product designs that incorporate interactive play value, often incorporating unusual shapes, textures, colours, tastes and smells, and characters printed directly onto the food.

One study in the UK identified the nature of this trend and its potential to change children's food preferences and behaviour: "Manufacturers are asking children to interact with their products and that is gaining them a lot of market share. Children are no longer satisfied with straightforward snacks and sweets – they now want to be "eatertained" as well...Although one fun food a day may be sufficient for an adult, a child may want fun food at every eating occasion. As children increasingly associate fun with food they will expect more from their chosen food" (Datamonitor, 1999, p.1, cited in BBC, 1999). The success of these marketing techniques is unprecedented. When Heinz marketed a purple coloured version of their ketchup in small bottles designed to write on food, the company achieved a five percentage point increase in the US ketchup market (Eig, 2001). Similarly, when Kelloggs included free Beyblade toys in cereal packets, market share increased by an average of three percentage points worldwide (Logistix, 2005).

Many child health advocates and organizations have raised concerns about 'fun food' in view of increasing rates of overweight or obese children. These marketing techniques are used, almost without exception, to promote unhealthy food. This was illustrated in the recently released report into "Star Wars food" (CCFC, 2005), which found that almost all of the 25 foods offering a Star Wars premium were high in sugar, sodium or saturated fats. Poor diet is one of the major causes of obesity, a condition now affecting more than 25% of Australian children (DAA, 2003; RACP, 2004). Obesity increases children's susceptibility to a range of medical conditions including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, stroke, cancer, musculoskeletal problems, kidney and gall bladder disease and respiratory problems (NOTF, 2003,). Longitudinal research by Stamatakis (2002, cited in Ofcom, 2004) found that: "Obese 18 year olds are twice as likely to be dead at 50" (p. 31). Obesity also increases susceptibility to psychological problems resulting from poor body image, low self esteem and increased exposure to bullying (AIHW, 2004). It reduces gross motor skills and fitness levels (Carter, 2004), and impairs children's ability to participate in sports and play with peers.

An survey of 13 developed countries found that Australian children are exposed to more food advertising than children in other developed nations (Dibb, 1996). The implications for obesity become clear when the content of this advertising is taken into consideration. A content analysis of Australian children's advertising revealed that almost 50% of food advertisements were for confectionary, chocolate and fast foods (Zuppa, Morton and Mehta, 2003). Hill and Radimer (1997) found that the main appeals used were free-gifts (20% explicit) and fun (14% explicit, 36% implicit).

This is in stark contrast to health and nutritional appeals (4.2% explicit).

Children are gaining greater influence over household purchases (Wilson and Wood, 2004), and this influence is particularly strong over lower priced items (Duff, 1991 cited in Lackman and Lanasa, 1993). It has been suggested that the increase in the child's influence on household consumption has led to increasing conflict within the parent-child relationship. This problem was identified in seminal research by Atkin (1978) that remains widely cited though yet un-replicated. This observational supermarket study found that parental refusal of cereal requests resulted in child-parent conflict 65% of the time, with more unpleasant consequences observed lower down the socio-economic scale.

The impact of food premiums has been researched in a supermarket setting by Atkin (1978) and Carruth, Skinner, Moran and Coletta (2000). Both studies found that premiums had a strong influence on children's food purchases. Atkin found that almost half the children sampled were influenced by a premium in their choice of cereal and noted that premiums had a strong influence on mothers. When children referred to the premium while making a purchase request they had a much higher rate of success. Research by Mizerski (1995) also found evidence of the influence on adults. In a study on the effect of premiums in a fast food restaurant, the presence of a children's premium had more influence on adults than children. A study that tracked the premium purchases of 6500 households found that licensed characters were most influential with preschool children, particularly boys (Bashford, 2004). Licenses were present on 34% of all products bought for four and five year olds and 15% of licensed products bought for children were purchased by grandmothers.

The vast body of literature examining food promotion effects on children is beyond the scope of this paper – a systematic review of the literature on this subject identified almost 30,000 relevant items (Hastings, 2003). While some note that the body of literature provides unequivocal evidence of the influence of food promotion on children's diet (APA, 2004; Livingstone, 2004), others argue that the literature only confirms effects at a brand rather than category level (Ambler, 2005). It is possible that empirical research is incapable of providing unequivocal answers to this question due to a range of measurement problems that include communication limitations with young children and ethical problems of offering unhealthy food to children (Ofcom, 2004, p. 14). As a result of these methodological limitations, this study adopted an exploratory approach to improve our understanding of the consequences of food

promotion by investigating the impact of marketing activities that use fun to sell unhealthy food to children.

Method

The research design incorporated a grounded, phenomenological approach to generate new insights on the complex issue of how food promotion influences children's food consumption. Focus groups were combined with in-depth interviews to provide different and complimentary contributions to the research problem. Two focus groups (containing nine participants in total) and twelve in-depth individual interviews were conducted. Interviewees were middle-class mothers with primary school children. Although this was a convenience sample, a representative balance was achieved between single and two-parent families, working and non-working mothers and a wide spread of child gender and age. A modified type of auto-driving technique, in the form of pictures of fun food products, was effectively used to elicit responses (Thomsen, McCoy and Williams, 2000). The individual interviews offered detailed insights into the impact on everyday food consumption, however their effectiveness was reduced by social desirability response bias. Interviewees were reluctant to discuss the unhealthy food their children consumed, requiring extensive probing and lengthy interviews to establish trust and allow meaningful discussion. This problem was surprisingly reduced (though not entirely absent) in the focus groups, where the shared camaraderie of 'mothers-in-arms' allowed parents to lower their masks and talk freely about their triumphs and failures with their children's diets.

Findings

Without exception, the mothers discussed examples of premiums driving greater demand for unhealthy food. This was especially apparent with collectable premiums—frequently included in cereals and chip packets and in sets of characters included with fast food meals.

Mine went crazy when the Tazos were in the chip packets...We were getting chips all the time... they'd get chips they didn't even like (mother of two).

They do want to go back to get the other ones in the set...if there's five games, they'll want to get the whole set. If there's a good toy,

they'll pester me to go to McDonald's. It's got nothing to do with the food, it's all to do with the toy (mother of four).

The fun appeal of these products appears to create greater resonance between child and brand, with children embracing these 'fun foods' as much for their play potential as their taste appeal. Play is experienced on two levels: interactive play with the product through dunking (Dunkaroos), unwinding (Roll-ups) and shredding (Cheese Stringers), and playing with friends through the trading of snacks or premiums (Tazos or cards).

Fun appeals – increasing peer pressure on the lunchbox

The parental admonishment not to play with your food is increasingly 'falling on deaf-ears' as children engage in brand-play in the playground. Despite the young age of the children, they already appreciate the ability of brands to confer and deny status as we see in this story told by the mother of a child in pre-primary:

The teacher asked me to come in and she said the kids had been telling them that their mother had put a special treat in their lunch box – and it wasn't there! My daughter had been caught taking them. I was horrified –my child is a thief! The teacher said: "She probably thinks she is missing out, because she said she doesn't ever get any of that in her lunchbox...It was the packet, it was the look of the packet...that it wasn't home made. It was being able to unwrap this packet and everyone saw that you had the same packets as them" (mother of two).

Several mothers mentioned the danger of children being excluded at school if they failed to participate in these conspicuous consumption rituals:

If we explain to our kids that these toys are a waste of money and don't give them, then they are going to be in that few who are going to be different (mother of three).

This anxiety appeared to drive the mothers' desire to do everything they could to increase their children's chances of surviving the

playground jungle – in this case by providing them with the necessary props to play the games.

The influence of individually packaged 'kidz meals' is extending to family eating occasions:

I said: "We're buying a big chicken and we're going to divide it," and he didn't want it on a plate. He wanted it in his own little box (mother of three).

I wrap their veggies on their dinner plate in a parcel of green or red cellophane, so they've got to unwrap it...they'll eat it, coz it came out of a packet. I say, "oh it wasn't home cooked, I didn't make that" (mother of three).

The findings suggest that this form of marketing has greater impact than marketing has traditionally been credited with. The free toys, high sensory appeal, collectability, trading dimensions and appeal of the invincible superhero on the packaging are not merely a child's equivalent of 'a set of free steak knives'. These techniques appeal to children's deep-rooted psychological needs (Bettelheim, 1976 cited in Zipes, 1983). The importance of children's vulnerability to these appeals is emphasised by Carruth et al. (2000). Their study found that preschool children in the preoperational stage of development – according to Piaget's (1976) model – were unable to select cereal on more than one attribute. The five-year-olds were incapable of weighing up multiple attributes such as the presence of a premium against whether they liked the taste or how much it cost. This was noted to be a source of family conflict by the interviewees who selected cereal on economic grounds.

Effects on Food Marketing on families: Mothers-in-Arms

The interviewees reported feeling as though they are engaged in battle to provide a healthy diet for their children. This struggle appears to take place on two levels: with other carers and within the wider community. Several discussed the failure of other caregivers to reinforce healthy eating messages. Despite the increasing reliance on care provided by other family members, the mothers perceived that fathers and grandparents are 'playing' at the role of caregiver rather than taking on the full responsibilities of the role. Some described returning home from work to discover the debris of fast food containers and unopened homework.

(When) their grandfather picks them up from school...I come to pick up the children at 5pm and he'll say, "Don't worry, I've given them a Happy Meal" (mother of three).

The mothers suggested that ex-husbands and grandparents were particularly prone to purchasing fun foods as a way of enhancing time spent with their children. The consumption of special foods helped to reinforce the 'specialness' of their time together. This suggests that societal changes – such as the increases in working mothers and non-traditional family models – may put increasing pressure on children's diets.

The failure to provide consistent messages about healthy eating was not limited to family members. Many mothers believed that this failure is occurring throughout the community and that this contributes to their sense of fighting a 'loosing battle'. Schools were heavily criticised for providing canteens that sell exactly the kinds of foods that parents were criticised for serving at home and for their use of unhealthy foods to reward students. The mothers also expressed a sense of hopelessness over influencing how much of the healthy food that they put into the lunchbox was actually consumed at school:

I'd gone up to school to drop something off...and I saw my son stand up and chuck his banana into the bin. I was so cross. I saw a child in my daughter's pre-primary class do it too – he got out his apple and chucked it into the bin. It's so wasteful, but I don't think the teacher noticed. They don't seem to take any notice (mother of three).

The mothers shared several stories about doctors and dentists rewarding their child's 'bravery' with burger-vouchers. These incidents are concerning not only because of the effect on children's diets and the messages they give to children; they also subtly contribute to the mother's sense of what foods are acceptable.

The interviewees also expressed concern about the increasing pervasiveness of promotions targeting children, particularly in the supermarket. They reported feeling of being defeated at every turn by supermarkets and by advertising:

There's something in every aisle...he'll ask for everything. Even those frozen icy poles, they have characters on now. Jelly has characters on now. Everything, paper towels, toothpaste...The

flavoured milk, that's where my kids have a fit. If they've missed out on the yogurt and they've missed out on whatever, then they get to the milk – that's the last thing they can ask for, and that's why I cop it (mother of three).

Even a trip to the movies was a source of conflict over premiums. Four of the mothers mentioned their frustration that a trip to the movies now included licensed coke 'cups' that are heavily marketed by the cinema complex:

When you go to the movies and they sell those combos (popcorn and coke) that works incredibly effectively, every time you go they want to have the Mr Incredible drink topper with the picture on the cup... it's so in your face (mother of two).

Theoretical and Management Implications

These findings point to food marketing effects occurring at a category level, an outcome that is important given the failure of previous research to demonstrate this link. Although this was a small, non-representative sample, the message from mothers was unanimous - fun techniques are increasing children's consumption of unhealthy foods. This effect was most noticeable with the use of sets and collectibles as premiums. The mothers' concerns with their inability to control their children's diets suggest that social marketing campaigns should target a wider community, including schools and grandparents, not just parents and children.

This study reveals significant changes occurring in promotional culture: parents and other caregivers are giving children increasing control of their children's diet at a time when food marketers are targeting children more intensely. These two trends may be occurring independently or may be interrelated. The fallout from these two forces colliding may be a significant contribution to the failing health of Australian children. As such, further research is needed to guide policy decisions in this area to facilitate an improvement in Australian children's diets. In particular, investigation is required into the relative importance of newer promotional elements such as licensed packaging and premium offers relative to other more acknowledged influences, such as advertising.

References

Ambler, T., (2004), "Does the UK Promotion of Food and Drink to Children Contribute to their Obesity?" *Centre for Marketing Working Paper* No: 04-901, from the London Business School website. Available <http://facultyresearch.london.edu/docs/04-901.pdf>, accessed 1 May 2005.

APA (American Psychological Association) (2004), *Report of the APA Task Force on Advertising and Children*. Available <http://www.apa.org/monitor/jun04/protecting.html>, accessed 30 March 2005.

Atkin, C. K. (1978), "Observation of Parent-Child Interaction in Supermarket Decision-Making," *Journal of Marketing*, 42, 41-45.

BBC News (1999), "Where Pocket Money goes on Food," Available http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/your_money/442558.stm, accessed 9 September 2005.

Bashford, S. (2004), "Kids characters come up trumps," *Promotions and Incentives*, 14-16.

Carruth, B. R., J. D. Skinner, J. D. Moran, and F. Coletta (2000), "Preschoolers' Food Product Choices at a Simulated Point of Purchase and Mothers' Consumer Practices," *Journal of Nutrition Education*, 32 (3), 146-151.

CCFC (Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood) (2005), *Star Wars Food Lures Children to the Fat Side*. Available <http://www.commercialfreechildhood.org/pressreleases/starwarsfood.htm>, accessed 20 May 2005.

DAA (Dietitians Association of Australia) (2003), *Television Advertising of Food to Children*. Available http://www.daa.asn.au/util/download.asp?id=45&doc_id=1001&view=statement&type=file, accessed 7 June 2005.

Dibb, D. (1996), *A Spoonful of Sugar: Television Food Advertising Aimed at Children: An international Comparative Study*, London: Consumers International.

Eig, J. (2001), "Edible Entertainment – Food Companies Grab Kids by Fancifully Packaging Products as Toys," *Wall Street Journal*, October 24.

Enright, A. (2001), "That's Eatertainment," *Prepared Foods*, April. Available http://www.preparedfoods.com/CDA/ArticleInformation/features/BNP_Features_Item/0,1231,114847, accessed 19 May 2005.

Hastings, G., M. Stead, L. McDermott, A. Forsyth, A. MacKintosh, M. Rayner, C. Godfrey, M. Caraher, and K. Angus (2003), *Review of Research on the Effects of Food Promotion to Children*. Available <http://www.foodstandards.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/promofoodchildrenexec.pdf>, accessed 10 March 2005.

Hill J. M. and K. L. Radimer (1997), "A Content Analysis of Food Advertisements in Television for Australian Children," *Australian Journal of Nutrition and Dietetics*, 54 (4), 174-181.

Lackman, C. and J. M. Lanasa. (1993), "Family decision making theory: An overview and assessment," *Psychology and Marketing*, 10 (2), 81-93.

Livingstone, S. (2004), *A Commentary on the Research Evidence Regarding the Effects of Food Promotion on Children*. Available http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research/tv/reports/food_ads/appendix1.pdf, accessed 10 March 2005.

Logistix (2003), *Case Studies: Kellogg's BeyBlade International Promotion*. Available http://www.logistix.co.uk/cs_kelloggs.php, accessed 20 April 2005.

McAllister, S. (2002), "Captivating the Kids with Eatertainment," *Grocer*, 225 (7575), 53-54.

Mizerski, R. (1995), "The relationship between cartoon trade character recognition and attitude toward product category in young children," *Journal of Marketing*, 59 (4), 58-71.

NOTF (National Obesity Task Force) (2003), *Healthy Weight 2008: Australia's Future*. Available http://www.healthyaactive.gov.au/docs/healthy_weight08.pdf, accessed 22 May 2005.

Ofcom (Office of Communications) (2004), *Childhood Obesity: Food Advertising in Context*. Available http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research/tv/reports/food_ads/, accessed on 22 May 2005.

Piaget, J. (1976), *The Child's Construction of Reality*, London: Routledge & Paul.

RACP (The Royal Australian College of Physicians) (2004), *Children and the Media: Advocating for the Future*. Available <http://www.racp.edu.au/hpu/paed/media/print.htm>, accessed 20 May 2005.

Thomsen, S. R., J. K. McCoy, and M. Williams (2000), "Reconstructing the World of the Anorexic Outpatient: Procedures for Enhancing Trustworthiness and Credibility," *The Qualitative Report*, 5 (1 & 2).

Zippe, J. (1991), *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, New York: Routledge.

Zuppa J., H. Morton, and K. Mehta (2003), "Television Food Advertising: Counterproductive to Children's Health? A Content Analysis using the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating," *Nutrition and Dietetics*, 60 (2), 78-84.

Wilson, G. and K. Wood (2004), "The Influence of Children on Parental Purchases during Supermarket Shopping," *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 28, 329-336.

Copyright the Journal of Research for Consumers 2001