Children’s Television and Nutrition

The prevalence of overweight children, and hours of television viewed are positively correlated\(^1,2\). Causality may include greater periods of inactivity and exposure to food advertising and product placement while watching television. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends a maximum of 2 hours of non-educational television viewing per day for children over 2 years\(^3\). However, recent evidence suggests that children aged 6-11 years watch 24.5 hours of television weekly\(^4\). A healthy and balanced diet provides the recommended amounts of nutrients and other food components to promote normal growth and development, reduce chronic disease risk, and foster appropriate energy balance and a healthy weight trajectory. But the current eating regimes of children and adolescents differ markedly from recommended patterns and increase their risks of obesity and poor health\(^5\). Obesity is associated with increased risks of diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer, lower life expectancy and poor quality of life scores\(^6-8\).

There is a strong dose-response relationship between the prevalence of overweight children and hours of television viewed\(^1,2\). Television viewing is associated with greater periods of inactivity and exposure to food advertising and products\(^9,10\). Television viewing influences the amount of health-related activity undertaken and directly correlates with consumption of low nutrient-density foods, the persuasion of parents to purchase such food, and development of poor eating habits\(^11,12\). Sugary and low nutrient foods and beverages comprise up to 60% of all food cues in television programmes during prime time television\(^13\). Exposure to food advertisements produces significant increases in energy intake in all children, with the largest increase in obese children\(^14\). Children who see a branded product placement are more likely to select the branded product, and age does not appear to be a mediating factor\(^15\). Embedding brands within entertainment exerts a powerful implicit influence on children’s memory and choices, typically without explicit awareness of advertising exposure\(^15\). We expect that there is a high probability of increased product consumption with product placements within children-specific programming.

Food advertising aimed at children is dominated by high calorie, low nutritional quality foods\(^9,10\). In studies, 97.8% of food-product advertisements viewed by children aged 2-11 years old were for unhealthy foods\(^16\). During 91 hours of advertisements on British children’s television, food advertisements were the single largest category of products advertised, accounting for 50% of total advertisements\(^17\). Advertisements provide a convenient opportunity for children to eat; evidence suggests that people snack more while watching television\(^18,19\). Thus, foods that should be eaten in moderation comprise a large proportion of children’s food advertisements. Encouragingly, however, the number of food advertisements children are viewing appears to be decreasing\(^20\).

Irish context

We investigated the frequency and type of food and beverage in children’s television programming, and described the context, motivating factors and outcomes of food and beverage placements on public broadcast channels within Ireland (RTE) and the UK (BBC). These are “public-good” channels, which aim to inform, educate and empower audiences\(^21,22\). In our study, unhealthy foods such as sweet snacks and candy accounted for 47.5% of all food-specific placements and sugar-sweetened beverages accounted for 25% of all beverage placements\(^23\). Consistent with previous research, social or celebratory motivations for food and beverage depictions within children-specific programming were most common. Motivations and outcomes for cues were similar across UK and Irish television programming\(^23\). Thus, eating (particularly, eating fatty and sugary foods and sugar-sweetened beverages) is portrayed to children in an attractive and appealing light. We further analysed the portrayal, motivating factors and outcomes of food and beverage placements within different genres of children television including cartoon, animated, movies, quiz, and tween programming (unpublished data). Overall, more than 50% of depicted food cues across genres were for unhealthy foods. Fruit and vegetable-related cues were evenly distributed across most genres (about 10%). A high proportion of fast food and convenience foods was seen within tween programming and a high proportion of sweet snacks and sweets/candy-related cues were seen in animated, cartoon and children genre programmes. A very small proportion of unhealthy food types were depicted within quiz programming. These results highlight the high prevalence of unhealthy foods depicted independent of genre.
the high proportion of unhealth y foods depicted, independent or program genre.

To date, most research on children’s television advertisements has focused on advertisements during broadcasts within the United States, thus to address this issue we recently studied advertisements within Irish television during children’s specific programming. 31% of advertisements related to food or beverage products, with 66.3% of food advertisements for foods that should be eaten in moderation. The most frequently recorded food advertisement was for fast food products (27.3%), followed by sweets/candy (21.6%) and dairy products (17.0%). There were no advertisements broadcast for healthier foods such as fruit or vegetables.

Television has the power to either aid in or oppose the fight against the current obesity epidemic in children. In 2012, new regulations issued by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, prohibited the endorsement of foods with high fat, sugar and salt content by celebrities, sports stars, programme characters, characters and personalities from cinema releases, and prohibited health or nutrition claims, or inclusion of promotional offers. Notwithstanding, these regulations do not address the positive and frequent portrayal of unhealthy food products during children’s specific television programming. We suggest that parents, policy makers and physicians should be aware of the frequent portrayals of unhealthy food and beverages in children’s television. The potential impact of unhealthy food and behaviour portrayals on children requires further research. Future, children’s television programmes makers should address these concerns by including frequent and positively associated connotations with healthy foods and behaviours. The future of children’s programming should include the active inclusion of more frequent and positively associated connotations with healthy foods and behaviours. So, in addition to attempting to restrict the amount of time spent watching television programming it is also important to change the messages being portrayed regarding food and eating habits on the programs being viewed.

P Scully, AP Macken, D Leddin, C Dunne, W Cullen, CS O’Gorman
The Children’s Ark, University Hospital Limerick, Limerick
Email: clodagh.oogorman@ul.ie

References


**Author’s Correspondence**
No Author Comments

**Acknowledgement**
No Acknowledgement

**Other References**
No Other References

© Copyright 2004 - 2009 Irish Medical Journal