

Old McDonald's has a hold on kids' taste buds, study finds

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Say what you will, Shakespeare, but a McNugget by any other name is just not as tasty. At least, not to the 3- to 5-year-old set.

Asked to sample two identical foods from the fast-food giant McDonald's, children preferred the taste of the version branded with the restaurant's familiar "Golden Arches" to one extracted from unmarked paper packaging, say researchers at the Stanford University School of Medicine and Lucile Packard Children's Hospital.

The study shows that even young children are swayed by brand preferences. The results are likely to fuel more debate over a growing movement to restrict marketing to kids under 8 years old.

"Kids don't just ask for food from McDonald's," said Thomas Robinson, MD, director of the Center for Healthy Weight at Packard Children's and associate professor of pediatrics and of medicine at the School of Medicine. "They actually believe that the chicken nugget they think is from McDonald's tastes better than an identical, unbranded nugget."

The degree of preference expressed by the children correlated with the number of television sets they had in their homes and the frequency with which they ate at McDonald's.

Numerous studies have shown that young children are unable to understand that advertising, product placement and co-branding with popular toys are meant to get them to choose one product over another.

For them, "truth in advertising" has a very literal meaning.

"It's really an unfair marketplace out there for young children," said Robinson, who is also a member of the Stanford Prevention Research Center. "It's very clear they cannot understand the persuasive nature of advertising."

Robinson is the lead author of the research, which will be published in the August issue of Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine.

The researchers studied the taste preferences of 63 children between the ages of 3 and 5 who were enrolled in six Head Start centers in San Mateo County, Calif. The children sampled five foods: chicken nuggets, a hamburger, french fries, baby carrots and milk. The chicken nuggets, hamburger and french fries were all from McDonald's; the carrots and milk were purchased from a grocery store. Robinson and his colleagues chose to specifically study McDonald's because the company is the largest fast-food advertiser in the United States and most study subjects would likely be familiar with the brand.

Each food sample was divided into two identical portions, one wrapped in a McDonald's wrapper or placed in a McDonald's bag, and the other in similar wrapping without the McDonald's logo. The children were randomly asked to taste first one and then the other of the five identical, differently packaged, pairs of food samples and indicate whether they tasted the same or which they thought tasted better. With four out of the five foods - chicken nuggets, fries, carrots and milk - significantly more children pegged the McDonald's product as tastier, despite the fact that the foods were exactly the same.

"The branding effect is very strong, even by only 3 to 5 years of age," said Robinson.

He and his colleagues also asked the children's parents to complete a questionnaire that asked, among other things, how many TVs they had in their house, how often they ate at McDonald's and whether they had any toys from McDonald's. The kids had an average of 2.4 televisions in their homes, and more than half the kids had a TV in their bedrooms. About one-third of the children ate at McDonald's more than once a week, and more than three-quarters had McDonald's toys at home.

"We found that kids with more TVs in their homes and those who eat at McDonald's more frequently were even more likely to prefer the food in the McDonald's wrapper," said Robinson. "This is a company that knows what they're doing. Nobody else spends as much to advertise their fast-food products to children." McDonald's is estimated to spend more than \$1 billion dollars per year on U.S. advertising.

Robinson was quick to point out that marketing is more than just television advertisements, and that it's not restricted to McDonald's. An older sibling's co-branded toy or a parent's hankering for an Ultimate Double Whopper can amount to an implicit nod of approval in the eyes of an impressionable toddler. And although the parents hold the keys to the car that goes to the fast-food restaurant, they're not entirely to blame.

"Parents don't choose for their children to be exposed to this type of marketing," he said. "Parents have a very difficult job. It may seem easier to give in to their child's plea to go to McDonald's than to give in to the many other hundreds of requests they get during a day."

In 2007, both the Federal Trade Commission and the Kaiser Family Foundation released studies on the effect of advertising on children. They found that children between the ages of 2 and 11 are exposed to about 5,500 food advertisements every year. Although this is a decrease over past years, the studies also found that the advertising was significantly more concentrated in children's television programming.

The growing concern is not falling on deaf ears. Last December, possibly in response to threatened regulations and lawsuits, McDonald's and nine other top food companies announced the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative. Participants agree to devote at least half their advertising messages to promoting healthier choices for children.

"I have tremendous trust that the private sector will find a way to offer better products and still make a profit," said Robinson, "but we've seen a lot of promises go by the wayside over the years. No one is going to propose we totally stop industries from promoting their products. But there is a very good argument for regulating and limiting marketing to children."

Source: Stanford University Medical Center

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