

Study suggests children's food choices are affected by direct advertising and parental influence

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Directly advertising food items to children worries many parents and health care providers, and the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Psychological Association have expressed concern about the negative impact of advertising on children's healthy food choices. A new study soon to be published in *The Journal of Pediatrics* explores the relationship between fast food advertisements, parental influence, and the food choices made by children.

Dr. Christopher Ferguson and colleagues at Texas A&M International University studied 75 children ranging in age from 3 to 5 years. All of the children watched a series of two cartoons, with commercials shown between each cartoon. The children were divided into two groups; half of the children watched a commercial for French fries, and the other half watched a commercial for apple slices with dipping sauce. After watching the cartoons and commercials, the children were allowed to choose a coupon for either advertised food with input from their parents, half of whom encouraged their child to choose the healthy option, and the other half remained neutral.

Of the children who viewed the commercial for French fries, 71% chose the coupon for French fries if their parents remained neutral. However, the number only dropped to 55% when the children were encouraged by their parents to choose the healthier option. "Parental encouragement to eat healthy was somewhat able to help undo the message of

commercials, although the effects of parents were smaller than we had anticipated," Dr. Ferguson explains. Of the children who viewed the commercial for apple slices with dipping sauce, only 46% picked French fries when their parents remained neutral; this number dropped to 33% when their parents encouraged them to pick the healthier option.

"Children were clearly influenced by the commercials they saw; however, parents are not powerless," Dr. Ferguson states. He goes on to note that although advertising effects can be considerable, "Parents have an advantage if they are consistent with their long-term messages about healthy eating." Rather than focusing on banning advertisements to children, the authors suggest that politicians, advocates, and food producers should concentrate on ways to promote the advertisement of healthy food options. As Dr. Ferguson concludes, "Advertisement effects can work both for and against healthy eating."

More information: "Advertising Influences on Young Children's Food Choices and Parental Influence" - [DOI:10.1016/j.jpeds.2011.08.023](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2011.08.023)

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