

Fast food commercials to kids 'deceptive' by industry self-regulation standards

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Fast food ads aimed at kids fail to de-emphasize toy premiums, making them deceptive by industry self-regulation standards. They also fail to emphasize healthy menu items, investigators at Dartmouth-Hitchcock's Norris Cotton Cancer Center have found. The research was published in the March 4 edition of the journal *PLOS ONE*.

"Kids were just as likely to notice the toy premiums in the kid's ads as they were the food, when their own standards require a de-emphasis on premiums compared to foods," said James D. Sargent, MD, [researcher](#) at Dartmouth-Hitchcock's Norris Cotton Cancer Center and senior author of the study. The children noticed food less than half of the time in the kid's ads, but recalled it more than 70% of the time in the adult ads, where food was the primary focus of the commercial.

In the study, "Children's Recall of Fast Food Television Advertising-Testing the Adequacy of Food Marketing Regulation," 100 children aged 3-7 years were shown McDonald's and Burger King children's and adult meal ads, which were drawn at random from ads that aired on national television in the United States in 2010-11. The children were asked to share what they had seen immediately after seeing the ads. For comparison, they also assessed net impression to ads aimed at adults from the same companies.

Food marketing self-regulation, conducted by the Better Business Bureau, is supposed to ensure that the marketing is not deceptive and emphasize healthy foods promoted with these meals. The Bureau claims

to analyze the ads in the context of the net impression of children in the intended audience.

"These companies had promised to emphasize healthy foods - apples and milk," Sargent added. "Children only rarely mentioned these foods - less than 10% of the time - after seeing the kid's ads."

The researchers concluded that the depictions of healthy menu items were present, but not prominent, because the children did not notice them. Tie-ins to toys were found to be common in children's ads but rarely in ads for adults, as almost half of participants failed to recall any food but were just as likely to recall the toy tie-ins. When children did remember seeing food in the [ads](#), they rarely noted the healthy menu choices the [fast food](#) companies were marketing.

The researchers suggest that the study offers a design that should be used to improve adherence of [food](#) advertising aimed at children to regulatory standards using a pattern of practice approach.

More information: *PLOS ONE*, journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0119300

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