

# Kids meals, toys, and TV advertising: A triple threat to child health

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Fast food companies advertise children's meals on TV with ads that feature toy premiums, and it has been suggested that the use of these toy premiums may prompt children to request eating at fast food restaurants. In a new study scheduled for publication in *The Journal of Pediatrics*, researchers found that the more children watched television channels that aired ads for children's fast food meals, the more frequently their families visited those fast food restaurants.

Using a database they compiled of all [fast food](#) TV [ads](#) that aired nationally in 2009, Jennifer A. Emond, PhD, and colleagues from the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth found that only two nationally-recognized fast food chains engaged in child-directed TV advertising at that time. According to Dr. Emond, "Seventy-nine percent of the child-directed ads from those two [restaurants](#) aired on just four children's networks."

The researchers enrolled 100 children (3-7 years of age) and one of their parents in the study. The parents completed a survey that included questions about how often their children watched each of the four children's networks, if their children requested visits to the two restaurants, if their children collected toys from those restaurants, and how often the family visited those restaurants. Researchers found that 37% of parents reported more frequent visits to the two [fast food restaurants](#) with child-directed TV ads.

Fifty-four percent of the children requested visits to at least one of the

restaurants. Of the 29% of children who collected toys from the restaurants, almost 83% requested to visit one or both of the restaurants. Some factors associated with more frequent visits were more TVs in the home, a TV in the child's bedroom, more time spent watching TV during the day, and more time spent watching one of the four children's networks airing the majority of child-directed ads.

Despite the small numbers of enrolled families, this study shows that the more frequently a child views child-directed fast food TV ads, often involving a toy, the more likely the family visited the fast food restaurant that was featured in the advertising. These findings also show that [children](#)'s food preferences may be partially shaped by a desire for the toys featured in TV ads. "For now," notes Dr. Emond, "our best advice to parents is to switch their child to commercial-free TV programming to help avoid pestering for foods seen in commercials."

**More information:** "Commercial Television Exposure, Fast Food Toy Collecting, and Family Visits to Fast Food Restaurants among Families Living in Rural Communities," by Jennifer A. Emond, PhD, Amy M. Bernhardt, Med, Diane Gilbert-Diamond, ScD, Zhigang Li, PhD, James D. Sargent, MD, appears in *The Journal of Pediatrics*, [DOI: 10.1016/j.jpeds.2015.09.063](#)

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