

Even adverts for 'healthy' fast food are bad for children – here's why they should be banned

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Television adverts for foods which are high in fat, salt or sugar are banned from [children's television schedules](#). Yet a McDonald's "Happy Meal" advert was recently [ruled to be exempt](#) from these restrictions.

Shown between episodes of Peppa Pig, the advert promoted a meal which included chicken nuggets, pineapple and water – a menu which passed the Advertising Standards Association's standards for healthy [food](#). But, while it might be encouraging to see one of the world's biggest food giants promoting fruit, can a McDonald's advert ever truly be considered "healthy"?

It is clear that the huge amount of money spent on food advertising works. Campaigns are highly effective at persuading us to buy and eat more junk food, contributing to our expanding waistlines and hopelessly declining health.

The influence has been particularly well documented in children, [who are more likely](#) to like, demand and consume products which are high in fat, sugar or salt (HFSS) after watching adverts which promote them. Against a backdrop of worryingly [high sugar consumption](#) by children in the UK, the evidence is so compelling that the government is now considering a 9pm watershed on HFSS food marketing as part of the [Childhood Obesity Plan](#).

Some food companies have responded by reformulating their products to cut down on sugar, salt and fat. This means that traditionally HFSS brands are now producing healthier, "non-HFSS" products which are exempt from the marketing restrictions, including the Happy Meal that appeared during the Peppa Pig ad-breaks.

On the face of it, this seems like a reasonable and logical solution. The fast food companies can still market their products and make a profit, while healthier foods are being promoted to the public.

But eating behaviour is often anything but reasonable and logical. It is driven by urgent, primitive desires that can be triggered by exposure to any images associated with our favourite unhealthy foods. These triggers

include iconic logos such as those famous golden arches, which are more far readily associated with burgers and fries than with pineapples and water.

Our prior experiences of these brands matter – and old habits die hard. [One study](#) found that advertising "healthy" McDonald's Happy Meals to children simply increased their liking for fast food overall and did nothing to encourage them to choose a healthier option.

There is also a risk that these adverts make the brand as a whole seem healthier than it really is. This is known as the "[health halo](#)" effect, where the positive attribute of "healthiness" spreads from the advert in question to the brand as a whole in the eyes of the consumer. This is a subtle effect that often occurs without conscious awareness.

But even if a young Peppa Pig viewer was to get a craving for pineapple, and successfully pester for a trip to McDonald's, upon arrival they would be immediately immersed in the smells and sights of less healthy but more tempting options. Unsurprisingly, people rarely choose a healthy option when a less healthy one is available. Even if we'd originally planned to go for the healthy choice, our brains are naturally turned on by HFSS products. Neuroimaging research has begun to uncover just why this is.

Food for thought

When a person is exposed to a picture of appealing food, the regions of the brain associated with attention, reward and motivation [quickly become active](#). Salivation and food cravings [increase](#). This is an automatic conditioned response built up over a lifetime of experience with these [types of food](#). Importantly, this reward response seems to be particularly associated with high-calorie foods – in other words, the pineapple doesn't stand a chance.

The strength of this "food cue reactivity" response [differs between people](#) and is an [important predictor](#) of food intake and weight gain in both adults and children. It is also influenced by genes. Children with a higher genetic risk for obesity show stronger brain reward responses to food [adverts on TV](#) and eat more sweets [in response to food adverts](#). This suggests that some individuals have a vulnerability to advertising that is beyond their control.

To resist the cravings that are triggered by the brain's response to these adverts, individuals must engage in self control. This involves a brain area called the [pre-frontal cortex](#), and is harder for children because the pre-frontal cortex does not finish [maturing until adulthood](#).

In contrast, the brain areas underlying the reward response develop [at a much younger age](#). This leaves children particularly vulnerable to the marketing of tempting foods.

One could argue that this is not a problem for the McDonald's adverts approved by the ASA. However neuroimaging reveals that children's brains show a similar reward response when they [recognise a brand](#) associated with HFSS food. So just seeing logos associated with burgers can result in the same kind of reaction as seeing images of the foods themselves.

Of course, it isn't only TV adverts that are a problem. Junk [food adverts](#) are everywhere, from bus shelters to supermarket promotions, and the [brightly coloured packaging](#) is hard to miss.

The UK food industry spends huge sums promoting HFSS foods, and much less on healthier alternatives. [Only 1.2%](#) of broadcast advertisers' budgets is reportedly spent on promoting fresh vegetables.

Ultimately, if the government really does want to protect children from

junk food marketing, they must restrict all adverts that promote HFSS brands, not just those that explicitly show the food itself. It's time we started paying attention to how human eating behaviour really works, rather than how we wish it did.

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