

How to talk to your kids about marketing

Source: [Heart & Stroke](#)

There's a certain sugary cereal that markets itself as "for kids" – not silly rabbits. Sure, it's just a slogan. But the message that unhealthy food is kids' food is echoed in a Canadian study, where researchers asked more than 600 children in grades 1 through 9 to differentiate between "kids' food" and "adult food."

Children identified junk food, sugar (or sugary cereals) and candy as "kids foods."

High sugar and low nutrient foods tend to be marketed to children and adolescents. These foods are promoted as fun and entertaining, says University of Calgary researcher Dr. Charlene Elliott, lead author of the study and CIHR Canada Research Chair in Food Marketing, Policy and Children's Health.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, kids classified vegetables, salads and meat as "adult food."

The 2017 Heart & Stroke Report on the Health of Canadians reports that children and youth spend almost eight hours a day in front of screens. With a captive audience, advertisers can follow and target kids online with a number of powerful tactics including banner advertising, promoted posts on social media, video games and contests. The bottom line: kids of all ages are vulnerable.

Teens are influenced too

"There seems to be a presumption that young kids need protection, but 12-year-olds are competent consumers. This is simply not the case," notes Dr. Elliott.

It's true that kids' media literacy tends to improve as they get older; most teens understand that companies use ads to persuade. However, they are often unable to recognize the embedded messaging in ads targeted directly to them. Students in Grade 9, says Dr. Elliott, are often as influenced by pictures on packaging as children in Grade 1, and many Grade 9 students were unable to sort out the marketing appeals from the factual elements on food packages. "Kids would tell us, 'This is a healthy choice because there's a picture of fruit on the box, or because the package is green,'" she says.

How to talk to your child

Since you can't police every ad that pops up, empowering kids to navigate and understand the messages they're seeing can go a long way. Dr. Elliott offers these tips to kick start the conversation with your child at any age.

Age 4-6

Ask your child how they understand food. By school age, most children tend to differentiate "kids' food" from adult food. But healthy food is for all ages. Discuss what kids' food means to your child and whether they think there should be a difference.

Age 7-11

Review Canada's Food Guide together. The guide is a staple in classrooms, but it doesn't distinguish between kids' food and adult food. It's a good opportunity to explain that the concept of kids' food comes from marketing. Marketing is about selling products, not necessarily what's healthy.

How many food mascots can your child name? Explain that cartoon characters are used to attract attention and entertain. But they can't provide important information, like how healthy a product is.

Age 12 and older

Pull out the packaged foods from your cupboard or pantry. Ask your child to separate the boxes into two groups: healthy and unhealthy. Then, ask how they made their choice.

It's normal for kids and teens to use packaging – rather than nutrition labels – as a shortcut to figure out what's inside. They may see foods in boring, plain packages as healthier options; green packaging can provide foods with a healthy, fresh feel. Imagery, like a bowl of fresh fruit, can also suggest that a product is healthier than it is.