

Myth of Choice: How Junk Food Marketers Target Our Kids

You can view the video and find more information about these themes at www.foodmyths.org.

Food companies tell us they're just doing their job: serving up exactly what children and teens are asking for. But are these foods really what kids want? Or are they what corporations are pushing on our kids? And who is being too controlling when it comes to Moms like me who insist on carrots instead of Cheetos, or food corporations who spend roughly two billion dollars a year on ads specifically targeting children and teens—ads telling kids what's cool to eat.¹ Foods that are cheap for companies to make, easy to brand, and designed to be addictive—all ingredients for huge profits.²

To get these answers we'll have to look at what these flashy ads aren't telling us: Like, almost one in three kids eats fast food *every day*.³ Nearly half the calories children and teens eat now come from fat and sugar.⁴ And how many are eating enough fruits and vegetables? Only sixteen percent.⁵

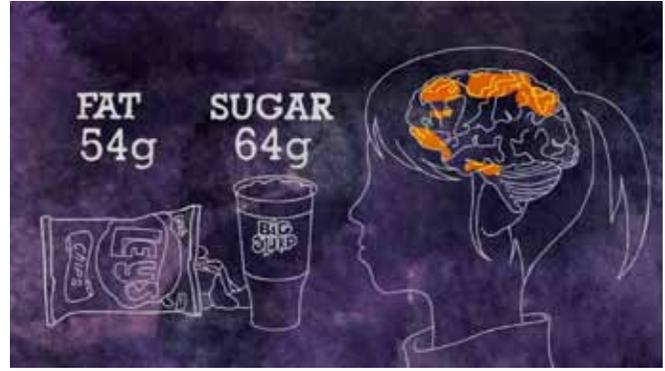
No wonder pediatricians are seeing diet-related illnesses in young people alarmingly on the rise: heart disease, high blood pressure, asthma, obesity, type two diabetes—even cancer.⁶

What we eat and drink is literally a matter of life and death for America's children ... like my daughter, Ida.

So here's Ida, and here's a bunch of "kid-friendly," highly processed food. My job is to keep her healthy. But let's see what I'm up against. First, her biology: these products aren't food as we normally think of it; they've been engineered to target Ida's evolutionary impulses.⁷

Because fat and sugar are so hard to find in nature, her brain has evolved to want as much of both as she can get. So when food companies offer them to her at levels she could never get from real food, she'll drive me crazy for it.⁸





Still, I can just say no, right? Well, they're not just using Ida's biology against me. They're working on her psychology as well. A typical kid sees nearly five thousand TV ads for food and drinks every year.⁹ Almost all of them will be for products high in sugar, salt, and saturated fat.¹⁰

Watching these ads leads kids to prefer specific brands – and triggers them to eat more calories. Period.¹¹ To make these ads, the food industry hires experts to exploit how Ida thinks—even how she sees. They've figured out what colors she responds to best and what kinds of characters she'll love most.¹²

Creepy, right?

Can't I just turn off the TV? It's not that simple. See, the industry has figured out it takes an average of nine nags to get a typical parent to cave in and buy a product like Froot Loops.

They know TV isn't enough, so they've figured out ways to infiltrate all aspects of Ida's life. In first grade, her teacher might use a math book sponsored by Oreo cookies.¹³

In third grade, she'll be targeted online and through social media with free, branded games and apps, offering prizes and awards in exchange for her personal information.¹⁴ In fifth grade, she might get enlisted to raise money for her school through My Coke Rewards—pulled into a soda-marketing program just to get her school some basic gym supplies.¹⁵ In seventh grade, she'll be seeing junk food product placements in her favorite movies and TV shows.¹⁶ By the time Ida graduates from middle school, one in three of her classmates will either have diabetes or will be on their way to getting it.¹⁷ Maybe she'll be one of them.

It doesn't have to be this way for Ida or any of her friends. Of course I'll resist, though this will paint a strange picture for Ida. On the one hand will be sports heroes, singers, and friendly Tigers. They'll be aligned with junk food designed to manipulate her biology, psychology—and even her friends—to make her crave it. On the other hand will be me, her mom, appealing to her still-forming rational mind to make healthy choices. I'm going to fight as hard as I can to do this since nothing is more important to me than keeping my kids healthy.

And I might win because kids *do* love fresh, healthy food when they're given the choice.¹⁸ I've seen it with my own kids and thousands more across the country, and because these choices are available where I live and I can afford them. But so many families have no access to real food as supermarkets disappear and fast food franchises pop up in their communities.¹⁹ This is a battle parents can't, and shouldn't have to, fight on their own.



The food industry has spent millions lobbying to take away the government’s power to regulate them — putting in place their own voluntary rules.²⁰ And what do we get? A national epidemic among our children.

It’s time for “we the people” to step back in. We can stand with the parents, teachers, mayors, doctors, all across the country who have won real victories in this fight: like the school administrators in St. Paul, Minnesota who banned school-based marketing of junk food and sugary drinks.²¹ Or the grocery chain owner in Maryland who decided to take kids’ products that feature cartoon characters off his shelves.²² Or the people of Quebec who passed a ban on fast food advertising to kids—and saw a thirteen percent decrease in fast food consumption.²³ We can work together to scale up these wins—and more like them.

Let’s choose policies to put healthy food within the reach of everyone. And let’s demand that companies stop using cartoon characters to tell kids what to eat.²⁴ Imagine our power if we realize we’re in this life-and-death struggle together and that *together* we can make sure that for any kid, anywhere, it’s easier to get apples and clean water than Doritos and a Coke. Look, if what kids really want is highly processed foods, put them on the shelves where we can choose them—or not. But keep them off of our TVs, our phones, our computers—and especially out of our schools. We don’t need corporations telling our families—what to eat.

Visit FoodMyths.org to learn more, connect with the hundreds of groups at the front lines of making sure everyone has access to good food—and get involved.

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 12. Brent Berry and Taralyn McMullen, "Visual Communication to Children in the Supermarket Context: Health Protective or Exploitive?" *Agriculture and Human Values*, 25:3 (2008).
 13. Sarah Albee and Victoria Raymond, *The Oreo Cookie Counting Book*. (New York: Little Simon, 2000.)
 14. Examples of websites include McDonald's [HappyMeal.com](http://www.happy meal.com) and Kraft's [DinnerNotArt.com](http://www.dinnernotart.com).
 15. See MyCokeRewards.com for more about this program. For an example of Parent-Teacher Associations pushing the points program, see: <http://www.lcps.org/Page/17263> and <http://www.carmelpta.org/cash4trash/my-coke-rewards>.
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21. St. Paul's 2013 Wellness Policy states: "H. Fundraising, marketing, or advertising activities will not conflict with messages supporting healthy eating and physical activity. As such, sites will limit food and beverage marketing to the promotion of foods and beverages that meet U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) nutrition standards." Saint Paul Public Schools, Policy 533.00 Wellness, (March 19, 2013).

From the District's Wellness Policy in 2007: "School-based marketing of brands promoting predominantly low-nutrition foods and beverages is prohibited. The promotion of healthy foods, including fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat dairy products is encouraged." Saint Paul Public Schools, *Wellness Policy Champions Implementation Manual*.

To read more about St. Paul, see: Monica Gagnon and Nicholas Freudenberg, "Slowing Down Fast Food: A Policy Guide for Healthier Kids and Families," CUNY School of Public Health at Hunter College and Corporate Accountability International, http://www.stopcorporateabuse.org/sites/default/files/resources/slowing_down_fast_food_corporateaccountabilityinternational.pdf (2012).

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24. See Retire Ronald campaign, Corporate Accountability International, <http://www.retireronald.org/files/Retire%20Ronald%20Expose.pdf>.