

Grocery Shopping

What You Need to Know

Advertisements and marketing messages reach young consumers through a variety of vehicles—television, radio, magazines, music, the Internet, etc.—in many different venues, including homes, schools, child-care settings, grocery stores, shopping malls, theaters, sporting events, and airports. It is important for parents to be aware of how ads and marketing messages influence their families' habits.

Food and beverage marketing, among other factors, has been found to influence the preferences and purchase requests of children ages 2 to 11, in addition to influencing their short-term consumption patterns. Moreover, the foods being marketed to children and youth are not in line with recommended healthful diets. "Food and beverage advertising on television influences children ages 2–11 years to prefer and purchase high-calorie and low-nutrient foods and beverages," states the Institute of Medicine's *Food Marketing to Children and Youth: Threat or Opportunity?* report overview.

Parents need to educate their children about the way advertising may influence their purchases. According to the Institute of Medicine, "Of the more than \$200 billion children and youth collectively spend annually, the top four leading items children ages 8–12 years select, without parental permission, are high-calorie and low-nutrient foods and beverages." In addition, "Foods and beverages, particularly candy, carbonated soft drinks, and salty snacks or chips, were ranked among the top leading items that teens ages 13–17 years old purchase with their own money." By educating your children about nutrition and advertising techniques, however, you can act as a counterinfluence on your children's purchasing decisions.

A Kaiser Family Foundation report titled *It's Child's Play* explored the online marketing of food to children and found that "The vast majority (85%) of the leading food brands that target children on TV are also either directly targeting children on the Internet or providing online content likely to be of interest to them."

What You Can Do

Pay Attention

When at the grocery store, or when deciding where to stop to pick up a quick dinner, pay attention to your instincts and consider your choices carefully. Are you choosing a product that might not be as healthy as another simply because the packaging is attractive or its advertising campaign is clever? Figuring out why you are inclined to make certain purchases is the first step in overcoming impulses prompted by advertisements and becoming a smarter shopper.

Talk to Your Kids

Kids, especially young kids, don't yet understand the persuasive intent behind advertisements. As a parent, it's your job to help your children learn how ads try to affect the choices they make in their daily lives. The prevalence of ads means there are many opportunities to talk about this. When watching television together or listening to the radio in the car, ask your children about the products in the ads and how the ads are persuading the audience to buy that particular brand. When at the store, take a look at packaging and the placement of different items and discuss how this may make you notice some brands over others.

Make a List

To cut down on impulse purchases and the "nag factor" from your kids, make a list before you head out to the supermarket. If your children are along for the trip, make sure they have eaten before you shop, and make it clear to them before you enter the store that you are buying only the items on your list, and only certain brands that you know to be healthier options. Once in the store, give your children portions of the list and have them help you find the items.

Do Your Homework

It may not always be easy to judge how healthy the different items on a restaurant menu are. Many restaurants, however, especially large chains, post the nutrition details of their menu options online, or will give them to you upon request in the restaurant. Take a careful look before you go; you may be surprised at what you learn about the nutritional content of the meals and decide to make different choices. Decide in advance what you will order.

Hold a Taste Test

For the staple products that your family always has on hand, buy a couple different brands and hold a blind taste test in your kitchen. This is especially important when there is one brand that is significantly healthier than another, or when there are two equally healthy options but one is a name brand and the other is a generic or store brand. Once your family members have decided which option tastes best, reveal the brands and discuss whether their selections matched their (and your) expectations. Did a package make you think a certain brand would be better? Does the healthier brand actually taste better?

Where You Can Go

- * The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, www.kff.org
- * Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, www.iom.edu