

Tough Enough: Being a Parent is Hard Enough

Food Marketing Makes Feeding Children Healthfully Even Harder

Food marketing makes parents' job harder. It slows down shopping, causes disagreements at the dinner table, and let's face it, sometimes it can be downright embarrassing. Isn't being a parent hard enough? Do we really need food companies trying to turn our kids against us?

"My three boys practically never saw any food or beverage commercials until they were 7, 4, and 2 respectively when we once again, to my dismay, got cable. My youngest son, who was exposed to commercial advertising the longest and at the youngest age, is the one who tries to sneak junk food in the shopping cart. He craves snack foods and would prefer to eat chips and sweets as opposed to meals. He is the child that asks for products with cartoon characters gracing the boxes. I spend half my shopping trip sending him off to return junk food to where he found it."

-Michelle, New Haven, CT

"My eleven year old daughter argued that we should buy Lucky Charms because "it was part of a healthy breakfast." Where do you think she got that? I clarified that the healthy part was the apple, toast and milk that were shown."

-Steph, Sacramento, CA



"MOMMY! MOMMY, LOOK, CHEWBACCA!! CHEWBACCA, GET HIM, GET HIM!!" Every shopper in the aisle (and probably several in each direction) stopped and stared. I prevented her from tumbling out of the cart and then followed her gaze to a box of cereal with a big picture of Chewbacca on it. Fact is, my daughter hated any cereal that involved flakes – but she was hell-bent on getting that box of cereal.

-Cindy, Washington, DC

"I only let my kids watch PBSKids because I don't want to have to contend with their begging and crying for all of the junk that they would see on the other stations. But that doesn't seem to make trips to the supermarket any easier—even if they don't know who SpongeBob is, they want products with him pictured on the package. Same with Dora, etc. I have endured dozens of tantrums because I say no to junk food in the supermarket. When the kids were toddlers I would waste money buying stickers and balloons and match box cars just to avoid tantrums about food ("no, you can't have that, but take this...")—terrible, I know, but there were times when it was worth it to me just so I could get the shopping done and get out of there without disturbing too many other shoppers!"

-Meghan, Hamden, CT

“When my youngest was in Kindergarten, I learned our PTA was planning to have a Chick-Fil-A Spirit Night Fundraiser. I contacted the PTA president and principal to share my concerns about marketing to kids in school. As a parent, I can and do turn off the ads at home but lose that option when Chick-Fil-A turns the school itself into an advertisement by bringing in their corporate mascot. I went to school early on the day of the promotion to pick her up and depart using a different door than where the Chick-Fil-A Cow was stationed. When we got home, she asked if we could go to Chick-Fil-A for dinner. When I asked her why, she said the Chick-Fil-A cow had visited the classroom and put stickers on the kids’ backpacks to remind them about the Spirit Night (see attached picture). I had to try and explain to a five year old why the adults at school and Chick-Fil-A were putting profit above health.”

-Casey, Lexington, KY



“Our television/PC stays turned off during the week, and on the weekends if they do get turned on, it’s for watching a movie without commercials. However, during the airing of the Olympic Games we turned it on only to be bombarded with numerous fast food/sugary drinks commercials. My kids begged to go McDonald’s to participate in the Olympic games, think Jack in the Box is “All American”, and raved about how Coke must have some impact on all the athletes, as all of the commercials lead them to think “drink Coke, achieve greatness.” It’s successful advertisement, but truly detrimental to kid’s mental/physical health.”

-Joy, Sacramento, CA



“I hate checking out in stores since he often sees candy or some other unhealthy snack and while often he doesn’t pay attention, if there’s any kind of cartoon character on it he wants it even though he doesn’t know what it is. I truly don’t understand why companies are allowed to market to kids. As long as I only take him to the farmer’s market I’m fine, but I feel like stores are minefields where I have to avoid any aisle where a temper tantrum may occur when I won’t buy something that he thinks looks like it’ll be fun for him to have.”

-Pam, Rochester, NY

“My greatest struggle has actually been as my 9 year-old has gotten older and gets teased at school for not bringing “cool” food in his lunch like Doritos, Lunchables, etc. I have to hide the veggies, not from my son – but from his friends.”

-Sarah, East Boston, MA

For more information or to get involved, please contact the Center for Science in the Public Interest at (202) 777-8352 or foodmarketing@cspinet.org.