



# **REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON THE EFFECTS OF FOOD PROMOTION TO CHILDREN**

## **Final Report (Executive Summary)**

Prepared for the Food Standards Agency

*Gerard Hastings, Martine Stead, Laura McDermott,  
Alasdair Forsyth, Anne Marie MacKintosh, Mike Rayner,  
Christine Godfrey, Martin Caraher and Kathryn Angus*

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Does Food Promotion Influence Children? A Systematic Review of the Evidence

### Background

This review was commissioned by the Food Standards Agency to examine the current research evidence on:

- the extent and nature of food promotion to children
- the effect, if any, that this promotion has on their food knowledge, preferences and behaviour.

Before addressing these aims, two smaller reviews of related literatures were undertaken to provide some context. The first examined what we know about marketing and promotion and the effects it might have on children's consumer behaviour. It shows that promotion is just one part of the complex process of marketing and that measuring its effects on consumer behaviour (and disentangling these from other influences) is notoriously difficult. Nonetheless, advertisers do it all the time and base enormous budgetary decisions on the resulting data. The second small review looked at the field of alcohol and tobacco promotion, showing that hard and fast proof about promotional effects will never emerge; rather, judgements have to be made on the balance of probabilities. It also showed that, in the case of tobacco promotion, these have now been made.

### Systematic Review Methods

The two main reviews on the extent and effects of food promotion used 'systematic' procedures. These are borrowed from medical science, where great care is needed to ensure that particular treatments are really safe and effective, and ensure that every possible source of evidence is identified and rigorously evaluated. The precise methods of this search and evaluation process are laid down in a detailed protocol, so that other researchers can replicate the review and check the conclusions it reaches. In short, systematic reviews are both rigorous and transparent. This is the first time that such procedures have been applied to a social phenomenon like food promotion, but it was felt that adopting them would help ensure that the review findings are relevant to and accepted by the many parties with an interest in this issue.

Three methods were used to identify potentially relevant research: an extensive search of electronic databases; searches of the 'grey' (not formally published) literature; and personal contact with key people in the field.

## **The Extent and Nature of Food Promotion to Children**

Children's food promotion is dominated by television advertising, and the great majority of this promotes the so-called 'Big Four' of pre-sugared breakfast cereals, soft-drinks, confectionary and savoury snacks. In the last ten years advertising for fast food outlets has rapidly increased, turning the 'Big Four' into the 'Big Five'. There is some evidence that the dominance of television has recently begun to wane. The importance of strong, global branding reinforces a need for multi-faceted communications combining television with merchandising, 'tie ins' and point of sale activity.

The advertised diet contrasts sharply with that recommended by public health advisors, and themes of fun and fantasy or taste, rather than health and nutrition, are used to promote it to children. Meanwhile, the recommended diet gets little promotional support.

## **Effects on Children's Food Knowledge, Preferences and Behaviour**

There is plenty of evidence that children notice and enjoy food promotion. However, establishing whether this actually influences them is a complex problem. The review tackled it by looking at studies that had examined possible effects on what children know about food, their food preferences, their actual food behaviour (both buying and eating), and their health outcomes (eg. obesity or cholesterol levels). The majority of studies examined food advertising, but a few examined other forms of food promotion.

In terms of nutritional knowledge, food advertising seems to have little influence on children's general perceptions of what constitutes a healthy diet, but, in certain contexts, it does have an effect on more specific types of nutritional knowledge. For example, seeing soft drink and cereal adverts reduced primary aged children's ability to determine correctly whether or not certain products contained real fruit.

The review also found evidence that food promotion influences children's food preferences and their purchase behaviour. A study of primary school children, for instance, found that exposure to advertising influenced which foods they claimed to like; and another showed that labelling and signage on a vending machine had an effect on what was bought by secondary school pupils. A number of studies have also shown that food advertising can influence what children eat. One, for example, showed that advertising influenced a primary class's choice of daily snack at playtime.

The next step, of trying to establish whether or not a link exists between food promotion and diet or obesity, is extremely difficult as it requires research to be done in real world settings. A number of studies have attempted this by using amount of television viewing as a proxy for exposure to television advertising. They have established a clear link between television viewing and diet, obesity, and cholesterol levels. It is impossible to say, however, whether this effect is caused by the advertising, the sedentary nature of television viewing or snacking that might take place whilst viewing. One study resolved this problem by taking a detailed

diary of children's viewing habits. This showed that the more food adverts they saw, the more snacks and calories they consumed.

Thus the literature does suggest food promotion is influencing children's diet in a number of ways. This does not amount to proof; as noted above with this kind of research, incontrovertible proof simply isn't attainable. Nor do all studies point to this conclusion; several have not found an effect. In addition, very few studies have attempted to measure how strong these effects are *relative* to other factors influencing children's food choices.

Nonetheless, many studies have found clear effects and they have used sophisticated methodologies that make it possible to determine that i) these effects are not just due to chance; ii) they are independent of other factors that may influence diet, such as parents' eating habits or attitudes; and iii) they occur at a brand and category level.

Furthermore, two factors suggest that these findings actually understate the effect that food promotion has on children. First, the literature focuses principally on television advertising; the cumulative effect of this combined with other forms of promotion and marketing is likely to be significantly greater. Second, the studies have looked at *direct* effects on individual children, and understate *indirect* influences. For example, promotion for fast food outlets may not only influence the child, but also encourage parents to take them for meals and reinforce the idea that this is a normal and desirable behaviour.

## **Conclusions**

This first UK systematic review of the research literature shows that:

1. There is a lot of food advertising to children.
2. The advertised diet is less healthy than the recommended one.
3. Children enjoy and engage with food promotion.
4. Food promotion is having an effect, particularly on children's preferences, purchase behaviour and consumption.
5. This effect is independent of other factors and operates at both a brand and category level.

This does not amount to proof of an effect, but in our view does provide sufficient evidence to conclude that an effect exists. The debate should now shift to what action is needed, and specifically to how the power of commercial marketing can be used to bring about improvements in young people's eating.