

CHILDREN'S ATTITUDES TO TELEVISION FOOD ADVERTISING

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Overconsumption of food and particularly of foods which are high in energy and fat and low in fibre cause major health problems for Australians. Data from a recent dietary survey of Australian schoolchildren (Department of Community Services and Health 1988) suggest that by many criteria children's diets are even worse than adults', with many children having high blood cholesterol levels and/or being overweight. It is widely recognised that health behaviours developed in childhood are strong predictors of adult health behaviours; consequently, the television advertising of food directed at children concerns social nutritionists in Australia. An influential NHMRC report (1981) concluded that undesirable practices of advertising had arisen, and urged stronger self-regulation by the industry. Later Morton (1984) found that, during the specially designated children's hour ('C' hour) from 1600-1700 hours on weekdays, food advertising had fallen from 44% to 24% of all advertising; but more recently levels have risen sharply again (Morton 1989).

Most Australian studies into food advertising have concentrated on monitoring its extent and content, particularly in the 'C' hour. Children's attitudes to food advertising have not been surveyed systematically, although school nutrition programs do address effects of the media on eating behaviour. This study collected data by questionnaire from 185 grade eight Adelaide high school children (90 males, 95 females) on viewing habits, food behaviours and attitudes toward food advertising; data which could be used in developing more appropriate nutrition education strategies.

Results confirm that many children are watching over three hours of television a day, mostly at peak times on the commercial stations. This suggests that nutritionists' concerns over food advertising directed at children should not be restricted to the 'C' hour. There was an accurate recall of food advertisements, particularly those for breakfast cereals and fast-food restaurants. A large number of children reported trying to persuade parents to purchase advertised products, even among those who watched less than one hour of television per day. Sex differences were found, with boys having fuller recall than girls and attempting to influence parents' food buying more; but there was evidence that not all persuasive attempts were successful. Most respondents said that eating a lot of fast food was inadvisable, with almost half identifying high fat as the problem. More girls than boys cited weight gain as a reason for avoidance. Many children were skeptical of the advertisers' message: few thought that advertisements often gave useful information about nutrition. On the other hand nutrition messages such as "eat less fat" or "eat more fibre" were recalled by many respondents, suggesting that the media could be used to promote positive health behaviours.

This study highlights the need for school programs to continue to recognise the effects of food advertisements on children. The sex differences and the recall of health messages contained in the advertisements have implications for nutrition education and need further study.

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY SERVICES AND HEALTH (1988). 'National dietary survey of school children (aged 10-15 years)'. (AGPS: Canberra).

NHMRC (1981). 'Report of the working party on television advertising of foods directed to children'. (AGPS: Canberra).

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