Food marketing to young children on the island of Ireland: Parents’ views, attitudes and practices and implications for early years policy

How to cite:


For guidance on citations see FAQs.

© [not recorded]

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher’s website:
https://childrensresearchnetwork.org/knowledge/resources/food-marketing-to-young-children-on-the-island-of-ireland

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online’s data policy on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk
Food Marketing to Young Children on the Island of Ireland: Parents’ Views, Attitudes and Practices, and Implications for Early Years Policy

Mimi Tatlow-Golden, Eilis Hennessy, Lynsey Hollywood and Moira Dean

Research Funding
This research was funded by Safefood, the Food Safety Promotion Board, under Fund No. [09-2010]. The authors are grateful to the preschools, schools, children and parents who took part.

Introduction
Food advertising significantly (and independently) affects children’s food preferences and consumption, with long-term effects on health (Cairns et al., 2013), and is therefore regulated across the island of Ireland. However, restrictions on unhealthy food advertising apply only during children’s TV programming, yet young children watch substantial amounts of TV at other times. Thus they continue to see at least 1000 unhealthy food ads annually in the Republic of Ireland and 700 in Northern Ireland (Tatlow-Golden, 2014).

TV remains the major viewing medium for younger children, but digital viewing is increasing (Federal Trade Commission, 2013; Ofcom, 2014). Online food advertising is unregulated; combined with continued TV food advertising exposure, even in jurisdictions with regulations, this is a concern to policy makers worldwide.

To date, most research on advertising effects has focused on later childhood, but indications are that advertising exposure in the early years affects early taste preference and brand awareness. By three to five years of age, young children who have detailed mental representations of fast-food and soft drink brands (through advertising exposure as well as experience) also have higher salt, fat and sugar food preferences (Cornwell and McAlistier, 2011). Even without conscious cognitive processing, advertising implicitly develops decades-long emotional associations with food brands, and exposure earlier in childhood may create stronger, longer-lasting attachments (Braun-LaTour et al., 2007; Nairn and Fine, 2008; Connell et al., 2014).

Across the island of Ireland, children aged three to five years had high levels of knowledge about eating healthy foods (fruit, vegetables, potatoes and milk) but knew much less about restraint regarding unhealthy foods (sweets, savoury snacks, deep-fried foods). Furthermore, when shown food brand logos, for brands advertised to a similar degree at times young children watch television, children’s food brand knowledge was significantly greater for unhealthy brands, compared to healthy ones. In addition, unhealthy food brand knowledge advanced significantly between three and four years, before children’s knowledge of unhealthy food started to develop (Tatlow-Golden et al., 2013, 2014).

Parental mediation of advertising – through explanation and/or restriction – can modify children’s food preferences and choices (Buizjen, 2009). However, parents are reported to rarely engage in such activities, focusing more on content appropriateness than advertising (Ofcom, 2014). To design effective policy for public education and early years settings in Ireland, it is essential to identify the views and practices of parents in Ireland. As part of the study, cited above, exploring pre-schoolers’ understanding of food and food marketing, we examined parents’ views regarding advertising food and drink to young children and the effects on their children’s food preferences, and parents’ practices in mediating such advertising exposure.
Method

Parents (n = 100) of a socio-economically mixed sample of children, aged three to five years across the island of Ireland, completed questionnaires about family demographics and practices relating to food and media (for details about the child and parent samples, and measures used, see Tatlow-Golden et al., 2013, 2014). Parents were asked about their views of food marketing influence, mediation of advertising, and children’s food requests. A brief measure of parental attitudes to food advertising was also developed, using items drawn from the National Preschool Nutrition Survey. These were subjected to Principal Components Analysis; two components resulted, correlated with one another at r = .50, and were named Food Advertising Influence on Child, and Negative View of Advertising Influence (Livingstone et al., in press).

Results

Media use

Children watched an average of two hours and nine minutes TV daily. Thirty-four per cent had a TV in their bedroom; thirty-three per cent used the internet (average eighteen minutes daily). The top five TV channels parents reported children watching (in descending order) were Nick Junior, Nickelodeon, CBBC/CBeebies, Disney and Disney Junior. The most frequent online access was to CBeebies, followed by YouTube, Disney Junior (UK), Nick Junior (UK) & Cartoon Network (UK).

Food requests

Over half of parents (fifty-seven per cent) said that while shopping, their child ‘always’ or ‘usually’ asked for food or drink items; nearly a quarter of parents (twenty-three per cent) said their child ‘always’ or ‘usually’ became angry if they refused.

Parent attitudes to food advertising

Parents had high scores regarding Negative View of Advertising Influence (range 1-10), (M = 8.1, SD = 1.64). Less negative views of advertising were associated with lower maternal education (r = .21, p = .043, N = 95), and more family TV exposure (r = -.25, p = .023, N = 86). Parent responses indicated they believed that Food Advertising Influence on Child (range 1-20) was moderate (M = 11.3, SD = 3.57), and it was positively associated with more family (r .34, p = .002, N = 82) and child (r .32, p = .002, N = 90) TV exposure.

Parent mediation of advertising

When asked about whether they talked with their children about TV advertising, sixty-one per cent parents ‘never’ told their child that ads wanted to sell something or did not tell the truth, with just twelve per cent ‘often’ or ‘always’ doing so; and eighty-eight per cent ‘never’ asked their child to turn off the TV or switch channels because of advertising.

Discussion

This survey of parents’ views regarding food advertising and young children, among a socio-demographically mixed sample on the island of Ireland, supports a number of actions by educators and policy-makers.

Notably, parents had very high negative attitudes to food advertising to children, yet they believed that advertising influence on their own child was moderate. Few parents believed that TV advertising influenced their child’s eating, but they pointed to other aspects of food marketing that influenced their child, including free toys, cartoon

Table 1. Parent views of social and marketing influences on their child’s eating

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence</th>
<th>Parents reporting a ‘strong’ or ‘very strong’ influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free toys or promotions</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cartoon or other TV characters on packaging</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Store promotions</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food tied into TV programmes</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brands and logos</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV food and drink ads</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Children aged three to five years had high levels of knowledge about eating healthy foods but knew much less about restraint regarding unhealthy foods.
We recommend that (1) guides be developed for early years food education units be developed for the preschool years onward; and to transfer not just from school as Food Dudes (see http://www.fooddudes.ie) suggests that food-related education into adulthood.


**Author Information**

**Dr Mimi Tatlow-Golden** is currently a Newman Research Fellow in the School of Medicine and Medical Science, University College Dublin (UCD) and conducted this research in the School of Psychology, UCD. Her research employs innovative methods to explore the well-being of children, including their mental health and self-concept, as well as their exposure to, and understanding of, TV and digital advertising.

**Dr Ellis Hennessy** is senior lecturer in developmental psychology in UCD. Her research in early childhood has focused on children’s experiences in out-of-home care, their understanding of food and TV food advertising as well as on innovative ways of researching young children’s experiences.

**Dr Lynsey Hollywood**, Lecturer in Consumer Studies, Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management, University of Ulster, Coleraine, conducted this research at Queens University Belfast (QUB). Her areas of research interest are in healthy shopping, food advertising to children, new food product development and consumer choice.

**Dr Moira Dean**, senior lecturer in Psychology of Food Choice and Consumer Behaviour at QUB, has worked on projects funded by the Food Standards Agency, Safefood, the Medical Research Council, the Economic and Social Research Council and the EU. Her research addresses the psychology of food choice, risk perceptions, and dietary change in both adults and children.