

OECD (2010) *Gender Brief*. Paris: OECD.

OECD (2012) *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care*, Paris: OECD.

Penn, H. & Lloyd, E. (2014) How Can the Government Ensure that Early Care and Education is of High Quality in a Market System? Learning from International Experience. In Start Strong, 'Childcare': *Business or Profession?* Dublin: Start Strong.

Plantenga J. & Remery, C. (2013) *Childcare Services for School-age Children: A Comparative Review of 33 countries*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Vincent, C. & Ball, S. J. (2006) *Childcare, Choice and Class Practices*. London, Routledge.

## Author Information

**Dr. Catriona O'Toole** is a lecturer in psychology at Maynooth University Department of Education. She has previously worked in practice across a variety of settings including early childhood care and education, psychological support services, and with young people in residential care. Her research interests focus primarily on child and adolescent wellbeing in school and community contexts.

**Dr. Delma Byrne** is a lecturer at Maynooth University Departments of Sociology and Education. Her research interests focus on social stratification and the sociology of education in particular, and the role of education in facilitating life chances over the life-course.

# 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 McAlister, 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 (Buijzen, 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 TV exposure ( $r = .34$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $N = 82$ ) and child ( $r = .32$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $N = 90$ ) TV exposure.

### Parent views of food marketing influence

When asked about specific influences on their preschool child's eating, parents reported that a 'strong/very strong' influence was exerted by social

relationships and multiple food marketing techniques (Table 1). They accorded primary influence to family, free toys/promotions, friends, and cartoon or other TV characters on packaging.

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

	Parents reporting a 'strong' or 'very strong' influence
Family	69%
Free toys or promotions	43%
Friends	39%
Cartoon or other TV characters on packaging	35%
Store promotions	22%
Food tied into TV programmes	19%
Brands and logos	18%
TV food and drink ads	15%

### 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



and TV characters, and food tied in to TV programmes. Friends were also considered influential in terms of children's eating. Over half of parents reported their child asked for food when shopping and nearly a quarter that saying no resulted in their child being angry. Despite this, most never talked with their child about advertising and almost all never encouraged their child to switch off from ads.

Parents' reports of the TV channels their children view suggest that parents may not register all the TV their children are exposed to, as parents almost exclusively cited child-directed channels. However, Nielsen/TAM 2010 audience panel data for the Republic of Ireland indicates that, of the top 5 channels viewed by children aged 4-6 years, general-view channels (RTE 2, RTE 1 and TV3) were viewed more than child-directed ones (Nick Junior and Nickelodeon). Viewing patterns among children in the UK are similar (Ofcom, 2006) It may be that parents in Ireland discount family viewing and other times when the TV is on and the child is in the room – yet these are the times when children are exposed to unhealthy food advertising. Furthermore, it is likely that further exposure to unhealthy food advertising will take place in the future as children's Internet viewing increases.

UK and Australian evidence indicates that parents are almost completely unaware of advertising online (Pettigrew et al., 2013; Newman and Oates, 2014; Spiteri-Cornish, 2014).

*Parents may not register all the TV their children are exposed to, as parents almost exclusively cited child-directed channels*

### **Implications for Early Years Policy and Public Education in Ireland**

*Public education:* Parents have very strong negative views of TV advertising of food and drink products to young children. However, most never act on these views. It would be beneficial to inform parents about the long-term effects of food marketing and advertising; to encourage them to talk with their children about the nature of advertising from the preschool years onward; and to recommend that parents turn off the TV during ad breaks, if a child is in the room.

Importantly, as digital viewing grows among young children, parents also need information and education about Internet advertising and the benefits of selecting advertisement-free viewing options online. For example, the free YouTube Kids app, recently launched in the U.S., has attracted substantial criticism for the volume and nature of unhealthy food advertising shown, and the presence of branded channels. It is currently the subject of a complaint to the U.S. Federal Trade Commission by child and consumer advocacy organisations, for unfair and deceptive advertising practices violating existing safeguards protecting children (Chester, 2015).

*Early years education:* These findings regarding parents' knowledge and behaviour, taken together with our findings regarding young children's knowledge about food and food brands on the island of Ireland (Tatlow-Golden et al., 2013, 2014), point strongly to a role for early education in both food and advertising.

We recommend that (1) guides be developed for early years educators with advice on developmentally appropriate ways to talk with young children about advertising and (2) food-related education units be developed for the preschool years and the first year of school, addressing not just healthy foods but also foods that should be eaten in moderation, and exploring the role of marketing and branding in the foods we eat. Indeed, the experience of school-based programmes such as Food Dudes (see <http://www.fooddudes.ie>) suggests that such learning has the ability to transfer not just from school to the child but also from the child back to parents at home as well.

### **References**

- Buijzen, M. (2009) The Effectiveness of Parental Communication in Modifying the Relationship between Food Advertising and Children's Consumption Behaviour. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 27, pp. 105-121.
- Braun-LaTour, K. A., LaTour, M. S., & Zinkhan, G. M. (2007) Using Childhood Memories to Gain Insight into Brand Meaning. *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 71, pp. 45-60.
- Cairns, G., Angus, K., Hastings, G., & Caraher, M. (2013) Systematic Reviews of the Evidence on the Nature, Extent and Effects of Food Marketing to Children. A Retrospective Summary. *Appetite*, Vol. 62, pp. 209-215.
- Chester, J. (2015) Child and Consumer Advocates urge Federal Trade Commission to Investigate and Bring Action against Google for Excessive and Deceptive Advertising Directed at Children. *Center for Digital Democracy*. Available online at <https://www.democraticmedia.org/content/child-and-consumer-advocates-urge-federal-trade-commission-investigate-and-bring-action>
- Connell, P.M., Brucks, M. & Nielsen, J.H. (2014) How Childhood Advertising Exposure Can Create Biased Product Evaluations that Persist into Adulthood. *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 41(1), pp. 119-134.
- Cornwell, T. B., & McAlister, A. R. (2011) Alternative Thinking about Starting Points of Obesity. Development of Child Taste Preferences. *Appetite*, Vol. 56, pp. 428-439.
- Federal Trade Commission (2013) *A Review of Food Marketing to Children and Adolescents*. Follow-up Report, December 2012. Available online at <https://www.ftc.gov/reports/review-food-marketing-children-adolescents-follow-report>



Harris, J. L., Brownell, K. D., & Bargh, J. A. (2009) The Food Marketing Defense Model. Integrating Psychological Research to Protect Youth and Inform Public Policy. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, Vol. 3(1), pp. 211–271.

Livingstone, B., Kerr, M., Dean, M., Hollywood, L., Tatlow-Golden, M. & O'Brien, M. (in press) *Food Marketing and the Preschool Child*. Dublin: Safefood.

Nairn, A., & Fine, C. (2008) Who's Messing with my Mind? The Implications of Dual-process Models for the Ethics of Advertising to Children. *International Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 27(3), pp. 447–470.

Newman, N. & Oates, C.J. (2014) Parental Mediation of Food Marketing Communications aimed at Children. *International Journal of Advertising: The Review of Marketing Communications*, Vol. 33(3), pp. 579-598.

Ofcom (2006) *Television Advertising of Food and Drink Products to Children. Annex 10*. Trends in Children's Viewing and Advertising. London: Ofcom.

Ofcom (2014) *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report*. London: Ofcom.

Pettigrew, S., Tarabashkina, L., Roberts, M., Quester, P., Chapman K., & Miller, C. (2013) The Effects of Television and Internet Food Advertising on Parents and Children. *Public Health Nutrition*, Vol. 16(12), pp. 2205–2212.

Spiteri-Cornish, L. (2014). 'Mum, Can I Play on the Internet?'. *International Journal of Advertising: The Review of Marketing Communications*, Vol. 33(3), pp. 437-473

Tatlow-Golden, M. (2014) *Food Marketing and the Preschool Child. Healthy – or not?* Invited presentation, Safefood Obesity Forum Meeting, Dublin, Ireland. Available online at [http://www.safefood.eu/SafeFood/media/SafeFoodLibrary/Documents/Professional/Events/Food-Marketing-and-the-Preschool-Child-Mimi-Tatlow-Golden\\_1.pdf](http://www.safefood.eu/SafeFood/media/SafeFoodLibrary/Documents/Professional/Events/Food-Marketing-and-the-Preschool-Child-Mimi-Tatlow-Golden_1.pdf)

Tatlow-Golden, M., Hennessy, E., Hollywood, L., & Dean, M. (2013). 'Big, Strong and Healthy'. Young Children's Identification of Food and Drink that Contribute to Healthy Growth. *Appetite*, Vol. 71, pp. 163–170.

Tatlow-Golden, M., Hennessy, E., Hollywood, L., & Dean, M. (2014). Young Children's Food brand knowledge. Early Development and Associations with Television Viewing and Parent's Diet. *Appetite*, Vol. 80, pp. 197-203.

## 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 Eilis 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.

