

Food adverts on children's programs on TV in South Africa

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Research in the U.S.A. since the early 1990s has shown that adverts that appear on children's programs on TV are the antithesis of the recommended diet. They are mainly for fast foods and for foods rich in sugar and fat. There is almost no promotion of healthy food choices. Essentially all such previous research has been conducted in developed countries. In this study we examined food advertising on children's TV in South Africa. We recorded 2 sets of children's programs during weekdays: (1) 12 hours of programs (SABC2; 9 am-11 am); these are for children below school age, are mainly in English and Afrikaans, plus a small amount in Xhosa. Out of 47 ads none were for food. (2) 37.5 hours of programs were recorded on YoTV (SABC1; 3 pm-5:30 pm). This program is for children aged over approximately 7 years. It is mainly in English plus a small amount in Zulu. Out of 408 ads 69 (16.9%) were for food. Virtually all (97%) of the food ads fall into 2 groups: (1) 38 ads (55%) were for foods of generally poor nutritional value (fast food restaurants, highly refined breakfast cereals, candies, potato chips, and sugar-rich cold drinks); (2) 29 ads (42%) were for foods of generally good nutritional value (yoghurt and peanut butter). These findings suggest that food ads on children's TV in South Africa is more evenly balanced towards healthier foods than is the case in the U.S.A. Further investigation is required to form a clearer picture.

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INTRODUCTION

Research in the U.S.A. since the early 1990s has shown that adverts on children's programs on TV are the antithesis of the recommended diet (1-4). They are mainly for fast foods and for foods rich in sugar and fat. There is almost no promotion of fruit and vegetables.

Essentially all previous research on food advertising directed at children has been conducted in developed countries. However, several facts indicate that this is an important issue in developing countries. In South Africa, which is the focus of this study, most food consumed by children in schools in Cape Town is of poor nutritional quality (5). Rapid urbanization of the black population has led to a sharp increase in intake of fat, saturated fat, and sugar (6). Obesity is a fast growing problem (7). In order to help illuminate these trends we conducted a study to examine food advertising on children's TV in South Africa.

METHODS

Children's programs were recorded on two TV channels:

1. SABC2 was recorded from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. on 6 occasions. The programs were mainly for children below school age. The languages used are mainly English and Afrikaans plus a small amount of Xhosa.
2. YoTV on SABC1 (3.00 p.m. to 5.30 p.m.). This program is mainly in English plus a small amount in Zulu. It is for children aged over approximately 7 years.

The recordings were done during weekdays between June and October, 2006. They were then viewed by a person fluent in the languages used. We tabulated the total number of ads, the number of ads for food, and the food products that were advertised.

RESULTS

The 12 hours of children's TV programs on SABC2 had 47 ads but none were for food. A total of 37.5 hours of programs were recorded on YoTV on SABC1. There were 408 ads of which 69 (16.9%) were for food (Table). Virtually all (97%) of these ads can be categorized into 2 groups:

(A) 38 ads (55%) were for foods of generally poor nutritional value: fast food restaurants (n = 18; 12 ads were for McDonald's and 5 for KFC), highly refined breakfast cereals (9), sweets (candies [6]), potato chips (2), and sugar-rich cold drinks (2).

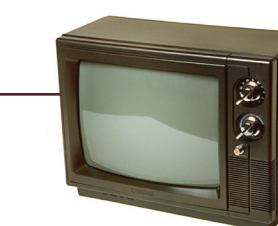
(B) 29 ads (42%) were for foods of generally good nutritional value: yoghurt (24) and peanut butter (5), i.e., these foods are nutritionally superior to foods in group A but, depending on the formulation, are still likely to be inferior to comparable whole foods such as milk and nuts.

DISCUSSION

Previous studies conducted in developed countries have shown that the vast majority of food advertising targeted at children is for food of poor nutritional value, while such foods as fruit, vegetables, and whole grains are seldom advertised. In contrast to those reports, our findings reveal that many ads were for foods of generally good nutritional value, namely yogurt (24 ads) and peanut butter (5 ads); these two foods comprised 42% of all ads for food. Nevertheless, 55% of food ads were for foods of poor nutritional value. There were no ads for fruit, vegetables, or whole grains.

Our findings must be viewed with caution. We recorded children's programs on two TV channels, but only one of them had food ads. Our data are based on 69 food ads, all from one TV program shown on weekdays over a five-month period. No distinction was made between locally-produced ads and those made in other countries. Further investigation is therefore required to form a more detailed picture of food advertising on children's TV in South Africa.

There has been much debate about how to regulate food advertising directed at children (8). Some countries, such as Norway and Sweden, have banned such advertising while the UK announced in January 2008 that it also plans to do so. However, most other countries have lesser degrees of restriction. A major factor in this is strong resistance by industry when attempts are made to impose legislative restrictions on advertising (8). In our opinion a ban on food ads on children's TV, or at least major restrictions, especially for young children, is a policy whose time has come (9).



Foods Advertised on TV	
Product Advertised	Number of Ads
yoghurt	24
fast food restaurants*	18
highly refined breakfast cereals	9
sweets (candies)	6
peanut butter	5
potato chips	2
cold drinks (sugar rich)	2
margarine	1
coffee	1
pies	1

*12 ads were for McDonald's and 5 for KFC

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