



How Children Develop Unhealthy Food Preferences

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Have you ever wondered why it's so difficult to get kids to eat their vegetables? Not wanting to eat broccoli is rooted in a great deal of more complicated issues than just not liking green food. How we come to like certain foods is associated with many factors and is referred to as *food preferences*.



How Food Preferences Are Developed:

In the first 2 years of life—when learning is constantly taking place—food preferences are also forming. Most are learned, but some are innate. A child's food preferences directly affect eating behavior, which in turn is linked to overall health, wellness, and the formation of obesity.

For years now, the food and beverage industry has used this knowledge to their advantage and encourages the development of unhealthy food preferences in children of all ages through various marketing and advertising techniques.

The Food and Beverage Industry's Role in the Formation of Food Preferences:

How often have you seen a food advertisement for broccoli? Healthy foods are advertised less than 3% of the time in comparison to their counterparts. This has a direct impact on children's food preferences—considering food and beverage companies spend \$2 billion dollars a year on food marketing campaigns directed at children.

The fast food industry spends nearly 5 million dollars a day marketing products high in sugar, fat and salt, while also suggesting portion sizes grossly disproportionate to a child's energy needs. Increasingly, fast food companies are also using toy tie-ins with major children's motion pictures to try to attract young people. Remarkably, studies demonstrate that even very young children exposed to persuasive ads can develop food cravings for unhealthy foods that they have never even tasted!

This has a direct consequence on the formation of potentially lifelong, unhealthy food preferences associated with the development of obesity and all that comes with it. Although food preferences can be unlearned, this is often a monumental task as we age.

Regulation—or lack thereof

The marketing of food to children on media is unregulated in the U.S. Instead, major food and beverage manufacturers have voluntarily pledged to limit child-directed marketing of unhealthy foods as part of the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (<http://www.bbb.org/council/the-national-partner-program/national-advertising-review-services/childrens-food-and-beverage-advertising-initiative/>). However, independent research groups have highlighted several limitations of that program, and young children remain highly exposed to advertisements for foods and beverages that may contribute to unhealthy food preferences.

The Problem with Baby and Toddler Snacks:

Reducing sodium and sugar intake early on can help set taste preferences and help children make healthy food choices later in life. However, a report (<http://www.uconnruddcenter.org/BabyFoodFACTS>) from the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity found only 4 out of 80 baby and toddler snacks met nutritious standards. In addition, 83% of baby food snacks and 83% of toddler food snacks contained added sweeteners.

Parents need to look carefully at nutrition labels (</English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Front-of-Package-Nutrition-Labels.aspx>) when selecting commercial toddler foods and infant or toddler snacks, desserts, and juice drinks. Choose products lower in added sugar and sodium. Get tips here (</English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/How-to-Tame-Your-Childs-Sweet-Tooth.aspx>) for taming your child's sweet tooth in a world of sugary treats. [Back to Top](#)

The Problem Continues as Children Grow:

Older children are bombarded with ad campaigns through every existing marketing vehicle. Walk through any supermarket and notice where the children's cereal is located. It invariably sits enticingly at a child's eye level. Point-of-sale placement of candies and sweets are another well-thought-out marketing tactic.

Food marketing and media use

Children are also exposed to countless ads on TV, streaming services, through video games, social media, and most internet websites. This is one of many important reasons why the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that screen time be avoided from birth to 18 months (except for video chatting with loved ones). Here's why (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/Why-to-Avoid-TV-Before-Age-2.aspx>). Parents of children 18 to 24 months of age who want to introduce digital media should choose high-quality programming/apps and co-watch limited amounts together. For children 2 to 5, media limits are very appropriate and should be limited to 1 hour or less per day of high-quality programming. The AAP screen time guidelines also emphasize the role that media can play in disrupting healthy eating habits, such as when media is on during family mealtimes. Create a family media plan (</English/media/Pages/default.aspx>) that includes screen-free zones, like the dinner table.

And what about celebrity endorsements? A study (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1542/peds.2015-3977>) in the July 2016 *Pediatrics* examined the food industry's use of music celebrities to endorse sugary soft drinks and nutrient-poor foods through multi-million-dollar campaigns. Results also showed these celebrities are highly popular among teenage audiences—considering adolescents ages 12 to 18 report spending almost 2 hours listening to music each day!

Food marketing in schools

Advertising, serving, and promoting unhealthy foods continues to occur in schools across the US. Many groups are actively pursuing innovative methods of enhancing food literacy for children and their families, which include improving food choices, as well as learning how to grow, cook and properly identify healthy foods.

The AAP policy statement, *Snacks, Sweetened Beverages, Added Sugars, and Schools* (<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/doi/10.1542/peds.2014-3902>), explains the three categories of foods and beverages kids eat at school and where there is opportunity for parents, pediatricians, and students to raise awareness about the importance of healthy choices. It's understandable given the food preferences they have become accustomed to—and they are generally less expensive than healthier alternatives.

A study (<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/doi/10.1542/peds.2015-1720>) published in the August 2016 issue of *Pediatrics* suggests that marketing tactics, often blamed for popularizing nutritionally poor foods, can also lead more kids to select vegetables at lunchtime. Elementary school students were offered vegetables in their cafeteria from a large salad bar. In some schools, the salad bar was decorated with banners showing cartoon characters gaining "superhuman" powers by eating the salad bar veggies. Other schools showed the same scenario on a TV monitor set up nearby. Some schools used both the banners and the monitor to entice the kids. The control group had just the plain table of fresh veggies. In the group with the monitor and the banner, 3 times the vegetables were chosen. When either the banner or monitor was used, twice the healthy foods were taken as compared to the control group. Clearly, advertising can be manipulated to present messages of value capable of impacting the development of healthy food preferences and behaviors.

What Parents Can Do:

Parents need to be well-informed about the potential negative health consequences of most current food marketing practices. This information can help them plan accordingly in reference to media exposure and the introduction of unhealthy foods in their child's diet.

If you're not satisfied with the choices available in your child's school cafeteria, get involved (</English/family-life/Community/Pages/School-Lunches-You-Can-Make-a-Difference.aspx>) in your school's parent-teacher organization and brainstorm some healthful alternatives, as parents and teachers all over the country are doing.

Additional Information & Resources:

[How to Get Your Child to Eat More Fruits & Veggies \(/English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/How-to-Get-Your-Child-to-Eat-More-Fruits-and-Veggies.aspx\)](/English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/How-to-Get-Your-Child-to-Eat-More-Fruits-and-Veggies.aspx)

- Food and Media: Not a Healthy Mix (/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Food-and-TV-Not-a-Healthy-Mix.aspx) [Back to Top](#)
- Energy In: Recommended Food & Drink Amounts for Children (/English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Energy-In-Recommended-Food-Drink-Amounts-for-Children.aspx)
- Snacks & Sugary Foods in School: AAP Policy Explained (/English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Snacks-and-Sugary-Foods-in-School-AAP-Policy-Explained.aspx)
- Portions and Serving Sizes (/English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Portions-and-Serving-Sizes.aspx)
- What Parents Need to Know About Food Marketing (https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0u1YXsJwfO7g89l7k6tQ_yi-4L98BPZu&app=desktop) – Animated video series by Suanne Kowal-Connelly, MD, FAAP

About Dr. Kowal-Connelly:



Suane Kowal-Connelly, MD, FAAP is a pediatrician with 30 years group practice experience and is a voluntary faculty staff physician at Nassau University Medical Center mentoring residents. She also cares for private patients at the Long Island Federally Qualified Health Centers (LIFQHC) in Nassau County. Within the American Academy of Pediatrics, she sits on the Council on Sports Medicine and Fitness, the Council on School Health, and the Section on Obesity. Dr. Kowal-Connelly is a USAT (USA Triathlon) Level I Certified Coach and a USAT Youth & Jr. Coach. She is also founder of [www.HealthPoweredByYou.com](http://www.healthpoweredbyyou.com/) (<http://www.healthpoweredbyyou.com/>), where families and organizations can learn strategies for successful lifelong health and wellness and

read her blog. She is also the very proud mother of three grown sons. Follow her on Twitter @healthpby (<https://twitter.com/healthpby>).

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