

CHILDHOOD OBESITY AND OUR 'TOXIC ENVIRONMENT': SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

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While many factors contribute to childhood obesity, this article focuses on the socio-cultural studies and 'solutions' that strive to deal with problems of over consumption. Many of these solutions pivot on social engineering remedies that 'protect' children from a toxic environment laden with junk foods. Yet this article argues that education practitioners and policy makers need to shift focus to more fully understand the marketing of fun foods within the supermarket retail environment. Knowledge of the semantics of food (beyond the obvious category of 'junk' food) can allow educators to make great strides in informing parents and teaching children to make healthy food choices.

The widespread problem of childhood obesity has drawn attention to the socio-cultural aspects contributing to being overweight. Scholarly analyses of these phenomena frequently attribute childhood obesity to a 'toxic environment' (Horgen, Choate & Brownell, 2001; Schwartz & Puhl, 2003; Wadden, Brownell & Foster, 2002) that bombards kids with food-related media messages and encourages the consumption of high-fat, high-sugar foods. Underpinning these studies is the awareness that food 'messages' can influence both purchasing and consumption habits (Schwartz & Puhl, 2003) and as such, fruitful gains can be made in scrutinizing how children are targeted by food, beverage and fast food companies.

Frequently, the mass media take center stage in these studies probing food messages and childhood obesity. Analyses of televised food advertisements, for example, reveal that 'novel' foods and highly processed foods' (i.e., high sugar/fat and low nutrient foods) typify commercials targeted at children, (Byrd-Brenner & Grasso, 2000; Hill & Radimer, 1997; Kotz & Story, 1993; Story & Faulkner, 1990) while other studies find prime-time television shows equally problematic in depicting and glamourizing poor eating behaviours (Hampl, Wharton, Taylor, Winham, Block & Hall, 2004). Popular critiques of children's food add to this discourse, stressing how advertising and entertainment industries strive to 'fool' children into desiring (and acquiring a taste for) particular food products—and consequently 'pestering' parents to purchase these foodstuffs (Centre for Science, 2003, 1998; Hunter, 2002; Jacobson, 2004). Marketing appeals created by fast food outlets are equally criticized in this regard.

One upshot of this increased awareness of our 'toxic (food) environment' is a push toward what Eagle, Bulmer, De Bruin and Kitchen (2004) identified as "social engineering remedies", policies used to address concerns of childhood obesity. Such 'remedies' can be found in proposed 'sin' taxes on junk food (Matorin, 2001), restrictions on the sale of sugary sodas in elementary schools (Gray, 2004) or required 'colour coding' of unhealthy fare in select schools (Gray, 2004; Steffenhagen, 2004). Social engineering remedies can even come in the form of outright prohibitions as per Ontario Education Minister Gerard Kennedy's recently announced ban on junk food in grade schools in Canada (Ontario Society, 2004).

But social engineering remedies, while well intentioned, come with their own set of difficulties for family and consumer sciences education practitioners. Bans and prohibitions on junk foods aim to remove the 'problem' of poor food consumption choices within schools. It's a shaky 'solution' that works more to delay than eliminate consumption; but more significantly,

the ‘solution’ can lead educators (and also parents) to overlook other critical ‘spaces’ and food messages targeted at children. One of the most ‘promising practices’ for dealing with childhood obesity, I believe, is to recognize *and subsequently educate on* the types of food messages targeted at children in the supermarket.

Supermarket food and the packaging of ‘fun’

Missing from the scholarly discourse on food messages and environmental cues is an awareness of how food *packaging* and particular food products work to target children and to encourage consumption. The excessive focus on television/advertising messages or mass marketing campaigns has generally obscured more ‘foundational’ messages—those wrapped tightly around the product (i.e., through packaging) and those inscribed in the product itself (i.e., through shape, size and colour). In short, the existing analyses overlook a very basic ‘mediascape’ that conveys food messages to all children: the supermarket. ‘Social engineering remedies’, too, are somewhat narrow in their localized focus on junk food. Childhood obesity is not merely a consequence of consuming Pepsi and Skittles... not to mention that children are usually *well-aware* of the fact that junk food is ‘bad’ for you. But when we move beyond junk food, there is a real knowledge gap. We know very little about the *types* of foods (in the dairy, dry goods and meat categories) constituting children’s fare. This is highly problematic since most children make their first purchasing decisions in a food store and wield tremendous influence over product selection. Children can influence up to 80% of a family’s food budget (Hunter, 2002; Roy, 2004), and a similar degree of influence has been reported for tweens (Reactorz, 2003).

Within the supermarket retail environment, it is important to recognize that many of the foods targeted at children and symbolically positioned as ‘children’s fare’ are defined in terms of their *opposition to* ‘regular’ or ‘adult’ food. They are ‘fun foods’, a category of products which use shape, colour, size, package iconography and graphics and language to identify their status *as* children’s fare and/or fun. When it comes to distinguishing fun food from regular food, a ‘grey zone’ seldom exists their success *as* ‘fun foods’ hinges on a pointed claim to the theme of ‘fun’. Following is a very brief list of examples:

- Heinz E-Z Squirt Stellar Blue ketchup or Heinz E-Z Squirt Funky Purple ketchup
- Parkay’s Shocking Pink Fun Squeeze Margarine
- Kellogg’s Mickey’s Magix cereal (which ‘magically’ turns milk blue)
- Quaker Oats’ Dinosaur Eggs oatmeal (in which dinosaur eggs ‘hatch’ with the addition of hot water) or Quaker Oats’ Treasure Hunt oatmeal (whereby ‘treasure chests’ melt into green, red and gold coins when hot water is added)
- Saputo’s Cheese Heads Play Cheese Snacks
- Ore-Ida’s Funky Fries (coloured Kool Blue)
- Yoplait Yumsters or Yoplait Go-GURT
- Kraft Macaroni & Cheese Sponge Bob Square Pants; Kraft Macaroni & Cheese Scooby Doo; or Kraft’s Blue’s Clues Macaroni and Cheese (with blue colored paw prints)
- Mott’s Blue’s Clues Berry Flavored Apple Sauce (tinted blue)
- Kool-Aid Magic Twists Switchin’ Secret (which turns into “a secret color and flavor”)

- Frito Lay’s Mystery Colorz Snack Cheetos (which ‘dye’ consumers’ tongues either blue or green); and
- Pepperidge Farm’s rainbow coloured Goldfish.

Fun foods, then, can be signified by packaging and graphics (cartoon images and the like), and also by the foodstuffs themselves—purple ketchup, blue fries, unusual shapes, weird tastes, food that changes colour, size, etc. Knowledge of this field of food is important because, while the precise relationship between *fun* food and childhood obesity has yet to be examined, current research *has* established the following: 1) a positive correlation between ‘exposure’ and food preferences in children (Horgen *et al.*, 2001; Wadden *et al.*, 2002); and 2) that early experiences with food direct future patterns of food consumption (Birch, 1996; Escobar, 1999). In light of this, it is possible that ‘fun foods’ work to create a space in which children become accustomed to the ‘unnaturalness’ of food and learn to appreciate the value of food as fun, sport or distraction (instead of focusing on nutritional components).¹ Ironically, it is the very use of food *as fun*, or eating as entertainment (or distraction) that has consistently been identified as a contributing factor to obesity.

As education practitioners, knowledge of the messages in and around supermarket food may help us to gain a more complex understanding of the social environment contributing to childhood obesity. It allows us to alert parents *and* children to some of the less obvious spaces, places and messages which, ironically, are the mainstay of our consumption experience. Parents may vigilantly avoid buying junk food and candy for their children, yet unproblematically purchase Kellogg’s Mickey’s Magix® cereal, Betty Crocker’s Screamin’ Green Apple Fruit Gushers® fruit snacks or Kraft’s Lunchables®. Second, fun food ‘cues’ (embedded in packaging, labelling, and foodstuffs) work to identify children’s foods to both children *and* adults. While children respond positively to food products that are created ‘especially for them,’ (Green eggs, 2002; Howell, 2003; Hunter, 2002; Roy, 2004) parents equally rely on signifiers of fun foods (i.e., cartoon images, strangely shaped/coloured foods), since they try to “provide foods that they think their child will like” (Schwartz & Puhl, 2004). But this reliance may result in a less nutritious diet than the parents realize. More research on fun foods, however, would allow us to respond to several identified needs pertaining to food products and childhood obesity. Psychologists M.B. Schwartz and R. Puhl (2003) have called for the need to move *beyond* educating parents on the principles of ‘good nutrition’—what is really required, they claim, is a solid awareness of the current food environment, and “ideas on how to protect their children” from unhealthful messages. As educators, we need to work toward providing this kind of knowledge.

Note:

1) This speculation is supported by Eagle *et al.*, (2004) who note that “over 80% of obese adolescents sustain their obesity in adulthood... primarily because dietary habits that are developed when young persist over time” (p. 51).

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