

Talking to Your Kids about Junk Food and Fast Food Advertising

Kids are bombarded by advertising messages and images for junk food and fast food everywhere they turn. In fact, kids see one food commercial every five minutes during Saturday morning cartoons, most of them for foods high in fat, sugar, and calories.

Older kids with cell phones are even more exposed. When they buy candy or chips, they get offers for text-based messages, free music downloads, ring tones, and whimsical wallpaper for their phone screens. They're usually routed to a Web site, where they're hit with even more junk food advertising. And the messages they get on their phones? Ads, contests, e-cards, fun phrases to forward to friends, and invitations to return to the site for more so-called freebies.

To help kids understand the intent of junk food and fast food advertising is to sell them something, here are some questions you can ask.

“Why do you think the advertiser put a commercial on this particular program?” This gets to the heart of an important media literacy concept: all messages are designed for a particular audience.

“Why do you think advertisers use slogans or catchy music?” You may even ask them to recall other songs or slogans they remember from ads. Many of us can remember a particular phrase or jingle that we heard 10 or 20 years ago.

“What is appealing in this commercial? Is it the way the food looks; the happy family seen eating the food?” Remember that commercials are constructions, and that techniques are used

to make the product seem more attractive. Explain “tricks” that advertisers use in commercials, like using Vaseline to make hamburgers look juicy and putting hair tonic into cereal bowls to make sure the cereal doesn't get soggy. Also chat with kids about the true purpose behind promotions, downloads, and links from games, websites, and cell phones. Kids need to know that no matter how clever the gimmick or game, they're all ads.

“What might the advertiser be leaving out of the commercial and why?” Most food ads are not designed to tell us the nutritional values. Encourage your kids to look elsewhere for the missing information.

“Does it make a difference to you that a celebrity was in that commercial?” Teach your children about the popular techniques ad-makers use, such as testimonials from celebrities -- or everyday people. This will help your kids know how they're being influenced.

Here's another idea: Consider muting the sound during commercials and asking your kids to provide dialogue. Ask, “What are they saying?”, “What music is playing?” You can also ask your kids to find subtle sponsorships and product placement in the games they play and Web sites they visit. This is a fun way to help them become more aware about popular techniques.

This tip sheet was adapted from original articles written by Frank Baker and Amy Jussel, published respectively on 1/13/06 and 2/24/06 by Common Sense Media. Frank is a media education consultant who created the website <http://medialit.med.sc.edu>. Amy Jussel is the Executive Director of Shaping Youth, a new consortium of media and marketing professionals concerned about harmful messages to children. For 20 years she's written extensively about food marketing and advertising techniques to alert parents with insider tips for media literacy.