

Grade 6 – Close Reading

KIDS GET DIET OF JUNK FOOD COMMERCIALS

by Bootie Cosgrove-Mather

In a child's buffet of food commercials, more than 40 percent of the dishes are candy, snacks and fast food. Nowhere to be found: fresh fruit, vegetables, poultry or seafood.

For years, health officials have warned that kids were being inundated with commercials about not-so-healthy foods. Now, researchers have put numbers to those warnings in the largest-ever study of commercials aimed at children.

The study, the largest ever of TV ads for children, found America's kids are bombarded with commercials for unhealthy foods full of sugar, salt and fat, reports CBS News correspondent Bill Whitaker. Children ages 2 to 7 see an average of 30 hours of such ads a year. Kids 8 to 12 see 50 hours annually, while teenagers see 40 hours every year.

"The vast majority of the foods that kids see advertised on television today are for products that nutritionists would tell us they need to be eating less of, not more of, if we're going to get a handle on childhood obesity," said Vicky Rideout of the Kaiser Family Foundation, which conducts health research.

Overall, the foundation's researchers monitored 13 television networks. The viewing took place primarily between late May and early September 2005. They saw 2,613 ads featuring food and drinks that targeted children and teens.

"Since (preteens) are at an age where they're just becoming independent consumers, understanding what type of advertising they are exposed to is especially important," Rideout said.

Of food ads aimed at children, 34 percent were for candy and snacks, 29 percent for cereal, 10 percent for beverages, 10 percent for fast food, 4 percent for dairy products, 4 percent for prepared food and the rest for breads and pastries and dine-in restaurants.

In December 2005, the Institute of Medicine concluded that marketing practices from the food and beverage industry are out of balance with recommended diets for children and contribute to an environment that puts children's health at risk.

The institute recommended that companies shift their advertising to emphasize food and drink that are substantially lower in calories, fats, salt and sugars.

In November, 11 major food and drink makers, including companies such as McDonald's, The Coca-Cola Co. and PepsiCo Inc., agreed to adopt new voluntary rules for advertising. The companies said they would devote at least half their advertising directed to children to promote healthier diets and lifestyles.

The rules have not gone into effect yet. However, researchers believe that the study released Wednesday will serve as an important benchmark that will help determine whether the voluntary guidelines lead to any significant changes in advertising content.

Margo Wootan, director of nutrition policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, said the federal government should take a more active role in regulating the content of television ads aimed at children.

"The industry is not as serious about self-regulation as they say they are," Wootan said.

But business leaders asked for patience.

"Give us a chance to see what we can do," said C. Lee Peeler, president and CEO of the National Advertising Review Council, an organization that promotes truth in advertising through voluntary regulation.

Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan., said he would prefer self-regulation by the advertisers. He said that intervention by the federal government would actually delay the changes in ad content that so many seek. That's because legislation would lead to opposition from various interest groups as well as potential court challenges.

Advertisers also stressed that the content of food ads has already begun to change, with more ads promoting healthy foods and exercise than during 2005.

Sen. Tom. Harkin, D-Iowa, said he hoped the study would also prove helpful to a new Federal Communications Commission task force examining the impact of the media on childhood obesity rates.

"We now have data that conclusively shows kids are seeing an overwhelming number of ads for unhealthy food on all types of TV shows," Harkin said. "The 'childhood obesity epidemic' isn't just a catch phrase. It's a real public health crisis."

The study also recorded the number of public service announcements that children watch on television. The report said that expectations for educational campaigns affecting child obesity rates should be tempered.

Children see few public service announcements compared to food ads. Children under 8 see one announcement on fitness or nutrition for every 26 food ads. For preteens, it's one announcement for every 48 food ads. And for teens, the ratio is one public service announcement for every 130 food ads.