



# Food and Beverage Marketing to Children



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# Objectives and Method



## Methodology

<b>Composition and Recruitment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A total of eight in-person focus groups were conducted: four with White moms, two with African American moms, and two with Latina moms.</li><li>• Participants were screened to ensure they had a child age 2-14, were engaged in supporting a social issue, and were not strongly-opposed to government intervention or limitations on food marketing to children.</li></ul>
<b>Fieldwork Locations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Philadelphia</li><li>• San Francisco</li><li>• Atlanta</li><li>• Phoenix</li></ul>



## Research Focus

- Attitudes on food for children and their eating preferences;
- Attitudes on food and beverage marketing to children;
- Food marketing stimuli;
- Facts about unhealthy food and marketing to children; and
- Messages to encourage action against unhealthy food and beverage marketing to children.





# Summary of Findings



## Overview

- Moms do not need prompting to describe what food and beverage marketing to children looks like, where it is, and its impact.
- Concern about unhealthy food and beverage marketing to children is not, however, synonymous with concern about its consequences, and there is some **resigned acceptance towards this marketing**.
  - **Facts matter and are motivating**, though, and moms appear willing to take action once they focus on the issue, becoming more motivated as they learned more over the course of the group.
  - The **amount spent on food and beverage ads to children** is particularly provocative. The proportion of children's meals that are unhealthy and the prevalence of unhealthy food marketing in schools also resonate.
- There are **mixed views on the role of both food and beverage companies and the media in addressing this type of marketing, with moms believing that media companies have a greater responsibility** than food and beverage companies to limit unhealthy marketing. However, what moms think these groups *should do* is not synonymous with what they think they are required to do.
- Removing unhealthy food and beverage marketing from schools and improving the nutritional quality of children's meals are the most popular interventions.



## Overview of Food and Beverage Marketing to Children

What Food and Beverage Marketing Looks Like	What Food and Beverage Marketing Does
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Features <b>cartoon characters and/or celebrities</b></li><li>• Highlights shapes (which are often linked to cartoon characters)</li><li>• <b>Colorful and bright</b></li><li>• Contains busy <b>animation</b></li><li>• Is in children's lives all day</li><li>• Is found <b>everywhere</b>: on television, online, on billboards, in schools, on food packaging and in checkout aisles, and among friends</li><li>• <b>Primarily used for unhealthy food and beverages</b></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Excites children, who ask to try specific products</li><li>• Makes children's meals more appealing even if the actual meal is unhealthy</li><li>• <b>Makes food shopping and promoting healthy choices harder for moms</b></li><li>• Forces negotiation between parents and children, often ending with purchase of product</li><li>• <b>Causes obesity, diabetes, and other health problems</b></li><li>• <b>Helps make money for companies selling these foods and beverages</b></li></ul>



# What Foods and Beverages Get Marketed to Children?

“A lot of it is fruit-based but only in name because what are those little gummies...”

San Francisco, White

“Yogurt, now, a lot of times. Those GoGurts.”

Atlanta, African American

“Like Gatorade, the juice boxes, the packs, the squeeze foods are huge now to market to kids. Because it’s quick and easy. Everything is on the go, on the go, grab and go.”

Phoenix, White

“A lot of sweet stuff.”

San Francisco, Latina

“And the applesauce comes in this Mickey Mouse type.”

Philadelphia, African American

## Mostly unhealthy foods and beverages



candy + dessert



sugary snacks (incl. fruit snacks)



cheese-based meals



chips



fried foods



energy drinks and juice boxes

## With a few notable exceptions



yogurt



fruit



cheese sticks



applesauce

...and almost anything on a children’s menu



## Where is Food and Beverage Marketing to Children Occurring?

“...if they watch Nickelodeon or any of those shows, they’re on all the time.”

San Francisco, White

“When they play games, they pop up.”

Atlanta, African American

“At school, as well, because they have all the posters displaying food, like veggies and fruit. And then they have vending machines as well.”

Phoenix, Latina

“My son always wants this stuff with the pretty packaging...like we see the cheese and there’s a Minion on the box. He loves to have that one rather than this one.”

Philadelphia, African American



### Television

Television in general was top of mind for almost every group. Nickelodeon, in particular, was called out as a primary place where children see food and beverage marketing.



### Online

Especially for older children, computers and tablets can be an opportunity to see food and beverage marketing directed towards children. “Pop-up” games and ads were mentioned in multiple groups.



### In schools

While some suggested there was no marketing in their children’s schools, most were cognizant of vending machines, fundraising deals with local restaurants and franchises, and the influence of their peers. However, they also only referred to these as “marketing” after they were suggested to be so.



### In the Supermarket

Moms report that bringing children to the supermarket results in argument, longer trips, and more money spent because of interest in unhealthy food packaging that features characters and celebrities.



### Among Friends

Children notice what their friends are eating and want to try it, too. Sharing Instagram pictures (e.g., of Starbucks cups) is another way food marketing travels from peer to peer.



### At Checkout

Unhealthy items are marketed to children waiting in line with their parents, and most report purchasing something at least on occasion. They are also well-aware that this problem extends beyond grocery stores.



## Collective Impacts of Food and Beverage Marketing to Children: Health & Obesity

### Ingredient Focused

Concerns about **preservatives and processed foods** come up across the board.

**Excessive sugar** is also a concern, with moms expressing concern that sugar is addictive, bad for their children's health, and more appealing in terms of taste.

### Health Focused

Moms worry about the health impacts of the foods being marketed to their children, with **obesity and diabetes** frequently mentioned as the most likely negative health problems.

Even in groups where moms reflected more positively on their own children and their ability to control their children's food intake, moms noted that parents who don't exert this control or who have children who are not good eaters may find their children experiencing health problems.



# Addressing Unhealthy Marketing: At a Glance

## Shared Responsibility

The greatest messaging opportunities come in addressing the shared responsibility of parents and corporations to encourage children to eat more healthfully.

## Mom is in Control

Moms say that parents maintain the primary responsibility for speaking with their children about, or otherwise limiting their exposure to, unhealthy food and beverage marketing.

# Addressing Food and Beverage Marketing to Children

Moms liked the policy possibilities that improve the healthy food options that are available and keep marketing out of schools.

## Marketing-Free Schools

Media outlets for children, who moms believe can make their money off of any advertising, are also held responsible for the food and beverage marketing shown to children.

## Media Outlet Accountability



# Who Plays a Role in Addressing Food and Beverage Marketing?

Higher Consensus

## Parents

- Definitely! (They are seen as the most responsible party)

## Government

- Yes, definitely in schools; mixed views on the general notion of government involvement

## Media companies

- Generally less pushback than with food and beverage companies (less of a concern about profit and more willingness to hold them accountable)

## Food and beverage companies

- Possibly by some (though there is not consensus here)

Lower Consensus



## Promoting Changes: Role of Media and Food Companies

- Many moms feel as though **media companies** have a role to play in limiting the amount of unhealthy food and beverage marketing that their children see because they are **the primary conduit** of this advertising.
  - When prompted with information about voluntary changes to marketing that Disney has made, mothers praise the company's decision.
- While there is some degree of consensus about media companies taking responsibility, **food companies do not face the same scrutiny**, as moms do not necessarily think it is these companies' responsibility to limit the unhealthy food and beverage marketing directed at children. Rather, their resistance is linked to beliefs about these companies' goals. Simply stated, their priorities are profits.
- However, **moms would like food and beverage companies to provide healthier options**, and advertise them as well, so they can exercise their ability to choose the healthier option when they want it and the less healthy options when they do not.



## Support for Key Interventions

- Across cities, there was not consensus among moms about the role of government in limiting unhealthy food and beverage marketing to children, with moms in San Francisco and Atlanta and Latina moms in Phoenix being the most receptive.
- Reflecting on **schools**, specifically, though, moms believe they **represent places of learning where, in turn, healthy habits should be both taught and encouraged**. As a result, moms say that unhealthy food and beverage marketing has no place in schools.
  - Some moms who were less receptive to the idea of government intervention still felt as though schools had a responsibility to be free of this kind of marketing.
  - Parents were receptive to intervening to remove unhealthy food marketing from schools.
- **Improving the nutritional quality of children's meals at fast food and other restaurants was the most popular intervention**. This would make it easier for children to choose healthier food.
- **Policies that require food companies to take specific actions were the least popular** of those discussed.



## Mobilizing Support

- Messaging should **balance moms' interest in maintaining control and protecting their children with the general sentiment that parents are ultimately responsible** for what their children eat and drink.
  - Communicating the strength and breadth of food and beverage marketing to children – particularly that \$2 billion/year is spent on marketing foods and beverages to children, or that three-quarters of the food and beverage ads they see are for unhealthy foods and beverages – activates moms because such an overwhelming amount of money is spent on ads with adverse consequences.
  - While this research was only conducted among moms, it is important to emphasize the impact of this type of marketing on and the role of both moms and dads.
  - Moms are most responsive to messages that promote a vision of shared responsibility and ask food companies to do their part and step back so that moms can step up.
- Moms are willing to take action, like sharing news stories over Facebook and signing petitions, to encourage food companies and politicians to support improving food options and getting unhealthy food and beverage marketing out of schools.



## Individual Action

### Individual Actions

Work with the PTA

Sign an online petition

Write or share a Facebook post

"Like" a Facebook page

Comment on a news story

Sign up for emails/alerts

Share a YouTube video

Email, tweet at, or write a congress-person/legislator

Email or tweet at a food company

Go with other parents to city council or state legislator

Tweet or retweet

Donate money online

Write an op-ed

Blog

Tier 1: High interest  
Tier 2: Middling interest  
Tier 3: Low interest



## Postcard Exercise

"Our children are hurting because of your need for 'profit at all cost.'"

San Francisco, White

"Please consider our children's health. Be mindful of the ingredients of your products. Healthier is better. Obesity is a beast."

Atlanta, African American

"It would be helpful and nutritional to advertise more healthy choices to kids. With this we might be able to stop obesity in so many kids."

Phoenix, Latina

- Participants consistently asked more of food companies in their postcards than they appeared to ask during the groups.
- Postcards emphasized the importance of honesty in marketing, requests for marketing healthy foods, frustrations, and health impacts:

Honesty in marketing about health value the foods and beverages being advertised...as opposed to unfairly targeting children

Proposed advertising of healthy alternatives in the way that unhealthy foods are currently marketed

Frustration about how the marketing affects them as moms

Wrongful promotion of unhealthy habits and, for many, obesity is also top of mind



## Demographics in Focus

- **Race/Ethnicity:** Overall, race and ethnicity do not appear to be a key factor influencing perceptions or concerns about food and beverage marketing to children. When asked specifically, a few, but definitely not the majority, of Latina and African American moms say feel targeted by this type of marketing because of their race.
- **Age of Child:** The focus groups were recruited to bring together either moms with at least one child ages 2 to 6 or 7 to 14. However, while moms with younger children tend to report having more control over what their children eat, the discussions do not vary considerably based on a child's age. Rather, moms experience the pervasiveness, influence, and impact of unhealthy food and beverage marketing independent of their child's age.
- **Party Identification:** Political leanings of participants in these focus groups are not an explicit predictor of support for potential initiatives or interventions to address or reduce unhealthy food and beverage marketing to children. In fact, the Democratic-leaning group of African Americans moms in Philadelphia was most resistant to the proposed interventions while the more conservative group of White moms in Atlanta was most favorable towards them.
- Quantitative research would be an important step to help confirm or clarify these demographic insights from the focus groups



## Recommendations

- **Communicating the depth and breadth of unhealthy food marketing** gives moms a reference point to rally against (and increases the magnitude and personal relevancy of the problem).
  - Let them know that \$2 billion is spent annually on food and beverage marketing to their children and that two-thirds of that goes to marketing unhealthy foods and beverages.
- Messages should **inspire a vision of shared responsibility, preserving parents' ability to make decisions** while also asking food and beverage companies to do their part to protect children's health and help promote longer term healthful habits.
  - The proliferation of cartoon characters and celebrities in advertising also reflects moms' realities, so incorporating these elements will make communications more relatable.
- Moms are willing to take **quick, easy actions within their social networks**, both online (Facebook) and offline (at school, as part of PTA), namely sharing information and encouraging others to engage.

