

Fact Sheet: Why media literacy?

We live in a food environment characterized by the pervasive promotion of unhealthy foods and beverages to children. In fact, Canadian children:

- See **8 to 10** food and beverage advertisements a day on television, mostly for unhealthy foods.¹
- See over **25 million** food and beverage advertisements each year on their favourite websites.¹
- Are exposed to (an estimated) **6,000 ads** per year on social media.²

Food promotion has a significant impact on children's food preferences, attitudes, habits, and health. Research shows that a "strong link" exists between exposure to food marketing and childhood obesity.³ And when it comes to the techniques used to persuade (or the "power" of the marketing messages), a recent review of the literature shows that cartoon characters are predominantly used to attract children's attention, along with appeals to health/nutrition, taste, and fun.⁴

In Canada, children's nutrition knowledge is largely based on *Canada's Food Guide For Healthy Eating*, which is taught as part of the school curriculum. **For the very first time**, Health Canada's most recent food guide tells Canadians to "**be aware of food marketing**".⁵ However, the Food Guide highlights whole, unprocessed foods; it does not easily translate into making choices in an environment dominated by packaged food products.

Food packaging is a powerful form of food marketing. Yet many children lack the skills necessary to navigate the myriad advertising techniques (including *cartoon characters, colour, nutrition claims* and *incentives*) that promote packaged foods of varying nutritional qualities. Given children's substantial exposure to food marketing, **media literacy skills** are required.

- ✓ Media literacy is *the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages across a variety of contexts*.⁶
- ✓ Media literacy is specifically focused on exploring how mediated messages shape our perceptions of the world around us.
- ✓ Looking at food marketing through the lens of media literacy directs us to examine and interpret the effects of persuasive communication techniques on perceptions of food and nutrition.

Health-promoting media literacy education helps children to develop and use the analytical skills necessary to critically examine media messages to make informed food choices.⁷ This is something not covered in the current school curriculum, even though children's worlds are filled with packaged food products.

The MLFM lesson plans and toolkits promote improved understanding of the ways that food marketing works to influence our perceptions and preferences, or *food attitudes*. Children need media literacy skills to be able to decipher the content of food marketing, to separate out the marketing from the facts, and to identify healthy packaged foods. **These are critical media skills that children will draw on for a lifetime.**

¹ Heart & Stroke Foundation (2017). *The kids are not alright: How the food and beverage industry is marketing our children and youth to death. 2017 Report on the Health of Canadians.*

² Potvin-Kent et al. (2019). Children and adolescents' exposure to food and beverage marketing in social media apps. *Pediatric Obesity*, 14(6), e12508.

³ Smith R, Kelly B, Yeatman H, Boyland E. (2019). Food marketing influences children's attitudes, preferences and consumption: a systematic critical review. *Nutrients*, 11(4):875.

⁴ Elliott, C. & Truman, E. (2019). Measuring the power of food marketing to children: A review of recent literature. *Current Nutrition Reports*, 8(4), 323-332.

⁵ Health Canada. (2020). *Canada's Food Guide: Healthy Food Choices*. <https://food-guide.canada.ca/en/healthy-food-choices/>

⁶ Livingstone, S. (2003). The changing nature and uses of media literacy. *Media@LSE Working Paper*, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.

⁷ Truman, E & Elliott, C. (2020). Health promoting skills for children: Evaluating the influence of a media literacy and food marketing intervention. *Health Education Journal*, 79(4), 431-445.