

BRAND NAMES, TAGLINES AND HEALTH SYMBOLS ON FOOD PACKAGING

This fact sheet is part of a series developed to help parents, guardians and educators understand how children view and interpret packaged foods.

BACKGROUND

A Media Literacy & Food Marketing curriculum was developed from focus groups with over 600 Canadian children in grades 1 to 9. Children discussed their thoughts on package images and colours and claims, as well as the nutrition facts table, and ingredient lists. Children were asked what they look for on a packaged food to determine whether it was healthy.

BRAND NAMES, TAG LINES, HEALTH SYMBOLS AND THE MARKETING OF FOOD

The focus groups with children revealed that product names strongly influenced children's evaluations of packaged foods. Children typically interpreted a brand name literally. For example, children interpreted the "Eating Right" brand as healthy. Tag lines like "Quality" or product lines such as "Natural Selections" had the same impact on children.

Health symbols, seals, and emblems (e.g., Organic, Fat Free, Gluten Free), also give products credibility with children—even though few children could accurately explain what organic, gluten free (etc.) meant.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

ONE CANNOT CLASSIFY ALL PRODUCTS AS HEALTHY BASED ON A BRAND NAME

Symbols are often difficult to navigate because they are a mixture of government-regulated nutrient content claims (such as 'a good source of calcium' and 'excellent source of fibre') and diet-related health claims (such as 'a healthy diet low in saturated fat may reduce the risk of heart disease'), as well as manufacturer created claims ('x grams of fibre'), symbols (whole grain stamps, goodness corners) and product names highlighting nutritional qualities.

NAVIGATING BRAND NAMES, TAG LINES, AND HEALTH SYMBOLS

Brands contain many different products, each with different nutritional value. Children frequently made assumptions about the health of one packaged food based on the brand name or family of brands. If one well-known product in the brand was healthy (such as oats) children assumed that all products under the brand were healthy.



Health symbols complicate children's understanding of packaged food even further. Packaging information is often more about marketing than nutrition, making it critical to use the Nutrition Facts tables and ingredient lists.



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FINDINGS

After selecting a packaged food product they felt was a healthy choice, children in the focus groups were asked why they made the selection they did.

FINDING 1

CHILDREN OFTEN ASSOCIATE PRODUCTS AS HEALTHY BY VIRTUE OF THEIR ASSOCIATION WITH A PARENT BRAND THEY “KNOW” TO BE HEALTHY

“[It’s healthy because] its Quaker®... and I have a bag of Quaker® flour and it says that it’s really healthy on the back.” Grade 3

“[It’s healthy because] it has the Quaker® dude and I am pretty sure that he’s a lot of healthy food.” Grade 5

“I usually look for a company that I know doesn’t make treats and makes more meals. I think President’s Choice.” Grade 5

FINDING 2

CHILDREN’S DETERMINATIONS OF A HEALTHY PACKAGED FOOD ARE BASED ON LITERAL INTERPRETATIONS OF PRODUCT NAMES, TEXT AND TAG LINES

“[It is healthy because] It says Eating Right.” Grade 3

“Breton® Supergrains [is healthy] because of the supergrains.” Grade 3

“[It is healthy because] it says Sensible Solutions.” Grade 5

“It is healthy because it has the Eating Right label.” Grade 6

FINDING 3

CHILDREN’S INTERPRETATIONS OF LABELLING BECOME MORE NUANCED AS THEY AGE. HOWEVER, WHEN ASKED WHAT MAKES A CERTAIN PRODUCT A HEALTHY CHOICE, CHILDREN COMMONLY REFERRED TO SYMBOLS FOUND ON THE FRONT OF A PACKAGE

“[It is healthy because] it has the green seal [Sensible Solutions logo].” Grade 3

“[It is healthy because of the] “two healthy symbols on the corner.” Grade 6

“[It is healthy because] it has a checkmark.” Grade 6

“Well, first I read the ingredients and it was organic, so I said, “This must be healthy.” Grade 7



THINGS TO TRY AT HOME

Look at all the health symbols, logos and other emblems on the packages you have in your pantry with your child. These may include words and claims like Organic, Fat Free or Gluten Free, and attributes like “Quality”, or brand lines like “Natural Selections”. Discuss what these appeals mean and why they are being used on the front of packages. Compare the marketing symbols to the information found in the ingredient lists and nutrition tables: how might these differ?

ORGANIC	<i>Organic</i> describes how a product was grown. It means that the crop/food was grown without the use of synthetic pesticides and chemical fertilizers.
FAT FREE	<i>Fat free</i> means the product does not contain any fat. While this statement is very straightforward, it does not mean that the product as a whole is healthy. For example, a food may be fat free but high in sugar.
GLUTEN FREE	<i>Gluten Free</i> means the product does not contain the protein gluten. Gluten is found in grains such as wheat, barley, and rye. Gluten free doesn’t necessarily mean the product is healthy (consumers still have to look at the ingredient list and the Nutrition Facts table). Gluten, too, is a concern only for people with allergies to gluten.

SUMMARY

Brand names, tag lines and symbols are marketing tools. They can sell the story of the product and highlight key attributes, but they don’t necessarily reflect the overall nutritional quality of a packaged food product. For this, you need to examine the Nutrition Facts table and ingredient list of each product.