

THE JUNK WARS

by Abby Williams

With food manufacturers deliberately marketing their products to appeal to little shoppers it can be a battle to encourage healthy eating — but it's a battle you can win!

HOW many times have you been in a supermarket and overheard a voice pleading, "Please, Mummy!" or, worse still, "I want one — now!"?

If you've been on the receiving end of such requests, you'll no doubt sympathise. Taking children to a supermarket can be a battle of wills, as you try to steer them away from the unhealthy processed foods increasingly designed to attract them.

"Families face a wide range of health messages and information that can be

confusing; they may also find buying healthy food a challenge on a low income, with a large family or under time pressure," says Jo Butcher of the National Children's Bureau. "Parents may not always have access to healthier food choices depending on the area in which they live and if they do, persuading children to eat fruit and veg can be a struggle."

"We also know that sometimes parents are unable to recognise when



their child is actually overweight or obese," adds Jo.

However, more serious pressures also contribute to junk food often winning out.

"Junk food" — defined as foods high in salt, fat and sugar (sometimes referred to as HFSS foods) — don't appeal to children solely because of their taste, but also because of the way they're marketed.

"Food marketers are treating children as blank canvases on which to paint their branding; embedding unhealthy food

choices from a very young age and adding to the UK's rising child obesity problems," says Sue Davies of *Which?* magazine.

Their report found that fun, colourful TV ads appeal to children's desire to have fun and play. One five-year-old girl commented, "I want to buy the cereals to get the free toys," whilst a boy, aged six, added, "The signs on the TV say cola and football is good for you."

They also appeal to

children's desire to belong by having clubs like the Haribo Club. Interestingly, many companies, such as Weetabix, deny targeting children in any advertising. Yet they offer football stickers in boxes of Weetos!

"How can parents be expected to give their children a healthy, balanced diet when these

sophisticated, underhand techniques are targeting their children?" asks Sue.

"Seventy-seven per cent of people think using kids' favourite cartoon characters such as *Shrek*, *The Simpsons* and *Scooby Doo* on packs of HFSS foods makes it difficult for parents to say no to their children."

"A little dog advertises them," says an eight-year-old about Nestlé Cookie Crisp. "He is a funny character, they make me want more."

IS IT really doing that much harm, though? After all, some so-called "junk foods" are promoted as having health benefits. The DairyLea range, for example, is "full of calcium." What they don't tell us, though, is that it's also high in fat and salt.

"Confectionery and savoury snacks are generally high in fat, salt or sugar. They may be eaten occasionally but should not be part of a child's everyday diet," says Dr Joanne Lunn at the British Nutrition Foundation.

"Many food ads on TV promote products that are packed with fat, salt or sugar. Reducing this powerful influence on our children's eating habits is a vital step in protecting future generations' heart health," advises Ruairi O'Connor at the British Heart Foundation.

Many Kellogg's cereals are loaded with sugar including Honey Loops, Ricicles, and Frosties. Although Real Fruit Winders contain "real fruit", they're also full of sugar.

Martin Fallowfield, dentist and member of the British Dental Association says, "The sugar that children consume in food and drink contributes to tooth decay by feeding the bacteria that causes dental plaque. Reducing sugar in their diets helps to avoid this problem."

Some scientists believe that eating foods containing hydrogenated and trans fats may also be a factor in children's behavioural problems. "Children are replacing essential fats that would make their bodies and brains work properly with ones that are clogging up the machinery," says Dr Alex Richardson, Director of the charity Food and Behaviour Research.



So do we need a third party, interested in parenting not profits, actively encouraging children to eat more healthy food?

Oftcom, the broadcast regulator, has put forward several proposals which it hopes will help to limit children's exposure to TV advertising of these HFSS products.

"HFSS food and drink products would not be allowed to be advertised in any programme of particular appeal to the under-16s," a spokesperson for Oftcom revealed. "There would be a ban on the use of celebrities and cartoon characters popular with children, a ban on promotional activities such as free gifts and on health and nutritional claims in ads for these type of products."

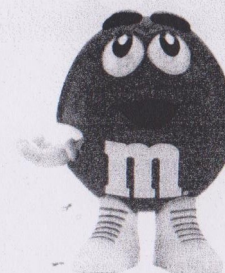
It's a start but there is still much that can be done — and you can help too. ■

WHAT CAN I DO?

Discover the nutritional content of all breakfast cereals at www.which.co.uk/cereals.

If you're concerned about junk food manufacturers targeting children log on to www.which.co.uk/kidsfood and join the Which? campaign to put pressure on the government.

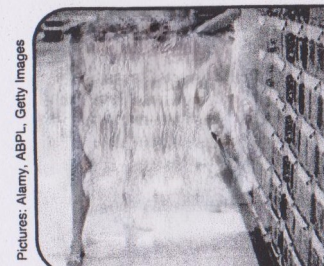
- Tell them about irresponsible promotions you've seen that target children.
- Discover more about the tricks manufacturers are using.
- Download a campaign pack for more information on taking action.



KEEPING KIDS AWAY FROM JUNK

Annabel Karmel, author of many books for families with children on nutrition and healthy eating, suggests the following tips to avoid junk;

1. Lunchboxes — create your own stackable snacks! Thread cherry tomatoes and cheese or fresh and dried fruit together on to a little straw.
2. Rewards — instead of giving sweets or crisps encourage them to choose stickers, a comic or novelty pen.
3. Distract children from temptation at the checkout. Get them to help unload the shopping.
4. Make healthy eating fun — ask your child to find six red fruits and veg or choose six foods made from cows' milk as you go round the supermarket.
5. Talk to older children about the marketing ploys and unhealthy food adverts. Suggest reading the label on packets to see what's really inside.
6. In a restaurant avoid kids' menus — they often read like a fast food order. Ask for a half portion from the adult menu instead.
7. Watch out for the names glucose, fructose, sucrose and maltose — they're all types of sugar!



Pictures: Alamy, ABPL, Getty Images

By 2010 the Department of Health predicts that at least one million children in England alone will be obese. That gives us three years to act, reduce the junk and prove them wrong!