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# Selling Kids on Healthy Eating



By Paulo Albuquerque , INSEAD Associate Professor of Marketing

## **Marketers and parents both have a role to play in combating the global childhood obesity crisis.**

In the last four decades, childhood obesity has escalated into a full-blown global epidemic. As rates **continue to skyrocket** across Africa and some parts of Asia, **the latest U.S. data** largely deflates hopes that the crisis was beginning to recede.

The main causes of the epidemic include: the globalisation-fuelled prevalence of fast food chains around the world; Big Food's child-targeted marketing tactics; the resource-thin lifestyles of poorer families; and a general decline in physical play due to the mobile revolution. It is a perfect storm that leaves concerned parties wondering where to start combating the crisis. No less challenging is assessing which interventions are likely to be most effective and should therefore receive the lion's share of government support.

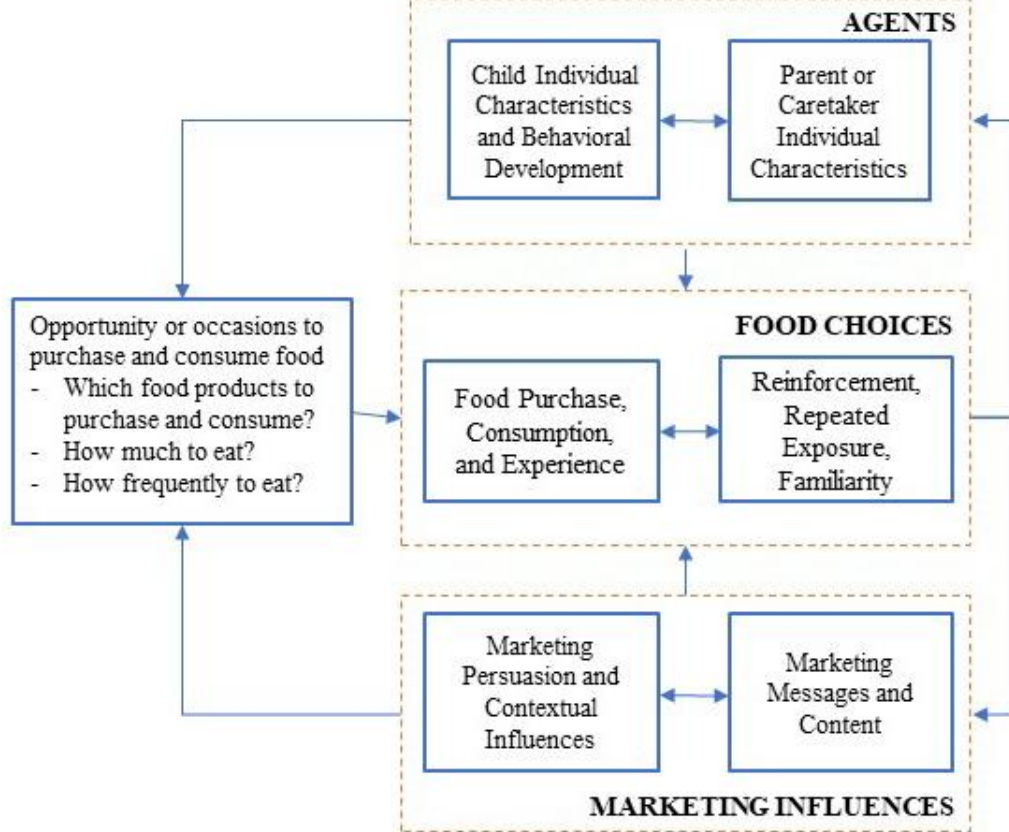
The field of marketing has been especially implicated, with some advocacy groups **demanding tougher restrictions** on junk-food advertising that reaches children.

To move the dialogue forward, it's essential that we better understand how the contributing factors combine to influence children's food choices. Towards that end, my [recent paper](#) proposes a framework that encompasses not only the major motivators, but also the self-reinforcing pathways by which unhealthy choices become ingrained bad habits. The paper was co-authored by Merrie L. Brucks (University of Arizona), Margaret C. Campbell (University of Colorado Boulder), Kara Chan (Hong Kong Baptist University), Michal Maimaran (Northwestern University), Anna McAlister (Endicott College) and Sophie Nicklaus (INRA).

Although food choice is the topic under consideration here, we believe the framework should also apply to many other product categories.

### **Long-lasting influences**

As shown in the diagram below, children's dietary decisions aren't made in a vacuum. The entire process is jointly informed by the personal characteristics of the child and their caretakers, as well as the marketing messages to which both parties are exposed.



The framework is cyclical, not linear. Our choices change us, as we develop preferences based on what we've grown accustomed to. Those preferences strongly affect future choices. The sensual experience of eating certain foods, for example, creates familiarity and taste expectations, i.e. the evolution of a palate. This feedback loop is present for people of all ages, but it spins much faster in the case of small children, whose developing minds are especially receptive to suggestion. The food-related habits forged in early childhood are long-lasting. Recent studies project that **young children who are obese or overweight** are likely to stay that way well into adulthood.

Research indicates that the first 1,000 days of a child's life are crucial for long-term habit formation. By age three, up to three quarters of children develop food neophobia, i.e. fear and avoidance of unfamiliar foods. Research suggests that caregivers can make the most of their 1,000-day window of opportunity by adopting the concept of **responsive feeding**,

which favours reciprocity and attention to the infant's needs over scheduled feeding.

Under responsive feeding, caretakers decide the “what, when and where” of eating and let children determine the “how much and whether”. According to several studies, parents should use their power of choice to introduce a variety of foods as early as possible, undeterred by the infant's initial refusal. It takes eight to ten exposures for infants to develop a taste for a new fruit or vegetable. Dietary variety early in the weaning process has been linked to increased acceptance of fruits and vegetables later in life.

### **The marketing feedback loop**

Preschool-aged children are “information sponges”, indiscriminately soaking in signals from their environment about what to eat, how much, with whom, etc. Being too young to understand the motivations behind marketing content, they will readily take their cue from advertising in the absence of strong caretaker guidance. Grade-school children can grasp the purpose behind advertising, but are often susceptible to it anyway. It isn't until age 13 or so that children start to display adult-like scepticism towards marketing messages.

Children who are exposed to advertising at a tender, credulous stage will often retain positive associations with brands throughout their lifetime. The halo effect makes it harder for adults to rationally re-evaluate brand beliefs from childhood, further reinforcing deep-seated consumption habits.

Foggy childhood memories also play a role, by blurring the line between advertisements and entertainment. Blending promotional slogans, graphics, etc. with movie imagery and TV-show catchphrases, pop culture nostalgia helps maintain marketing's grip on ageing generations.

It isn't surprising, then, that calls for a crackdown on marketing aimed at kids are growing louder. Barring tighter restrictions, however, the best bet for purveyors of healthier products may be to emulate some of Big Food's selling strategies. For example, integrating sports stars and superheroes into product packaging is a venerable tactic of junk-food marketing. Yet one study showed that kids aged six to 12 were more likely to choose healthier snacks when they were prompted to think about what a role-model figure such as Batman might eat. In some cases, health-conscious brands may have more to gain from celebrity endorsements and licensing deals than

their indulgent competitors.

Results of several studies suggest that when addressing kids, marketers of healthy food products should avoid messaging that evokes self-improvement. In one experiment, a group of three- and four-year-old children who heard a story about a girl who likes to eat carrots ate twice as many carrots as another group who were also told that the girl believed carrots would improve her math skills. Given the choice, young children will select food based on the pleasure it promises to deliver. Additional benefits, such as getting stronger or smarter, dilute their interest rather than boost it.

### **Managing the feedback loop**

Marketers can help kids fight the temptation to consume too much unhealthy food. Returning to our framework, however, one can't overestimate the importance of the first 1,000 days in providing kids with a probable foothold in long-term health, as the feedback loop keeps turning into toddlerhood and beyond.

Educating parents of infants, especially those with fewer financial resources, about healthy eating should be a top public-sector priority. Again and again, researchers note a direct link between parental sophistication around food issues and children's health outcomes. For example, in one study, parents of obese children were more inclined to agree with questionable assertions such as, "It doesn't matter which foods my child eats. As long as they eat enough, they will grow properly."

To make headway against this global crisis, we need to both promote education and continue to call attention to how marketing contributes to shaping long-term health and well-being.

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