

Don't Tell Them It's Healthy

A parent's guide to marketing nutritious food to children and teens

KAREN FISCHER



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Introduction

*There is no such thing
as an attention span.
People have infinite attention
if you are **entertaining** them.*
Jerry Seinfeld

How do junk food advertisers do it? They are just so brilliant at convincing children (and many adults) that a product – a burger, dessert or soft drink – will make them happy, popular or stronger. And the youth of today lap it up.

The good news is you can use very similar marketing ‘slogans’, mottoes and food styling to persuade your child to eat healthy food. And most importantly, you can be the one showing them how to become stronger, faster and happier. No more nagging. No need to bribe them with desserts and treats. No cooking separate meals in order to hide the vegetables in more appealing food. Kids *need* to eat their veggies, their wholegrains and a variety of good food to be healthy, strong and gorgeous and it’s about time they knew it!

This form of ‘healthy’ marketing can work for you in a number of ways. Imagine convincing your child to embrace nutritious food *and* decent morals. They wouldn’t be so vulnerable to peer pressure during their teenage years and you could sleep soundly at night knowing your child was more likely to exercise good judgement. This is because healthy marketing makes you, the parent, more influential especially when setting a new household rule. Your child is less likely to throw a tantrum or rebel because you successfully convey to them how the rule is in *their* best interest, not yours.

If you don’t take your parenting power back by using healthy marketing then by the time your child becomes a moody teenager their eating habits will be largely beyond your control. If you already have a teen who won’t listen to a word you say then this book also provides useful advice for you. But you might want to hide this book from your surly adolescent so your caring cover is not blown.

Why is it necessary to market healthy food to the youth of today?

Approximately one in four children in Australia are either overweight or obese.¹ Children under the age of nineteen are being diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, a condition predominantly seen in adults.² More and more children are being prescribed ADHD drugs to control hyperactive and unfocused behaviour.³ And four-year olds are getting acne.⁴ Healthy eating habits would help them immensely, as would exercise and having breakfast on a daily basis.⁵

But kids already know this. They hear the nutrition experts and their parents say that healthy food is important. They know

veggies are good for them, that brown bread is best and they may even realise that breakfast is the most important meal of the day. And they understand that junk food is bad for them. And they don't give a damn. They see lollies and fast food advertised on television and they see potential pleasure. They walk past the corner shop or supermarket aisle with rows of brightly coloured chocolate wrappers and they see a source of potential happiness. Then they start whining 'Muuuumm, can you buy this for me? Please, please, please!'

My daughter is seven and is no exception. She sits in front of the television, watches the ads and then turns to me with a glint in her eye. 'Mum that cleaning product is amazing,' she says. 'You *must* buy it'. Gee, I never knew she cared so much about the bathroom tiles. She tells me that the top fast food chain sells healthy food and when we drive past it her eyes light up as if she's just seen the face of God. During the cartoon break I hear my daughter call out 'Mum, come look! Can you buy me this? Oh, I just love it!' I used to think *if only she was as enthusiastic about eating her vegetables*.

I am a nutritionist but I have to confess, after my daughter turned three she became a fussy eater and I spent the next two years throwing her veggies in the bin each night. I would do the right thing and put them in her bowl. They were mixed in with the rice and the chicken. And I would nag her to eat one, maybe two tiny pieces of carrot or capsicum and then the rest would sit to one side of her plate and later become land fill. I didn't even consciously realise I was condoning it. I had recently become a single mum and I was very tired and busy. I reasoned at least I was cooking most nights.

A couple of years later I was doing book research and I read a few scientific studies on vegetables. Then I read some more and became increasingly alarmed. Time after time they confirmed that vegetables reduce the risk of deadly diseases. Reduce the occurrence of cancer, reduce the likelihood of heart disease, reduce the statistics on obesity and overweight children and reduce the incidence of type 2 diabetes. I was killing my kid!

That was my initial thought anyway. I felt guilty. So I increased my nagging by a few decibels to get her to eat her veggies. But that didn't make me feel good. It just made me sound like a bitch and I began to hate the echo of my own voice. So I mashed up vegetables and hid them in more desirable food so my daughter didn't know she was eating them. My girl was five by this stage and I felt a bit silly feeding her like a baby.

So I changed tactics and used dessert as a bribe. 'You can't have dessert unless you eat all your dinner, INCLUDING YOUR VEGETABLES!' This worked but I wondered if sweets should be placed on a pedestal as some sort of prize for putting up with veggies. Then I realised that I too was advertising junk food like it was something special.

Parents, the government and health experts alike are working on a solution to improve the health of our children. The latest idea from the Australian government is to weigh kids at the age of four so the overweight cherubs can be put on a health and fitness program before they become morbidly obese. And parents lobby to have junk food advertising banned from daytime television. Others say TV viewing in general is to blame. But it is not. We are to blame because we never studied marketing and we don't make the effort to make nutritious food sound desirable to our kids. We think we do but we don't bother

to teach them about healthy living *in their language*. Instead, we use grown-up jargon such as ‘healthy’ and ‘nutritious’ – words that can sound boring and trivial to most children.

Kids are strong-willed and stubborn about the food they will and won’t eat. You can’t beat them or berate them into submission. Nor should you. A child should have their own will. It is healthy too. And when you market nutritious food to your child, worded in a more fun and child-like manner, you can convince them that it is in their absolute best interest to eat vegetables and wholegrains and pretty soon it becomes their own will.

My daughter covets the junk food on TV commercials. But I don’t turn off the television. I don’t even curse those TV advertising gurus for being so good at their job. Instead, I study the ads and wonder what makes them so effective. I question what makes the biggest junk food companies stand out from the others. The less popular take-away chains serve similar foods that aren’t any worse and are sometimes better tasting. Why aren’t they as influential or popular? I read lots of marketing books and I begin to see a pattern emerge. Television commercial advertisers use simple techniques to make their product seem like a must-have. Their product is consistent and predictable in taste and quality. They seem to know what we like and dislike. And they advertise daily.

In reality, we don’t need a separate cleaning product for each room of the house and our bodies certainly don’t require junk food to be happy, popular or gorgeous. Yes, junk food tastes good and it momentarily satisfies our taste buds. But after eating it we may soon feel lethargic, bloated or unwell. Primitive societies that don’t eat junk food don’t get acne and they are

unlikely to suffer from cancer or heart disease. However, according to scientific research, once they adopt the modern Western diet, which includes junk food, they soon develop acne, and modern Western diseases begin to occur in their population.⁶

So junk food is good for the taste buds but it doesn't offer our kids anything of value. In large doses junk food may even be harmful and it fills up their tummies so there is less room for the healthy stuff. I've now realised it's not about weighing kids and preaching health to them. It's all about the marketing – the promise of pleasure, happiness and achievement – that sways many kids (and adults) into changing from bad eating habits to healthy ones.

So I modified my approach to feeding my daughter. One evening I decided to market the carrots and green beans that sat in her dinner bowl. And that night she ate every single vegetable on her plate. I didn't have to nag or hide them or use bribery. Don't get me wrong, she didn't suddenly 'love' vegetables but each day from then on I convinced her it was in her best interest to eat them. It was so easy I nearly felt guilty. But I reminded myself I was reducing her risk of falling ill. In fact I noticed she no longer seemed to catch the usual cold and flu bugs that once affected her so regularly.

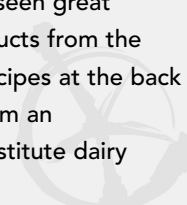
I began teaching other parents how to use healthy marketing. I visited schools and talked about it on radio stations around the country. I was amazed by the positive feedback from parents. One said 'We were at a Chinese restaurant and my boy, who normally hates vegetables, said 'I only want the broccoli'. Everyone at the table was surprised'. Another said her daughter reminds her how she needs to eat green vegetables every day.

And parents tell me the marketing tips have created a more peaceful home environment with less tantrums and more healthy habits.

I hope you also reap the inner satisfaction when you convince your child that healthy food is an essential part of their daily life. They will certainly know that you are feeding them nutritious food because you love them. And one day they may even thank you for it.

Health and happiness,
Karen

PLEASE NOTE: As a nutritionist who specialises in skin conditions such as eczema and acne, I have seen great results from temporarily omitting dairy products from the diet. Therefore I have included soy-based recipes at the back of this book. If your child does not suffer from an inflammatory condition then feel free to substitute dairy products in any of the recipes.



CHAPTER 1

Rose coloured carrots

The last time I checked, McDonald's didn't serve fresh carrot sticks. However, according to a study published in the *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine*, preschoolers prefer the taste of carrots when packaged in a McDonald's bag. The 'brandless' carrots just didn't taste as good. Neither did the brand-free french fries, hamburger and chicken nuggets, even though they were genuine McDonald's products simply served in a plain bag without the big 'm' present.¹

So what does it mean when kids prefer the taste of carrots wrapped in fast food packaging? Should you start serving veggies in brand-name containers to get them to eat up without the usual tantrums?

No. It does not mean you should start serving vegetables draped in corporate logos. This would only be a short-term quick fix that could further diminish your power as a parent. This study simply shows that kids respond to good and consistent marketing. And they are a tad gullible.

Short-term quick fixes

You are a parent so it's natural to want the best for your child. This includes excellent health and good eating habits. But how do you get fussy, strong-willed and plain old stubborn children eating healthy food on a daily basis? You could use short-term quick fixes such as nagging, smacking, shouting, hiding vegetables in more desirable food and banning TV viewing. However, let's consider the problems associated with relying on these methods:

NAGGING

Nagging is a common strategy used by many parents, especially weary mothers who care about their kids. They nag them to clean up their room and they nag them to eat healthy food, among other things. In the short-term, nagging can work well. All you do is dish out repetitive instructions that get increasingly louder each time, wearing your child down into a submissive 'Yeess, Mum'. Now they'll take a reluctant bite of that grainy sandwich and hate every moment of it.

You may find nagging works for you now but wait until your family develops a curious case of 'selective' deafness. Then nothing you say will be heard the first or second time you say it. Yes, nagging is only beneficial if you like repeating everything at least three times before getting a response. This is exhausting and you will forever be a weary and undermined parent if you don't break the nag cycle.

SMACKING AND SHOUTING

Smacking and shouting are old fashioned methods for getting kids to comply with the household rules and are considered

politically incorrect these days. However, some people believe that bad behaviour, obesity and crime are predominantly due to poor discipline and that belt-cracking punishment should be reinstated. But are these short-term quick fixes really the answer to raising healthy kids?

Of course they're not. Smacking and shouting teaches a child that violence and yelling are acceptable forms of communicating your wants and needs. I learnt this the hard way when my daughter was two. She bumped her head on the table. To make her feel better (and stop her from crying as quickly as possible), I resorted to smacking the table and said 'Naughty table!' She smiled and hit the table and my problem was solved. Until a boy at her day care centre accidentally bumped into her. She belted him and told him he was naughty. Clever communication and marketing are much healthier and in the long run, they're more effective than smacking and shouting.

HIDING VEGETABLES IN MORE DESIRABLE FOOD

What about the well-meaning health experts who recommend hiding vegetables in sauces, casseroles and pies? They say purée your vegetables or chop them finely enough to blend in with more desirable food like mince patties. Now your fussy child doesn't know they're eating something healthy and they won't upset your day by being difficult.

While I'm not totally opposed to this method of administering healthy food, you do have to wonder if it really helps your child to be healthy. It may give them more vitamins and minerals but you are missing out on a wonderful opportunity to be the primary health educator of your child. That's fine of course: you can always leave your child's health

information up to their school, their mates or junk food manufacturers who have the big bucks to advertise.

Alternatively, you could be the one to let your child know that eating vegetables is a fact of life and a damn important one that will help them feel good, look great and be successful. Educate them because you care and let them in on the secret while you still have some influence over them.

BANNING TV VIEWING

An experiment found that even a single exposure to a TV advertisement influenced preschool children's brand preference.² This is true. My daughter has a favourite bathroom cleaning product thanks to Bam's fun name and effective marketing. Another study showed there is a correlation between increased television watching and excessive calorie consumption in the youth of today. And the foods they're munching on are more likely to be the same ones frequently advertised on TV.³ This is great news for advertisers but not so good for us. So, should you ban your kids from watching television to prevent naughty fast food manufacturers from poisoning your child's delicate mind?

However great banning the TV seems in theory, be prepared as it means you'll have a child who demands five star entertainment from you, especially when you're busy cooking dinner. This is okay and can be a wonderful way for the family to bond. I personally loved having no television for a few months, then I realised my partner would slowly go insane if I didn't let him have a humongous flat screen.

A large TV is like having an extra window in the room but should the kids be allowed to share this portal into a land where soft drink makes you popular and sugar makes you an iron man?

By all means, kick up a fuss about fast food marketing and ban the TV so your family can't be victimised anymore. However, your child acquires prejudices from more than just television. There are billboards, shops, the internet, peer pressure and well-meaning relatives giving your child messages of what products are going to make them feel good.

You must get smart and stop blaming outside influences. Marketing is not an underhanded crime wielded by heartless food manufacturers. It's legal and astoundingly effective. So why wouldn't you learn the marketing tricks that make these food giants so successful? Yes, I am telling you to use subtle brainwashing techniques on your child so they voluntarily eat veggies, favour wholegrains over white bread and reach for the water jug without demanding 'Where's the cordial?'

Key points to remember

- * Short-term quick fixes are only beneficial in the interim and they can cause more hassles for you in the long run.
- * Keep nagging to a minimum (yes, you can still nag a little bit).
- * Don't smack or shout unless you want to raise a child who is good at smacking and shouting.
- * Limit hiding vegetables in more desirable food as your child needs to get to know vegetables on a first-name basis.
- * You can ban the television but be aware that your child is influenced by more than just TV commercials.

CHAPTER 2

Don't tell them it's healthy

You want to promote healthy eating to your child but there is a right way and a not-so-beneficial way to do it. Preach about healthy food and you risk boring them to death or worse, you may freak them out so much that they end up with an eating disorder. Some kids are sensitive. Others are just complicated or simply more focused on kids' stuff. As a parent you need to keep this in mind if you want your child to comply with your health food rules. You also need to avoid making the following mistakes:

Don't tell them it's healthy

Sure there are studies that say fruits and vegetables, when consumed during childhood, can cut their risk of cancer when they grow up.^{1,2} But who cares? Not your healthy, energetic child. Remember, 'being healthy' is *not* your child's personal goal, unless they are very, very ill. Children usually have other desires like being good at sport or computer games and making best friends.