

Tight family budget may lessen impact of food commercials on children

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Young children in households with no financial restraints may be at risk for poor eating habits by watching television commercials about fast food, sugary drinks and salty snacks.

A new University of Michigan study found that when family resources are perceived to be plentiful, parents buy both unhealthy [food](#) as well as [fruits and vegetables](#). Food commercials often trigger the child and parent to satisfy their hunger with junk food.

However, for households with little "wiggle room" in the family budget, anxiety over resources limits the effects of food advertising, said Kristen Harrison, professor of communication studies and faculty associate at the U-M Institute for Social Research.

The anxiety contributes to food insecurity, which influences the quantity and types of food parents buy. The insecurity exists when nutritious and safe foods are limited or when the ability to acquire them is limited.

"This finding is consistent with the argument that food insecurity constrains the influence of external factors such as [food advertising](#) by imposing limits on families' ability to satisfy hunger with gratuitous food expenditures," said Harrison, the study's lead author.

TV commercials urge viewers to buy certain foods that seem rewarding to eat. Once those foods are in the pantry, the same marketing messages and other environmental cues may trigger cravings, she said.

While parents control what preschoolers eat, the children have greater independence over the types of food as they begin grade school.

"It is important to gauge preschoolers' food behaviors to understand what they think 'healthy' meals are and how sociocultural factors such as family commercial media exposure may influence these perceptions," Harrison said.

In the study, researchers asked children ages 4-6 what they considered healthy by using a placemat with 36 realistic food replicas in child-sized

portions arranged in categories: vegetables, fruits, grains, dairy, meat and other proteins, and beverages.

Half of the items were low in calories and high in nutrients (nutrient dense) and the remaining food were high in calories, but low in nutrients (energy dense).

Each child was asked, "Are you hungry right now?" to which they could answer "No," "A little" or "A lot." The researchers asked the preschoolers to assemble their favorite food on a plate. In the next test, the children made a plate of what they considered a healthy meal.

Meanwhile, their parents answered questions about household income and their kids' body measurements and weekly exposure to TV commercials. They also reported what their children ate for one week based on seven foods: fruits, vegetables, [sugary drinks](#), French fries, [fast food](#), candy/sweets and [salty snacks](#).

To determine [food insecurity](#), the questions included: "I worried where our food would run out before we got money to buy more," "We couldn't afford to eat balanced meals" or "The food that we bought just didn't last and we didn't have money to get more."

In addition, children believed that foods high in calories, but low in nutrients, were ideal choices for healthy meals. The researchers noted that could become a problem for children in grade school who select these foods when given the option in the lunch line.

Harrison collaborated on the study with U-M colleague Mericarmen Peralta and the STRONG Kids Team at the University of Illinois. It is published in the *Journal of Communication*.

More information: "Parent and Child Media Exposure, Preschooler

Dietary Intake, and Preschooler Healthy-Meal Schemas in the Context of Food Insecurity." *Journal of Communication*.
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