

Parents' Attitudes about Food Marketing to Children: 2012 to 2015

April 2017

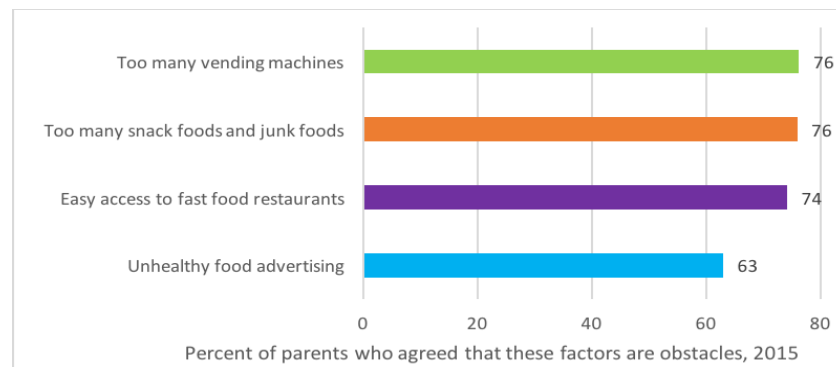
Parents surveyed perceive numerous obstacles in the food environment that discourage healthy eating for their children. Furthermore, they broadly support public policies that would help them raise healthy children, including greater restrictions on unhealthy food marketing. These findings suggest numerous opportunities for policy makers, the public health community, and food and media companies to take actions to help parents raise healthy children.

The research

The Rudd Center surveyed 3,608 parents with children ages 2 to 17 from 2012 to 2015. The survey assessed parents' attitudes about food marketing to children and food industry self-regulation, and their support for policies to help encourage healthy eating for their children. Researchers used a cross-sectional sample of parents, including black, Hispanic, and low-income parents, and assessed changes from 2012 to 2015. This report updates findings from a 2012 Rudd Center report. The study sample was designed to assess differences between parents by socio-demographic characteristics and is not representative of the entire U.S. population.

Key findings

Parents perceive many obstacles to encouraging their children to eat healthy.



From 2012 to 2015, parents' perceptions that too much junk food, easy access to fast food, and unhealthy food marketing were obstacles to their children's healthy eating increased.

- Parents' agreement that nearly all types of food marketing – including licensed characters on product packages, sponsorships in schools, and internet, mobile, and social media marketing – negatively impact their children's eating habits increased.

Parents believe food marketing to children is improving, but want companies to do more.

- The majority of parents agreed that food companies have improved the nutrition of products marketed to children and have made positive changes to reduce childhood obesity (69% and 67%, respectively, 2012-2015).
- But 85% of parents surveyed agreed that food companies should reduce unhealthy food marketing to children; and 71% agreed that food companies do not act responsibly when they advertise to children and that they make it difficult for parents to raise healthy children.

Some companies have pledged to advertise only healthier choices to children up to 11 years old, but 67% of parents surveyed agreed that food company voluntary pledges should apply to children up to at least 14 years old.

Most parents support public policies that would promote healthy eating habits for their children in the media, schools and communities.

On average, in 2015:

- 74% of parents in the survey supported policies for healthier kids' meals at restaurants;
- 73% supported policies to restrict advertising to children and teens on TV;
- 66% supported policies to limit food marketing in schools; 63% supported limiting food marketing around schools; and
- 64% supported policies to address sugary drinks, including warning labels and taxes.

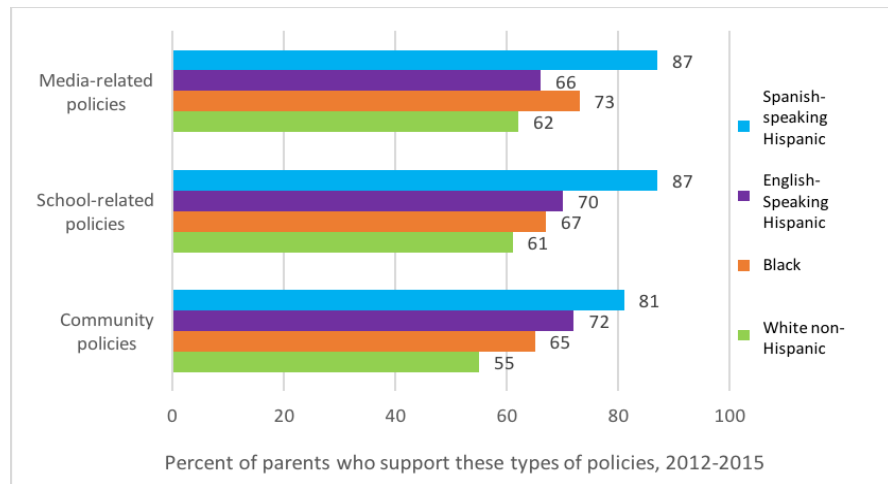
Parents are willing to take action to reduce unhealthy food marketing to children.

- Of parents who agreed that companies should reduce unhealthy food marketing to children in 2015, 80% or more would: stop purchasing products advertised to children; talk with other parents about food marketing to kids; sign an online petition to reduce unhealthy food marketing to children; and/or serve on a school committee.

Black and Hispanic parents perceive greater impact from unhealthy food marketing on their children.

- Compared with white non-Hispanic parents, black and Hispanic parents perceived that their children saw or heard more ads daily for most unhealthy food categories; and
- They were more likely to rate unhealthy food advertising, easy access to fast food, and unhealthy food in schools as obstacles to ensuring healthy eating habits for their children.

Black and Hispanic parents were significantly more likely to support the majority of potential policies to promote healthy eating habits for their children. Spanish-speaking Hispanic parents expressed highest support for such policies.



Recommendations

- Policy makers should recognize parents' concerns about raising healthy children and their broad support for policies to address unhealthy food environments in the media, schools, and local communities.
- Advocates should create opportunities for parents to voice their concerns, and encourage parents to join their school district's local wellness committee.
- Food and media companies should take stronger actions to improve food marketing to children and teens to help support parents' efforts to raise healthy children.

The Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at the University of Connecticut is a multi-disciplinary research center dedicated to promoting solutions to childhood obesity, poor diet, and weight bias through research and policy. For more information, visit www.UConnRuddCenter.org/parentattitudes.

This research was funded by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.