FACTSHEET

THE MEDIA AND CHILDREN’S FOOD CHOICES

ADVERTISING OF FOOD TO CHILDREN

Food advertising has been suggested to play a role in childhood overweight and obesity. Recent laboratory-based research suggests that, in the short-term, advertising can encourage children to choose and overconsume foods high in fat, salt and sugars, though whether these effects occur in the ‘real-world’ and over the longer-term remains to be empirically tested. Because of concerns about the role of foods high in fat, salt and sugar in childhood obesity, it was decided that there should be restrictions in television advertising aimed at children of these types of food and drinks (identified using a nutrient profiling model developed by the Food Standards Agency). On 1st January 2009, all advertising of foods high in fat, salt and sugars was banned from children’s channels. It is not yet known what impact this has had on children’s consumption of these foods.

BODY IMAGE

Societal influences, including popular media, can influence young people’s body image, potentially placing pressure on young people to obtain an ‘ideal’ body shape. This may lead adolescents, particularly girls, to adopt unhealthy practices such as diet pill use; skipping meals, especially breakfast; and avoiding certain foods because they are perceived to be ‘fattening’. Girls tend to be more dissatisfied with their appearance than boys; however, dieting is prevalent in both genders, with recent data showing that 15% of boys and 26% of girls aged 13 to 14 years report food restriction in the last 3 months. Research in the US has suggested that some adolescents, more usually girls, are resorting to extreme dieting methods such as fasting and the use of diet pills. Bodyweight and shape concerns have the potential to develop into serious long-term psychological problems, such as anorexia nervosa (see factsheet on mental health). It is vital that those involved in children’s development and upbringing try to emphasise the importance of developing healthy diet and exercise habits, in the hope that this will track through into the adult years.