

Kids are more responsive to junk food when watching cartoons



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Public Domain MaxPixel -- A boy watches TV

Study finds that unhealthy foods hold children's attention for longer than healthy foods do.

Cartoons entertain and amuse children, but there is some concern that they may also shape children's dietary preferences. Researchers from the University of Vienna wanted to find out if there was a difference in the way children respond to junk food in cartoons, compared to healthy food, so they designed a study involving 56 boys and girls between the ages of six and 12.

The study (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0195666317317543?via%3Dihub>) featured two traveling panda bear brothers, Peppino and Rondo, who were seen in half of the images eating healthy foods like apple slices and bananas, and eating unhealthy foods like ice cream and pizza in the other half. The foods were similar in size, complexity, and color. The researchers used eye-tracking devices to record how much attention children gave to food they encountered throughout the cartoon.

They discovered -- not surprisingly -- that food does evoke a physiological and psychological response in children, and that kids' initial visual interest was the same, regardless of how healthy or junky the food was. But when longer-term attention was assessed, the junk food won out, capturing the children's attention for longer. The different types of food had no impact on kids' levels of hunger.

The way in which cartoon characters interacted with food (i.e. looking, touching, consuming) had an effect, too: "An increase in the level of food integration led to an increase in visual attention."

Food Navigator reports (<https://www.foodnavigator.com/Article/2018/02/21/A-treat-for-the-eyes-Children-are-more-responsive-to-unhealthy-food-cues#.Wo64wSimx3Q.twitter>):

"[The study authors] suggest this may be because foods with more hedonic components, such as chocolate's tastiness, are more likely to capture individuals' long-term visual attention compared to food stimuli that are high on the cognitive dimension, such as a salad's healthfulness."

We know from previous studies (<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/nov/28/children-seeing-up-to-12-adverts-for-junk-food-an-hour-on-tv-study-finds>) that children are susceptible to food advertising, and this is a matter of great concern for the many people fighting to improve children's health and lower the rate of child obesity. When children see junk food portrayed in ads and cartoons, it leaves an impression on them that is difficult to undo. It increases familiarity with brands, which leads to recognition in stores, and it triggers cravings (<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/jul/05/junk-food-ads-children-cancer-research-obesity-advertising>) that would not be there otherwise.

One of the study's co-authors, Brigitte Naderer, told Food Navigator (<https://www.foodnavigator.com/Article/2018/02/21/A-treat-for-the-eyes-Children-are-more-responsive-to-unhealthy-food-cues#.Wo64wSimx3Q.twitter>):

"Our key message to the food industry and especially to food marketers is to cut back the marketing of unhealthy food to children by increasing the marketing of healthy food. The food industry should take responsibility for children's well-being. We firmly believe that the extent of unhealthy food advertising targeting children should be limited."

I like that Naderer calls for an increase in healthy food advertising as a way of overpowering the junk-food advertising. I do not think that the vilification of certain foods is necessarily a constructive approach, since 'treat' foods can be enjoyed in moderation. (For example, comparing ice cream cones to cigarettes (<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/jul/05/junk-food-ads-children-cancer-research-obesity-advertising>) makes me uncomfortable because they're not at all the same thing.) We do need to teach kids to love vegetables, and if cartoon characters can help to normalize this behaviour, all the better for everyone, most of all the kids, to whom we adults owe the best possible start in life.