

Food Advertising, Education, and the Erosion of Autonomy

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ABSTRACT: To augment the consumption of the ever growing production of processed foods, food companies are specifically targeting children with their advertisements. Advertising has even infiltrated the educational system in the form of corporate sponsored “educational materials.” This paper discusses the effects such aggressive forms of advertising have on the development of personal autonomy, or self-governance. I argue that the bad reasoning skills such advertisements promote undermine the development of the very abilities children need to become adults capable of making rational choices. A detailed look at several types of food advertisements aimed at children supports this claim.

I. INTRODUCTION

To augment the consumption of the ever growing over-production of processed foods, food companies are specifically targeting children with their advertisements. In recent years, advertising has even infiltrated the educational system, for instance in the form of corporate sponsored “educational” materials distributed in schools.

While the detrimental effects such aggressive advertising has on children’s health is often discussed, there are also other, less obvious but equally damaging consequences. In particular, the “arguments” these food advertisements present to children undermine the development of one of the necessary conditions for autonomy, or self-governance: the capacity to make well-considered, *rational* choices. This is because of the poor reasoning that such advertisements (some of which pretend to be *educational*) contain, reasoning which adversely affects the development of critical thinking skills that children need in order to become fully autonomous adults. Not only that, but since these advertisements are intended to promote the sale of (largely) unhealthy foods, it would not be an overstatement to say that the poor choices these advertisements have as a consequence, can threaten children’s lives.

This paper examines several food advertisements and the poor quality of reasoning they promote. We will take an especially careful look at the forms of advertising that corporate sponsors deem “educational.” If autonomy is indeed a fundamental value, then a change in current policies regarding advertising to children is desperately needed.

II. THE PROBLEM: FARMING, THE FOOD INDUSTRY, AND ADVERTISING TO CHILDREN

In an eye-opening ABC news special called “How to Get Fat without Really Trying,” Peter Jennings took public some facts about food and the food industry not widely known by consumers. American farmers produce about twice as much food as we actually need. If we were to live *healthily*, however, they would have to produce twice as many fruits and vegetables than they currently grow. This is because most government subsidies go towards meat and corn, and almost none of them support the foods we should be eating more of. And as most farmers cannot survive without subsidies, there’s little to no incentive to produce these foods.

Take corn, for instance. So much corn is produced that it is now found in many, if not most, food products: pick up any packaged food and check the label. There, you’ll find ingredients like corn starch, corn oil, and high fructose corn syrup, the sweetener of “choice”¹ for most of the cookies and candy bars America consumes, as well as most soft-drinks. Corn is also used to feed cattle, although is not part of their natural diet. Most of us have probably forgotten—but not too long ago, cows ate *grass*.²

The observations about corn make it clear: all this food has to go somewhere. And so it does, in the form of 40,000–50,000 different food items that a typical large supermarket contains. Most of these foods are processed, and the majority of them are what we call “junk foods.” They are made from sugars (e.g., high fructose corn syrup), water, flour, starch, fat, food colorings, and a bunch of chemicals the names of which the lay person cannot recognize, let alone pronounce. For instance, Ocean Spray Cranberry juice has cranberry juice listed as only the fourth ingredient. The first three are water, high fructose corn syrup, and sucrose. Also, again, most sodas contain the equivalent of about ten teaspoons of sugar, mostly in the form of high fructose corn syrup.

To entice consumers to buy all these foods, the advertising industry spends billions of dollars each year on all kinds of ads geared towards any potential or actual market, including ads for *children*. Children are an ideal target because they still have decades of purchasing power ahead of them,³ because they are very impressionable, and lastly, because of what the advertising industry calls the “nag factor”—children’s ability to nag parents to buy certain products (something all parents are familiar with). In fact, ads to children have been so lucrative for advertisers that over the last ten years, the advertising industry has doubled its investments on ads for children.

Because of insufficient funding, some school districts now make deals with major food companies like Coca Cola. As a result, one can also find advertisements in schools in the form of vending machines, food ads on school buses, hallways,

even in classrooms. Moreover, some companies distribute “educational” materials to students, many of which, according to Eric Schlosser (2001), are “biased, providing students with incomplete or slanted information that favored the sponsor’s products and views.”⁴ According to School Nutrition Association’s *2003 School Food Service and Nutrition Operations Survey*, “64.2 percent of districts surveyed currently serve some type of branded food item in their district, with the majority being fast food name brands and soft drinks.”⁵ Some of my undergraduates have reported that their high-school cafeterias resemble the food courts in malls. Their “school lunches” were provided by McDonald’s, Pizza Hut, and KFC, among others.

Advertisers indeed know that students are an excellent source of revenue. For instance, Video Placement Worldwide, a company that distributes “educational” materials to schools, has this to say to its potential sponsors:

Consider that students . . .

- are the workers, employees, consumers, parents and voters of tomorrow;
- spend over \$150 billion a year on everything from toys and games, to household items, food and clothing;
- influence billions more in their families’ spending choices;
- are building brand loyalty and learning to be savvy consumers;
- need guidance in understanding the world around them.⁶

It is interesting to note that the last of these lines, which I quoted for the sake of completeness and accuracy, is indeed last, and not first.

III. THE OBVIOUS EFFECTS: CHILDHOOD OBESITY

None of this is good. Some reasons for this are obvious, others less so. A brief mention of the obvious underscores the need to change the less noticeable effects that I will address shortly: recent studies (as well as a good look at America’s children) show that over the last twenty-five years, childhood obesity has risen dramatically: it has increased over two-fold in 12-19 year olds and over three-fold in 6-11 year olds. In minority groups, childhood obesity has risen twice as fast as in non-minority groups.⁷ Childhood obesity can cause Type 2 Diabetes, which, in turn, can cause heart disease, stroke, and limb amputation. It also increases the risk of asthma, sleep apnea, kidney disease, and has numerous psychological effects on children. Worst of all, it is only expected to increase in the future.⁸

Where do these trends in childhood obesity come from? Nowadays, about 10 percent of the calories kids consume are from soft drinks.⁹ This represents a three-fold increase over soft drink consumption since the mid-1960s. Furthermore, the higher consumption of refined carbohydrates (such as the sugar in soft drinks, bread products, pasta, as well as potato chips), and especially the consumption of carbohydrates with a high glycemic index, increases appetite.¹⁰ Lastly, “fast food consumption has increased five fold” since the mid-1960s.¹¹

Unfortunately, it only takes an increase of 120 calories a day over a period of ten years to produce a weight gain of over 100 pounds (one can of Coke has 140 calories).¹² What does it take to get rid of those 120 calories? A 1.5 mile run. But suppose one eats a large fast food meal: a double cheeseburger, French fries, soda,

and dessert. That's approximately 2200 calories, and one would have to run an entire marathon to work it off.¹³

But most of this is well known and well-documented. Not everyone may be clear on just how bad the situation is, or how unhealthy some of the foods that we consume really are, but most *are* aware that eating a typical McDonald's meal (burger, fries, soft-drink) is not as healthy as a salad. After all, the fries are, well, *fried*. And soft-drinks contain sugar.

IV. THE NOT-SO-OBVIOUS EFFECTS: THE EROSION OF AUTONOMY

The less obvious problem with advertising to children is how it affects the development of personal autonomy, or self-governance. This concern is aggravated by the fact that we are not just talking about any old advertisements, but advertisements for *foods*.

In the United States, advertising to children is largely not government regulated. There are only limited restrictions with regard to what kinds of ads, or how many ads, children can see.¹⁴ Why is advertising to children not banned in the US? One possible argument against such regulation is this: the food industry claims that what foods we eat, as well as how much we eat, are a matter of *choice*. Americans are *choosing* to buy foods that make them fat and they simply don't exercise enough to work them off. In other words, according to the food industry, we act *autonomously* with regard to food choices.

Before continuing, let us examine the concept of autonomy more closely. There are actually several conceptions of autonomy in the philosophical literature. But for the purposes at hand, we can define autonomy fairly simply. First, to be autonomous means to be governed by our own desires—by desires that conform to, or represent, our true needs and wants. Second, to be autonomous means to be in a position to act freely and without the undue influence of any external or internal pressures. In other words, autonomous actions must be free from outside coercion (e.g., someone holding a gun to one's head), and they cannot be driven by internal compulsions (e.g., addictions). Third, to be autonomous, one must be in a position to make *rational* choices. One must fully understand what these choices involve, and be able to critically evaluate them. This rationality also entails that these choices are made with a sufficient understanding of their *consequences*.¹⁵

In short, to be fully autonomous, the following three conditions must be met:

1. Authenticity: a person's choices must correspond to his or her own desires.
2. Independence: a person's choices must be free from coercion.
3. Competence: a person must be able to evaluate his or her choices rationally.

Famously, Kenneth Galbraith (1976) argues that many of our wants are actually created by advertisers.¹⁶ He thus worries that advertisements have a negative effect on the condition of authenticity. It is also often mentioned that due to the

nature and prevalence of many ads, our choices to buy certain products are not always independent.¹⁷

What I want to focus on, however, is the third of these conditions: competency. It is certainly hard to imagine that *children* are capable of acting autonomously in the sense of being able to evaluate their choices rationally. After all, that's what education is for—education is supposed to *develop* in them the ability to distinguish between good and bad reasoning, with the ultimate goal of teaching them how to make rational choices. Our educational system thus shows that autonomy is regarded as a *fundamental moral value*, a value that ought to be both developed and preserved.

That children do not yet (fully) meet the competence condition is supported by the first principle of CARU, the Children's Advertising Review Unit, which offers a total of seven principles for advertisers to follow as a means of self-regulation:¹⁸

Advertisers should always take into account the level of knowledge, sophistication and maturity of the audience to which their message is primarily directed. Younger children have a limited capacity for evaluating the credibility of information they receive. They also may lack the ability to understand the nature of the personal information they disclose on the Internet. Advertisers, therefore, have a special responsibility to protect children from their own susceptibilities.¹⁹

But nobody (not even adults) can make rational choices, if the information contained in the advertisements is not truthful, and the facts are not easily accessible elsewhere. For children, the situation is even worse. They may not have any access to the facts at all. This is recognized by CARU as well, in principle four:

Recognizing that advertising may play an important part in educating the child, advertisers should communicate information in a truthful and accurate manner and in language understandable to young children with full recognition that the child may learn practices from advertising which can affect his or her health and well-being.²⁰

Principle four also contains another crucial claim, which connects to the concern about truth: "*advertising may play an important part in educating the child.*" For, one objective of education is the presentation of facts. The other objective of education—mentioned above—is to provide children with the tools they need to *evaluate* those facts, so that they may become adults fully capable of autonomy.

Why might CARU make the assumption that ads play a role in a child's education? The answer to this question has already been partially provided. Companies advertise in schools, and they distribute "educational" materials that create brand awareness. Second, virtually all children's shows contain ads, even educational ones like *Sesame Street*. Last, outside of the educational environment, ads are simply everywhere. Of course they influence what children come to believe.

Unfortunately, children also tend to be very literal minded: they don't *interpret* what they see but take it as literal truth. Younger children may not even draw the distinction between the educational show they see on TV and the ads that are placed in between. It is all the more worrisome, then, that, in the words of Richard Lippke (1989), advertisements tend to

subtly encourage the propensity to accept emotional appeals, oversimplification, superficiality, and shoddy standards of proof for claims. Evidence and arguments of the most ridiculous sorts are offered in support of advertising claims. Information about products is presented selectively, the virtues of products are exaggerated, and deception and misinformation are commonplace.²¹

So this is the type of *education* advertisements provide to America's children.

It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that the constant exposure to advertisements seriously undermines the development of the *very skills* children need in order to meet the competency condition. As adults, their ability to think critically about the pros and cons of a particular choice, or whether or not to make a certain choice, will be severely impoverished or, in the extreme case (dare I say it) absent. Jules Henry (1965) aptly calls this lack of critical thinking skills "wooly mindedness."²² In my own experience, many undergraduates have trouble distinguishing between good and bad arguments, and some of them report that they are overwhelmed by the task of sorting through the various pieces of evidence they need to make decisions about, say, buying a product, but also about the more fundamental and important decisions they might be faced with.

Lippke summarizes the dilemma in this way: advertisements demonstrate to children that "anything (or nothing!) can be proved, that evidence contrary to one's claims may be ignored, and that words can mean whatever anyone wants them to mean."²³ That, perhaps, is an overstatement, but this much seems to be right: to the advertising industry, *how* someone is persuaded of a claim does not matter. And bad enough as this is for adults, for children the effects can be devastating.

V. CASE IN POINT

Let us now look how at some examples that illustrate how advertisements undermine the development of competent decision making.

1. McDonald's Ploy: The Advertoy.

Ever had a McDonald's Happy Meal? A Happy Meal, as is well known, consists of a hamburger (or cheeseburger), small fries and small soda. I "bagged" one at McDonalds.com to check the nutritional information (on the McDonald's website, you can put the items you want to eat into a virtual "bag" and select "get the nutrition facts"). The caloric damage was 600 calories, including 30 mg of cholesterol in the hamburger, 2.5 g of trans-fats in the fries, and a whopping 93 g of carbs in the soda.

What makes the Happy Meal especially enticing to kids is the toy that's included with the meal. McDonald's, until recently, had a contract with Disney to market Happy Meal toys and figures related to the Disney movies that were released in films or on video. Presumably, Disney hoped to "persuade" children to see its films over and over, as many of them do.

The name, "Happy Meal," of course suggests to children that the meal will make them happy. And who doesn't want to be happy? The name therefore plays a crucial role in connecting the meal and its toy to the fundamental human desire for happiness. For children, this happiness is achieved when they are rewarded

with the coveted object: the advertoy (which can only be purchased together with the meal).²⁴

The appeal to the child's emotions is as blatant as it is powerful: don't *think* about whether or not you want the food, just think about whether or not you want the toy. And of course the child wants the toy; which child wouldn't? The underlying message is also straight forward: to guide your actions, use your emotions, not your mind. This lays a nice foundation for many other advertisements of similar sorts the child will be confronted with at a later point in life.²⁵ For instance, there is an entire category of ads called "lifestyle ads" which associate products with the kind of lifestyle that people desire. Alcohol and cigarette advertisements are among those that invoke this technique most strongly.

2. Tony the Tiger and the Confusion between Correlation and Causation

Remember Tony the Tiger? That's the athletic looking cartoon character who is telling you that Kellogg's Frosted Flakes are great. Sugar Frosted Flakes, that is. For, they were originally called "Kellogg's Sugar Frosted Flakes of Corn." But now that sugar has come into disrepute, that name doesn't sound so good any more.

Surely, Tony the Tiger helps Kellogg's sell a lot of boxes of cereal. Unfortunately, having a cartoon character represent a certain food also exploits our natural—and necessary—propensity to learn by association. In this case, the association that is formed is between eating-sugar coated corn flakes and—presumably—the strength of a tiger. Perhaps the image is supposed to suggest energy, in particular, the energy that is provided by eating the cereal. But as we now know, the energy that sugar provides is not long lasting (though the negative effects of consuming too much of it certainly are). So what we have here, really, is a mere correlation between two rather unrelated things: the energy of a tiger and a cereal. But, as the advertisers well know, constantly seeing two things together will easily lead to the false impression that what is mere correlation is actually a *causal* connection.

(Of course, there is a causal connection, but it isn't between the cereal and the energy of a tiger, but between the cereal and early onset diabetes: 100g of Frosted Flakes contains 90.3g of refined carbohydrates, of which 38g are sugar, and only 3.2g are fiber. This connection, however, is not so obvious.)

Another point should be emphasized here—one that actually relates to the independence condition for autonomy rather than the competence condition. The food choices of many adults appear to be quite automatic and unreflective. Quite possibly, this is because of the ads, and consequently the foods, they were exposed to as children. These adults may have become *addicted* to foods that are high in sugar and refined carbohydrates, as well as fats. But if autonomy requires freedom from internal compulsions, are those choices really autonomous? Perhaps not, for it may be the case that the choices these adults make are in fact driven by the subconscious desire to eat certain things. Healthy foods may no longer even taste good. The analogy to the cigarette addict is not far fetched. Many addicts say that cigarettes taste good to them. Some even maintain that they are choosing to smoke.

In my experience of working with students, most of them are convinced that their food choices *are* autonomous. In fact, whenever I put the issue to a vote, even after having explained at length what an autonomous decision involves, many students maintain this position. The majority opinion is also that most adults are fully responsible for their health and their weight. Yet, it is also well known that many, if not most people (in America, at least), are not happy with their weight. So then why don't people simply choose to eat different foods? Wouldn't that be the rational thing to do? (I take "rational" here to mean something very simple: making choices that lead to the desired goal.)

If the food choices of most adults really are automatic and unreflective, perhaps because of behavioral patterns established early in childhood, then their perception that they are acting autonomously could be mistaken. This is because they are not evaluating their choices rationally—they do not meet the competence condition.

If, on the other hand, adults do think about their choices and decide to eat healthy but are unable to act accordingly, this might point, at least partially, to an internal compulsion. As we all know, shifting one's eating habits, even when we recognize the necessity of doing so, is extremely difficult.²⁶

3. Counting with M&M's

Some companies have thought of another way to teach their little consumers. Through children's book companies, such as Cartwheel Books, a division of Scholastic (note the name), they sell corporate sponsored books to parents and children. The official claim is that these books are educational. That may be true, but the un-official aim is quite another. Take, for example, the *M&M's Brand Counting Book*,²⁷ or *Reese's Pieces Count By Five*.²⁸ These books show kids how to count by play, and they involve pictures of M&M's, or Reese's Pieces, respectively.

Now, the easiest way for kids to learn simple counting is by one-to-one mapping: putting an object, or a set of objects, and a number into one-to-one correspondence. One-to-one mapping is a particular instance of learning by association. Each number is associated with a certain set of items, M&M's, say. By imitating the mapping in play sessions, the memory of numbers is cemented in.

Fortunately for advertisers, number and simple counting memory are formed very early in life. Some say that number memories are actually "hardwired" into the brain, that is, certain synapses are formed that "represent" these numbers. (As most bi-lingual readers know, it is very difficult, when counting or doing basic adding, not to revert to one's first language.) We must therefore ask ourselves what happens when these early associations are formed with the help of M&M's. If numbers become hardwired, what happens to the M&M's?

It is clear that here, too, the propensity to learn by association is exploited. Only in this case, matters are particularly worrisome because of the ubiquitous and irreplaceable role numbers play in our daily lives.

4. Educational Materials

"Educational" materials that companies provide to schools or on their websites present a special problem, and I'll focus the rest of my discussion just on these.

Sponsors provide such materials free of charge. Again, such materials are just thinly disguised efforts at marketing the sponsor's product. And they do a lot of damage to the development of reasoning competencies.

Let me provide a few examples of such materials. At dole5aday.com, Dole offers a few "educational" games to play for kids. I tried "Vending Machine Mania." This game allows you to catch various food stuffs that come flying out of a vending machine. One is supposed to catch them with a net, put the "bad" stuff into the garbage and the give the "good" stuff to a friend. The "bad" stuff consists of soda cans and chips bags. These do not have brand labels on them (they just say "soda" and "chips"). The "good" stuff is labeled "Dole" and consists of boxed raisins, canned fruits, and the like.

The message: if Dole tells you that raisins and canned fruits are good to eat, then they are. And how does Dole tell you this? Simple: if you continue to give the chips and the soda to your friend, you lose the game. So, the child is flatly conditioned to prefer canned fruits and vegetables over chips and soda. The "ordinary" method of deciding what's good for us—studying the nutritional facts of foods—is ignored. Nor does the game give you much time to think about what is good for you: if you don't act fast enough to catch what comes out of the vending machine, you again lose the game.

For Dole, this method is the only one that makes sense: many, if not most canned fruits, are higher in sugar than their fresh counterparts (mostly because they are packaged in light syrup or a sugary gel). Raisins, while admittedly healthier than chips, still contain a lot of sugar. Dole's 5-A-Day campaign, if taken seriously, should perhaps not include any Dole products at all. So why should Dole want us to make the decision what to eat based on nutrition facts? (Why would Dole want us to think about such a decision at all?)

At Sunkist.com, kids can perform various experiments at home. One of these experiments asks the kids to test the hypothesis that different parts of the same fruit have different flavors. What's required for this experiment is a Sunkist orange. Not just any orange, but a *Sunkist* orange. And the experiment about how to get the most juice out of squeezing a lemon requires a Sunkist lemon. Why does one need a Sunkist product for these experiments? At best, the child will simply think that Sunkist fruit are better than other fruit, and that's what Sunkist hopes for, of course. At worst, however, the child will falsely assume that the fact that the fruit is a Sunkist fruit has something to do with how the experiment turns out.

The Campbell Soup Company also offers some "science" experiments for kids. According to the Consumers Union, it provides a kit called "Prego Thickness Experiment" to schools.²⁹ I could not find this kit on the internet—perhaps this means that it has since disappeared.³⁰ So I will limit my remarks about this experiment. As the Consumers Union describes it, the experiment is supposed to "help . . . students become aware of the many situations in which scientific thinking plays a part."³¹ With the help of the kit, children then prove that Prego is thicker than Ragu. The Consumers Union points out that neither variables nor blind testing are discussed in this experiment. Also, the non-sequitur is obvious: why is a thicker spaghetti sauce a better one? Does a thicker sauce taste better? Does it contain more spices? This, if anything, is a lesson in equivocation.

My last example is of sufficient interest to be evaluated in a bit more detail: the American Egg Board distributes a teaching unit to 4-6th graders called "The Incredible Journey from Hen to Home." The entire unit can be printed out or downloaded from the website of the American Egg Board.³² According to the American Egg Board, with this unit "your students will be learning how to learn by comparing, contrasting, analyzing and evaluating."³³ The lessons include activity sheets which consist of puzzles, "fill in the blanks," cartoons, and posters, among other things.

Overall, the unit provides a lot of nutritional and other useful information, including a description of the food pyramid, safe-handling tips, and even a simple recipe. But note the following subtleties. Lesson one goes over the nutritional information for eggs. There, it is (correctly) claimed that "[e]ggs contain neither carbohydrates nor fiber." But then the sentence goes on to say that this is "a fact easily remedied by eating them with plenty of grain foods, vegetables and fruits." One is left to wonder: if one wants to increase the fiber in one's diet, why eat the egg at all? A child could easily infer that the egg plays some sort of role here, which it clearly doesn't.

Next, the lesson explains that "[e]gg yolks provide about 22 percent less cholesterol than previously thought (213 mg per Large egg yolk)." Again, this may well be correct but it is nevertheless misleading. 213 mg is a fairly large dose of cholesterol, considering that one should not eat more than 300 mg a day. And even though lesson three includes a fairly detailed discussion of a person's nutritional needs, this limit is never brought up. If anything, it is downplayed by the following claim: "For heart health, a small percentage of people need to pay close attention to the cholesterol they consume. For most pre-teens, though, it's more important to reduce total fat in the diet, especially saturated fat, than to worry about cholesterol consumption." Given the present obesity crisis, this claim could be read as a license to eat more cholesterol than even a child should be having.

It may also be correct that "health professionals point to the far greater importance of limiting dietary fat, especially saturated fat, rather than dietary cholesterol, to control high blood-cholesterol levels." But this does not mean that they *don't* pay attention to it. Not to mention the fact that a few lines up, it is pointed out that an egg yolk does contain fat (5g).

The objective of lesson five is to "compare eggs to other foods as a cost-effective protein source." This just strikes me as blunt advertising. What does the price of eggs have to do with education about the egg? This is only a relevant fact if the Egg Board hopes that kids will nag their parents to buy more eggs.

Lastly, lesson seven discusses the production process "from hen to home" — as the title says. There, absolutely nothing is said about the difference between free range eggs and factory eggs. No mention is made of the antibiotics chickens are usually fed — as most educated consumers know, these are needed because the chickens house so closely together that disease easily spreads. The harmful effects of these antibiotics is omitted, and consequently, there's no discussion of the option of letting chickens roam freely on a farm to prevent the spread of (or even contraction of) disease. There's only one red flag, which may have been raised inadvertently: "At a modern egg farm, the egg is dropped automatically

from the hen's cage to a conveyor belt below or is mechanically collected from a special nest." That poor hen.

VI. LESSONS

It appears, then, that the advertisers claim that people choose foods that make them fat is simply not true. On the part of children, advertisers *presume* that there is no autonomy. Advertisers seem to be interested in settling the question of *when* children become capable of making well-reasoned choices.³⁴ The message they want us to get from this is that they are concerned not to exploit them. I think that their reasons are precisely the opposite. If you know when children cannot make well-reasoned choices, you know when you can manipulate them most easily. I think advertisers are well aware of what children are and are not capable of, as well as when their capabilities begin to change. They know at what age children are most gullible. In fact, they *rely* on it, and that's why their advertisements are constructed the ways they are.

Moreover, what these types of ads ensure is that autonomy, in the full sense described here, doesn't even develop. Given the types of "reasoning" employed by the food advertisements we examined here, it is difficult to build adequate reasoning competencies. For the advertiser, this method makes sense. The critical and well educated consumer who knows how to make a good choice for him or herself might choose few to none of the products that are discussed here. This would obviously not be in the best interest of the companies seeking to promote them.

The lesson, for us, hardly needs stating. If autonomy is indeed a fundamental moral value, a drastic change is needed. If the advertising industry cannot be counted on to self-regulate—and I don't think it can—then making the change falls upon us. Schools must be encouraged to find alternative methods of generating funds. Teachers and parents have to do whatever possible to help remedy the damage such advertisements cause: children need to be educated on what the right foods are to eat; and the reasoning flaws in these advertisements should be clearly exposed. Access to corporate sponsored "educational" websites must be limited, and corporate sponsored "educational" books ought not to be purchased. Finally, there has to be pressure on government to follow the examples of other countries and begin to regulate such advertisements more strongly—perhaps even prohibit food advertisements to children altogether.

Endnotes

1. We're not talking about the consumer's choice, here, but that of the manufacturer. High fructose corn syrup is cheaper.
2. Some are starting to remember, however, as is evidenced by the recent trend towards grass-fed meats.
3. Schlosser, 2001, 54.
4. Schlosser, 2001, 55–56.
5. <http://www.asfsa.org/newsroom/sfsnews/aphaadvres.asp>
6. <http://vpw.com/opportunities/benefits.asp>

7. Ebbeling, et al, 2002.

8. One of the main, and rarely discussed, reasons for this is that there is “a direct relation between maternal obesity, birth weight, and obesity later in life.” Children of obese mothers are at higher risk for obesity, not only because there might be underlying genetic factors, or poor diet habits that are established early in life, but because of prenatal over-nutrition. (See Ebbeling, et al., 2002)

9. Schlosser, 2001.

10. Ebbeling, et al., 2002.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. By contrast, Italy prohibits all ads on cartoon shows, Australia does not allow ads on shows for pre-schoolers, and Sweden does not permit any advertising to children under the age of twelve.

15. My thanks to Richard Burnor for helpful discussion on autonomy.

16. Galbraith, 1976.

17. See, for example, Beauchamp, 1999, who discusses some of the psychological pressures that advertisers put upon us. (Beauchamp’s main focus is manipulative advertising, which I would categorize as involving both the dependence and the competence conditions.)

18. An exercise for the reader: given the current ads for children, does this kind of self-regulation work?

19. <http://www.caru.org/guidelines/index.asp#principle>.

20. <http://www.caru.org/guidelines/index.asp#principle>. Note that health is cited as a factor. This suggests that food advertisers, especially, have the moral obligation to follow these regulations.

21. Richard Lippke, 1989, 539 (in Shaw and Barry).

22. Jules Henry, 1965, 49.

23. Richard Lippke, 1989, 539 (in Shaw and Barry).

24. And this is not just so with the Happy Meal. Many high-sugar cereals also come with toys, and again, the path to obtaining that toy is via the purchase of food.

25. These types of ads also show how foods become associated with the instant gratification of cravings: the craving for a particular toy, but also, those cravings created by eating too many refined carbohydrates. What is subtly – or not so subtly – communicated is that instant gratification of cravings must be good. The child does not learn that cravings, in particular, food cravings that can be detrimental to the child’s health, might need to be curbed, or at least, redirected towards other foods. Self-control, or the ability to postpone the gratification of desire, is not acquired. Kids, perhaps, should not always be required to exercise such self-control, but there’s something very infantile (and distasteful) about the adult who doesn’t.

26. One ought also not disregard that certain external constraints prevent the exercise of autonomy: one is extremely hungry, driving along on a long stretch of highway with nothing but cheap and unhealthy fast food restaurants. This is not exactly uncommon.

27. Barbara Barbieri McGrath, 1994.

28. Jerry Pallotta, 2000. I’m afraid there are many others. Cheerios, Hershey’s, and Skittles, to name just a few, sell similar books.

29. http://www.consumersunion.org/other/captivekids/SEMs_food.htm

30. I did, however, find several articles that expressed great concern over it.

31. http://www.consumersunion.org/other/captivekids/SEMs_food.htm. This is a quote provided from the kit.
32. <http://aeb.org/teacher/hentohome/index.htm>
33. <http://aeb.org/teacher/hentohome/index.htm>. Introduction.
34. "How to Get Fat Without Even Trying."

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