Exploring parents’ perceptions of television food advertising directed at children: A South Australian study

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Abstract

Objective: To increase our understanding of parents’ perceptions of the influence of television food advertising on children's food choices.

Design: Five focus group discussions.

Subjects: Thirty-two parents (24 women and eight men) of children attending primary school.

Setting: Adelaide, South Australia.

Data analyses: The focus group discussions were taped and transcribed and coded as themes. Transcripts were verified and coding was audited. All researchers met regularly to analyse data and reach consensus on emergent themes (researcher triangulation).

Results: Parents who participated in the study indicated that television is a powerful source of information for children's food choices. Parents expressed concern about the negative influence of television food advertising on children's food preferences. They suggested that the current regulations governing television food advertising were not adequately enforced. Parents wanted to see an overall reduction in the volume of food advertisements directed at children, and an increase in advertisements promoting healthy foods. Parents expressed mixed views about banning food advertisements directed at children.

Conclusion: In order for television food advertising to be health-enhancing for children, parents in the study suggested the need for restrictions on advertising practices, tighter enforcement of existing regulations and an increase in healthy food advertisements. The present research shows that parents want to see changes in the current arrangements governing television food advertising to children.

Key words: advertising, children, focus group, food, parent, television.

INTRODUCTION

Childhood obesity is a growing public health concern. Magarey et al. showed that between 1985 and 1995 the prevalence of overweight and obesity among children in Australia increased from 10% to 20%. Television viewing has been suggested as a contributing factor to obesity in children through associations with reduced participation in physical activity and decreased active involvement in sports. It is also associated with increased snack food consumption. Furthermore, television food advertising may influence children’s food preferences. For example, children exposed to television food advertisements are more likely to choose advertised items, or make more requests for advertised items. The number of food advertisements remembered by children has been correlated with snack foods consumed. The World Health Organization regards heavy marketing of fast foods to children as one of the probable aetiological factors contributing to excessive weight gain. A review of research on the effects of food promotion to children conducted by Hastings et al. suggested that current food marketing strategies affect children’s food choices including preferences, purchase behaviour, consumption and nutrition knowledge.

Many Australian children under 14 years of age watch in excess of three hours of television and videos daily. Several studies have found that approximately one in three of all advertisements promote food products. A recent study of television food advertisements in Australia reported nine food advertisements per hour, of which 79% marketed unhealthy foods, non-core foods as defined by the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating.
In Australia, the public debate on television food advertising to children began in 2002 with New South Wales Childhood Obesity Summit and since then has been actively discussed in the media and in state and federal parliaments. The National Obesity Task Force considered the issue and recommended 'Better protection for young people against the promotion of high-energy poor nutritional value foods and drinks'

Peak medical, health and consumer groups have been calling for a complete ban on all television food advertising during programs where children (0–12 years) make up a majority of the viewing audience. Although the public and political debate in Australia has been quite vigorous, it has nevertheless been dominated by public health and industry interests; the voices of parents have not substantially informed the discussion to date. This is due in large part to there being limited information about how parents experience the impact of television food advertising on their children's food choices, parents' coping strategies and overall level of parental concern for this issue. There is some evidence to show parental concerns about increased requests to purchase food products (‘pester power’) and the truthfulness of television food advertisements. Most of the studies in this area adopted a semi-quantitative approach (survey or self-administered questionnaire), which would have provided limited deep understanding of parents' perceptions and experience of this issue. A qualitative approach to research on parents' perceptions can shed light on 'not only what people think but how they think and why they think that way'. In other words, a qualitative methodology can provide a richer understanding of how parents experience television food advertising directed at children. The present study was designed to address a gap in the current debate on television food advertising to children, by introducing the views of parents on this issue.

METHODS

The aim of the present study was to increase our understanding of parents’ perceptions about the influence of television food advertising on children's food choices. The chosen method of study was focus groups comprising parents of primary-school-aged children. The focus groups were guided by semi-structured interview schedules.

Sampling

Parents were recruited using two methods. The first method involved selection through a market research company in South Australia that actively recruits participants for research purposes. Potential participants were selected from a database using the following criteria: either male or female; age 18 years or over; from a cross-section of socioeconomic backgrounds; and having children attending primary schools. Potential participants were then contacted randomly by phone and invited to participate in the research. Three focus groups were recruited using this method. These participants received an introductory letter explaining the purpose of the study prior to participation and were paid a fee of $40 (set by the company) for their involvement. The second method involved recruiting parents through two primary schools in Adelaide. The schools were in different socioeconomic areas, with one school situated in an area of relatively higher socioeconomic advantage and the other in an area representing the mean for Adelaide. Parents were informed about the research through announcements in school newsletters and on notice boards. Introductory letters were then distributed to all parents in both schools. In one school, the primary researcher (JI) also recruited parents through a weekly ‘Parents and Friends’ group held at the school.

Focus groups

Focus groups were chosen as the research method to facilitate the gathering of qualitatively rich information. Focus groups are believed to allow interaction among participants, enabling participants to compare and contrast others’ opinions with their own; focus groups also encourage participants to talk more easily than in an individual interview. In order to ensure consistency of data gathering, the primary researcher (JI) facilitated all focus group sessions, which were held between July and September 2004. Between them, the research supervisors (KM and JC) attended all focus groups to observe and record contributions made by participants and record the balance of participation by members of focus groups. Four focus groups were conducted during weekday mornings, and one during a weekday evening. Each focus group lasted for 60–90 minutes. The three focus groups recruited through the social marketing company were held at Flinders University or Flinders Medical Centre. The two school-based focus groups were held in the respective schools.

Interview schedule

Each focus group session was guided by a semi-structured interview schedule informed by the literature on food advertising to children. Key areas of interest were:

- Parents' experience of marketing of foods to children
- Their awareness of different forms of marketing to children
- Their opinions about the impact of marketing on children's food preferences
- Parents' opinions about television food advertising to children
- Their opinions about the impact of television food advertising on children's food choices, diet and health
- Their awareness of the regulations governing television food advertising to children
- What changes if any, they wanted to see in the area of television food advertising to children

The interview schedule used in the focus groups is listed in Table 1.

The interview schedule was tested on a pilot focus group comprising experienced dietitians and researchers to deter-
Table 1 Interview schedule for focus groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General views on marketing of food products to children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the many ways in which children get to know about food products?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you consider to be the most powerful form(s) of marketing to children?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show sample of television food advertisements to focus discussion on this area of study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ perceptions of television food advertising to children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What were your thoughts about these food advertisements?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does television food advertising influence your child(ren)'s eating behaviour and their general health? In what ways? Give us an example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are some other influences on your children’s eating behaviour? How would you rank the influences from parents, grandparents, school, peer group pressure and television food advertising?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are trying to figure out how people think about how important it is to have a policy on TV food ads to children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compare with ‘anti-bullying’ and ‘SunSmart Policy’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ strategies for managing television food advertising and children’s food preferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are some results or consequences of television food advertising on your children’s as well as your family’s usual eating habits?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What strategies do you use to manage children’s food choices in relation to television food advertising?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ views about regulations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show relevant Children’s Television Standards (Table 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are your views about the current regulations on television food advertising to children?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential for changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show newspaper article discussing current debate on banning television food advertising to children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think about a ban or minimisation of food advertising to children?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who is responsible for controlling the impact of food advertising on children?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What changes would you like to see in the area of television food advertising to children? Consider types of ads, frequency and time of screening</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Children’s Television Standards regulating television food advertising to children

| CTS 17 | No advertisement may mislead or deceive children, and nothing is taken to limit the obligation imposed by this standard |
| CTS 18.1 | A licensee may not broadcast any advertisement designed to put undue pressure on children to ask their parents or others to buy the advertised product or service |
| CTS 20.2a | Any reference to the premium must be incidental to the main product or service advertised |

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A premium is anything offered with or without additional cost that is intended to induce the purchase of an advertised product or service.

mine the appropriateness of questions for eliciting responses to issues, and length of time for focus group discussion. The data from the pilot group were not included in analysis. Following the pilot group, the interview schedule was modified appropriately.

To stimulate focus group discussion, three visual aids were presented to participants. 1 A videotape with eight television food advertisements: two advertisements for fast food restaurants; two advertisements for confectionery; one advertisement each for energy drink, muesli bar, crisps and dairy snack. Two of the advertisements showed a premium. A premium is anything offered with or without additional cost that is intended to induce the purchase of an advertised product or service. The advertisements were recorded on two separate days from the three commercial network stations broadcast in Adelaide, channels 7, 9 and 10, during children’s peak viewing time (7–9 a.m.; 5–9 p.m.) in July 2004. The type of advertisements shown in the videotape was representative of those shown in children’s viewing times. For example, Zuppa et al. reported 79% of television food advertisements during children’s viewing time marketed non-core foods as defined by the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating. The television food advertisements displayed in the present study were consistent with this finding.

2 A list of relevant Children’s Television Standards (CTS) (Table 2), describing fair and conscionable advertising practices during programs aimed at children. The CTS are administered by the Australian Broadcasting Authority for programs classified ‘C’ (aimed at primary school children). The commercial television industry undertakes to abide by the CTS for advertisements directed at children during programs classified ‘G’ or ‘PG’ (General or Parental Guidance Recommended).

3 A newspaper article highlighting the current debate on television food advertising.
Data collection and development of themes

All but one group were audiotaped (with permission) and transcribed verbatim by the primary researcher. A failure of audiotape in one focus group required transcription from notes taken during the focus group session. All transcripts were verified by one of the research supervisors (KM or JC who attended the session). Transcripts were coded by the primary researcher. Coding was verified by the research supervisors. Themes were developed on the basis of ideas expressed and agreed upon by more than one person within the group. Ideas expressed by a single participant that were not agreed to or built upon by other members of the focus group were not identified as themes. All researchers met regularly to review findings and reach consensus on data analysis thereby achieving researcher triangulation.31

Confirmation of thematic interpretation

To ensure that the thematic interpretations were an accurate reflection of parent’s views, all parents were sent a letter outlining the key themes emerging from the focus group interviews and asking for their feedback.

Ethics approval

Ethics approval was obtained from the Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee in the Flinders University of South Australia. Permission was obtained from school principals from each of the primary schools where parents were recruited. All participants gave informed written consent prior to participation in focus groups.

RESULTS

Sample

There were five focus groups with a total of 32 participants. The size of focus groups ranged from five to 10 participants, with one or two fathers attending each group. In total, 24 mothers and eight fathers of primary-school-aged children participated in the focus groups. Demographic profiles of participants were not collected as it was not deemed necessary for the purposes of the present research. The research sought simply to collect qualitative impressions from a range of parents about their experience of television food advertising directed at young children.

Key themes emerging from the focus group discussions were classified into four main areas: impact on children, how advertising works, parents’ experiences, and changes needed. The discussion about parents’ experiences yielded rich information that was further categorised into a number of subthemes including: concerns, strategies to manage television food advertising and views on current regulations. These themes and subthemes are discussed below.

Impact on children

The majority of parents considered television advertising and peer group influence as major ways in which their children found out about food products. Other important sources of information about food included road sign advertisements, supermarket product placements and promotions, and school curriculum and school canteens. One group believed food packaging was an important way that children became aware of food products. When asked which form of food marketing was most powerful to children, four groups cited television food advertising:

TV would be the biggest one. They’ve got all the pictures and toys in the pictures. (father/group 1)

Most groups thought that the use of toys and premiums in advertisements affected their children’s desire to purchase particular food products. Peers were also cited as sources of influence, particularly in relation to the acquisition of toys and premiums:

As they see their friends have got this particular toy, my daughter does it quite a lot, she says, ‘Ahh, let’s go to McDonald’s’ or ‘I want this toy or what’. She says this straight out. (mother/group 1)

Parents from both school groups differentiated between factors controlling children’s actual food intake and factors influencing food preference. In their opinion, parents had ultimate control over what children eat, but television and peers had the greatest influence on children’s food desires.

How advertising works

A strong theme for all groups was the extent to which toys or premium that offers in television food advertisements influence children to want those food products. As one mother put it:

I think that TV is a lot to blame, like with KFC, McDonald’s and Hungry Jacks, they offer toys. And I find my son wants these things. It’s not always for the food but for the toys. (mother/group 2)

They entice a lot of the kids with toys and things. (mother/group 2)

Parents considered that fun and happy themes together with visual impact were key elements that attract children. One group believed repetition (multiple appearances of the same television food advertisement during commercial breaks) to be another aspect creating effective advertising to children.

Parents identified typical examples of how television food advertisements mediate their influence on children through shaping food preferences, as the example below shows:

There was a Kentucky fries ad a few weeks ago, which has a Spiderman toy . . . my kids don’t generally like [KFC] . . . they are more McDonald’s. But when I got home that night from work, my son was going, ’Can we go
to KFC? I worked it out later that he saw the ad. (father/group 1)

However, not all influences on food preference were seen as negative as the discussion on the Weetbix advertisement below shows:

But there’s a plus side of it as well, because when I think about that Weetbix ad. My son eats nothing but Weetbix for breakfast because it will make him have more energy and be faster. (mother/group 3)

Pestering (children nagging parents to buy a particular product) was seen as another way in which food advertisements mediate children’s influence. As a mother remarked:

Those potatoes [roasted potatoes advertised on television] . . . my son actually asked for them, he said, ‘Oh, you know, maybe tonight we can have some of those potatoes’ and they are constantly asking about it. (mother/group 2)

Television food advertisements could also influence how children think about particular foods. Parents thought that young children (five years or younger) would believe the advertised message literally.

I noticed that Cadbury one [reference to videotaped advertisement shown to each focus group]. One of the phrases they used was ‘good to eat’ and I’m sure they mean that it tastes good, not that it’s good for you. But they [the advertiser] are wanting the children to hear that it’s good for you to eat. (mother/group 3)

Other suggested effects of television food advertisements included inducing appetite when children were not hungry and creating an interest in watching food advertisements. One group mentioned that children from disadvantaged families may be more vulnerable to the influence of television food advertising. However, one school group suggested children may not remember television food advertisements and consequently would not be strongly influenced by them.

In terms of the consequences of television food advertising to children, parents nominated two possibilities: childhood obesity and parent–child conflict. While two groups of parents discussed the association between television food advertising and childhood obesity, they also acknowledged physical inactivity as a contributing factor. Moreover, for these groups, television watching was perceived as safer on occasions than going outdoors to play. In one school group, a strong belief was expressed in parental control of television viewing hours. These parents did not all fully support the connection between television food advertising and childhood obesity.

Some parents in other groups reported television food advertisements to be the cause of parent–child conflict over food choices. Parents felt the need to give in to ‘pester power’ on some occasions even when they considered the food unsuitable:

. . . . if you never let them have any of these things [advertised foods], you start to feel like the dreadful parent. I mean, that’s disgusting! (mother/group 2)

Parents’ experiences

Overall, parents in the present study had negative and critical views about television food advertising. Three sub-themes were identified in this area: concerns, strategies to manage television food advertising, and views on current regulations.

Concerns

Parents from two groups expressed concerns about television food advertisements being coercive by taking advantage of children’s naiveté and playing on their emotions. These parents considered that the food companies and advertisers had little care and consideration about children.

The advertising is a big business. It’s all advertising, advertising, business, money situation. There’s little thought of the children and their future. (father/group 2)

Parents also perceived television advertising as influencing children’s thinking through a repetitive process. One father summarised the phenomenon:

You are not just getting one McDonald’s ad per advertising block, but you are getting three and it’s a repetition like blocks of three or more that actually helps to sink into the minds. (father/group 3)

Another area of concern was on the relatively minimal focus on the actual food product in some of the food advertisements. One mother summed it up thus:

I actually thought a lot of them [advertisements] actually showed what they could do or what you got with it [premium] before you actually saw the product. (mother/group 3)

Some parents questioned the truthfulness of messages, for example, nutrition or quality claims in advertisements. For instance:

Can they lie in those ads? Can they say it’s a 100% breast fillet or whatever they say? They label that as, but I know that it’s not true. Can they? (father/group 1)

. . . . like the Nutella ad, that was so clever, because it says 50% less fat than peanut butter and 50% less salt than Vegemite and 80% less sugar than jam and it is all those things. But, Vegemite has no fat or sugar, jam has no fat and peanut butter has no sugars. And Nutella has all of those things. It might have less than those other products but it has them all in there, so, it’s no healthier. (mother/group 3)

Ethics in advertising also emerged as an important issue. Some parents objected to the use of high-profile personalities to promote unhealthy foods (e.g. high-sugar breakfast cereals or high-fat spreads):

Don’t they [personality] have a conscience? They must know, these sports people, they must know it’s crap. (mother/group 3)
**Strategies to manage television food advertising**

When asked how they manage children's eating in the context of television food advertising, the most common strategy cited by parents was saying ‘no’ to children. Parents felt that they were in control of how often children consumed unhealthy foods (e.g. once a week or on special occasions). Some parents reported avoiding situations that induced children's food requests, for example turning off the television or switching to the non-commercial channel or avoiding shopping with children. Requiring children to use their own pocket money to buy the advertised foods was another strategy used by parents to discourage children from consuming advertised unhealthy foods. Building a healthy lifestyle by offering regular meals, offering healthy food choices, modelling and teaching were other strategies used by parents.

**Views on current regulations**

Most parents held strong views about the current regulations governing television advertising to children. They primarily referenced their comments against the television food advertisements shown at the start of each focus group session, and used the handout of CTS given to them (Table 2). Parents were concerned that the regulations were not being enforced.

I don't see how any of these [Children's Television Standards—CTS] are enforced now. (mother/group 3)

... having discussion and seeing these rules, it reinforces the view that the advertising industry is totally out of control. (father/group 4)

My kids put me under undue pressure 24 hours a day, so I reckon the second one [CTS 18.1] is being unadhered to. (father/group 1)

Parents seriously questioned the regulation governing premiums, CTS 20.2a (Table 2). They thought that the two food advertisements depicting premiums breached the regulations, to the extent that the showing time of the premium was not incidental to the showing time of the food product.

Well, that McDonald's ad first started off with the toy and they were talking about the soccer and that, which is the toy. And then it was 'hang on...a message from our sponsor', and then it talked about the foods... (mother/group 1)

Just look at that chip ad... the whole ad was about that strong man and the kids standing around you and right at the end, the smallest part, was just a quick shot of four bags of chips. (mother/group 3)

Parents also commented that some of the advertisements shown were misleading to children because children may not be able to do all the things that were depicted in the advertisement.

Three groups of parents believed that CTS 18.1 (Table 2) was vague in its wording and therefore open to different interpretations. They remarked that ‘undue pressure’ was difficult to measure and individual children would respond differently in terms of applying pressure on parents to purchase the desired product. Therefore, the regulation was too broad and not particularly useful.

I mean, basically, it's written to be ignored. (father/group 4)

It's written in legal jargon. (mother/group 4)

Some parents expressed incredulity that the regulations existed at all.

These are the regulations? You're kidding. (mother/group 1)

No, it can't be. You must have the wrong one. (father/group 2)

**Changes needed**

Overall, parents expressed the need for changes to control television food advertising directed at children. They saw this as important for children's health. Suggested changes covered more stringent enforcement of existing regulations, restricting food advertising aimed at children, improving the types of food advertisements and creating health-related policies to improve children's food and lifestyle choices.

Parents appeared to have mixed views about supporting a ban on television food advertising directed at children. In two of the groups, parents agreed unanimously for a total ban of food advertising during children's viewing times in order to protect children and relieve pressure on parents. Although another group supported a ban on food advertising, participants were not confident that this could happen because of fiscal pressures from the industries involved.

I'll be quite happy to see it [advertisements] totally banned. (mother/group 2)

You will never get them to ban it, too much money for the government. (mother/group 2)

You will never ban it, I mean, look at this [the regulations]. I mean, this tells you what, doesn't it? This is the rules and regulations they're supposed to abide by and then no bits get done. (father/group 2)

Barriers cited that would prevent imposition of a ban on food advertising included funding and sponsorship of commercial television stations. Some parents believed that television food advertising was crucial to the viability of commercial television. Another barrier identified by one group was the difficulty in defining unhealthy foods; this would create problems for determining which food advertisements should be banned. Yet another group of parents were worried that banning food advertisements could increase other forms of food marketing to children, for example promotions through schools or computer games.

There was wide support for the stronger enforcement of current regulations. Three groups stated that they would like...
important information about how parents experience this

Although the results of the present study cannot be genera-

used a qualitative approach with a small sample of parents.

vide in-depth insight into parents' perceptions about televi-

All groups believed that the number of food advertisements
directed at children needed to be reduced, for example to
one advertisement per food product per commercial break or a quota system for advertising of unhealthy foods.

With respect to screening times, the majority of parents
suggested restricting television food advertising during
morning time-slots (7–9 a.m.) and after school (3–6 p.m.).
However, restrictions until 8:30 p.m. was also suggested by
one school group because children watch television until that time. One school group did not support screening
restrictions because they considered that parents should be
in control of children's television viewing times.

Increasing advertisements for healthy foods was an option
suggested by all groups. Fruit was cited as a good example of
a healthy food that should be advertised more on television.
Other examples included dairy foods and Weetbix. Three
groups saw a need to make healthy food advertisements
more appealing to children by using similar techniques as
the food companies.

It would be good, I reckon, if people like the government
or someone could come up with a really glitzy ad about
fresh food but use the same advertising principles that the
fast food people used. (father/group 2)

Some parents suggested other health-related policies as solu-
tions to help children adopt healthy food and lifestyle
choices. They suggested school and community education
for both children and parents. These included programs to
increase nutrition knowledge, improve children's cooking
skills and provide recipe ideas for parents. Two groups sug-
gested the need for increased resources for physical activity
programs. Some parents mentioned that the school their
children attended had a healthy eating policy, and conse-
quently they wanted to see more resources allocated to pro-
moting physical activity.

From the analysis of focus group data, it can be seen that
parents have a number of concerns about the current status
of television food advertising to children.

DISCUSSION

To our knowledge, this is the first Australian study to pro-
vide in-depth insight into parents' perceptions about television
food advertising directed at children. The present study
used a qualitative approach with a small sample of parents.
Although the results of the present study cannot be general-
ised to the whole population, the study nevertheless reveals
important information about how parents experience this
controversial area of children and the media.

This group of parents considered television food advertis-
ing to exert a strong influence on children's food preferences. Many examples were cited of children requesting food prod-
ucts that they had seen advertised. For the most part, parents
were concerned at the high proportion of unhealthy foods
advertised to children although they did recognise occa-
sional advertisements for healthy foods. The use of toys or
premiums and the association of popular personalities to
advertise food products, was of particular concern to the
parents.

Parents in the present study expressed strong views about
the regulations governing food advertising to children on

 television. When shown the CTS of relevance to advertising
they generally expressed the view that the regulations were
not being adhered to.34 They took particular issue with the
standard governing the use of premium offers. Parents inter-
preted this standard as meaning that promotion of the pre-
mium in the advertisement should not be of a longer
duration than promotion of the food product. With refer-
ence to the advertisements shown to parents at the start of
the focus group as well as their own recollection of adver-
tisements, parents expressed the opinion that this regulation
had been breached on a number of occasions. Parents also
expressed disillusionment that the regulations did not
appear to have an enforcement aspect to their administration
and consequently were not taken seriously by advertisers.

Although discussion of the regulations was an intentional
focus of the research, the strength of parental opinion on this
matter was unexpected. The use of interview props such as
a display of food advertisements and a list of CTS34 stimu-
lated the discussion, but parents also recalled advertisements
they had seen in their homes to discuss their views about
regulations.

Among the changes advocated by parents in the present
study was a call for a reduction in the number of television
food advertisements aimed at children. Parents wanted to
see restrictions on food advertisements directed at children
during the time-slots 7–9 a.m. and 3–6 p.m. CTS34 do
impose limits on advertising time during these hours, but
parents in the present study wanted to see more restrictions.
There is evidence to suggest that children watch television
until 9 p.m. and that the peak viewing times for children are
between 5 and 9 p.m.36 On the basis of this information, any
restrictions on food advertising to children should extend to
9 p.m.

Parents also expressed concern about the bombardment
and repetition of advertisements promoting unhealthy foods
during programs aimed at children. Parents felt that the rep-
etition of advertisements contributed to their potency to
influence children's food preferences. There is at present no
provision within the CTS to regulate the volume and inten-
sity of advertising of individual food products.34 This issue
should be addressed in any review of the CTS.

On the matter of banning television food advertising to
children, the parents in the present study expressed mixed
views. Some parents supported a ban on advertising to chil-
dren whereas others felt this could not be achieved because
of fiscal barriers. Still others felt that parents were ultimately
CONCLUSION

The present study establishes an important starting point to further explore parents' perceptions about television food advertising directed at children. Parents perceived television food advertising to be a powerful influence on children's food preferences and nominated tighter regulations and restrictions to be imposed in order to protect children, as well as more promotion of healthy foods. These views should be of interest to stakeholders (government, food companies, parents and advocacy group) in the current debate on the link between television food advertising and childhood obesity. There is widespread recognition of the need to address the media as a potential obesogenic vector. Further studies with different groups of parents will be beneficial to further clarify parental views on television food advertising directed at children.

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