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Food promotions used to attract children in UK supermarkets

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The rising levels in childhood obesity have been attributed, in part, to an obesogenic environment within the UK. The marketing of foods high in fat, sugar and salt directly to children is thought to have both direct and indirect costs on the weight and consequently the health of these children.

The present study aimed to investigate the amount and types of sales promotion used to attract children at the point of sale within UK supermarkets. The approach used was based on that of an earlier study in Australia⁽¹⁾. The research explored the quantity of food promotions and array of techniques used by food manufacturers to attract children to a product. The nutrient profile of those products using promotion was then determined. Nine supermarkets selected from the top three UK retailers and located across Nottinghamshire were surveyed to measure the number of products using promotional techniques across eight food categories: confectionery; sweet biscuits; crisps; dairy snacks; cereals; tinned pasta and beans; fruit and fruit juice; soft drinks. Products that used marketing specifically aimed at children were then classified as healthy or less healthy according to the Food Standards Agency (FSA) nutrient profiling system⁽²⁾. Determining whether children were the target audience for promotion was subjective. All recorded promotions were included that were perceived to have some appeal to children, including the type of celebrities used as a marketing tool.

A total of 13 402 products were surveyed for the study. Of these products 1352 (10.1%) used promotional techniques. Cartoon characters were most frequently used to market foods, accounting for 83.2% of all promotion (Fig. 1). Other techniques included television and film endorsement, giveaways and competitions. The study found that 58.2% of all promotions were for foods classified as ‘less healthy’ against FSA criteria and 41.8% for foods considered ‘healthy’. Confectionery displayed the largest number of promoted products, making up 24.0% of total promotions. Children are valuable consumers of confectionery and the study also demonstrated that these items are heavily marketed to children. However, a relatively low percentage of the surveyed biscuit products made use of promotional techniques (3.3%). A large percentage of tinned and dairy products used promotional techniques to appeal to children (Fig. 2), and 14.0% of the dairy foods surveyed used some form of promotion. The range of tinned pasta and beans was surprisingly extensive, utilising many different cartoon characters in order to appeal to a wide spectrum of children. Cereal products also exhibited a high level of promotion, and several products used two or more marketing tools. Breakfast cereals in particular used multiple techniques to market their product; for example, a cartoon character and giveaway were used in conjunction.

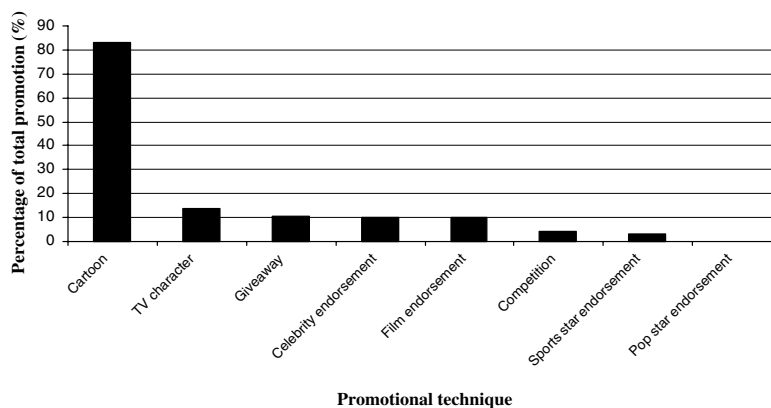


Figure 1. Promotional techniques used to market food products to children.

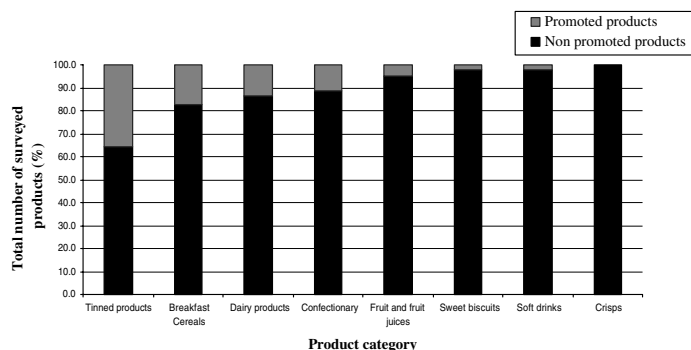


Figure 2. Percentage of products using promotional techniques within each product category.

In conclusion, product manufacturers use a number of different vehicles to communicate messages to children at the point of sale. Whilst the promotion of healthy foods exists, unhealthy foods are still being marketed more to children. Progress has been made to limit children’s exposure to food promotion in other areas, such as television advertising, but further action is required to discourage the development of poor food behaviours.

1. Chapman K, Nicholas P, Banovic D & Supramaniam R (2006) *Health Promot Int* 21, 331–338.
2. Food Standards Agency (2006) <http://www.food.gov.uk/healthiereating/advertisingtochildren/nutlab/nutprofmod> (accessed April 2008).