

# FOOD CLASSIFICATION AND FOOD MARKETING

*This fact sheet is part of a series developed to help parents, guardians and educators understand how children view and interpret packaged foods.*

## BACKGROUND

A Media Literacy & Food Marketing curriculum was developed from focus groups with over 600 Canadian children in grades 1 to 9. Children discussed their thoughts on package images and colours and claims, as well as the nutrition facts table, and ingredient lists. Children were asked what they look for on a packaged food to determine whether it was healthy.

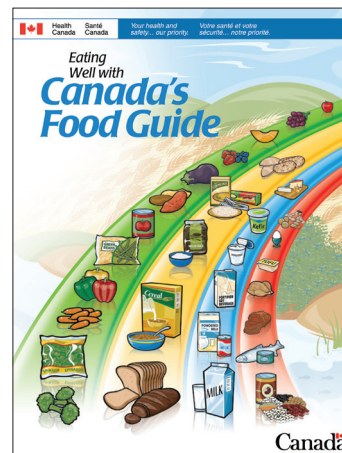


## FOOD CLASSIFICATION AND THE MARKETING OF FOOD

Children in focus groups differentiate between “kids’ food” and “adult food.” They identify kids’ food as junk, sugar (or sugary cereals), and candy, and adult food, primarily as salad, vegetables and meat. Simply put, children define unhealthy foods as “food for them” and the unprocessed vegetables and meats recommended by Canada’s Food Guide as “food for others.” Successful marketing campaigns for “kids food” work to both create and reinforce these perceptions.

## FOOD CLASSIFICATION AND CANADA’S FOOD GUIDE FOR HEALTHY EATING

Canada’s Food Guide does not differentiate between kids’ food and adult food.



Canada’s Food Guide presents different serving sizes in terms of the number of vegetables and fruits, grain products, milk and alternatives, and meat and alternatives, depending on an individual’s age and gender, but there certainly is not a difference between the types of foods kids and adults should eat!

## THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

### WHY DO WE CLASSIFY FOODS AS “KIDS’ FOOD” OR “ADULT FOOD”?

“Kids’ food” has been created by the food industry in order to sell more products. There is no nutritional reason why children need yogurts, cereals, or snacks that are specially designed for them. Beyond this, packaged kids’ food is often of poorer nutritional quality than its ‘regular’ counterparts. Furthermore, meals on many kids’ menus at restaurants—such as hot dogs and fries or chicken nuggets and fries—are not what many adults consider to be ‘food’ per se. Rarely would you see a salad on a child’s menu. Why, then, do we feed our children foods that many adults would not consider eating themselves?

This research stems from an Alberta Innovates Health Solutions and ALMA funded project on children’s understanding of packaged foods, and is supported by the CIHR Canada Research Chairs program.

# FINDINGS

When asked *What is kids' food?* and then *What is adult food?*, children affirmed the following:

## FINDING 1

### CHILDREN DEFINE "KIDS' FOOD" AS JUNK, SUGAR (OR SUGARY CEREALS) AND CANDY

- "I think sugary stuff...cause lots of kids like sugar."* Grade 1
- "It's junk food!"* Grade 1
- "Candy and chocolate because they are unhealthy and no good."* Grade 1
- "Um, it makes me think of candy."* Grade 3
- "I start thinking about sugar and everything."* Grade 9

## FINDING 2

### CHILDREN DEFINE "ADULT FOOD" AS SALAD AND VEGETABLES AND MEAT

- "A lot and a lot of salad."* Grade 1
- "Something healthy... apples, bananas... steak."* Grade 3
- "Healthy and stuff like vegetables."* Grade 3
- "Brussels sprouts or asparagus."* Grade 5

## FINDING 3

### CHILDREN IDENTIFY KIDS FOOD THROUGH ITS COLOURFUL PACKAGING AND FUN SHAPES

- "[Kids food] is stuff that's like colourful and all different shapes and something that would attract you to look at it and buy it."* Grade 3
- "Colourful and it has cool shapes and stuff."* Grade 3
- "Cookies that are shaped...and some popsicles that are shaped. I've seen a bunch of them at the store, but my parents don't let me have them."* Grade 5



## THINGS TO TRY AT HOME

Ask your child "what is kids food?" Then ask them "what is adult food". Discuss whether they think there should be a difference.

- Review Canada's Food Guide with your child. Canada's Food Guide does not distinguish between kids' food and adult food. Explain that the difference between kids' food and adult food is about marketing – about selling products – not about what is healthy.
- Is there a difference between what adults and children eat in your family? Do the adults and children eat different foods? Why?

## SUMMARY

Today, packaged food products specifically designed to appeal to children have proliferated throughout the entire supermarket. Food marketing to children is currently a multi-billion dollar industry, and the foods promoted are not necessarily the healthiest choice for children. Encouraging children to question why foods are targeted directly to them fosters the development of critical skills about marketing to help them make healthy decisions across a lifetime.