MEDIA LITERACY & FOOD MARKETING

IMAGES AND SPOKESCHARACTERS ON FOOD PACKAGING

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.

IMAGES, SPOKESCHARACTERS AND THE MARKETING OF FOOD

Not surprisingly, children respond powerfully to images and spokescharacters when making packaged food choices. Children use pictures, colours, shapes, and words to support the decisions they make when trying to select a healthy food. How they make decisions about packaged foods has implications, because what is represented on a packaged food may not actually be present in the package itself. For example, children routinely selected a box of cereal with the image of fruit on the front of the package as the healthiest of various cereals because of the fruit itself.

Spokescharacters on packages generally work to distract children from the food product itself. In the focus groups, children interpreted products as either healthy or unhealthy depending on the spokes-character on the front of the box: for instance, the Quaker Man Quaker (representing products ranging from rolled oats to chocolate dipped granola bars) was unanimously viewed as an indicator of a healthy food—regardless of the actual product. In contrast, licensed characters from children's shows such as *Dora the Explorer* (on fruit snacks) or *Elmo* from Sesame Street (on cereal) indicated less healthy foods to children.

NAVIGATING IMAGES AND SPOKESCHARACTERS

Spokescharacters call children's attention to products, and generally distract them from product attributes—but do not help children to make a choice based on the qualities of the food. Consider ways of looking beyond spokescharacters to the "character" of the packaged food through ingredient lists and the Nutrition Facts panel.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

THINGS THAT ARE *ON* THE BOX ARE NOT REQUIRED TO BE *IN* THE BOX!
Make sure product evaluation is based on what is actually there rather than what could be there. Spokescharacters attract children's attention, but often to the "fun," rather than the nutritional qualities of the packaged food.

FINDINGS

After grouping packaged food products into "healthy" and "less healthy" choices, children were asked why they made the selections they did.

FINDING 1

CHILDREN'S LITERAL INTERPRETATION OF IMAGES ON PACKAGED FOODS COMPLICATES THEIR DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

"The Life® [cereal is a healthy choice] because it has a peach on the box." **Grade 1**

"[The box of crackers] just looks good. 'Cause it has vegetables on the front." **Grade 2**

"Crunchy Corn [is a healthy choice] because it has like strawberries [on the package]." **Grade 3**

"[The cookies are healthy because] they're blueberry and it looks like they have some seeds in it. " **Grade 6**

"All the healthy [packaged foods] have pictures of fruits. " **Grade 7**

"[The crackers are healthy because] the grain on the bottom…. you can actually see it, so you know." **Grade 8**

"I wouldn't look at the Nutritional Facts, actually, I'd probably just look at the picture on the box." **Grade 9**

FINDING 2

A SPOKESCHARACTER'S (OR LICENSED CHARACTER'S) PRESENCE, WHEN CONNECTED WITH A CHILD'S PROGRAM, IS OFTEN INTERPRETED AS UNHEALTHY. SOME CHILDREN ASSOCIATED THE LOOK OF THE CHARACTER WITH THE 'HEALTHFULNESS' OF THE FOOD

"Dora's not healthy at all …cause it's Dora!" [referring to the licensed-character on fruit snacks] **Grade 5**

"Elmo isn't healthy … he's all scruffy." [referring to the licensed-character on a box of cereal] **Grade 5**

"The zebra [on the yogurt] does not look healthy." **Grade 8**

FINDING 3

SPOKESCHARACTERS ASSOCIATED WITH BRANDS CAN BE INTERPRETED AS HEALTHY

"[The cereal is healthy] 'cause it's Quaker®… and I have a bag of Quaker® flour and it says that it's really healthy on the back." **Grade 3**

"My family always buys this person [indicates the Quaker Man as a healthy choice) and we love it." **Grade 3**

"The Life® looks healthy, they pour the milk a certain way, and it's Quaker® – it's a popular company that lots of people like to buy." **Grade 3**

"[The cereal is healthy because] it has that [Quaker®] dude and I am pretty sure that he's a lot of healthy food." **Grade 5**

THINGS TO TRY AT HOME

Ask your child to look at the images on the front of packaged foods. Look for any of the pictured food items in the ingredient list. Which ones are in the package, and which ones are only on the package? Do the images that are not in the box – such as pictures of fruit or milk – make the product seem healthier?

Get your child to look at the spokescharacters on the front of packaged foods in your home or at the store. Ask your child what he/she thinks of the characters and whether they help shoppers to make a healthy choice. Explain that spokescharacters are used to capture attention and to sell products, but not to provide information about the content of the packaged food.

SUMMARY

Package images guide children's perceptions and understandings of food. Children make decisions about healthy or less healthy packaged foods based on what a package looks like – "seeing" a food is important to children's rationale for making informed choices. When images suggest ingredients not in the food, and brand characters and popular spokescharacters distract from food contents, it is difficult for children to make clear decisions about the health qualities of packaged products. It is important to remind children that spokescharacters are often about branding rather than food quality, and that the images on packages might not actually be *in* the food.