

COLOUR USE IN 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.

"Red on [the package] makes me think of an apple sort of taste"
Grade 1 student



"...that just looks healthy because the packaging is kind of boring"
Grade 9 student

COLOUR AND THE MARKETING OF FOOD

Colour is used in food packaging to influence product perception. Colour not only motivates people to buy, it also encourages consumers to make particular associations. Research indicates that colour usage significantly impacts how people view products—even though consumers may be unaware of its use as a marketing tool.

HOW CHILDREN NAVIGATE COLOUR IN FOOD PACKAGING

Colour can send a powerful message. Children viewed plain or boring packages as more healthy. Less colourful packages—or those without cartoons or 'fun' images—were deemed to be healthier foods. Significantly, children did not regard simple packaging as marketing. Certain colours were repeatedly referenced as indicating a healthy choice.

COLOUR MEANINGS AND ASSOCIATIONS

anger excitement heat danger	visibility fitness service exaggeration	caution happiness warmth summer	nature environment freshness prosperity
authority balance cleanliness trust	extravagance ambition dignity sophistication	power mystery formal elegance	goodness purity low fat dairy

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

Colour is often used as an expression of identity and quality when it comes to food and food products, and can even affect taste

- Green packaging is often associated with healthy foods, while consumers say that coffee in brown packaging tastes stronger and more aromatic (and coffee in yellow or blue packaging tastes smoother)
- White bread tinted brown is perceived as more healthy while red apples command the highest market price
- Consumers have identified vanilla pudding tinted dark brown as 'chocolatey', white wine tinted pink as sweeter, and spicy meals that are more red, hotter (even though it the same meal!)
- Red increases metabolism, and research shows that people often eat more—and more quickly—when surrounded by red. As such, red is a popular colour for restaurants
- White in food packaging is associated with purity, low-fat and dairy and coldness. Children see white (and also black) as "serious" and "adult" packaging—and therefore as a healthier product

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

In the focus groups, children were asked to identify a packaged food that they felt it was a healthy choice, and then explain why they made the selection they did. After selecting a packaged food product they felt was a healthy choice, children were asked why they made that selection they did. **It is healthy because:**

FINDING 1

CHILDREN VIEW SIMPLE, PLAIN OR “BORING” PACKAGING AS MORE HEALTHY

“[Plain] packaging looks like something healthy.” Grade 3

“It is healthy because the box seems very dull.” Grade 3

“[[It is healthy because] its not that colourful and it doesn’t catch my eye.” Grade 6

“To me that just looks healthy because the packaging is kind of boring.” Grade 9

FINDING 2

LESS COLOURFUL PACKAGES AND THOSE WITHOUT CARTOONS OR “FUN” IMAGES ARE IDENTIFIED AS HEALTHIER CHOICES

“I chose this as a healthy choice because it is not colourful.” Grade 3

“The Organics Crackers (are the most healthy) because there’s not a lot of colour.” Grade 4

“I chose it [as the healthiest] because it doesn’t have bright colours.” Grade 6

“[[It is not healthy] because it’s colourful.” Grade 8

“It doesn’t look healthy...because of the way it kind of looks (childish).” Grade 9

FINDING 3

CHILDREN DID NOT INTERPRET “SIMPLE” PACKAGING AS “MARKETING”

“The [plain] packaging looks like something healthy.” Grade 3

“The package doesn’t really pop out at you. They’re not trying to sell themselves off as a fun, sugary snack. They’re trying to sell themselves off as healthy. So they make the box a bit more like, calm and not too much going on.” Grade 5

“Lots of healthy brands have the black writing at the top. Also, because all this stuff is usually in the white box.” Grade 6

FINDING 4

PARTICULAR COLOURS CONVEY MESSAGES TO CHILDREN

“When there is green on the box, it means it’s healthy.” Grade 1

“(Honeycomb cereal is) healthy because it is brown.” Grade 5

“Well, it’s more of a browny colour, and that symbolizes whole-grains.” Grade 5

“Green stands for good.” Grade 5

“Green means go and red means stop.” Grade 6

“Since it has so much green, I just automatically think it’s good.” Grade 9



THINGS TO TRY AT HOME

Go into your food pantry/cupboard and pull out packaged foods. Ask your child(ren) to sort these into two groups: healthy and unhealthy. Then ask your child(ren) why they made the choices they did. Did your child use colour to make choices? Did they remember to check the ingredient list and nutrition facts table?

SUMMARY

Colour in food packaging is an effective tool to promote and sell products. It can influence consumers’ understanding of a product, and can work to create associations (e.g., green = healthy). However, the colour of a package does not tell consumers whether the food is healthy.