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### CHILDREN AS CONSUMERS: NUTRITIONAL CONCERNS AND THE CONSUMER EDUCATOR'S ROLE

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U.S. children represent a significant market segment. They purchase many items themselves and also influence the purchases of their parents. One recent survey found that the average allowance of four-to-12-year-olds was \$3 per week. If each child in the U.S. received that amount, the total would be more than \$4.7 billion a year. Much of this money is discretionary income and a large proportion goes to buy food products [5].

Several social and economic changes that affect family income mean that the consumer role of children has become more important in the past decade. In addition, these social and economic trends have had a profound impact on family food habits and food choices. The purpose of this article is to examine these changes, their potential effect on children's nutritional status, and ways consumer educators can facilitate children's consumer role.

## **Social and Economic Trends: Effects on Children's Consumer Role**

A major development affecting the consumer role of U.S. children is the large number of mothers who are gainfully employed outside the home. Today, fewer than 30 percent of U.S. children live in a "traditional" family with an employed father and a housewife mother [7]. Two-thirds of six-to-11-year-olds live in households where both parents are employed or the single parent is employed. One-fifth of all children live in single-parent families and in three-fourths of these the parent is employed outside the home [7].

The increased number of employed mothers has several implications for children's consumer activities. First, employed mothers in dual-parent families often mean higher family incomes. Thus, more money is available for consumption by all family members, including children. Second, a mother's employment may mean that, due to time limitations, many traditional home production activities must either be eliminated, done by or with other family members, or purchased as services. Examples of services frequently purchased include meals away from home, convenience foods at the supermarket, and housecleaning. Today's working mother may take her children grocery shopping with her, either because she just picked them up after work or because shopping excursions offer a shared time together.

A third implication of increased numbers of employed mothers is that children often arrive home after school to an empty house. Once there, they frequently watch television or play video games. Elementary school children watch 30 hours of television per week, including 400 commercials weekly or over 20,000 per year [5]. While children watch television they often consume snack foods that are high in sugar, sodium, and fat [2].

Thus, social and economic trends have changed children's food habits along with those of their families. Fewer meals are eaten together as a family and parents have less ability to control their children's food intake. An individual-centered style of eating has developed with each family member on his/her own [1]. Greater numbers of dual-earner and single-parent families often mean less time available for selection, preparation, and consumption of food.

Children in homes with employed parents are more likely to be involved in preparing their own meals, especially breakfast and lunch. Youth Monitor reports that 23 percent of children in "traditional" families prepare their own breakfasts. Nearly one-third of children in

dual-earner families and 36 percent of those in single-parent families prepare their own breakfasts [7]. The microwave oven has increased children's independence in the kitchen and is present in an increasing number of homes. In 1980, 13 percent of U.S. households had a microwave oven; in 1985, 40 percent of households did, and in 1990, close to 70 percent will [3].

## **Children as Consumers**

Children represent a significant source of revenue for manufacturers and retailers. In the past, children were thought of as savers and future consumers, not current consumers. Today, children are viewed as not one but three separate and viable markets. First, children represent a current market because they have needs and wants and money to spend. Second, children are an influential market since they have a substantial effect on their parents' purchases. Third, children are a future market because they are also tomorrow's customers. Soft drinks and candy are two products for which the brand loyalties formed in childhood often endure throughout adulthood [5].

## **Children's Money and How They Spend It**

How much money do children have and how do they spend it? One 1984 study indicated that children ages four to 12 received an average of \$3.03 weekly of which they spent \$2.72. In total, this age group received \$4.7 billion and spent \$4.2 billion [5]. The expenditures were totally discretionary: that is, they did not include expenditures for school lunches, clothes, or personal care items. The children spent the greatest proportion of their incomes for snacks and sweets, totaling approximately \$1.4 billion annually. Other expenditures were for toys, games, and crafts (\$1.1 billion); fun machines (\$0.8 billion); movies and sports (\$0.7 billion); and gifts (\$0.2 billion) [5].

The large amounts spent by children for snacks and sweets indicate their food purchases are often ones that increase the calories, sodium, sugar, and fat in their diets. If the family frequents fast food restaurants, intakes of fat, salt, and calories will be even higher. These dietary factors have been linked to obesity, high blood pressure, and cardiovascular disease. Combined with children's often sedentary activities, these behavior patterns have serious health implications for children [2].

## **Teenagers As Consumers**

Teenagers spend even larger sums of money than younger children. In 1986, teenagers 13 to 19 years old spent \$40 billion of

their families' money and \$30.5 billion of their own money [8]. For teenagers, the most frequently purchased personal items included snack foods, clothes, gasoline, gifts, and entertainment.

According to Teen Research Unlimited, teens are probably the epitome of conspicuous consumption and brand consciousness. Teens have significant exposure to the media and are likely to form strong brand loyalties. In addition, brand loyalties formed during the teenage years often continue into adulthood [4,8].

Today's teenagers are independent. They have their own interests and activities, make or buy their own snacks, and in many cases shop for food and begin dinner. Over 70 percent of U.S. teens do at least some grocery shopping for their families and almost 40 percent of all family food dollars are spent by teenage girls [8]. Most (82 percent) teenage girls also do some family food preparation at home [3]. Seventy percent of teens have working mothers, one-half of whom hold full-time jobs [4].

Because teens are spending more dollars in the supermarket, marketers are beginning to target food advertisements directly to them. If a teen cooks, she may very well be looking through *Seventeen* magazine for easy-to-prepare recipes. This makes it profitable for food manufacturers to advertise in that publication. Teens are receptive to food ads that tie in with fitness, health, and weight control, especially those for products that are low in calories. At the same time, they consume fast foods and snacks that are high in sugar, sodium, fat, and calories and inconsistent with their interest in weight control and fitness [3].

### **Conclusions and Implications for Consumer Educators**

Children learn consumer behavior through observation and participation as well as through intentional instruction by socialization agents such as teachers, parents, and consumer educators [5]. Parents teach and shape children for the consumer role from the time the child is old enough to ride in the supermarket shopping cart. Manufacturers spend millions of dollars to target products and advertising to children.

Given the changes in American lifestyles and the increasing independence of children in the marketplace, there is a critical need for consumer education programs targeted directly to young people. The large number of ads and products directed specifically to children and teens increases the importance of teaching children concepts about the marketplace and product promotion. Consumer educators also need to help young people understand the consequences of their

buying decisions. For example, many of their food purchases have implications for the overall nutritional adequacy of their diet, as well as short-and long-range consequences for overall health and well-being. This is a difficult concept for young people who are oriented to "now" rather than the future.

Even for young children, there are many ways to increase their awareness of the implications of their consumer behavior. Marketplace visits to supermarkets and various restaurants could be used to relate purchases to nutrition. At the supermarket, students could examine food labels as well as the store layout, placement of food products, and prices. At restaurants, menus, serving sizes, methods of food preparation, and nutrition information could be evaluated. The nutritional value of a food available in both a supermarket and a restaurant could be compared.

To increase their understanding of product promotion, students could analyze ads, premiums, and packaging. Helping young people to analyze videotaped television ads targeted to their age group would encourage critical thinking. Magazines are another excellent source of examples of product promotions directed to children. Several magazines targeted to younger children have recently joined the more-established teen magazines. These include *Betsy McCall*, *The Adventures of Kool-Aid Man*, *What's Hot*, and *Sports Illustrated for Kids* [6]. Children could examine the direct and indirect messages in ads as well as the nutritional messages found there.

The consumer educator will find many community resources available to teach nutrition-related issues. Dietitians in the community are excellent resources. The Dairy Council and USDA Extension Service have developed nutrition and consumer education materials which are often available to educators free or at a reduced cost. Consumer and regulatory agencies are resources for materials and speakers. Examples are the Food and Drug Administration, the Federal Trade Commission, the Consumer Product Safety Commission, and USDA. In addition, local businesses, including supermarkets and fast food restaurants, often have developed programs and field trips for schools.

It is clear that consumer buying is a legitimate and unavoidable activity of children and teenagers. They have money, most of which is discretionary, and are able and willing to spend it. Their buying is influenced by their parents, their peers, and industry, including the food industry. They are exposed to advertisements, many targeted directly to them, and other forms of product promotion. Protecting young people from marketing stimuli is an impossible task. Instead, efforts should be made to prepare them for satisfying, effective, and healthy consumer behavior.

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## Editor's Note

For information on nutrition education materials and services:

Northern Illinois 800/325-9121	Dairy Council of Wisconsin, Inc. 999 Oakmont Plaza, Suite 510 Westmont, IL 60559
Central and Southern Illinois 314/961-3100	St. Louis District Dairy Council 8710 Manchester Road St. Louis, MO 63144
Quad Cities 319/391-2384	Dairy Council, Inc. 1222 East 37th Davenport, IA 53807
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