



MEDIA LITERACY & FOOD MARKETING I

TEACHER BACKGROUND INFORMATION: PACKAGED FOODS

- As early as the 1950s, sugary cereals in the grocery store were targeting children. Today, packaged food products specifically designed to appeal to children have proliferated throughout the entire supermarket—from dinosaur-shaped processed cheese, fruit gushers, and yogurt tubes to Dino-egg “hatching” oatmeal. Food marketing to children is currently a multi-billion dollar industry, and important implications arise from marketing food as fun, as entertainment, and as a type of toy to children.
- The following research findings and the associated Media Literacy and Food Marketing Lesson Plans I & II stem from a Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) funded project on children’s understanding of packaged foods. The research drew from focus groups comprised of over 600 children (divided by age and gender), which found that children need to develop their skills in evaluating the healthfulness of packaged foods. This is something not covered in the current school curriculum, even though children’s worlds are filled with packaged food products.

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This Lesson Plan seeks to help expand children’s critical capabilities when it comes to packaging, labelling and nutrition.

THE ALBERTA CURRICULUM: FOOD AND NUTRITION OUTCOMES

Table 1 lists the food and nutrition outcomes detailed by the Alberta Education Health and Life Skills Curriculum¹. The research findings outlined in this Background Information document work to supplement these learning outcomes by providing children with the tools to understand and navigate the appeals made on packaged foods.

GRADES 1-6 ALBERTA CURRICULUM: FOOD AND NUTRITION OUTCOMES¹

Grade 1	Students will recognize the importance of basic, healthy, nutritional choices to well-being of self; e.g., variety of food, drinking water, eating a nutritious breakfast
Grade 2	Students will classify foods according to Canada’s Food Guide to Healthy Eating, and apply knowledge of food groups to plan for appropriate snacks and meals
Grade 3	Students will apply guidelines from Canada’s Food Guide to Healthy Eating to individual nutritional circumstances; e.g., active children eat/drink more
Grade 4	Students will analyze the need for variety and moderation in a balanced diet; e.g., role of protein, fats, carbohydrates, minerals, water, vitamins
Grade 5	Students will examine ways in which healthy eating can accommodate a broad range of eating behaviours; e.g., individual preferences, vegetarianism, cultural food patterns, allergies/medical conditions, diabetes
Grade 6	Students will analyze personal eating behaviours—food and fluids—in a variety of settings; e.g., home, school, restaurants

¹ GRADE 1: <http://education.alberta.ca/media/352951/gr1.pdf> p. 192-195; GRADE 2: <http://education.alberta.ca/media/352954/gr2.pdf> p. 225-227; GRADE 3: <http://education.alberta.ca/media/352957/gr3.pdf> p. 263-264; GRADE 4: <http://education.alberta.ca/media/352960/gr4.pdf> p. 314-318; GRADE 5: <http://education.alberta.ca/media/352963/gr5.pdf> p. 376-377; GRADE 6: <http://education.alberta.ca/media/352966/gr6.pdf> p. 423-425

RESEARCH FINDINGS: CHILDREN & PACKAGED FOODS

Table 2 summarizes children’s understandings of packaged foods (drawn from the focus groups conducted with children in grades 1 through 6). Each finding is further explained in the Teacher Background information section corresponding to each class activity.

RESEARCH FINDINGS: CHILDREN & PACKAGED FOODS

<p>Finding 1</p> <p>Children define “kids’ food” as different from “adult food.”</p>	<p>Children in the focus groups differentiated between “kids’ food” and “adult food.” They identified kids’ food as junk, sugar (or sugary cereals) and candy and adult food, primarily as salad, vegetables and meat. Simply put, children defined high-sugar, low nutrient foods or unhealthy foods as “food for them.” They identified unprocessed fruits, vegetables and meat—which Canada’s Food Guide suggests all Canadians need to eat more of—as “food for others.”</p> <p>Moderator: What is “kids’ food”?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I think sugary stuff...cause lots of kids like sugar.” (Grade 1 {G1}) • “Um, it makes me think of candy.” (G3) • “It’s junk food!” (G1) • “Candy and chocolate because they are unhealthy and no good.” (G1) <p>Moderator: What is “adult food”?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “A lot and a lot of salad.” (G1) • “Something healthy... apples, bananas... steak.” (G3) • “Something just came to my mind... adult food is boring food.” (G3)
<p>Finding 2a</p> <p>Children’s decisions about what is a healthy packaged food are based on front-of-package claims, trusted brands, and other visual cues.</p>	<p>Focus groups revealed children’s general inability to evaluate the health qualities of a packaged food. Children placed considerable emphasis on trusted brands, front-of-package claims or other visual cues.</p> <p>Moderator: Which one do you think looks the healthiest?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “That’s good because there’s no fat...no bad fat. See, it says fat free, so there is no bad fat in there.” (G1) • “Behind the O for Organics there’s a leaf which is natural, so it’s made from something natural.” (G3) • “If the box looks serious [it’s a healthy food].” (G3) • “I was just going to say there’s a fat strawberry in the middle of the box. ...it has a leaf!” (G5) • “I think the Life one—it has the Quaker dude.” (G3) • “Cause it’s Quaker... and I have a bag of Quaker flour and it says that it’s really healthy on the back.” (G3)
<p>Finding 2b</p> <p>Images on packaged foods complicate children’s decision-making processes. Children also trust visuals in order to assess health.</p>	<p>Packages that feature images of ingredients not actually present in the packaged food itself were misleading to children. In the focus groups, children would consistently identify the cereal box featuring an image of a bowl of cereal with sliced fruit in it as the healthiest option—even though the box in question did not contain any fruit.</p> <p>Pictures of fruit (and less frequently, the presence of milk), made the children classify the cereal itself as healthy. Notably, the items not in the package made children claim the packaged food was the healthiest out of numerous similar options.</p> <p>Moderator: which box of cereal is the healthiest?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life cereal “because it has fruit” (on the front of the box). (G5) • “Crunchy Corn because it has like strawberries” [on the picture featured on the front of the package]. (G3) • “I think the Elmo one would be healthy, maybe ... I don’t know, it just looks healthy.” (G3) <p>Moderator: Which one do you think looks the healthiest? Why?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I think the Elmo one would be healthy, maybe ...it just looks healthy.” (G3) • “If the box looks serious [it’s a healthy food].” (G3) • “Usually I can just tell by looking.” (G5)

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<p>Finding 3 Colour on packaged foods complicates children’s decision-making processes.</p>	<p>Children choose foods they believe to be healthy based on colour. This equally holds true for packaged foods, and can cause confusion in the decision-making process.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “When there is green on the box, it means it’s healthy.” (G1) • “It’s like different colours and that means that they put in food colouring or like something to change the colour... when it’s healthy cereals... it’s more white.” (G5) • [Honeycomb cereal is] “healthy because it is brown.” (G5) • “Green stands for good.” (G5) • “Lots of healthy brands have the black writing at the top. Also, [it is] usually in the white box.” (G5)
<p>Finding 4 Spokes-characters (or licensed characters) can influence children’s interpretations of a product’s overall healthfulness.</p>	<p>Certain spokes-characters, such as Toucan Sam and Lucky the Leprechaun, were interpreted as signifying an unhealthy product, whereas other spokes-characters explicitly associated with brand lines were cited as indicators of healthy foods. These associations, of certain spokes-characters with “unhealthy” and certain brands with “healthy” increased dramatically as children got older.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Dora’s not healthy at all...cause it’s Dora!” (G5-6) • “Elmo isn’t healthy... he’s all scruffy.” (G5-6) <p><i>Moderator: Why do you choose this as the healthiest of the three?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Because it’s not from a movie?” (G1-2) • “Cause it’s Quaker... and I have a bag of Quaker flour and it says that it’s really healthy on the back.” (G3-4) • “It has that [Quaker] dude and I am pretty sure that he’s a lot of healthy food.” (G5-6)
<p>Finding 5 Children have little understanding of the meaning of front-of-package claims.</p>	<p>Children use front-of-package claims as reasons to argue a food is healthy, but have little understanding of how these claims are representative of the packaged foods themselves.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It says fat free, so you won’t get fat.” (G1) • “I think the Life one ... it has the little check mark thingies here—low in saturated fat, zero trans fats, source of fibre.” (G3) • “See that little check mark at the bottom of that Life box...uh, I think it’s sort of like checking off like a health list of something.” (G5)
<p>Finding 6 Children need help applying their knowledge to nutrition labels and ingredients lists.</p>	<p>Children demonstrate uncertainty about how to use nutrition labels and ingredients lists. They know about nutrients, vitamins, minerals and serving sizes, but don’t know exactly what to look for to determine if a food is healthy. While older children in the focus groups knew that they were supposed to refer to the nutrition facts table, they didn’t really know what it meant, and typically would return to the visual on the front of the box to determine whether or not the food was “healthy”.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I changed my mind, to the organics. One is 1 cup and the other is ¾ cup, and they are the same calories. The organics are more healthy because of the serving size.” (G5) • “Life [cereal], there is some wheat in it, and I looked...[it’s] low in calories, high in iron, and has lots of calcium, and some vitamin A and B.” (G5)