

IMAGES AND SPOKESCHARACTERS ON FOOD PACKAGING

This fact sheet is part of a series developed
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food. Consider ways of looking beyond spokescharacters to the
“character” of the packaged food through ingredient lists and
the Nutrition Facts panel.

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.



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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