

# Healthy Food Looks Serious: How Children Interpret Packaged Food Products

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*Abstract:* Fun food is an overlooked, but increasingly significant, category of food targeted to children in the supermarket. These supermarket products emphasize foods' play factor, interactivity, artificiality, and general distance from "regular" foods: food is positioned as "fun" and eating as "entertainment." Using a series of focus groups, this study examined how children (segmented by age and gender) interpret these packaged appeals and how the thematic of *fun* connects with their understanding of health and nutrition. The study revealed that children are highly attuned to fun foods and its packaging, offering savvy, if flawed, interpretations of how to determine the healthfulness of a packaged good. I argue that the symbolic positioning of children's food as fun and fake creates several roadblocks in the quest to promote wholesome food habits in children, and that the thematic of fun has unintended consequences that require careful consideration.

*Keywords:* Food marketing; Food packaging; Children; Childhood obesity; Entertainment; Nutrition; Nutrition literacy

*Résumé :* Au supermarché, les aliments amusants sont une catégorie de nourriture négligée – mais de plus en plus importante – qui cible les enfants. De tels produits mettent l'accent sur l'aspect ludique, interactif et artificiel de la nourriture ainsi que sur leur distance par rapport à la nourriture « normale »; ainsi, ces aliments sont qualifiés d'amusants et manger est un divertissement. Cette étude se fonde sur une série de groupes de discussion pour examiner comment les enfants (divisés par âge et sexe) interprètent ce conditionnement des aliments et comment la thématique du plaisir influence leur compréhension de ce qui est sain et nutritif. L'étude révèle que les enfants sont très sensibles aux nourritures amusantes et à leur présentation, et offrent des interprétations astucieuses mais défectueuses de leur valeur nutritive. Je soutiens que le positionnement symbolique de la nourriture pour enfants dans le domaine du plaisir et de l'artifice crée de nombreux obstacles pour la promotion de bonnes habitudes alimentaires chez les enfants, et que la thématique du plaisir a des conséquences non intentionnelles qui requièrent une attention toute particulière.

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**Canadian Journal of Communication, Vol 34 (2009) 359-380**

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*Mots clés* : Marketing de la nourriture; Conditionnement de la nourriture; Enfants; Obésité infantile; Divertissement; Nutrition; Alphabétisme nutritionnel

*"The fun starts here."* Such was the promise—and the slogan—of Kraft Foods' 1999 campaign to promote its sweetened Post cereals to children. The campaign included, among other things, television and Internet advertising, coupon promotions, retail displays, redesigned packaging with greater "shelf impact," and cartoon stickers included in Post cereal boxes. Post's marketing push sought to capitalize on the 8.5% growth seen in its cereals from the previous year while the company affirmed its "commitment to innovation with its kid-targeted cereal brands" (Thompson, 1999b, p. 19).

This "commitment to innovation" in child-oriented food products was not unique to Kraft. The trend, which formally began in the 1950s with the sugar-laden cereals targeted at children (McNeal, 1992, p. 8), had significantly advanced by the 1999 campaign. Indeed, the fun *had* started by 1999, for in that year alone: Quaker Oats allocated U.S.\$15 million just to market Cap'n Crunch Cereal (Thompson, 1999a, p. 8); Yoplait launched its enormously successful<sup>1</sup> Go-Gurt kids' yogurt tubes (Thompson, 2000, p. 30); Kellogg announced it was "bringing fun" into the cereal aisle by putting Sesame Street mini bean-bag toys into specially marked cereal boxes (Kellogg Company, 1999); and marketer James McNeal devoted an entire chapter of *The Kids Market* to careful instructions on how to "kidize" packaging. Specifically, McNeal (1999) explained how marketers could shift from the "A to K" (adult to kid) in package design, so as to better serve the "end user" (that is, the child) (p. 88).

The "fun start" promised by Post's campaign threads throughout contemporary children's food marketing. In 2001, Kraft Foods extended its "fun cereal" motif to the snack food category, with the U.S.\$25 million launch of Lunchables Fun Snacks. "Some snacks have all the fun" was the slogan for these cookie or brownie snacks, which children could frost and decorate with sprinkles (Thompson, 2001, p. 45). Innovation, joined with theme of fun, is now standard in contemporary child-targeted foods. Kidized packaging is commonplace, and *fun* represents an entire category of food products. In today's supermarket, *fun foods* can be found in every food category. They populate the dry goods, dairy, meat, and refrigerated and frozen foods sections (Elliott, 2008b), and equally target every major meal. Such children's foods are not junk or confectionary products; instead, they are regular foods whose packaging and contents specifically and unambiguously target children.

In the supermarket, children's foods are cued by their unusual product names and unconventional flavours or colours, by their cartoon images and (child-related) merchandizing tie-ins, and by their direct reference or allusion to fun/play on the package. Fun foods rest on the key themes that food is fun and eating is entertainment—these products emphasize foods' play factor, interactivity, artificiality, and general distance from ordinary or "adult" food (Elliott, 2008a; Elliott, 2008b). Yet no data has been collected on how this U.S.\$15 billion industry (Gates, 2006, p. 38)<sup>2</sup> is influencing children's food preferences and dietary habits, or, more specifically, how children interpret the packaged food messages that are directly targeted at them. Although the childhood obesity epi-

demarcation has prompted sustained, critical scrutiny of food marketing to children (Federal Trade Commission, 2008; Harris, Pomeranz, Lobstein, & Brownell, 2009; Hastings, Stead, McDermott, Forsyth, MacKintosh, Rayner, Godfrey, Caraher, & Angus, 2003; Hawkes, 2004; Horgan, Choate, & Brownell, 2001; IOM, 2006) the focus has been predominantly on television advertising to children.<sup>3</sup> Even though recent studies have expanded in scope to probe online food marketing to children, such as advergames (Alvy & Calvert, 2008; Moore, 2006) or product placement (Moore, 2004; Auty & Lewis, 2004; Tiwaskul, Hackley, & Szmigin, 2005), the powerful communicator of *food packaging* is routinely overlooked. Indeed, it appears that the only people dealing seriously and primarily with children's food packaging are the marketers themselves.<sup>4</sup>

Along with the tendency to overlook children's food packaging (and the types of supermarket products targeted at children), a clear gap also exists when it comes to asking children what this kid friendly food communicates to them. This reality is underscored by a recent Canadian policy consensus conference examining "Obesity and the impact of marketing on children." Hosted by the Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance of Canada (CDPAC) in March 2008, the conference assembled leading national and international experts to present the most current sociocultural, legal, and scientific evidence on the problem of marketing and childhood obesity. The panel of assessors, in developing their consensus statement, observed that:

Advertising is but one component of marketing. Today's marketing is much more. We were not presented with any thorough research on the many dimensions of marketing in today's world, including but not limited to: pricing . . . labelling; branding, packaging; in-store displays . . . character creation and celebrity endorsements; and many other platforms that marketing now employs. (CDPAC, 2008)

The panel further remarked, "The health of Canadian children and the reduction of childhood obesity are at the centre of this discussion. In our view, the voices of children and youth themselves are missing in this process and they must be heard" (CDPAC, 2008).

It is within this context that the current research project was designed. The goal of this study extends beyond simply observing that food is marketed to children using child-friendly appeals (Elliott, 2008b; Linn & Novosat, 2008; Page, Montgomery & Ponder, 2008; Schor & Ford, 2007). Instead, it investigates how children interpret food packaging and, heeding the panel's call at CDPAC, seeks to bring children's voices into the discussion. Specifically, this project explores:

- 1) how children understand and respond to child-oriented foods—both in terms of packaging and the foods themselves;
- 2) how this understanding and response varies by age and/or gender; and
- 3) how children determine and classify what is healthy (both in general, and in relation to packaged goods).

Drawing from a series of focus groups of children from grades 1 to 6, separated according to age and gender, the project aims to provide some introductory

probes into an overlooked topic. The question was *not* about whether fun foods contribute to childhood obesity (which is a complex, multi-factorial problem), but rather to probe the meaning and appeal of these packaged foods to children. To this end, the article first contextualizes the research on children and marketing and then outlines the research design and methodology. The research findings, along with the concluding section titled “Making sense of fun food,” suggest some of the substantial implications of this type of symbolic marketing. Fun in food absolutely matters to these children, who fully appreciate the aesthetic, gustatory, tactile, and/or interactive features that these foodstuffs offer. However, although the children reveal extensive knowledge about the packaging cues they deem relevant to them, there is a remarkably limited literacy when it comes to health or nutrition. One unintended consequence of symbolically framing kids food as fun is that healthy food is seen as plain—and drab.

### **Contextualizing research on children and food marketing**

The childhood obesity epidemic has fueled much of the recent scholarly and policy interest in food marketing to children. With 26 percent of children being overweight or obese, Canada has one of the highest rates of childhood obesity in the developed world (Standing Committee, 2007). This problem of childhood obesity has pulled the food industry and its marketing practices into the spotlight. Food marketing is critiqued for establishing an “obesogenic” (Swinburn, Egger, & Raza, 1999) or “toxic environment” (Brownell & Horgen, 2004)—one where food is symbolically overvalued and always available (Ulijaszek, 2007). Referring specifically to childhood obesity, Schwartz and Brownell argue that the food industry makes “relentless efforts to market their brands to children” in a food environment that “promotes over-consumption of calorie-dense, nutrient-poor foods” (Schwartz & Brownell, 2007). Their critique is warranted: the Federal Trade Commission’s (July 2008) report summarizing industry expenditures on marketing food to children revealed that 44 food and beverage companies spent over \$1.6 billion in 2006 advertising foodstuffs directly to youth using the “full spectrum of promotional techniques and formats” (FTC, 2008). Most of these expenditures were used to promote precisely the types of poorly nutritious products that contribute to childhood obesity, including carbonated beverages, fast foods, and sugar-laden cereals.

Obesity aside, other interesting issues pertain to the relationship between food and children’s perspectives, although (as previously noted) children’s voices receive significantly less airtime. Even though academic research about children’s culture and consumer practices/preferences has “grown at what seems to be an exponential rate” over the past two decades (Cook, 2008b, p. 220), critical studies on children’s perspectives on food—especially supermarket foods—are rare. Marketing literature, however, provides some insight. Charles Atkin provided one approach in his 1978 study conducted in the supermarket, which observed parent-child “decision-making in the selection of breakfast cereals” (1978, p. 41). His study design called for unobtrusive observations of the parent-child negotiation over cereals, where a researcher (impersonating a store clerk carrying a clipboard) recorded “a verbatim description of the sequence of parent-child exchanges on a standardized form” (Atkin, 1978, p. 42). Basically, the chil-

dren's voices were recorded, even though their opinions were not asked. Marketer James McNeal (1992) attempted to assess children's perspectives through a different method, using drawing exercises. McNeal asked a sample of 1,330 children (aged 4 to 12) to draw "what comes to your mind when you think about going shopping" (p. 60). A good percentage of the children (40.2%) thought of the supermarket first and crayoned supermarket carts filled with packaged goods and some produce. More recent studies (Cooke & Wardle, 2005; Wardle, Sanderson, Gibson, & Rapoport, 2001) have used food preference questionnaires to determine what foods children like—although these studies tend to focus on single foods (e.g., apples), mixed foods (e.g., lasagna), and condiments (e.g., jam) instead of packaged foods (see Cooke & Wardle, 2005).

In short, children's thoughts on supermarket packaged foods are not the subject of academic inquiry. Even Martin Lindstrom's *BRANDchild*, promoted as "the world's most extensive study of tween attitudes and brand relationships" (Lindstrom, 2004, p. 311),<sup>5</sup> does not address branded/packaged foods (with the exception of a cursory nod to branded colas). In Canada, some insight into the topic of children's preference was provided by Health Canada's Nutrition Programs Unit, which, in 1995, published the results of a national study on children's broad perceptions of healthy eating concepts (Nutrition Programs Unit, 1995). The report documented children's views about their own eating behaviours and the factors influencing their food choices. While this study proves helpful in detailing children's observations about healthy eating in general, it is now extremely dated and provides no guidance with regard to the category of packaged foods or children's interpretation of the foods (and food labels) targeted specifically at them.

### **Research design and methods**

Assessing children's perspectives on packaged foods is perfectly suited to qualitative research methodology and principles. Qualitative research methods are an excellent choice when:

- 1) a concept or phenomenon is immature because of a lack of previous research in the area (Kitzinger, 1995);
- 2) the research problem fits well with the insistence in qualitative research that interpretations include the perspectives and voices of the people being studied (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996); and
- 3) when the nature of the concept (because of its seminal connection to the context in which it occurs) is not well suited to quantitative measures (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996).

All of these criteria apply to a study on child-responses to fun food.

In light of this, a series of focus groups were conducted with children from grades 1 to 6. Focus group research is designed to help understand what people think and why; as such, it provides an ideal research method for exploratory work on children's responses to fun food (Deacon, Pickering, Golding, & Murdock, 1999; Heary & Hennessy, 2002; Morgan, Gibbs, Maxwell, & Britten, 2002). Using a blend of random sampling and convenience sampling, a total of 36 chil-

dren were recruited for 6 separate focus groups held in Ottawa in February 2007.<sup>6</sup> The groups were divided so that three separate focus groups were held for girls (grades 1/2, 3/4, and 5/6), and three separate focus groups were held for boys (with the same grade segmentation). This allowed the researchers to note differences in perspective according to both gender and age. (Participants were not screened specifically for family income or ethnic background.) The study was conducted in facilities where researchers could view and listen in on the groups via a two-way mirror and closed-circuit audio in an adjacent room. Heeding recommendations regarding the optimal size and length of children's focus groups (Deacon et al., 1999; Levine & Zimmerman, 1996; Morgan et al., 2002) the research design aimed for 4-6 children per group, with each session lasting approximately 60 minutes.

The focus groups were led using a customized moderator's guide that asked participants to select from and discuss various child-oriented foods and food packages. Questions probed children's food preferences, how they categorize different types of food (i.e., what they like and what they feel is healthy), and how they make sense of nutrition information/claims on fun food packaging. Specifically, children were asked to: draw their favourite dinner, conduct mock shopping trips (where they selected from an array of packages and discussed packaging appeals), sample and discuss their preferred selections of fun foods, and explain their thoughts on nutrition and nutrition information. Responses were audio-taped and subsequently transcribed (with pseudonyms used for all participants); field notes were also recorded by the researchers during and after each session. A provisional list of codes was created from the conceptual framework and the overarching research questions outlined in the project objectives (described above), and inductive coding techniques (see Strauss & Corbin, 1998) were used to create a content analysis of particular topics. Salient themes were identified and coded following a grounded theory approach. For the purposes of this article, the goal is less to quantify the focus group findings than to provide a more nuanced exposition of children's perceptions and perspectives.

Please note that in the following discussion on the focus groups findings, for ease of readability, the term "children" refers *specifically* and solely to the children interviewed in the focus groups. As a small, exploratory study, it does not presume to speak for the preferences of all children.

### **What would you pick as your favourite dinner?**

At the outset of each focus group, the children were given a sheet of paper containing the image of an empty dinner plate. They were invited to draw their favourite meal and to explain why they chose the foods they did. Regardless of age or gender, children consistently drew a similar selection of foods. Pizza, fries, and "junk food" were top choices, with 84 percent of the participants selecting one (or more) of these items as constituting a favourite meal. Specific fruits and vegetables were infrequently mentioned—only 25 percent of children identified a fruit or vegetable as part of their meal. Likely this is unremarkable, since favourite meals may not contain the types of foodstuffs that children think they *ought* to eat. Yet the reasons children gave to explain *why* these foods were their favourite are worth noting. Several participants revealed that they love foods precisely because they are not

“healthy” foods. In children’s classification of foods, it appears junk food is enticing because it is junk (and perhaps in opposition to adult foods).

*John (Grade 1) (G1):* I like fries because it’s junk food.

This same theme is elaborated on in the Moderator’s (M) discussion with Kim (G2):

*M:* Can you tell us what you put on your dinner plate?

*Kim (G2):* Chips and treats.

*M:* And, why did you pick those for dinner?

*Kim (G2):* I like treats.

*M:* You like treats. What do you like the most about treats?

*Kim (G2):* Because they’re junky.

Notions of junk were underscored by the general sense of imbalance characterizing some of the children’s meals. Children were asked to draw their favourite meal, but the moderator was clear that the meal was dinner.<sup>7</sup> Several of the responses revealed complete indifference to balance in this meal:

*M:* Okay, do you want to tell us what you put for your dinner?

*Shannon (G1):* Pizza . . . and chicken nuggets. And, I was going to put fries. And, a spring roll.

*James (G1):* Donuts, fries, and chocolate. . . . I like the donut because it tastes like chocolate, and the fries are so good.

*Olivia (G3):* I made a pizza with a chocolate crust, caramel as a sauce, and then . . . no, wait. With chocolate sauce and caramel for the cheese.

Yet, as previously noted, the majority of children identified some variant of the “pizza/ fries and something sweet/junky” (often ice cream) combination. Branded foods were notably absent from this dinnertime discussion, with the exception of four mentions (Coke [twice], Caramilk chocolate, and Rice Krispies Squares). Children in this study clearly did not associate their favourite meals with either branded food or fast foods.

### **Selecting from child-oriented packaged foods**

At this point in the focus group, participants were asked to go on pretend shopping trips and to select the package they found most appealing. Two shopping stations were set up, displaying various fun and regular food packages of products in the same food category. To ensure participants were not influenced by the selections of others in the group, children went to each station one-by-one with a clipboard and recorded their choices in secret. They then returned to the table and explained the reasons for their selections.

Shopping Station 1 contained the same options for all of the focus groups, three boxes of chicken nuggets: a box of President’s Choice® (PC) Mini Chefs™ Jungle Buddies™ breaded chicken nuggets, a box of Janes Kids© Disney© Pixar Buzz Lightyear “fun-shaped breaded” chicken nuggets, and a box of President’s

Choice® breaded chicken nuggets. (See the three images.)

Shopping Station 2 contained a selection of either six children's breakfast cereals or nine fruit snacks. Breakfast cereal or fruit snack packages were rotated between groups, so as to provide a broader scope of perspectives.

It was in this pretend shopping that differences in perspectives according to age started to emerge. The youngest children (G1/2) unanimously selected the fun shaped nuggets—either PC® Mini Chefs Jungle Buddies™ or Janes Kids® Disney® Pixar Buzz Lightyear. Their focus was on the shape of the nuggets (50 percent of participants noted this) and the merchandizing tie-in with Buzz Lightyear (33%). Some children (17%) observed that the fun nuggets looked like they would taste better. The older children (G3/4 and G5/6) were less likely to indicate that they selected a package because of its fun shapes (11 percent and 13 percent, respectively), and none of them mentioned the merchandizing tie-in as a reason for their choice. For grades 3/4, all of the boys and half of the girls selected the regular chicken nuggets as their top choice—which was also the choice for all of the girls and 4 out of 6 boys in grades 5/6. The reasons provided were considerably more focused on the aesthetics of the package and/or a focus on taste: almost 56 percent of grade 3/4 participants and 67 percent of grade 5/6 participants made some direct reference to package aesthetics or the product “looking tastier” as the reason for their selection. The girls were more attuned to the package attractiveness, colour, and overall design:

*Kristen (G5):* I picked number 3 [the regular nuggets] because it looks pretty and, I don't know, I just like it.

*M:* You find the food looks pretty?

*Kristen (G5):* The whole box looks pretty.

*Susan (G5):* I liked number 3 as well; I think it looks a bit more perfect



to me. It also just, looking at the way it is displayed, it looks more appetizing. The other ones just don't look as good tasting.

*Kristen (G5):* I also notice that it looks like it is from a restaurant because it's in a small basket with the cloth and the little vegetables in the background. That makes it look prettier.

At first blush, it appears that these children's preferences matured from a focus on fun and shapes (G1/2) to an appreciation of aesthetics and taste (G3/4 & 5/6). However, the older children's responses were deeply informed by a concern about how their selections might appear to the rest of their peer group. When it came to the chicken nuggets, the older children were resistant to selecting packages that were "too young for them."

*Carly (G5):* I like number 3 because I look at number 1 [Jungle Buddies] and I saw it was in animal shapes and I had that when I was four. And with the little persons [Buzz Lightyear package], I thought it looked like for little kids...

*Hailey (G6):* I had the same one as Carly. I think it is maybe because sometimes, depending on what age you are, you don't necessarily like certain shapes that maybe younger kids would like. . . . If you were to have younger kids in the group, they would have probably gone for those [the other selections].

*Susan (G5):* [PC nuggets] It's just more appropriate for me.

Again, this appeared to be driven solely by the children's desire to be perceived by their peers as mature. When they were asked which product they thought *their friends* might like, half of the older children selected the fun shaped nuggets instead of the plain ones, and provided rather enthusiastic explanations as to why.<sup>8</sup>

### **Children's cereals and fruit snacks**

Shopping Station 2 provided a greater array of packaged products, yet the children's selections (and their explanations) generally mirrored the trends observed in their first shopping venture. Grade 1/2 children were more likely to cite cross-merchandizing as a reason for choosing a product (although it was not a dominant reason), whereas older children were more likely—far more likely—to specifically comment on the packaging or package aesthetics. None of the children in grades 1 to 4 referred to packaging to explain why they selected particular cereals or fruit snacks, whereas 50 percent of the girls and 43 percent of the boys in grades 5/6 made mention of it.

*Mavis (G5):* [Explaining why she liked one package over the other choices] It's yeah, the colour. It makes it stand out. I think if you go to a store and you were to walk by, you wouldn't see C since the colours, well they don't pop out to you as much as the other ones do. If you have a better package for it, then someone may look at it more than people usually would.

*Kristen (G5):* I agree. If you had like highlighters, you would say "oh it's highlighters" . . . your eyes are attracted to it. And with the colours, why

I chose B is because of the colours . . . the green and the yellow, and that's why . . .

Aesthetic reasons were also provided for why a product was not chosen:

*Simon* (G5): I hate the box, the box is ugly. . . . The other ones probably taste better and have a little bit more flavour.

*Daniel* (G5): It doesn't really stand out as much, and it [the cereal] is small, and people don't want to pick small things. It's not that interesting because there's just this bowl standing still with a bunch of cereal.

Daniel's comment reveals the degree to which fun matters to children, irrespective of the older children's desire to distance themselves from little kids' food. In fact, concerns over selecting packages that were too young were largely absent in the children's discussion of cereals and fruit snacks. It is important to emphasize that older children do *not* associate fun with little kids. (They have no problem with the concept of fun!) Moreover, all of the children showed considerable interest in the unique product claims or play aspects the packages trumpeted, as well as their surface appearance.

*Shawn* (G3): [Discussing Betty Crocker Tongue Talk Tattoo fruit snacks] You can get a tattoo from it and you can roll it up into a ball and suck on it. I like to put it around my finger.

*James* (G1): [Discussing Sun-Ripe Squiggles fruit snacks] It's junk food and I love it. It's very long and they squiggle like a worm.

*Lindsay* (G2): The Polly Pockets [fruit snacks] look fun because they have sparkles and everything.

*Tyler* (G2): [Discussing General Mills Chocolate Lucky Charms] The marshmallows are magical and each one has a power. And I like the colours on the box.

*Simon* (G5): [Discussing Chocolate Lucky Charms] It looks delicious.

*M*: What makes it look tastier than the other ones?

*Simon* (G5): Because of the rainbow things. And, it's in a pot of gold.

*Jake* (G6): It looks kinda cool. The box looks cool with streaks of colour coming out.

### **The appeal of fun foods**

Interest in surface appearance and play extended, not surprisingly, to the foods themselves. Children were asked to select their top choice from a tray containing samples of nine child-oriented cereals or fruit snacks. Selections were rotated in each session so that the children who examined cereal packages during their shopping trip sampled fruit snacks, and vice versa. (Children were able to taste/eat the snacks they selected.) Then all of the children had the opportunity to choose from an array of child-oriented yogurts or pudding snacks (and taste their choice). No packages or identifying material accompanied the samples; children selected

them based on the look of the foodstuff alone. (An exception is the yogurts/puddings, which were individually packaged in tubes or cups.)

Again, the theme of play factored strongly; children were intrigued by the foods' unusual colours and shapes and often indicated that they selected a sample because of these unique characteristics. The more unusual the colour or unique the feature, the better. Ryan (G5) selected pudding because "the [blue] colour stood out, and it looked good"; Jake (G6) picked pink pudding for the same reason ("the pink stood out"). Some participants were drawn to Yogo's fruit snacks because of their "neat" multi-colours, but also because "you can throw them up in the air" (Kim, G2) or because "they look like you can roll them" (Brendan, G2). In short, a general feeling expressed in all the focus groups is that fun or play remains an important variable.

### **Interactivity versus aesthetics**

Differences in gender emerged in the discussion of why certain products were chosen over others. Interest in a food's interactivity was substantially more pronounced for boys, whereas girls (particularly the older ones [G5/6]) generally focused on the aesthetic qualities of food. In the case of the yogurt/pudding samples, all children were invited to select from nine products. This included yogurt in brightly coloured portable tubes (Babang and Kaboum flavours), as well as Squeeze N Go pudding (also in a tube). A number of portable pudding snacks (in clear plastic) were offered, including bubblegum and cotton candy flavours (coloured bright pink and robin blue, respectively), Chocolate Splat! pudding (brown), and layered parfait-style puddings (one chocolate and vanilla, and the other, Oreo cookie layered puddings). Gendered differences to these options were remarkable. All of the boys (except two) chose the yogurt or pudding *tubes*—packages that allowed kids to squirt its contents into their mouths (often holding the tubes far up in the air with head tilted back to catch it), or squeeze the product onto their lips, or suck it up all in at once, as if through a straw. Although the boys did not usually articulate that the tube motivated their choice, they were absolutely drawn to this form of packaging.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, all of the girls selected the parfait-style puddings. Unlike Eric's (G4) observation that "when things look fancier, they taste worse," the girls appreciated the "pretty" components of the product, and the fact that (unlike the squirtable tubes) they could be savoured:

*Gwen* (G4): [Discussing the chocolate/vanilla parfait pudding] I can enjoy it more and I can save it for later, but with the tubes, it finishes very fast.

*Isabella* (G6): I thought it was a pretty package.

*M*: So, you like the colour? Why did you pick it over the tube things?

*Isabella* (G6): I like the stripes.

*Mavis* (G5): I thought it was interesting how it had stripes. . . . It looked the most appetizing.

The girls also were more likely to discuss the associational values evoked by the food/package, noting it reminded them of something (be it a movie, family out-

ing, feeling, et cetera). This did not happen with the boys, who provided more concrete explanations or focused on what they could do with the product (i.e., squeeze it, stretch it, twist it, play with it).

*Vivienne* (G1): [Discussing Oreo striped parfait pudding] I picked it because me and my friend went to a farm of cows, and it reminded me of the cow. Sometimes they are black and white.

*Kristen* (G5): [Discussing Jungle Buddies chicken nuggets] It looks funner because I like animals. And because, well actually, for the other box [of Buzz Lightyear shaped nuggets] in class we are doing space and it makes me think of homework.

*Melissa* (G2): [Discussing Froot Loops cereal] At school we made a necklace with Froot Loops, and at the end we got to eat it.

### **Classifying healthy: In general, and for packaged foods**

Classifying healthy is another important question when it comes to probing children's interpretations of packaged food—and food in general. Cereals, fruit snacks, yogurts, cheeses, canned pasta, frozen meals, packaged lunches—all offer fun food for sale. Yet no published research assesses how children classify what is healthy and not healthy in this vast array of consumables. Given this, the focus groups also probed what children consider to be healthy food and how they make sense of the healthfulness of packaged goods.

Without question, Canadians are concerned about food's health qualities. The latest *Tracking Nutrition Trends* surveyed over 2,000 Canadians (18 years and older) and reported that 91% of those polled deemed a food's "healthfulness" either "somewhat important" or "very important" when choosing what to eat (CCFN, 2008, p. 3). But healthfulness is a nebulous concept, both for adults (see CCFN, 2008, p. 2) and for children. Indeed, the children in this study showed a limited understanding of the health qualities of food. When asked to name a healthy food and explain why it was healthy, 67% of the children named a fruit or a vegetable, 17% named bread or pasta, and 7% named yogurt or cheese. Fifteen percent of children said "they didn't know"—comments made more interesting given that the focus group setting allows children to echo another child's response, should they desire.<sup>10</sup>

With 67% of participants naming a fruit or vegetable as a healthy food, it perhaps seems odd to argue that they have limited understanding of the health qualities of food. Yet this logic becomes clear when one considers the range of foods identified: specific fruits and vegetables were mentioned, but dairy, whole grains, lean meats, and fish were rarely given as examples of healthy foods. Consider, too, children's explanations of *why* the food is healthy.

*Stuart* (G3): Carrots, because it's a vegetable.

*Melissa* (G2): Apples . . . because, fruits are good for you.

*Ryan* (G5): I would say fruits and vegetables, because everybody says they're healthier for you.

*Mavis* (G5): Broccoli. It's a green vegetable, and I heard they are healthy.

*Simon* (G5): Pasta, because it's good for you . . . I think.

While a number of children (starting from grades 3 up) observed that fruits or vegetables are healthy because they have “vitamins” (and two children identified calcium as the reason cheese/yogurt is healthy), 70% of the children either did not know why the item they selected was healthy or provided a self-evident answer (i.e., oranges because they're fruit). This lack of knowledge over healthy extended to children's evaluation of packages and nutritional claims as well.

**“The box looks serious”: Children discuss how to tell if a packaged product is good for you**

When asked what they looked for on packaging to help them determine whether the food is healthy or not, children pointed to a number of important clues. They mentioned the ingredient list (22%) or the presence of a “smart check” or symbol (17%). Some children conflated the absence of (allergy-inducing) ingredients with product healthfulness, with 14% saying that “a peanut with a circle and a line” on a package is a clue that a food is healthy.

*Zack* (G5): One of the rules that I always was taught is if there's big words, like really big words that you can't pronounce, it's probably another way to say sugar.

Awareness of the nutrition facts table was remarkably low: only 8% of children (all from grades 5/6) named the nutrition facts table as means of evaluating whether a product is “good for you.” While this suggestion was well received by the other participants in the grades 5/6 focus group (some nodded agreement or verbally called out in affirmation), the children could not actually explain what the nutrition facts table “meant.” They simply knew to look for it on packages, because they had learned it at school (and for some, at home).

This said, children provided remarkably sophisticated—although not necessarily accurate—explanations about how to tell if a packaged food is healthy. Some of the answers (from 16% of the children, mostly grades 1/2) were completely wrong headed:

*Christine* (G1): You can tell [it's healthy] by the front cover. If [the food] is shaped, then it may have been cut with a dirty knife.

Yet most of the statements demonstrated a savvy reasoning, even if the answers were incorrect. *Kim* (G6) used calories as the sole indicator of health (“it has only 130 calories per serving, which makes it really healthy”), whereas 20% of the children relied on some aspect of the package *image* to determine healthy:

*Katie* (G3): If the box looks serious [it's a healthy food].

*Christine* (G1): Green means it's healthy.

*Brendan* (G2): When there is green on the box, it means it's healthy.

*Joshua* (G3): [Explaining why Honeycomb cereal was a healthy choice] It has honey on the box.

Several children suggested that they can simply tell by looking.

*Susan* (G5): Usually I know what's healthy; even if you look at the picture you can tell.

*Travis* (G3): [The box] *looks* really good and healthy.

This reliance on the visual assessments and associational indicators of health also played out in the children's selection of foods. If a serious package or its colour could indicate healthfulness for some children, then so could look of the foodstuff itself. Jake (G6) picked the Kellogg's Fruit Winders fruit snack to eat because, even though he thought the Froot Loops fruit snack "probably tasted better," the Fruit Winders "*looked better for you.*"<sup>11</sup> Zack (G5) explained that Honeycomb cereal was healthy because it was brown. The flipside also held true. Gwen (G4) explained that Lucky Charms cereal probably was *not* healthy "because they have covered the marshmallows in food colouring."

### **"It says fat free, so you won't get fat": Children's understanding of nutrition claims**

Front-of-package labelling has become ubiquitous in recent years, as food manufacturers strive to position their products to capitalize on consumers' interest in health. Canada's decade-old Health Check program (governed by the Heart and Stroke Foundation) exists to "help consumers make healthy food choices within food categories, at the point of purchase, across all eligible food categories" (Heart and Stroke Foundation, 2008, pp. 3-4). Numerous other front-of-pack "nutrition symbols" or food rating systems also exist, since food manufacturers have each created their own logos, slogans, or symbols—as well as their own criteria—as a strategy to communicate a food's healthfulness to consumers.

While certain scholars have criticized the validity of nutrition claims in general (see Elliott, 2008a; Nestle, 2002; Pollan, 2008; Smith, Stephen, Dombrow, & Macquarrie, 2002), they are also promoted as a strategy for improving people's diets. Even the Standing Committee on Health, which issued the *Healthy Weights for Healthy Kids* report in 2007, suggests that "Increas[ing] Awareness Through Front of Package Labelling" can help to promote healthy weights in children (Standing Committee on Health, 2007, p. 22) and is something that "must be done" to "tackle the issue of childhood obesity" (p. 18).

But this imperative seems wrong-headed, since children in this study revealed little understanding of the meaning of nutrition claims. First, (as earlier noted) they rarely referred to nutrition symbols in explaining the *clues* to use in evaluating whether a packaged food was healthy (17%). When directly asked about particular symbols found on the packaged foods being examined, children were rarely able to demonstrate a comprehension of what it *means* for food to be fat free, organic, or made with whole grains, etc. Children would literally read the claim ("it says fat free") and then come up with their own, reasonable, explanations. Discussing a round, orange symbol that proclaimed *FAT FREE*, participants observed:

*Matthew* (G1): It says fat free so you won't get fat.

*Abigail* (G3): You won't get any fatter if you're already very fat.

*Geoff* (G4): It means you won't get fat.

Regarding a green *CERTIFIED ORGANIC* logo:

*Zack (G5)*: I've not seen it before, but I can tell that it is a sponsor saying that something about this is true. Like for that it means it is good quality food. That company probably has taste testers.

*Daniel (G5)*: I'm not 100% sure what it is. But it says certified organic. So that means organic food and it was tested and looked at to make sure that it actually is organic and it's not just flavours that make it look organic or taste organic.

*Kristen (G5)*: The label is green so it's not mass produced in some greenhouse.

There was also the tendency to assume the symbols cued other diet or health-related qualities. Jake (G6) interpreted the *FAT FREE* symbol to mean "low in calories, [so] it's good for you." Vivienne (G1), and many others, equated the symbol with healthy ("it means it is really healthy"). Judging from the discussion in these focus groups, it appears that front-of-package labelling is of little help to children in accurately assessing the health of a product. Most of the children did not notice the claims on their own. It is worth noting, however, that some of the older female participants (G5/6) engaged in a lengthy, critical discussion over the use of several nutrition claims on the front of a particular box of sugared cereal. They dismissed the claims as lacking in credibility.

*Susan (G5)*: No one's going to believe it.

*Hailey (G6)*: I don't believe it since chocolate is unhealthy and marshmallows are unhealthy. The only thing healthy is the milk. It's just to get you to buy it.

Yet this was the *only* group to discuss the credibility of package claims. Remarkably, no such skepticism was voiced regarding any of the other semiotic elements on the package.

### **Making sense of fun food: Discussion and implications**

Although a small-scale study, these focus groups provide fascinating insight into how children make sense of fun food and its packaging. As the sales figures attest, parents and care-givers are certainly purchasing these supermarket products for their children. Children, in turn, show deep appreciation for the aesthetic, gustatory, tactile and/or interactive features that these foodstuffs offer. The focus groups consistently revealed how passionate children can be about food; they spoke enthusiastically and extensively about their favourite edibles and about why they selected particular packages. "Loving" food was articulated repeatedly (e.g., "I love chocolate," "I love the cheese [on pizza]," "It's junk food, and I love it," "They're yummy, and I'm in love with them").

These children were equally interested in taste, primarily explaining their selections in light of personal taste preferences (i.e., appreciation for chocolate, marshmallows, sweetness, sourness). The food package's *look* factored strongly in the children's comments about taste, and they were very clear about what *looked* tastier. This said, a discernable evolution was present in terms of the appre-

ciation of the aesthetic qualities of packaging. While younger children were more likely to be attracted to cross-merchandizing techniques (i.e., Buzz Lightyear, Spiderman, or Polly Pocket) and fun shapes, older children contemplated the overall look of the package—its colours, design, and their appreciation (or not!) of its images. The oldest girls in particular demonstrated a fairly sophisticated aesthetic sense, commenting on whether products looked tasty and selecting items based on overall display—be it the “pretty” package or “appetizing” nature of the parfait puddings “with the stripes.”

Although a clear progression existed with regard to aesthetic appreciation, this study did not reveal any discernable evolution in terms of actual taste. Children, regardless of age, showed, and said, that they *loved* chocolate, junk food, and sugary cereals/fruit snacks/puddings. They did not grow out of chocolate Lucky Charms cereal by Grade 6, for example—virtually every child in the study (92%) selected it as their top choice.

Of course, the central interest in this study pivoted on children’s interpretation of and responses to fun food—and the focus groups revealed that fun *absolutely* matters to children. Food holds a special position in children’s lives, and not for nutritive reasons. As Newton (1992) argues in her discussion of popular culture foodways:

Playing with food—by learning the ‘rules’ for eating Oreo cookies or spaghetti or Jell-O—quickly becomes part of a child’s repertoire of play behaviour. Although this food play is not approved of in most households, often adults and children have a tacit understanding about Jell-O: Jell-O for dessert is license to play. (p. 253)

Yet as the proliferation of fun food underscores, no longer is a “license to play” reserved for Oreos or Jell-O. Scholars such as Buckingham (2000), Seiter (1993), and others have long emphasized that cultural constructions of childhood are defined in opposition to adulthood. This opposition also unfolds with regard to food, and is reinforced by child-oriented food marketing. As Schor and Ford (2007) observe, the symbolic marketing characterizing children’s food persuades children “to eat particular foods, not on the basis of their tastiness, or other benefits, but because of their place in a social matrix of meaning” (p. 16). This “place,” I suggest, resides squarely within the theme of fun. Food marketers design and offer up fun food for consumption, and in many ways children are merely acting out the scripts provided for them. But these scripts clearly resonate with children.

Researchers probing the relationship between food advertising and childhood obesity affirm that “today, children opt for their own preferred food and drink rather than acquiescing to parental preferences” (Eagle, Bulmer, de Bruin, & Kitchen, 2004, p. 52), and the focus group participants patently demonstrated that these foods were of utmost appeal. Boys were particularly drawn to the interactivity (and transgressive eating practices) promised by the food products; they also liked foods because of their strange colours and “cool” shapes. Girls were more likely to choose products because of their pretty colours and general aesthetic appeal. The fun resided in the colours, “in the sparkles” and the associational elements the food presented—be it a memory, a personal experience with family/friends/at school, or a link to a movie. As a whole, the children were

highly attuned to the range of cues that made food fun, quickly identifying the Polly Pocket or SpongeBob Squarepants fruit snacks, the “gushing” quality of Betty Crocker’s Fruit Gushers, or the fun tattoo feature of Betty Crocker’s Tongue Talk Tattoo Fruit Roll-Ups. Many could (and would spontaneously) identify the special “power” represented by each marshmallow in Lucky Charms. These responses reveal the degree to which young children are embedded in a world of commercial marketing/media—but the children’s interest in the packages and products themselves (e.g., colours, interactivity, aesthetics, et cetera) did not stem solely from cross-merchandising or advertising appeals.

While the children discussed the fun aspects of food at length, their understanding of health was quite limited. Their ideal meals certainly did not reflect Canada’s Food Guide recommendations, and their discussion of healthy foods often comprised self-evident claims. But it is their evaluation of *how to determine if a packaged food is healthy* that is the most remarkable because, while the nutrition facts table or ingredient list was given a cursory nod, children favoured their own interpretive accounts. These accounts equally tended to conflate certain markers with “healthy” (e.g., green = healthy, serious = healthy). Policy recommendations for more front-of-pack labelling (such as those suggested by the Standing Committee on Health, 2007) may influence adult food selections, but such labels certainly did not lead to more informed food choices with the children interviewed in these focus groups. Indeed, children’s misunderstanding of nutrition (communicated through symbols/logos) also played out in their discussions of why they might pick certain products over another. For instance, Honeycomb cereal was identified as a healthier choice by several participants because of the honey pictured on the box or because it was coloured brown. Alpha Bits cereal was preferred by one participant *because*, she argued, “I don’t really like sugared cereals.” These kinds of responses underscore the opportunity for further education for children when it comes to determining healthy foods. As already mentioned, the children were highly literate when it came to deciphering packages—just not in the right arenas.

In fairness, the food industry has complicated the issue by putting front-of-pack nutrition claims on products that children do *not* identify as “good for you.” So-called “goodness corners” on boxes of sugary, marshmallow-laden cereals are a case in point, and some older children rightfully observed that the presence of these claims worked to undermine the credibility of the product as a whole. But the bigger issue is that children do not associate fun—or fun food—with nutrition. The more fun the package and product appears to be, the less children correlate it with health or classify it as a healthy selection. This raises some interesting challenges for food manufacturers who have developed “fun *and* healthy” product lines for children, but use the exact same techniques (such as cartoon images, unusual shapes, fun product names, wild colours, et cetera) to cue children’s food to children and their parents. To reiterate one of the more interesting claims made in the focus groups, some of the children observed that they could tell if a product was healthy simply by seeing whether the package looked serious or not. Serious packages, for children, are healthy food packages. Fun packages, regardless of the presence of nutrition claims, are not evaluated under the lens of health.

But the biggest issue underpinning this fun food marketing is the question of meaning. What are the implications of promising (as did Post's cereal campaign) that "the fun starts here"? There is certainly something problematic about positioning food mainly as fun. Eating for entertainment (or distraction) is one of the main drivers of the current obesity epidemic, and it leads to a distorted relationship with food. (Like food marketing in general, fun food marketing also does not address any notion of portion control.) The fact that children are being taught, through fun food messages, to value food strictly for its play factor is troubling; children learn taste preferences very early on, and they persist over time. When we teach children that "the fun starts" when they sit down in front of processed and pointedly artificial food—comprised of strange shapes, bizarre colours, or magical qualities—we are leading them down a dangerous path. Healthy food, as one child observed, *does* look serious, and (especially in light of the childhood obesity epidemic) it is critical that *serious* food be given prominence in the social matrix of meaning that defines children's fare.

### Acknowledgments

Funding for this research was generously provided by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. The author would like to thank Bernie Gauthier for his assistance in coordinating and overseeing the focus groups.

### Notes

1. Described as "kid-targeted slurpable yogurt in a tube," Yoplait's Go-Gurt captured \$100 million in retail sales within eight months of its launch, "bolstering General Mills to No. 1 in refrigerated yogurt ahead of Dannon Co." and "trigger[ing] a new growth phase for the category as a whole" (Thompson, 2000, p. 30).
2. Data are not available on the overall sales of fun foods in Canadian supermarkets. However, the sales of food individual brand lines are equally striking. Fun yogurts targeted at children—such as Yoplait's Go-Gurt and Dannon's D'animals line—had sales of U.S.\$99.9 million and \$94 million, respectively, for the 52-week period ending in March 2007 (Cultured products shine, 2007, p. 16). In Canada, the Toronto-based NDP group identified fruit snacks/rolls as one of the fastest growing snack foods (Cooper, 2006, p. 6). And Canada's President's Choice Mini Chefs brand—launched nationally in December 2004 and targeted specifically at children—has since tripled the number of products in the line.
3. See, for example, Batada, Seitz, Wootan, & Story, 2008; Botterill & Kline, 2006; Consumers International, 1996; Cook, 2008a; Harris, 2008; Gantz, Schwartz, Angelini, & Rideout, 2007; IOM, 2006; Kotz & Story, 1994; Livingstone, 2005; Powell, Szczypka, Chaloupka, & Braunschweig, 2007. As the U.S.-based Institute of Medicine *Committee on Food Marketing and the Diets of Children and Youth* reported "television advertising remains the dominant form of marketing reaching children . . . that is formally tracked" (IOM, 2006, p. 15).
4. In 2006, Palmer and Carpenter observed that marketers spend "over \$3 billion annually to design food product packaging that children and youth will want to purchase" (2006, p. 167)—a figure that has undoubtedly increased, particularly in light of the number of supermarket food brands (or sub-brands) aimed exclusively at children. These include, for example, Loblaw's highly popular President's Choice Mini Chefs brand, Safeway's Eating Right Kids line, Nature's Path EnviroKidz brand and Earth's Best Sesame Street line of children's foods.
5. The BRANDchild study spanned seven countries and interviewed thousands of children.
6. Ethics approval and written parental consent was obtained prior to holding the focus groups. Recruits for the convenience sample comprised 32 of the 36 children and were drawn from acquaintances of the research company (Delta Media Inc.) that hosted and moderated the focus groups. To completely fill the groups, four children were recruited randomly using a standard telephone directory listing for Ottawa.

7. The moderator's instructions included: "So, if you could choose what you would have for dinner, what would it be? . . . Remember, there are no right or wrong answers, just do your best to draw your favourite dinner."
8. This enthusiasm over kids' food (despite what the older children might have said) was demonstrated throughout the focus groups. At points, the children were literally crawling on the table to get their first pick of the cereals.
9. The remaining two boys were drawn to the most unnatural shades of pudding—blue and pink.
10. The percentage breakdown (67% fruit/vegetable; 17% bread/pasta; 7% yogurt/cheese; and 15% "don't know") adds up to more than 100 because some children provided more than one example of a healthy food.
11. Neither product was a healthy choice, owing to the high proportion of calories coming from sugar and the fact that the fruit snack would be better classified as a fruit-flavoured snack.

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