

## Parental Guidance vs. Advertising Power in Influencing Children's Food Choices: A Pilot Study

\*Shivani Pandey<sup>1</sup>; Prof. Meera Pal<sup>2</sup> & Zoomi Singh<sup>3</sup>

\*<sup>1</sup> Ph.D. Scholar, School of Health Sciences, Uttar Pradesh Rajarshi Tandon Open University, Prayagraj, India, E-Mail: [shivaniPandeyoct31@gmail.com](mailto:shivaniPandeyoct31@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Professor, School of Health Sciences, Uttar Pradesh Rajarshi Tandon Open University, Prayagraj, India E-Mail: [meerapalou@gmail.com](mailto:meerapalou@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup> Assistant School of Health Sciences, Uttar Pradesh Rajarshi Tandon Open University, Prayagraj, India E-Mail: [zoomisingh@gmail.com](mailto:zoomisingh@gmail.com)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17313275>

Accepted on: 27/09/2025      Published on: 10/10/2025

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### **Abstract:**

*The present study was undertaken to evaluate and compare the influence of parental guidance and advertising exposure on the eating habits and food preferences of school-going children. A standardized questionnaire was administered to children aged 6–12 years residing in Shantipuram, Prayagraj, along with parallel inputs obtained from their parents, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping dietary behavior. In addition to exploring these influences, the study also assessed the relationship between children's food habits and their Body Mass Index (BMI) to highlight potential health implications. The findings indicate that advertising plays a significant role in shaping children's food choices, often outweighing parental guidance. Children demonstrated a stronger preference for food items that were frequently advertised, regardless of parental advice or household dietary practices. Furthermore, the data revealed a concerning trend: a larger proportion of children who regularly consumed packaged and heavily advertised food products were found to fall into the overweight category, suggesting a direct link between exposure-driven food selection and higher BMI. Overall, the study underscores the powerful role of advertisements in influencing children's dietary patterns, sometimes undermining parental efforts to encourage healthier choices. These results highlight the need for greater awareness among parents, stricter regulation of food advertising targeted at children, and the promotion of nutrition education to foster healthier eating habits during the formative years.*

**Keywords:** Parental guidance, advertising exposure, Eating habits, Food preferences, Dietary behavior.

**Introduction:** Children's eating habits and food preferences are shaped by a combination of environmental, social, and psychological factors. Among these, parental guidance and media exposure play particularly influential roles during the formative years. Parents traditionally serve as primary role models and decision-makers in promoting balanced diets and healthy lifestyles. However, the growing reach of mass media, especially food advertising, has introduced new dynamics that often compete with or undermine parental influence.

Food and beverage companies frequently rely on television advertising to reach children, anticipating that this influence will extend to shaping the dietary choices of their households [Yamoah et al. (2021)]. American Psychological Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics have voiced serious concerns regarding how advertising affects children's decisions about healthy eating [American Psychological Association (2004); American Academy of Pediatrics (2006)]. When children were most likely watching TV, ads for junk food appeared far more often than ads for healthy foods. Companies used tactics like claiming health benefits, stressing brand advantages, and featuring cartoons or celebrities to capture children's attention [Yamoah et al. (2021)]. Advertisements targeted at children have increasingly promoted energy-dense, packaged, and processed food products. Such promotional strategies, often designed to be highly appealing, significantly impact children's dietary choices, regardless of household practices or parental advice. This trend has raised serious public health concerns, as frequent consumption of heavily advertised, unhealthy food items has been associated with higher Body Mass Index (BMI) among children.

In the recent years, children's changed media consumption would be the main cause of an increase in advertising exposure. This increased exposure may be problematic because research has connected it to adverse outcomes like obesogenic eating patterns. Positive effects on children's eating habits have been demonstrated by encouraging them to eat nutritious snacks with reasonable limits, sharing meals with them, and consistently having meals together [Keski-Rahkonen et al. (2003)]. Impact on Children Food announcements and TV has an adverse effect on the rise in rotundity, both in grown-ups and children. Rotundity is a major health and social issue in advanced nations due to its epidemic character [Rosiek et al. (2015)]. Rotundity is seen in both parents and children, and family members constantly engage in unhealthy habits. Still, it increases extensively in the case of children and teenagers. On

average, children between the periods of 2 and 14 spend 2.4 hours each day in front of a computer display or television screen. Out-of-door conditionings no longer engage the attention of children. There's no energy loss since adolescents spend a lot of time in front of their computers playing games and browsing the Internet, which doesn't bear physical exertion. Accordingly, the issue of fat and rotundity in children and adolescents is getting more current and continues into majority [Central Statistical Office (2014); Office Marshal Kujawsko-Pomorski (n.d.)]. Experimenters from the School of Public Health Project, Eating and Activity over Time (EAT), discovered that children from homes that watched TV while eating at a lower- quality diet than children from homes that switched off the TV during refection's [Feldman et al. (2007)]. Children said that being exposed to dangerous food advertisements on a regular base made it delicate for them to borrow healthy eating habits and made them feel shamefaced [Molenaar et al. (2021)].

Understanding the relative influence of parental guidance and advertising is therefore crucial for addressing unhealthy dietary behaviors in children. Examining this relationship not only highlights the challenges parents face in instilling healthy eating habits but also underscores the broader implications of media exposure on child health. The present study seeks to evaluate and compare these influences among school-going children, while also exploring the potential health risks linked to advertisement-driven food preferences.

### **Methods:**

The study was conducted among 40 children residing in Shantipuram, Prayagraj, within the age group of 6–12 years. Each child was accompanied by a parent, in most cases the mother, to provide supplementary information and ensure the accuracy of responses. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants, aiming to represent families from different socio-economic backgrounds within the locality. A standardized, structured questionnaire was administered individually to the children. The tool was designed to collect detailed information across multiple domains, including:

- Demographic Profile: age, gender, family size, parental occupation, and education.
- Dietary Patterns: frequency of meals, types of food consumed, and regularity of fruit and vegetable intake.

- Food Preferences: inclination toward home-cooked foods versus packaged or processed foods, as well as favorite items influenced by advertisements.
- External Influences: parental guidance, peer choices, and exposure to food advertisements through television, mobile phones, and other media.

Parents were also asked parallel questions regarding household food practices and their perceptions of advertising influence on children. This dual input ensured a more holistic understanding of children's eating behaviors.

To assess growth and nutritional status, anthropometric measurements such as height and weight were recorded using standard procedures. Body Mass Index (BMI) was then calculated for each child and categorized according to age- and sex-specific growth charts recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO). This enabled the identification of children who were underweight, within the normal range, or overweight/obese.

The collected data were compiled, tabulated, and analyzed to examine associations between parental guidance, exposure to food advertisements, children's food choices, and their corresponding BMI status.

### **Results:**

Firstly, it was observed that advertising exerted a strong influence on children's dietary preferences. A majority of participants expressed a greater inclination toward advertised food products, such as packaged snacks, fast foods, and sugar-sweetened beverages, even when parental guidance emphasized healthier, home-cooked alternatives. This suggests that exposure to media-driven promotions significantly overshadowed parental advice in shaping children's choices.

Secondly, the study found a direct association between the consumption of advertised or packaged food items and children's Body Mass Index (BMI). A considerable proportion of children who frequently opted for such products were categorized as overweight when assessed against age- and sex-specific BMI standards. In contrast, children whose diets consisted largely of balanced home-prepared meals were more likely to fall within the normal BMI range.

Additionally, parental attempts to encourage healthier eating habits, such as increasing the intake of fruits, vegetables, and traditional meals, appeared to have only a partial effect. While some children complied under direct supervision, their independent choices continued to be influenced by exposure to food advertisements.

Overall, the results underscore the prominent role of advertising in shaping children's dietary behaviors, often undermining parental efforts. The link between frequent consumption of packaged/advertised foods and higher BMI further emphasizes the potential long-term health risks associated with such dietary patterns.

### **Conclusion:**

This study demonstrates that advertising exerts a powerful influence on children's eating behaviors, often surpassing the impact of parental guidance. Despite consistent encouragement from parents to adopt healthier dietary practices, children displayed a clear preference for food products that were heavily promoted through advertisements. The findings also establish a significant association between frequent consumption of packaged or advertised foods and elevated Body Mass Index (BMI) values, indicating an increased risk of overweight and obesity among the affected children. The results underscore the need for proactive parental involvement in shaping children's food habits. Beyond providing healthy meal options at home, parents play a crucial role in educating children about the long-term benefits of a balanced diet and the potential health consequences of excessive consumption of processed and marketed foods. Furthermore, the findings highlight the necessity of broader interventions, including stricter regulations on child-targeted food advertising and the integration of nutrition education in schools, to counteract the persuasive effects of media promotions. In conclusion, while parental guidance remains a vital factor in influencing children's dietary choices, its effectiveness can be significantly diminished in the presence of aggressive food advertising. Addressing this challenge requires a collaborative approach involving families, educators, policymakers, and media platforms to foster healthier eating behaviors and safeguard children's nutritional well-being.

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