**Young kids recognise unhealthy food brands**

For very young children, awareness of food brands increases greatly between ages three and four and is highest for unhealthy foods, according to a new study from Ireland.

Food-brand knowledge predicts what kids will ask for later, said lead author Mimi Tatlow-Golden of the School of Psychology at University College Dublin.

The study included 172 children in Ireland, ages three to five years old, a quarter of whom were from Northern Ireland, where marketing regulations differ from the rest of the country.

Just over half of the kids attended school in a disadvantaged community, according to local government and education department data. Parents filled out questionnaires about family demographics, eating habits and children’s TV viewing alone and with others.

Researchers surveyed the kids at school one at a time, showing them nine food brand logos and product images, four belonging to healthy foods and five to less healthy foods, all of which are widely advertised in Ireland.

The researchers first asked kids if they knew the brand name of a food based on the logo, then if they knew what kind of food it was, then if they could match the brand logo to a picture of the correct food product.

Kids’ scores on the brand questions rose for all types of foods between ages three and five, the authors report in the journal Appetite. On average, kids could name about a third of the brands, name the product type of half the brands and correctly match the images of almost two-thirds of the brands.

At all ages, kids were better at recognising the less healthy foods. Their knowledge of unhealthy foods was most strongly predicted by how much unhealthy food their parents ate, and was not predicted by TV time or their mother’s education level, the researchers found.

“We definitely couldn’t conclude that marketing doesn’t work, we just need to look beyond TV,” said Sandra Jones, director of the Centre for Health Initiatives at the University of Wollongong in Australia.

Some of the healthy brands in the study, like Frube flavoured yogurt in a tube and Cheestring string cheese, only refer to one specific food product, whereas the unhealthy brands, which included Cadbury’s, McDonalds and Coca-Cola, produce a wide range of products, she noted. This could have skewed the results, said Jones, who was not involved in the research.

Although parents’ eating habits were the most important predictor of what kids recognised, advertising affects parental eating as well, Tatlow-Golden said.

In Ireland unhealthy and healthy foods get about equal advertising airtime on TV, she said, though there are many other avenues of advertising and ways kids are exposed to brands.

“What are kids seeing with their friends at school, or seeing out on the street or seeing displayed in the store?” she said.

Fat and sugar are inherently appealing to the human palate, so even with an equal amount of exposure to both healthy and unhealthy foods, that might explain the difference in recall, she noted.

Advertising makes unhealthy foods seem like something kids should want and something that will make them happy, and parents often end up limiting those foods and positioning them as a “treat,” which can play into kids’ heightened awareness of things like McDonalds, Jones noted.