

Food and beverage advertising to children

The rationale for age 12

There is no global age definition of a child in the context of advertising. But there is a lot of academic evidence which suggests why children under 12 should be treated differently from teenagers in the case of food and non-alcoholic beverage advertising.

The research addresses the question from two perspectives: (a) children's critical understanding of advertising; and (b) the impact of advertising on children's food preferences, choices and behaviours.

This is reflected in some existing national definitions and in other life contexts which infer a threshold for cognitive ability.

The academic evidence

Children's understanding of advertising:

- ***"By about 7 or 8 years of age, children have learned to identify the persuasive intent of advertising, distinguishing it from information. From 12 years of age, children can surely articulate a critical understanding of advertising, even becoming sceptical or distrustful of it."*** (Livingstone Review, for Ofcom, 2006)
- ***"By age 12 children have become acquainted with all aspects of their consumer behavior"*** (The Development of a Child into a Consumer, Vlakenburg and Cantor, 2001)

The impact of food advertising:

- **Influence on purchase requests:** *Strong evidence of influence on children 2-11. Insufficient evidence of influence on teens (12-18).*
- **Influence on food and beverage beliefs:** *Moderate evidence on children 2-11. Insufficient evidence for teens (12-18).*
- **Influence on short-term consumption:** *Strong evidence on children 2-11. Insufficient evidence for teens (12-18).*
- **Influence on usual dietary intake:** *Moderate evidence on children ages 2-5. Weak evidence on children ages 6-11 years. Weak evidence that it does not influence the usual dietary intake of teens (12-18).* (US Institute of Medicine, 2005)

Further information available at http://info.wfa.be/RAC_AgeEvidence_final.pdf

Existing age definitions

Existing advertising definitions:

- **In Sweden and Québec**, the only jurisdictions to apply blanket bans worldwide, restrictions apply to advertising to children under 12 and 13 respectively.
- **The International Chamber of Commerce Code of Advertising Practice and the US Children's Online Privacy Protection Act** both define children as 12 and under for online privacy protection (parental consent requirement).
- **Most advertising standards** define children as 12 (e.g. US, Canada, France, Spain, Mexico, Brazil, etc).

Some societal definitions:

- **The school going age** is similar in most countries, reflecting psychological development: ages 6-12 for primary school, 12-18 for secondary school.
- **Movie and games ratings** usually set cut-off points at ages 12, 15-16 and 18, where the age-12 rating is a step up from Parental Guidance (PG).
- **Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism and Islam** all set the age of maturity at 12-14.

- By the age of 6-8, children understand the persuasive intent of advertising
- Beyond age 12, there is no evidence that food advertising influences children's food preferences, choices or diets. There is some evidence that it does not.
 - Calls for restrictions on food advertising to teenagers (e.g. 16-18) are disproportionate when in most countries at this age they are allowed by law to drink alcohol, smoke, drive, marry and even join the army.