

# Hooked on McDonald's at Age 3

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A family eats at a McDonald's restaurant in Chicago.  
MARK PETERSON / CORBIS

The lure of McDonald's golden arches may take hold at a startlingly early age, according to the latest study on the effects of branding on young children published in the August issue of the *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*.

Researchers at Stanford University found that children as young as three years old responded to the fast food chain's familiar logo and packaging, saying that they preferred the taste of food coming out of McDonald's bags to the taste of the same food items emerging from plain paper bags. The scientists asked 63 children between the ages of three and five to participate in more than 104 taste tests with some of McDonald's most popular items — including a hamburger, French fries and chicken nuggets. On average, 48% of the kids said they preferred the taste of the McDonald's labeled hamburger, compared with 37% who preferred the unmarked burger; 59% liked the McDonald's branded chicken nuggets compared with 18% for the unbranded nuggets, and 77% said the French fries in the bag stamped with the McDonald's arches and a smile tasted better than the fries from a plain white bag.

Parents and child advocacy groups have long maintained that advertising targeted to children can be harmful, since young minds are not able to distinguish truth from advertising. By age two, say the Stanford researchers, children can already form beliefs about brands, and advertising during children's television programming, or through other media accessed by youngsters, further solidifies their ability to distinguish brand names, logos and packaging. Not surprisingly, in the Stanford study,

kids with more access to television in their homes, and those who owned more toys from McDonald's were more likely to say the branded foods were tastier.

"Children under the age of seven or eight really do not have the ability to understand the persuasive intent of advertising and marketing," says Dr. Thomas Robinson, an associate professor of pediatrics at Stanford University and lead author of the study, "so the justification for marketing, which is to inform a consumer, doesn't really hold for them, because they can't understand that advertising is biased."

In a written statement responding to the study, McDonald's spokesman Walt Riker said that the fast food chain "is only advertising Happy Meals with white meat McNuggets, fresh apple slices and lowfat milk," and that the company's recent promotion linked to the popular animated movie *Shrek* was McDonald's "biggest-ever promotion of fruits, vegetables, and milk — another indication of our progressive approach to responsible marketing."

While commendable, says Robinson, it's hardly enough. He argues that there should be no advertising at all aimed at children under the age of eight, even if it could be harnessed to teach kids about healthy eating habits. In fact, Robinson's own study hinted at such a possibility — two of the five items the kids tasted were healthy, baby carrots and milk — and the children still liked the taste of these items more when they were presented in McDonald's packaging than when they were offered in unmarked containers. But, says Robinson, "If healthful foods still represent the minority of choices available, then [McDonald's] will continue to promote the consumption of the junk foods that kids have been eating."

Dr. Victor Strasburger, professor of pediatrics at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine and a spokesperson for the American Academy of Pediatrics, says "using advertising in a positive way just doesn't sit right with me. It's Orwellian. To put it bluntly, advertising to children under the age of seven or eight is electronic child abuse. I think we ought to leave kids who are under seven or eight out of all advertising."

In response to the growing obesity problem in the U.S., companies including McDonald's, Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, Kellogg, and Kraft created the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative last year to self-regulate the \$10 billion worth of food and beverage messages they aim at young children each year. The initiative pledges to promote healthy lifestyles for youngsters by giving them healthier food and drink choices. It's a good start, says Robinson. "So far we have seen baby steps toward improving

menus," he says, "but it remains to be seen whether these companies will follow through on their promises. If the fast-food industry were to start including more healthful foods in their menus, so that the majority of the foods were healthful, then they could have a very important effect on improving the diets of children," says Robinson. And on proving that there might be such a thing as truth in advertising.