

# DIGITAL FOOD MARKETING: What parents and caregivers need to know

Healthy  
Eating  
Research

Younger kids and teens are spending more time online – on their phones, tablets, and computers. This is one reason food, beverage, and restaurant companies have increased marketing of their products on social media and video platforms, mobile apps, livestream gaming, websites, and streaming TV. Food companies spend billions of dollars each year to market sugary drinks, fast food, candy, and other unhealthy snacks that aren't good for kids. What's even more worrying is that this marketing can reach kids anytime and anywhere and is designed to take advantage of kids' developing minds. It's important to understand what kids are seeing online, why it can be a problem, and how you can protect them from harmful digital food marketing.

## What foods are marketed to children online and where?

The most common types of foods marketed to kids online are **fast food, salty snacks, candy, sweet snacks, and sugary drinks**. These ads appear on **social media platforms** like Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat; **video sharing sites** like YouTube and TikTok; **gaming platforms** like Roblox and Minecraft; **livestream gaming** on Twitch and Facebook Gaming; and **mobile apps and websites**.

Younger kids see more ads for candy and sweet snacks, while older kids and teenagers see more ads for snack foods. **About 75% of kids have seen ads for energy drinks.**

Adolescents  
see an estimated  
**16 to 35 food brand  
messages per hour.**

Younger kids see  
**3 to 8 food brand  
messages per hour.**

## Digital food marketing reaches kids anytime, anywhere

Digital food marketing reaches kids through the online platforms they visit the most, and through the people and places around them, like friends and schools. In return, the things kids do online create data that is collected and then shared with advertisers. Digital platforms (like Google, Amazon, and Meta) collect and sell children's personal data and allow food companies to use that data to precisely target marketing to kids tailored to their interests and behaviors.

1

Food companies create their own content and buy ads that attract kids

### FOOD COMPANIES

Games, promotions, and cartoon characters on **food brand websites**

Engaging posts on food brands' **social media** and **video sharing** accounts

Food brand messages placed within other online **entertainment content**

**Banner and video ads** on websites

**Apps** from food brands with deals to get people to buy more

2

Digital marketing links kids' devices to their physical environment

### IN THEIR COMMUNITY

Ads on **digital billboards**

**Digital ads** around schools are timed so kids see them when going to/from school

**Mobile apps** send deals to people nearby

### AT SCHOOL

**Digital ads** on educational websites

**Food marketing and location tracking** on both school and personal devices

3

Food companies' messages reach kids' social lives

### INFLUENCERS & CELEBRITIES

**Influencers make videos** showing themselves eating or promoting food

**Livestream gamers** promote and eat food while gaming

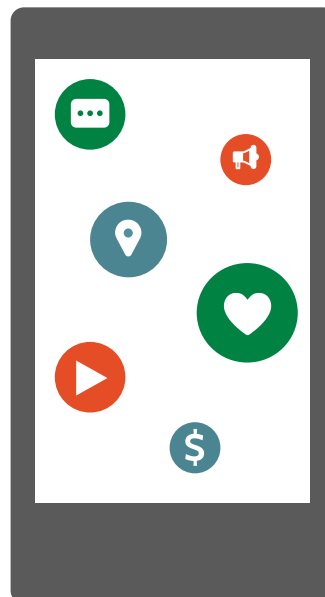
Influencers and celebrities **post ads** on social media

### FRIENDS/ PEERS

Talking about brands in **livestream chats**

Joining in **viral marketing challenges**

**Liking and sharing** food branded posts and videos



# Digital food marketing might be more harmful than traditional TV ads

## USES KIDS' INFORMATION TO TARGET WHAT THEY SEE

- Companies use kids' personal information—like their current location, online behaviors, or social media posts—to show them marketing designed to appeal to them. For example, fast-food companies might show ads to someone nearby.
- Food companies also design content to appeal to certain cultural or ethnic groups and target kids who identify with those groups. Companies target Black and Latino youth with marketing for their least healthy foods and drinks.
- Digital marketing promotes unhealthy foods and drinks that can harm kids' health and contribute to health disparities affecting youth in communities of color.

## BECOMES PART OF KIDS' SOCIAL LIVES

- Ads reach kids on their mobile devices at any time and anywhere.
- Marketing messages shared by friends are more persuasive than traditional ads.
- It's difficult for parents to keep track of or control what their kids see online all day.

## MISLEADS KIDS

- Online food marketing takes advantage of kids' trust in people they see online, like influencers and celebrities.
- Food and drink ads online are often hidden or disguised within entertaining videos, games, and posts from friends, making them more difficult to recognize than regular ads.
- Even if kids know it's marketing, they can still be influenced by it. When an influencer says, "a company paid me," kids trust them even more!

## CHANGES BEHAVIORS AND BELIEFS ABOUT FOOD

- Like traditional TV ads, digital food marketing makes kids prefer and eat more of the unhealthy brands marketed to them.
- Digital food marketing also makes consuming these brands seem cool, fun, adventurous – and normal.

## What can parents and caregivers do?

### SET DIGITAL BOUNDARIES

1. Choose commercial-free content for younger kids.
2. Set mobile device-free zones and times, like meals and bedtime.
3. Model good online behavior by setting personal digital boundaries and protecting digital privacy.

### PROTECT YOUR KIDS' DIGITAL PRIVACY *Encourage your teenagers to do the same.*

1. Set privacy settings as high as possible - Disable location tracking, data sharing, third-party cookies, and advertising when possible.
2. Skip it if not required - Don't provide info that's not needed when making an account.
3. Clean their devices - Remove apps they don't use and clean cookies and browsing history.
4. Clean online profiles - Delete profiles they don't use and remove comments.

### ADVOCATE FOR DIGITAL PRIVACY

1. Ask your schools about their use of technology and digital privacy using [these sample questions](#).
2. Join an advisory board to create recommendations for your school district (see [these Sample District-Wide Recommendations](#)).
3. Join the [Phone-Free Schools Movement](#).
4. Learn more about policy and other actions you can take at [fairplayforkids.org/act](#), [designitforus.org/take-action](#), and [democraticmedia.org/](#).

