

The Influence of Characters on a Child's Preference

By Dr. Linda Carson, founder of Choosy Kids, LLC

We are all victims of food, beverage, and media marketing. And every parent has experienced the “pester power” that children impose on us at the grocery store or toy store because of what they saw on TV. Research has indicated that children often select and prefer the taste of foods when a character appears on the packaging. Does this sound familiar to you?

We know more about how characters influence nutrition choices but less about how characters might influence preferences for physical activity. We want our children to develop preferences for both healthy nutrition and physical activities that support the development of motor skills, self-selected active play, creative expression, and problem solving through movement. Many of the food and beverage characters only promote eating but not exercise.

Your child's small circle of significant influencers can help change that! Usually the influencers of children include their family and teachers, but could also expand to include their faith based leaders, their doctor and dentist, and coaches. If you asked your children who they look up to, they may also say their favorite cartoon character, super hero or another fictional character. This is the influence of media we are talking about. American children view an estimated \$1.6 billion a year worth of food and beverage marketing, and many of those ads are for foods that are high in calories and sugar, but low in nutrition and totally don't even mention physical activity. Think of the characters that promote these foods. We could all name a handful I am sure!

While we wait for food and beverage companies to begin using children's characters to market only healthy products and physical activity, it is up to you, your family and the other significant influencers to share and repeat consistent health messaging to your child. One thing that your family can do is take advantage of what we know from research - create your own or introduce a familiar character to help deliver messages about healthy nutrition, activities that help make your body healthy, and appropriate dental health behaviors. If the character promotes it, the child is likely to be influenced by the character's preferences! What a concept!

Your character could still be the super hero or princess they already adore. You can just create healthy scenarios for them! My character that I like to use is named Choosy. Choosy's name stands for:

Choose
Healthy
Options
Often &
Start
Young®



If you want to use Choosy as the healthy hero in your home, go ahead!