

# The nag factor: How do children convince their parents to buy unhealthy foods?

August 15 2011

---

The Nag Factor: How do very young children get their parents to buy foods and beverages of low nutritional value?

Sure they're fun and kids love them, but could [cartoon characters](#) used in marketing contribute to the obesity epidemic as well as create nagging [children](#)? Today, some parents find themselves having a battle in the cereal aisle. Recognizable characters and logos prompt children to make repeated requests for a range of products including low nutritional foods and beverages. To better understand the media's impact on children's health, a team of researchers from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health examined the "Nag Factor." The "Nag Factor" is the tendency of children, who are bombarded with marketers' messages, to unrelentingly request advertised items. Researchers explored whether and how mothers of young children have experienced this phenomenon and strategies for coping. The results are featured in the August 2011 issue of the *Journal of Children and Media*.

"As researchers continue to investigate factors influencing the [childhood obesity epidemic](#), attention often turns towards the marketing and consumption of [junk food](#)," said Dina Borzekowski, EdD, EdM, MA, senior author of the study and an associate professor with the Bloomberg School's Department of Health, Behavior and Society. "Clearly, children are not the primary shoppers in the households, so how do child-oriented, low-nutrition foods and beverages enter the homes and diets of young children? Our study indicates that while overall media use was not associated with nagging, one's familiarity with commercial television

characters was significantly associated with overall and specific types of nagging. In addition, mothers cited packaging, characters, and commercials as the three main forces compelling their children to nag."

Using quantitative and qualitative methodologies, researchers interviewed 64 mothers of children ages 3 to 5 years between October 2006 and July 2007. Mothers answered questions about the household environment, themselves, their child's demographics, media use, eating and shopping patterns, and requests for advertised items. Participants were also asked to describe their experiences and strategies for dealing with the "Nag Factor." Researchers selected mothers as interview subjects because they are most likely to act as "nutritional gatekeepers" for their household and control the food purchasing and preparation for small children. Borzekowski and colleagues found that nagging seemed to fall into three categories: juvenile nagging, nagging to test boundaries, and manipulative nagging. Mothers consistently cited 10 strategies for dealing with the nagging; the strategies included giving in, yelling, ignoring, distracting, staying calm and consistent, avoiding the commercial environment, negotiating and setting rules, allowing alternative items, explaining the reasoning behind choices, and limiting commercial exposure.

"Our study indicates that manipulative nagging and overall nagging increased with age," said Holly Henry, MHS, lead author of the study and a PhD candidate with the Bloomberg School's Department of Health, Behavior and Society. "When it comes to the most commonly cited strategies for dealing with nagging, 36 percent of mothers suggested limiting commercial exposure and 35 percent of mothers suggested simply explaining to children the reasons behind making or not making certain purchases. Giving in was consistently cited as one of the least effective strategies. This unique study offers a platform from which to propose future research and policies to lessen children's repeated requests for advertised items."

Borzekowski adds, "To address childhood obesity, it may be necessary to limit the amount of food and beverage advertising shown on commercial television and other media, as this may lessen children's nagging for unhealthy items."

**More information:** "The 'Nag Factor' a mixed-methodology study in the U.S. of young children's requests for advertised products" was written by Holly K. M. Henry and Dina L. G. Borzekowski.

Provided by Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health

Citation: The nag factor: How do children convince their parents to buy unhealthy foods? (2011, August 15) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-08-nag-factor-children-convince-parents.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.