

The Nagging Question: How Checkout Undermines Parental Choice

Shopping for a family is hard enough. Grocery stores place unhealthy food and drinks at checkout, making parents' jobs harder.

- Checkout is filled with food and drinks that are overwhelmingly unhealthy.
- Placing unhealthy products near the register is a powerful form of marketing that captivates children's attention and ignites parent-child conflict.
- Marketers count on children to pester and wear parents down to purchase their products.

Grocers should stick to the healthy stuff and stock parent-friendly, kid-safe options at checkout.

Candy, sugary drinks, and salty snacks dominate checkout aisles.¹

- In checkout lanes, 90% of food options are unhealthy, such as candy, chips, and cookies, and 60% of the beverages are sugar-sweetened, such as soda, juice drinks, and sweet tea.²
- Candy occupies more space at checkout than any other food or beverage. It is available in more than 90% of grocery checkout lanes.³

"It's frustrating that we have to fight."
—San Francisco mother¹⁵

Placing low-nutrition food and beverages in high traffic areas in stores is marketing to children.

- In-store marketing is so effective that food manufacturers now spend three-times more on it than on other advertising.⁴
- Food manufacturers spend more than \$113 million on in-store promotions aimed at children, including cartoon characters on and toys in product packages.⁵
- Food manufacturers pay even more to place products in prime locations like checkout, which can be eight times as profitable per square foot as other locations in the store.⁶
- At checkout, candy, soda, and chips are typically at eye level and within reach, setting the stage for conflict between parents and their children.⁷
- Parents can choose to avoid the candy and soda aisles, but they cannot avoid checkout.

Unhealthy checkout puts parents in a tough position—battling food marketing while balancing children's health and happiness.

- Three-quarters of parents report that it is hard to shop at grocery stores because unhealthy food is so prevalent.⁸
- Children do not understand the complexities of good nutrition or the long-term consequences of their actions. Children's focus is more immediate, making them more vulnerable to marketing.⁹
- The National Academy of Medicine has concluded that food marketing puts children's health at risk, affecting their food preferences, diets, and health.¹⁰
- Parents typically resist children's demands for food and beverages. A survey found that parents said no three times for every time they said yes.¹¹ But

"It makes me upset just because I want to make my kids happy. Me, personally, as a single mom working outside the home, [I have] only so many hours with my children and that's [unhealthy foods] what they want. You want to give it to them."

—Phoenix mother¹⁵

parents do eventually give in—66% report buying their children snacks at least some of the time when shopping.¹²

- These pressures are particularly challenging for low-income families. Saying “yes” to inexpensive candy at checkout may be one of the few opportunities low-income parents have to oblige children’s requests.¹³

All the small battles “can weigh you down.”
—Atlanta mother¹⁵

Supermarkets, other retailers, and food manufacturers should support, not undermine parents at checkout.

- Getting unhealthy food and beverages out of checkout makes “it easy for parents to say ‘Yes’ to something healthy, rather than forcing them to say ‘No’ to something unhealthy.”¹⁴
- 80% of parents say they would regularly use healthy checkout aisles if stores offered them.¹⁰
- Parents have responded positively to stores that have made changes at checkout. For example, when Martin’s grocery stores featured Healthy Idea Lanes with better-for-you snacks, parents said they used these lanes to avoid buying candy for their children.

“The food industry brings in serious muscle to bully us into eating too much of all the wrong things.... Any conversation about personal responsibility or public policy that fails to acknowledge this reality is either disingenuous or uninformed. We have not a shred of evidence that the average, loving, busy parent of today is intrinsically less responsible than the average, loving, busy parent of yesterday. Yet that parent of today is far more likely to be obese and/or diabetic, and to have children who are obese and at risk for diabetes.”¹⁶

For more information or to discuss healthy retail opportunities, contact the Center for Science in the Public Interest at policy@cspinet.org.

¹ Miller C, Bodor JN, Rose D. Measuring the food environment: a systematic technique for characterizing food stores using display counts. *J Environ Public Health*. 2012;1-6.

² Fielding-Singh P, Almy J, Wootan MG. *Sugar Overload: Retail Checkout Promotes Obesity*. Washington, DC: Center for Science in the Public Interest, 2014. <https://cspinet.org/sites/default/files/attachment/sugaroverload.pdf>.

³ Masterfoods, TDS, Wrigley, Dechert-Hampe & Co. *Front End Merchandising and Operations Management*. Northbrook, IL: Masterfoods, 2010. <http://www.frontendfocus.com/documents/publications/FEF%20Merchandising%20and%20Operations%20Management.pdf>.

⁴ Rivlin G. *Rigged: Supermarket Shelves for Sale*. Washington, DC: Center for Science in the Public Interest, 2016. https://cspinet.org/sites/default/files/attachment/Rigged%20report_0.pdf.

⁵ U.S. Federal Trade Commission. *A Review of Marketing Food to Children and Adolescents: Follow-up Report*. Washington, DC: Federal Trade Commission, 2012. <http://www.ftc.gov/os/2012/12/121221foodmarketingreport.pdf>.

⁶ Mogelonsky M. Keep candy in the aisles. *Am Demographics*. 1998;20:32.

⁷ Horsley JA, Absalom KAR, Akiens EM, Dunk RJ, Ferguson AM. The proportion of unhealthy foodstuffs children are exposed to at the checkout of convenience supermarkets. *Public Health Nutr*. November 2014;17(11):2453-2458.

⁸ Checkout Polling: Online Survey of 1,024 adults. Princeton, NJ: Caravan ORC International, December 1–4, 2016.

⁹ Carter OBJ, Patterson LJ, Donovan RJ, Ewing MT, Roberts CM. Children’s understanding of the selling versus persuasive intent of junk food advertising: implications for regulation. *Social Sci Med*. 2011;72:962-968.

¹⁰ Institute of Medicine, National Academies. *Food Marketing to Children and Youth: Threat or Opportunity?* Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2006.

¹¹ Buijzen M, Valkenburg PM. Observing purchase-related parent-child communication in retail environments: a developmental and socialization perspective. *Health Commun Res*. 2008;34:50-69.

¹² Lidl Grocery Store. *Children’s Diets Challenged by Supermarket Checkout Chocolates*. Lidl Grocery Store, 2014. http://www.lidl.co.uk/cps/rde/SID-D3C46D2F-8007A714/www_lidl_uk/hs.xsl/5028.htm.

¹³ Fielding-Singh P. Why do poor Americans eat so unhealthfully? Because junk food is the only indulgence they can afford. *Los Angeles Times*, February 7, 2018. <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-singh-food-deserts-nutritional-disparities-20180207-story.html>.

¹⁴ Lidl Grocery Store. *Lidl Healthy Checkouts—Q & A Document*. London, UK: Bell Pottinger, 2014.

¹⁵ Findings from focus groups among mothers on food and beverage marketing to children. Washington, DC: KRC Research, 2014.

¹⁶ Katz DL. My conversation with Michael Moss: bullies, bodies, and the body politic. *Huffington Post*, March 1, 2013. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-katz-md/food-industry-health_b_2775984.html.