

CRUNCH BITES PODCAST

BITE SIZED CHILDREN'S NUTRITION INFO

Episode 8: Easily influenced? Overexposure to junk food advertising and how it's impacting our kids with Emma Groves

Mikala: Hello, and welcome to Crunch Bites, a podcast for parents where we discuss all things children's nutrition and inspire you to build those healthy habits in the home. Join us as we chat about picky eating, reaching for rainbow foods, packing school lunches that actually get eaten, and so much more. Brought to you by Crunch and Sip and presented by Qualified Nutritionists. This podcast is packed with goodness and full of fresh ideas.

Hi everyone, and welcome to today's Crunch Bites episode. I'd like to start by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet, the Whadjuk people of the Noongar Nation, and recognize their continuing connection to land, waters, and community. I also pay my respect to their elders and extend that respect to Aboriginal peoples living and working in all areas and listening in today.

Today's episode is brought to you by cauliflower. Our cauliflower is a very versatile veggie. It's packed with vitamin C, K, and folate, and it's really naturally low in sodium and high fibre. So, it's a bit of a winner in our household. Today we are interviewing Emma Groves, who is the Senior Obesity Policy Coordinator with Cancer Council WA. And welcome, Emma.

Emma: Good morning.

Mikala: I believe you're a big fan of a cauliflower, Emma.

Emma: I love cauliflower, particularly roasted. Delicious.

Mikala: Yeah, they are. They are a super scrummy veggie. So today we are talking about the food environment. We're going to have a chat with Emma about the work that she does around the policy space, the food environment, how the environment impacts on our kids. And as parents, what you can do about the environment around you if you have concerns or you feel like something needs changing or you need support. A good starting point, Emma, would be to tell us a little bit about yourself, a bit about your background, a bit about the work that you have done in the past.

Emma: Sure. So, my background is as a dietitian. So that was what I studied at university and I've been a dietitian ever since. However, working clinically, very quickly on, I had a big interest in public health. So, what that means is rather than working with individuals, I sort of take a step back. And so why do so many of us really struggle to eat the healthy diets we aspire to? So, we're looking at sort of more of the population level. What are the real drivers? Or why, you know, all of us don't get as much fruit and vegetables and whole grains as what we would like to.

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Mikala: Yeah, okay. Really important work, definitely. And so, then when you come into the Cancer Council space, what does that mean? What sort of projects are you working on?

Emma: Yeah, so at Cancer Council in Western Australia, we're particularly interested in food advertising that children are exposed to, but also the food environment at that real neighbourhood, our local level. So, when we're in the suburbs that we live in, what access to our food outlets do we have? So, for example, looking at the ways in which fast food outlets are approved. We've got lots of instances where fast food outlets are approved next to schools and really against what community want. And we know that that's not going to be very great for children's health and also with food advertising, looking at how much food advertising is around schools and the advertising that children are exposed to on a daily basis.

Mikala: Yeah, which I can definitely say from my own experience, you know, the world around us has definitely changed a lot. You know, just in so much as exposure to advertising, say, for example, from home to school and, you know, how much more kind of visually engaging and enticing advertising is. I mean, that has been a fairly steep progression, hasn't it? That the design of that space has evolved a lot.

Emma: Children are exposed to so much advertising and junk food advertising makes up a massive component of that. We looked at advertising, I think it was sort of up to two-thirds of all the outdoor advertising they see is for food and drinks. And then when you look at the food and drinks they're exposed to, again, about 80% of that is the junk food. It's the fast food meals, the sugary drinks, and alcohol advertising. So, when we look at what is being advertised to children, it's all the things that we at home are really trying to tell our children to avoid. But yet the food industry and the food system that they're growing, you know, growing about their day in is sort of prompting the exact opposite.

Mikala: And is that different in different parts of the state, in different suburbs, in different towns? You know, how does that vary when you sort of satellite out from the city?

Emma: Well, we know a lot of international evidence that people living in sort of more lower-income suburbs are exposed to a lot more unhealthy food and drink advertising. We do have a little bit of that evidence here in Perth. We haven't looked at the amount of outdoor advertising in our regional or remote communities. However, in the metro area of Perth, there certainly was more advertising in lower-income suburbs and a high proportion of that advertising for unhealthy food and drinks. So unfortunately, there is a gradient there where families who are already, you know, having an uphill battle to feed their children well, they're going to be exposed to more junk food advertising, but also they're being exposed to more fast-food outlets because there is the same gradient number of fast-food outlets in sort of more lower-income suburbs than the higher income suburbs.

Mikala: Yeah, which is such a shame really, because we know that what we want to be really readily accessible is the healthy whole food options and, you know, building those skills and actually helping families to cook healthy food well, rather than capitalising or, you know, preying on their wallet and trying to take those dollars.

Emma: Yeah, we all want to eat well. There's not one family out there who would say, no, I don't want my family to eat a healthy diet. And yet these foods, the unhealthy foods, the highly processed foods are so well marketed that they're sort of, they become quite appealing. They're marketed as the affordable choice and they're the most available. They're open 24-7. They're in, you know when we go into the supermarket, they're in your face, they're on the end of every aisle. They're when we enter, they're when we exit. So, of course, they end up being a major part of our diets.

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Mikala: And, I mean, when we talk about impact, impact on children, impact on health, impact on families, what does that mean? What is the impact itself?

Emma: Yes, the reason why we're so interested in, you know, eating well is because it is such a driver of chronic disease later in life. So, we live in a world where tobacco use has always been the leading cause of preventable disease. And now living with overweight and obesity and poor diets is second and third to tobacco use and rapidly on the incline. So, we really, it's a real priority to get people to eat well and support people to eat well, because that's going to prevent chronic disease later in life. And when it comes to kids, you know, we all know a healthy diet is important to kids for their growth, for their development, you know, so they live, grow up to be really strong, healthy adults. But when we look at their diet now, the latest stat is 40% of their diet is from discretionary foods. So, 40% of their diet is coming from these really highly processed foods, high in sugar, high in salt, high in energy, I suppose. And it's really displacing all those other parts of the diet, which should be a core part of their diet.

Mikala: Yeah, absolutely. So, that's referring to those core food groups that in my work in the Crunch and Sip team, we spend so much time talking to parents about, and that's your, you know, your whole grains, your dairy, your meat and meat alternatives, your fruits, and your veggies, keeping it nice and simple, reaching for all those whole foods.

Emma: That's right.

Mikala: So, to try and address this and to assist families and to provide more support, what is being done at a higher level when we consider this environment that families are growing up in?

Emma: So, at Cancer Council, we're looking at policies that we can implement at the state level. So, one of our big priorities is talking to the state government to remove junk food advertising off their own property. So, this is like school buses, train stations, any property that the government own, we're saying, hey, don't put junk food advertising on that. So, we are really driving and supporting government to really implement these policies to reduce children's exposure to junk food advertising. And that's also happening at the federal level. We're really trying to push for some standards around the way that junk food advertising has been exposed to children federally. So, that would cover things like when they're online, protecting them when they're online when they're scrolling through their social media or visiting websites that they frequently use. It's when they're watching TV or streaming services. It's when they're sitting down and watching the footy with their family on the weekend. You know, so much of our national professional sport is just covered in junk food advertising. It's just covered, that and alcohol advertising. So, there's a lot of work federally to try and protect kids to the exposure on that level.

Mikala: It just sounds like such important work because, I mean, if you're catching a bus or walking to school or hopping on a train, you know, they're essential modes of transport or they're essential, you know, trips from home to school. So, fair enough that that experience, that that transit time should actually be free of big industry trying to make money off people. So, you know, I think that's wonderful. I really hope that that grows wings and that, you know, government actually listens.

Emma: It needs to. We know that junk food advertising or children's exposure to this advertising influences the types of foods and drinks that they want, their preferences, what they're asking for at home. It influences their brand loyalty to these companies and we know that it actually impacts their diet. So, it has to be an absolute priority if we want to improve children's diets to reduce their exposure to all the junk food advertising.

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Mikala: But I imagine the online space is extremely complex and a hard one for regulation.

Emma: It's hard to even know how much junk food advertising they've been exposed to online because everyone's, each child's feed is individual, I suppose, and it's been called dark advertising because there is actually no way, very, very hard to monitor what they've been exposed to. There are some researchers now that are trying to watch what children are viewing online and so that they can record the amount of advertising they've been exposed to. But it is, you're right, very hard space to work in, and all the more reason why we need to set some real standards and protect children when they're online.

Mikala: Yep, absolutely. So, then building on that, for parents who might be listening today and have concerns, you know, or feel like, yes, they are actually seeing impact or they're, you know, really noticing that pester power taking hold, what can parents do about it?

Emma: Yeah, so I would say start local, see what they're being exposed to locally. Like if you've got a local sporting club that you're part involved with and you've been approached by a fast food outlet who wants to sponsor the team, for example, maybe say no and explore some different fundraising opportunities and sponsorship opportunities and try not to go with the big fast food outlets there. If you are part of a residential estate, perhaps, and you can see that a fast food outlet has been proposed, you can actually object to that proposal and get a community group together and really share your concerns with the local council there to really try and push for that land use for a drive-through fast food outlet next to the school to not be approved. So, it's just looking at maybe those sort of more local areas where you're seeing it in your community and seeing what you can do there.

Mikala: Yeah, wonderful. The fundraising angle is a great one. I think people don't realise that there's actually so many healthy ways to fundraise within a school or within a sporting club that give you back that control and that do move away from that unhealthy food industry approach. Within my kids' primary school, we did this really fun sock fundraising activity, which is working with a company called Hearty Socks. They provide boxes for each child and the box has got all the different sizes of socks and they're covered in really cool animations and people can buy one pair or buy four pairs. It was just a brilliant fundraiser because everyone needs socks. They're actually essential and it's a sustainable approach as well. So, yeah, I think that's something that you can tool up with. There is a fantastic resource on the WA School Canteen Association website called Healthy Fundraising Ideas. So, we can put the link in the notes for this podcast if people are interested in finding out a little bit more.

Emma: There's also grants that are available. You could contact Healthway and Healthway do have some grants available for local sporting clubs who do want to support some healthy advertising and support children to be healthy and participate in sport in a way that facilitates their health. Even maybe your local council, your local state MP might also have some community grants that they know of that sporting clubs can apply for.

Mikala: Yeah, brilliant. So, there's some good ideas there. It's really great to hear that there are support pathways and that parents aren't alone. So, Emma, if we want to give people some really short, sharp takeaways today, you know, thinking about everything that we've covered, if we want to give them just a few pointers to sort of hold on to, what would you leave the listeners with?

Emma: Yeah, I think just be aware of all the food advertising that's out there. I think we have someone who started working at Cants Council in the last six months and he says that he can't now unsee the amount of food advertising. He wasn't really that aware of it, but now that we're talking about it, you can't see it. So, maybe just have a look at what's out there. Have a lookout where you're driving to work or where you're driving the kids to school,

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what's out there, what's on the TV, and maybe have those chats to the children around what advertising they're being exposed to so that they can be, you know, savvy to the marketing tactics that are out there. We don't want to let the food industry off the hook and say, well, our children are savvy. Therefore, they don't need to be regulated. But at the same time, we do need to raise children that are really savvy to all the things that are out there.

Mikala: That's brilliant advice. I really like that actually. And it's good for me, I'll keep that front of mind with my own too, because obviously it's an area I work in, but it's great to be reminded or to have that, to shine a light on the need to actually keep those conversations flowing. And like you say, we're not going to let the food industry off the hook, but we absolutely need to be making informed choices and moving about the world with our eyes wide open. So, Emma, thank you. That was a wonderful, wonderful episode to share with you. Really appreciate you coming on board and telling us about the work that you do. If anyone would like more information or, you know, is interested in reaching out for a bit of support, please get in touch with us. Please also like, share, and follow our podcast. And we look forward to chatting to you next time. Thanks for joining us, everyone.

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