Playing games is an integral part of childhood and adolescence. However, electronic games currently include advertisements and marketing for unhealthy foods and beverages, and gaming often involves long periods of sitting with little movement. Games can play a role on the

(i) the *energy intake* side of the equation; and 
(ii) the *energy expenditure* side of the equation.

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(i) **Energy intake exemplars: Advergames**
Advergames are online games that market specific brands or products, frequently food products. Advergames appear on most children’s websites, yet young children do not understand that advertisements and marketing techniques are meant to persuade them to buy a product.

**Research findings:**
- Youth who play advergames are more likely to remember the marketed products, form positive attitudes about the products, and want to purchase and consume the products.
- Youth associate the product with the fun experience of game play. In other words, while playing the game, the child often forms brand loyalty that can translate into brand preferences and purchases without being consciously aware of those influences.

**Recommendations:**
- Because nearly all food advergames promote foods and beverages that are high in calories and added sugar, a key policy goal is to require advergames to contain healthier food and beverage choices or health-promoting messages when geared toward children.
- Self-regulatory industry practices could be coupled with legal sanctions that might deter unfair practices if industry does not regulate itself effectively.
- Ad breaks and media literacy campaigns are recommended to teach children to recognize advertisements and marketing techniques so the children can make more informed food choices, though these practices would remain ineffective for young children who do not understand that the intent of commercials is to sell them a product.

(ii) **Energy expenditure exemplars: “Exergames”**
Exergames are popular game activities among youth that involve moderate levels of physical activity.

**Research findings:**
- Exergames can promote cardiovascular health, aerobic fitness, and weight loss.
Policy recommendations:

- Funding research on the specific aspects of exergaming that promote maximal physical health benefits is needed to specify and implement how exergaming best promotes physical activity and weight loss.

- Exergaming should be incorporated into physical activity recommendations established by governmental and school policies.

- Public-private partnerships between science and policy create a window of opportunity to promote pediatric physical activity within a gaming environment.

Conclusion

Policymakers have a challenge to balance the alleged negative effects of gaming, involving the increased caloric intake prompted by most advergame play and the sedentary activity involved in many traditional video games, with the potentially positive health benefits of game play. The melding of electronic games with the health of children and adolescents is an intersection of science and social policy, gathering social scientists, game developers, and policy makers who can develop innovative, effective games that are engaging and fun to the many digital natives that are in great need of a much healthier lifestyle.


About SPSSI

The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) is an international group of approximately 3000 psychologists, allied scientists, students, and others who share a common interest in research on the psychological aspects of important social issues. In various ways, the Society seeks to bring theory and practice into focus on human problems of the group, the community, and nations, as well as the increasingly important problems that have no national boundaries.

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