

## Ad-dicted kids?

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AUGUSTA -- They're cute.

They're cuddly.

And they're trying to hook your kids -- even babies -- on junk food, for the rest of their lives.

"They" are any of a wide range of youth icons -- from SpongeBob Squarepants to characters on public television -- thought up by marketers in an effort to win kids' attention and their parents' money.

That was the message delivered by a psychologist and author who has written extensively about the effects of commercial marketing on kids at a conference Wednesday.

"I know a woman -- a very educated woman -- whose child's first words were 'Elmo, Nemo, and Coke,'" Susan Linn said at the Maine-Harvard Prevention Research Center's "What Marketers are Feeding our Kids" forum at the Augusta Civic Center.

"Preschoolers can't tell the difference between a commercial and a television program. And until the age of 8, they can't understand persuasive intent. They can't understand the concept of selling. They don't get it. They can't defend against it. And it's not fair we're doing this to them," she added. The forum was billed as "confronting the link between food advertising and youth obesity."

Linn said marketers even target infants in hopes they'll identify with a certain brand and remain loyal to it as they grow older.

She cited a wide range products, including what she described as junk food, marketed by cartoon characters such as Dora the Explorer and Blues Clues. There are books for babies designed to look like M&M's packages, intended, she said, to make babies associate the candy with the comfort of their parents' voices as they read to them.

"It's a way of getting into babies' brains," said Linn, who is also a ventriloquist and children's entertainer. "That's what we're up against. A lot of Americans believe parents can just say no. But I believe parents need help. We need to address it as a society."

She advocated a ban on marketing to young children.

The workshop, attended by some 200 health advocates, state officials and other health and youth advocates, was sponsored by the Maine Center for Public Health, Harvard Prevention Research Center and Maine Bureau of Health.

The state and Harvard University conduct health research through the Maine-Harvard Research Partnership.

Workshop participants also watched a live theater presentation, "This is Your Life," addressing nutrition, fitness and youth obesity.

Richard Veilleux, leader of a project seeking to provide more healthful food in Portland schools, and Anne-Marie Davee, leader of an experiment in several Maine schools seeking to get students to eat healthful foods, spoke of their efforts.

Davee said she was "horrified" when she saw what many high school students are eating for lunch, such as bags of chips or cookies purchased out of vending machines located in school hallways.

Participants in the workshop took breaks for walks and did some group knee-bends and marching in place, with many taking a break to munch on muffins and coffee cake at mid-morning.

They also watched the movie "Super Size Me -- a Film of Epic Portions."

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