

« FOOD MARKETING TO CHILDREN »

Editorial

Regulations do change eating behavior

Research shows what sells food to kids: cartoons, celebrities, commercials on their favorite television programs, and toys in Happy Meals. This kind of marketing induces kids to want the products, pester their parents for them, and throw tantrums if parents say no. Marketing makes kids think they are supposed to eat advertised foods, and so undermines parental authority.

Public health officials look for ways to intervene, given their particular legislated mandates and authority. But much as they might like to, they can't do much about marketing to children. Food and beverage companies invoke the First Amendment to protect their "right" to market junk foods to kids. They lobby Congress on this issue so effectively that they even managed to block the Federal Trade Commission's proposed nonbinding, voluntary nutrition standards for marketing food to kids.

Canadian researchers report that kids are three times more likely to choose healthier meals if those meals come with a toy and the regular ones do not. When it comes to kids' food choices, the meal with the toy is invariably the default.

A recent study in Pediatrics compared obesity rates in kids living in states with and without restrictions on the kinds of foods sold in schools. Guess what – the kids living in states where schools don't sell junk food are not as overweight.

Circulation has just published an American Heart Association review of "evidence-based population approaches" to improving diets. It concludes that evidence supports the value of intense media campaigns, on-site educational programs in stores, subsidies for fruits and vegetables, taxes, school gardens, worksite wellness programs and restrictions on marketing to children.

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Energy-dense nutrient-poor food marketing to children through product packaging: a problem for health and parenting

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Food marketing targeting children

Research conducted by Flinders University in South Australia, on marketing through child-oriented food product packaging, found high volume and power of marketing energy-dense nutrient-poor foods (EDNP)¹. A large supermarket chain was chosen because the Australian supermarket sector is controlled by two large supermarket chains which essentially sell similar products. Food products in all aisles were assessed for inclusion as child-oriented, using a set of marketing criteria commonly accepted by researchers in this field (see paper for details¹). The study found 157 discrete child-oriented products with 75% representing EDNP foods; confectionary, chocolate and snacks were the highest categories of EDNP foods. There was strong occurrence of marketing techniques that appeal to children, such as graphics (99% products), cartoons and celebrities (85% products), claims about health and nutrition (64% products) and cross promotions (77% products). Children are known to be highly attracted to cartoon characters, celebrities and animals, and to prefer foods with cartoon iconography over foods with plain packaging. Parents in Australia have consistently called for restrictions on the use of cartoon and celebrity characters in marketing foods to children. Many marketing techniques (more than 16 unique marketing techniques) were used, with a median of six marketing techniques per product. There was no significant difference between the application of marketing techniques to healthy or EDNP foods, indicating that food companies appear not to prejudice their marketing towards EDNP foods; this may be exploited in the future for the social marketing of healthy foods to children.

Energy-dense nutrient-poor food marketing should be restricted to prevent childhood obesity

Energy-dense nutrient-poor food marketing targeting children has been identified as contributing to the problem of childhood

obesity and we have consequently seen the food industry reduce television advertising to children. However the problem of children's exposure has not gone away as marketing investment has simply moved to non-broadcast media, and in fact marketing on these new media has the potential to employ more formidable techniques to influence children. Consequently the World Health Organization has called on member countries to restrict exposure and power of EDNP food marketing as a strategy to prevent childhood obesity. Investment in marketing through product packaging is significant and children are a particularly lucrative demographic, making supermarkets a potent site of children's pester power as they co-shop with their parents. The conflict associated with product refusal makes co-shopping a stressful experience for many parents and one to be avoided, when in fact it could be an important part of a child's consumer socialization.

Nutrition and health claims: two possible uses

The study also found claims about health and nutrition on more than half (56%) of EDNP food products. Health and nutrition claims are used by adult and child shoppers to inform their product choices and misleading information signals intent on the part of companies to deceive and confuse consumers. In a qualitative study by Mehta *et al.* (2010)², parents expressed concerns about nutrition and health claims exploiting their children's credulity, while children, on the other hand, described using the very same claims to persuade their parents to purchase products.

Industry self-regulatory codes in Australia, pledging restrictions on EDNP food marketing to children, currently do not extend to product packaging. Children's high exposure to EDNP food via product packaging, and the associated power of the marketing techniques to influence children's food choices, warrant serious consideration by policy makers who want to reduce childhood obesity and improve children's diets generally.



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Marketing of unhealthy food to children – position of the New Zealand Heart Foundation

— Delvina Gorton —

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Around the world calls are being made to restrict marketing of unhealthy foods and drinks to children as one strategy towards creating a less obesogenic environment for our children to grow up in. It is an important strategy because food marketing can and does influence children's eating habits – their food preferences, food requests, choices, and consumption¹.

We know childhood is a time when food preferences and eating habits begin to develop. These preferences and habits influence both current and future health so, naturally, childhood is a key time to encourage healthy eating. However, advertising and marketing of unhealthy food and drinks to children are undermining attempts to do so.

Exposure to advertising

Children are exposed to high volumes of advertising, both from television and other advertising media. New Zealand children watch on average almost two hours of television each day² and would see 7,134 food advertisements over a year³. Increasingly, children are also exposed to marketing through non-traditional media. This includes not only branding, point-of-sale promotions and packaging, but product placement in movies or television shows, radio, in-store promotions, magazines, sports sponsorship, school promotions, print and billboard advertisements, branded clothing or toys, viral marketing, toy giveaways, mobile phones and apps, brand mascots, social media, websites, advergames, webisodes, and buzz marketing.

Research suggests there is a misalignment between what children need nutritionally and what is being promoted. In 2005, 70% of advertising on New Zealand television during children's viewing time was for foods counter to good nutrition⁴. The Institute of Medicine in the United States determined that food and beverage marketing is out of balance with dietary guidelines and contributes to an environment that puts the health of children and youth at risk⁵.

Influence of advertising

Children are especially vulnerable to the influence of food advertising as they may not distinguish the commercial nature of advertising nor differentiate between advertisements and programmes⁶. Under 12 years of age, children cannot be expected to have the cognitive skills to be fully media literate. They deserve protection from undue influence from marketing of unhealthy food and drinks because in economists' terms, they are not 'rational consumers' – they cannot be expected to critically assess information and weigh up future

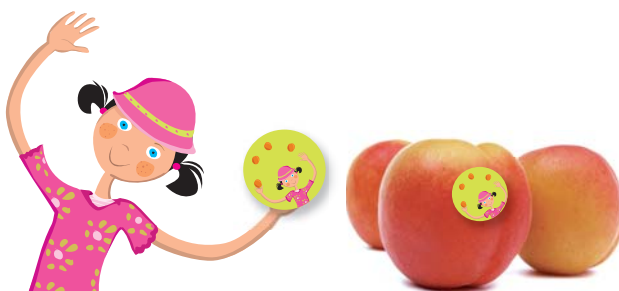
consequences of decisions.

Yet children are seen as an important target market as forming a bond with a product from an early age creates future customers⁷. In 2006, 44 food companies in the United States spent US\$1.6 billion advertising their products to children⁸. We only need stand in a typical supermarket to see how powerful children's demands can be. But children not only influence parents through 'pester power', they have spending power of their own. A survey of high-school students in Auckland, New Zealand found four out of five students spent money on food the previous day, with one in five spending more than \$10 on food⁹.

Protecting children

There is strong public support for greater protection of our children. In a 2007 survey, over 80% of New Zealand parents and grandparents stated they would like advertising of unhealthy food to children stopped¹⁰. The Heart Foundation of New Zealand strongly supports this position and believes that as a country we must protect children from marketing of unhealthy food and drinks. Doing so has been assessed as a highly cost-effective intervention to help reduce childhood obesity¹¹.

For fruit and vegetables, the influence of marketing presents opportunities that can be used to our advantage. Studies have shown that promotions such as use of cartoon characters on fruit can increase consumption. The argument about whether any advertising or marketing should be allowed to be directed at children is a worthwhile one. However, the current reality is we are far from regulating against advertising of unhealthy food to children, let alone all advertising. In that situation, using all available tools to increase consumption of fruit and vegetables by children is desirable.



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Junk food advertising to children: Is self-regulation working?

— Tim Lobstein —

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National responses have varied. Some countries have new regulations backed by statutory law to restrict advertising on TV, and others have maintained legislation banning all advertising to children, but most countries are relying on the food and beverage industry to take voluntary measures to cut the promotion of unhealthy foods.

With rising interest worldwide on the role of poor diets and obesity on causing non-communicable diseases, including cancers, diabetes and heart disease, the commercial promotion of food and beverage products is now the policy agenda in most countries. In 2004 the World Health Assembly called on the private sector to promote healthy diets in accordance with national dietary guidelines and to practice responsible marketing and in 2010 urged member states to restrict advertising to children¹.

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Are voluntary controls the answer?

The voluntary approach is attractive, as it may offer the same results quickly and without the need for legislation or the bureaucracy to monitor compliance. But it is risky: voluntary measures may not be supported by all companies, the measures can be rolled back or weakened at a later date, and above all they can be full of small loopholes which make them unfit for their purpose.

In 2008, several large companies agreed to a world-wide voluntary ban on marketing of unhealthy products to children, which in Europe took the form of the EU Pledge (see www.eu-pledge.eu). These companies set self-defined targets for restricting what and how they market, and to whom. The different company pledges show a degree of inconsistency in terms of the media formats, the age of children, and especially the types of foods which would and would not be restricted, which makes evaluation of the impact of the pledges hard to assess².

The pledge-coordinating bodies have published annual reports showing levels of compliance above 90% year after year, indicating a remarkable reduction in the exposure of children to the marketing of unhealthy foods.

Independent surveys find only weak effects of voluntary controls

Our organisation, the International Association for the Study of Obesity, is currently undertaking a systematic review of the peer-reviewed scientific literature and reports from government agencies and academic institutions, to assess the independent evidence on the effectiveness of self-regulation.

Our findings will be published later this year, but for IFAVA Newsletter readers we can summarise as follows:

- The scientific papers showed only weak or no improvement in reducing children's exposure.

- Government and academic reports also showed only low levels of improvement over the period, although there is stronger evidence for an improvement in the UK, which has introduced statutory regulations.

- In countries where no pre-Pledge data are reported, surveys have shown that children are continuing to experience a high level of exposure to advertising for unhealthy foods.

- Overall, self-regulation has had only a small impact or no impact, as children's exposure levels are not significantly below the levels found in pre-Pledge years.

Why do Pledge reports differ from independent surveys?

These results contrast strongly with the results reported by the Pledge coordinating bodies. One cause of discrepancy may lie in the lack of complete coverage of the pledges across all food companies, and it is possible that advertising from non-pledge members has continued and even increased, but this will not be reported in the Pledge-sponsored reports.

Further potential causes of discrepancy between industry-sponsored reports and other reports may lie in the definitions used for assessing the advertising. These include different audience definitions: most of the scientific papers used times of day when children are likely to be watching television, whereas the pledges have specified 'children's TV' to be only those TV programmes watched by an audience of which over 35% (or in some cases over 50%) are children under the age of 12 years. Different nutrient profiling definitions: scientific papers used a single set of definitions of unhealthy foods whereas each company has used its own, favouring its products. Thus a breakfast cereal company allows up to 35g sugar per 100g as advertisable, while more than 20g sugar per 100g makes the cereal an unhealthy product in the scientific papers.

Is it now time for governments to set the standards?

In conclusion, we recognise the remarkable efforts that have been made by many food and beverage companies to reduce the marketing of some of their products to children, and that new nutrient profiling schemes and new definitions of children's programming are being offered by the Pledge members for implementing in 2013.

However, the narrow range of media, the weak definitions of marketing, the absence of many large food companies, and the lack of enforceability or penalties for failure suggest that self-regulatory pledges are unlikely to be sufficiently comprehensive to have the desired effect of reducing children's exposure to the promotion of unhealthy food products.

Stronger measures are recommended, preferably based on government-led definitions of the media and the products to be controlled and the audience to be protected.

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