



FACTS

Unhealthy and Unregulated

Food Advertising and Marketing to Children

OVERVIEW

Research shows that marketing and advertising of high-calorie, unhealthy foods to children are linked to childhood obesity.^{1,2} Currently, almost one-third of children in the U.S. are overweight or obese.³ Severely obese children are more likely to become severely obese adults.⁴ Not only are these children at risk during their youth, but obese children also have higher risk of developing chronic and costly diseases,⁵ disability,⁶ and premature death.⁵ Much of the progress we have made in the fight against cardiovascular disease and stroke could be lost if childhood obesity is not addressed. Food advertising can encourage children to spend their discretionary dollars on high-calorie, low-nutrient dense foods.⁷

THE COST OF CONSTANT EXPOSURE

Children are regularly exposed to advertising and marketing through television, the internet, magazines, schools, product placements, video games, cell phones, and other means. These advertisements are designed to boost brand recognition, sales, and loyalty, more often for unhealthy, high-calorie foods. Unfortunately, most of these products have excessive amounts of added sugar, salt, and fat, and inadequate amounts of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.⁸ Promotion of these products is not limited to only advertisements. Marketing practices also include promotions, product placements, celebrity endorsements, and incentive.⁸ In order to address current issues with child-directed food marketing, Healthy Eating Research created *Recommendations for Responsible Food Marketing to Children*.⁹ These recommendations were developed by a panel of experts. The document defines child-directed marketing as advertising aimed at birth through 14 years old. The recommendations address the range of food marketing practices used and specifies approaches, techniques, platforms, and venues used to target these children.

- A report from the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) revealed that industry spent nearly \$1.8 billion in 2009 marketing and advertising foods and beverages to children. The top three sources were fast food (\$714 million), carbonated beverages (\$395 million), and breakfast cereals (\$186 million).¹⁰
- The fast food industry spends nearly \$2 million every day advertising to children.¹⁰
- On average, children are exposed to 13 television advertisements every day for food alone. This figure increases to 16 with adolescents.¹¹
- The projected spending for advertisements in interactive video games was expected to reach

\$1 billion by 2014,¹² with six million 3-11 year olds going online each month to partake in some type of virtual world.¹³

- In 2009, television accounted for 35% of all child-directed marketing expenditures.¹⁰ The remaining 65% was spent on other media platforms such as the web sites, social media sites, advergaming (advertisements in the form of games), and cell phones.
- Young children are especially vulnerable to these marketing and advertising strategies because they are developmentally less able to comprehend their intent.⁷

REGULATION IN THE U.S.

Although many countries across the world tightly control or ban food advertising and marketing aimed at youth,¹⁴ this is not the case in the U.S. In 1980, in response to corporate pressure, Congress removed the FTC's authority to restrict food advertising. They also created an Act that limited its jurisdiction regarding advertising to children.¹⁵ More recently, the government created a federal Interagency Working Group (IWG) to curb the marketing of unhealthy foods for children aged 2-17 years old.¹⁶ Although the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics supported IWG's recommendations as being "evidence-based" and "scientifically sound", organizations like the Grocery Manufacturers' Association pushed back saying the recommendations were unworkable and inconsistent with the government's own Dietary Guidelines.¹⁷ While the food industry has made some strides in self-regulation through the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI), there are still a number of companies that do not participate in the CFBAI and many foods allowed for marketing under these voluntary standards are still of poor nutritional quality.¹⁸ In 2014, the food and beverage industry spent almost \$32 million lobbying¹⁹ on food and beverage issues, which could include legislation and regulation that would decrease the marketing of unhealthy foods to kids and soda tax proposals.

CHILDREN AS CONSUMERS

The food industry recognizes children and adolescents have significant discretionary incomes and are a powerful consumer segment.

- Children and adolescents spend more than \$180 billion per year and influence their parents' spending for another \$200 billion per year.²⁰
- 84% of foods advertised as healthy don't meet basic nutritional standards.²¹
- 86% of food advertisements viewed by children are for products high in fat, sugar, or sodium.²²

FACT SHEET: Food Advertising and Marketing to Children

- African-American and Latino children are more highly targeted by food and beverage marketers. This population is also at increased risk for overweight and obesity.^{23,24}
- The use of media characters alone on food packaging influences children's taste assessment of a product - licensed characters can override decisions around nutritional content.²⁵
- The majority of cereals marketed to children (66%) do not meet national nutrition standards and are especially high in calories, sugar, and sodium when compared to cereals marketed to adults.²⁶
- Research shows that exposure to food advertisements leads to greater caloric intake in children.²⁷
- A recent study estimated that a ban of television fast food advertising alone would reduce the number of overweight children aged 3-11 years old by 10% and overweight 12-18 year olds by 14%.²⁸
- Food advertising particularly influences and harms at-risk children. Children of rural, minority families, who are already disproportionately affected by obesity, watch more television than children than their metropolitan counterparts,²⁹ increasing their exposure to advertising.

THE ASSOCIATION RECOMMENDS

The American Heart Association supports policy change that addresses the following efforts to limit the marketing and advertising of low-nutrient, high-calorie foods and beverages to U.S. children.

- The association supports the Healthy Eating Research's recommendations for food advertising and marketing to children. The food industry should incorporate these recommendations into the CFBAI.
- Only healthy foods, such as fruit, 100% fruit juice, vegetables, low-fat dairy products, and whole grain foods should be advertised and marketed to children. Implicit in this recommendation is that foods that are advertised meet criteria that the association has set for nutrients that affect cardiovascular disease risk, such as saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, fiber. These healthy foods and beverages should be the default options in children's meals whenever possible.
- Advertising, marketing, and brand awareness strategies used by industry should not be allowed in schools or educational materials.
- The association supports robust food and beverage and beverage marketing standards in local school wellness policies.

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