

FACTS

Unhealthy and Unregulated

Food Advertising and Marketing to Children

OVERVIEW

Research shows that the aggressive marketing and advertising of high-calorie, unhealthy foods to children are contributing to today's childhood obesity epidemic.¹ Currently, almost one-third of children in the U.S. are obese or overweight.² Not only are these young lives at risk, but overweight and obese children are more likely to become obese adults, condemned to chronic and costly diseases, disability, and premature death. Much of the progress we have made in the fight against cardiovascular disease and stroke could be lost if this deadly trend is not reversed.³ Food advertising leads children to spend their discretionary dollars on high-calorie, low-nutrient dense foods.⁴ The American Heart Association (AHA) finds no justification for manipulative advertising and marketing practices to children and supports efforts to restrict these practices in the U.S.

CONSTANT EXPOSURE TO TELEVISION AND ELECTRONIC MEDIA

Children are constantly 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 and sales, more often for unhealthy, high-calorie foods.

- A recent summary report from the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) revealed that industry spent nearly two billion dollars in 2006 marketing and advertising foods and beverages to children. \$474 million alone was spent on sugar-sweetened beverage advertising. These marketing efforts are working since, on average, adolescents get 11% of their calories from carbonated beverages.⁵

- Young people see more than 40,000 advertisements each year on television alone.⁶
- One study of typical Saturday morning children's programming showed that: 43% of all food product advertisements fell in the fats, oils, and sweets category; 11% of total advertising was for fast food restaurants; and there were no advertisements for fruits and vegetables.⁷

The amount of money that the food industry currently spends on marketing and advertising to influence what children choose to eat is twice the amount spent a decade ago.⁸ Young children ages 12 and under are especially vulnerable to these marketing and advertising strategies because they are developmentally less able to comprehend their intent.⁹

REGULATION IN THE U.S.

Although many European countries tightly control or ban it, food advertising targeted at children is not well regulated in the U.S.¹⁰ In 1980, Congress rescinded the FTC's authority to regulate advertising categorized as "unfair," and also limited its jurisdiction regarding advertising to children. While the food industry has made some strides in self-regulation through the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI) and has recently strengthened the guidelines under CFBAI, the vast majority of foods allowed for marketing under these standards remain unhealthy.¹⁰

CHILDREN AS CONSUMERS

The food industry recognizes that 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.^{11,12}

- Nearly two-thirds of highly-advertised children's food products with images or references to fruit on the package contained little or no fruit and were high in added sugar.¹³ Additionally, the use of media characters alone on food packaging influences children's taste assessment of a product -- licensed characters override decisions around nutritional content.¹⁴
- 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.¹⁵
- Research shows that exposure to food advertisements leads to greater caloric intake in children, especially obese children.¹⁶
- A recent study suggests that a ban of television fast food advertising alone would reduce the number of overweight children by 18%.¹⁷
- Food advertising particularly influences and harms at-risk children. Children in lower-income families who are disproportionately affected by obesity watch more television than children from higher socioeconomic families,¹⁸ increasing their exposure to advertising and reducing their physical activity.

AHA RECOMMENDS

The AHA supports legislation and regulation that addresses the following efforts to limit the marketing and advertising of low-nutrient, high-calorie foods and beverages to U.S. children.

- Support the efforts of the Interagency Workgroup on Food Marketed to Children (IWG) to quickly release their voluntary recommendations that are based on the latest nutritional science.
- 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 AHA 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.
- Product placement of food brands should be discouraged in multiple media technologies including movies, videogames, advertising, social networking sites, cell phones,

podcasts, and television programming geared toward children.

- Toy companies and the movie industry should not be able to partner with fast food companies to market unhealthy meals to children.
- Licensed characters should only be used to market healthy foods to children.
- Advertising should include positive messages promoting good nutrition and physical activity.
- Advertising, marketing, and brand awareness strategies used by industry should not be allowed in schools or in educational materials.

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