When I was growing up in Chicago in the 1950s, food companies encouraged me to eat their products, but their methods were primitive by today’s standards. The bells of the Good Humor truck would have me hankering for a Creamsicle. Cracker Jack boxes provided that junky plastic toy. And I’d occasionally watch a cartoon show on our new black-and-white TV set (though my friends and I were usually outside playing).

Fast-forward 25 years. By the 1970s, food companies were bombarding young children with sophisticated TV ads for sugary cereals, candies, pop, and the like. In 1977, our little U.S. Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), in parallel with Action for Children’s Television, called on the U.S. Federal Trade Commission to protect kids from those ads.

The U.S. FTC concluded that any advertising aimed at young children was unfair, because kids don’t even understand the intent of advertising. When the FTC boldly questioned whether there should be any advertising to kids, The Washington Post derisively dubbed it the “National Nanny” and the U.S. Congress, buckling under industry pressure, stripped the agency of its authority to regulate advertising directed to children.

In Canada, the Quebec National Assembly picked up where the U.S. FTC got knocked down. In April 1980, the province’s Consumer Protection Act banned all ads targeted at children under age 13. For nearly a decade, Parti Quebecois and Liberal governments defended their law against a litigious toy company, drawing support from the U.S. FTC staff report. Ultimately, the Supreme Court of Canada upheld the law, agreeing that advertising to children is “per se manipulative” and that “such advertising aims to promote products by convincing those who will always believe.”

Fast-forward to 2010. TV has been joined by Internet advergames, product placements in movies, ads on cell phones, free toys at burger joints, vending machines in schools, and other means of cajoling kids to buy or demand packaged and restaurant foods. In Canada, federal laws protect adults from misleading or deceptive ads for foods (or for anything else, for that matter). But kids, who lack the defenses to interpret commercial marketing, don’t get special protection (outside Quebec). And companies are beginning to exploit loopholes in Quebec’s law.

In May, CSPI joined 20 organizations—including the Canadian Teachers’ Federation, UNICEF Canada, and the Canadian Stroke Network—in urging the federal Minister of Health to enact tough laws to protect children from commercial marketing.

Kids should be playing hockey, riding their bikes, and eating foods served at home and school by people who care about them. They shouldn’t be pressured to purchase (or pester) by profit-hungry companies that see them as easy targets for products that keep them snacking.

I’m afraid to fast-forward another 25 years. I just hope that my grandchildren (should I be so lucky) and other youngsters won’t still be having to fend off the junk-food peddlers. Stay tuned.

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