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The rising childhood obesity rates and children’s food choices are affected by many factors. Food marketing is a significant contributor. While food manufacturers and restaurants are not intentionally trying to undermine children’s health, there’s no disputing that the goal of food marketing aimed at children is to influence children’s food preferences and choices and what they pester their parents to purchase. The end result is that food marketers undermine children’s health.

If companies were marketing broccoli and bananas to kids, no one would be concerned. But the fact is that virtually all of the foods marketed to children are high in calories, salt, saturated fat, and refined sugars and low in nutrients.

Parents are fighting a losing battle against food manufacturers and fast-food restaurants. Those companies use aggressive and sophisticated marketing techniques to get into children’s heads, attract their attention, manipulate their food choices, and prompt them to pester their parents to purchase products. Harry Potter, SpongeBob Squarepants, Winnie the Pooh, Elmo, games, contests, prizes, and sports stars are enlisted to entice children to request low-nutrition foods. Kids are exposed to a relentless barrage of marketing from morning until night, wherever they go, or whatever they do.

When I was a kid, marketing tie-ins with television, movie, and sports figures appeared primarily on cereal boxes. Now they are on everything from crackers, beverages, ice cream, and cookies to Pop-Tarts, fruit snacks, fries, and frozen dinners. Companies not only plaster popular cartoon characters on packages, but also feature them in ads and shape food to look like them.

Toys and other premiums, games, and contests also are used to entice children to nag their parents to purchase junk foods. The front of Nabisco Oreo packages states that “You’ve Won $10,000,” but it takes a close look at the side of the package to find out that the odds of winning are 1 in 12 million.

Some ads children can play. Food products, logos, and company spokes-characters are built into “advergames” on company websites. In the Oreo Adventure game on Kraft Foods’ Nabiscoworld.com website, children’s “health” is reset to 100% when they find the golden cookie jars on their journey to the Temple of the Golden Oreo. The nutrition education website for kids that Kraft funds with other food companies, Kidnetic.com, pales in comparison. Its games encourage children to do pushups and jumping jacks in front of their computer. Pushups or jungle adventure games, which are kids more likely to go for?
Advertising is built into children’s toys. For instance, McDonald’s Fun Time! Restaurant Playset comes with a food counter and miniature fries, burgers, pies, and sodas, all emblazoned with the golden arches. Barbie, dressed as a McDonald’s clerk, and Kelly, shown eating a Happy Meal, are sold separately.

School-based marketing targets a captive audience and associates products with trusted schools and teachers. The sale of junk food in schools and advertising on school scoreboards, vending machines, book covers, Channel One, and school publications have become commonplace. With Campbell’s Labels for Education program, students collect product labels and redeem them for school supplies. However, this program is more about marketing than corporate benevolence. The program requires students’ families to buy about $2,500 worth of soup to get just one $59 heavy-duty stapler (2,100 required labels at a cost of about $1.20 per can of soup). Using a different approach, the Krispy Kreme Good Grades program offers elementary school children one doughnut for each “A” they earn on their report card – for up to six doughnuts per grading period.

Some ads misleadingly imply that foods are healthy by associating the product with athletes or physical activities; by showing the product surrounded by pictures of fruit, milk or other healthy ingredients; or by featuring slim healthy, fit kids enjoying high-calorie foods. Pepsi’s website profile of baseball star Jason Giambi, which prominently displays the quote, “I usually have several Pepsis each day – it really lifts me up,” provides a lousy role model for kids who should be drinking less, not more, soda pop. While we need to do more to promote physical activity to children, linking junk food with fitness does more harm than good.

From the examples outlined in our report, it’s clear that many food manufacturers and restaurants are not marketing their products to children responsibly and that the current regulatory system is inadequate. To help protect children’s health:

- Congress or state legislatures should halt the marketing of high-calorie, low-nutrition foods aimed at children on television, in magazines, schools and other child-directed venues.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and state health departments should be funded to sponsor aggressive media-based campaigns to promote healthy eating and physical activity to balance the pressures to eat low-nutrition foods.
- Industry should agree not to market junk foods to children and should place low-nutrition foods in retail stores at parents’ eye level rather than at children’s eye level. Companies should not take advantage of schools’ financial problems by offering cash in exchange for the opportunity to market or sell junk food in schools.
- Parents, health professionals, and other community members should work to pass laws to limit junk-food marketing aimed at children, reduce marketing in schools, and be positive role models for healthy eating and limiting television viewing.

Companies argue that although they market their products directly to children, parents ultimately decide whether to purchase products. The reality is that marketing aimed at children makes it much harder for parents to feed their children well. It’s time that we supported parents and protected kids.

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