Statement by Michael F. Jacobson
Executive Director
Center for Science in the Public Interest

November 10, 2003

Good morning and welcome to this press conference. I am Michael Jacobson, the executive
director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest. For those of you who aren’t familiar
with us, CSPI is a nonprofit consumer-advocacy organization that focuses on nutrition,
food-safety, and other issues. We are funded largely by the 800,000 subscribers to our Nutrition
Action Healthletter, as well as by foundation grants.

One of the issues that CSPI has worked on for many years is children’s diets and health.
Obviously, the major concern of today is the soaring rates of childhood overweight and obesity.
The rate of overweight in young children has doubled in the past 25 years, and in teenagers it has
tripled. Kids are less active, but they are eating more. Schools downplay PE, suburbs don’t have
sidewalks or any place to walk to, and television and computer screens keep kids glued to their
seats. Meanwhile, the marketing of junk foods has increased: Soft-drink vending machines are
everywhere, including in schools; fast-food outlets have metastasized from city streets to
shopping malls, hospitals, and museums; and food manufacturers have unleashed an awesome
number of unhealthful foods designed specifically to entice children.

Clearly, it is parents’ job to encourage their kids to eat healthful diets. They need to set a good
example, ensure that healthful foods are available, and limit their kids’ consumption of junky
foods. But parents have a virtually impossible job when manufacturers, retailers, and restaurants
use every trick in the book to hook kids on their brands of processed foods that are high in
calories, fat, sugar, and salt and low in vitamins, minerals, and dietary fiber.

Could you imagine the outrage if salesmen peddled junk foods door-to-door, asking parents to
talk to their kids—alone? Those peddlers would be thrown out on their ears. Well, what’s
happening is that marketers are not going door to door, but they are using every other device to
talk directly to kids, be it via television, movies, schools, the Internet, or toy stores.

Twenty-five years ago, CSPI and Action for Children’s Television petitioned the Federal Trade
Commission to restrict children’s television advertising, in part because of the junk-food
commercials. The FTC, after much study and public hearings, became convinced that not just
junk-food ads, but all advertising aimed at young children was simply unfair—and in violation of
the law—because those kids simply don’t understand the concept of advertising. At that point,
the food, toy, broadcasting, and advertising industries used their political might to get Congress
to stop the FTC’s inquiry. That was the last serious attempt to protect children from junk-food advertising.

Given the rising obesity rates and the poor state of children’s diets, CSPI is revisiting the problem of marketing to kids. Today we are publishing a new report, "Pestering Parents," authored by CSPI’s director of nutrition policy, Dr. Margo Wootan. The report describes the extent, many of the techniques, and the impact of food marketing aimed at kids.

I was very pleased to learn that just yesterday, a top official said that the government is commencing a national debate on policy options to reduce childhood obesity. The government will be considering bans on food advertisements aimed at pre-school children, taxing advertisements aimed at children and using the revenues to promote healthier diets, and requiring health warnings on foods high in fat, salt, or sugar. The government said that the rising rate of children’s obesity “is a time bomb that could explode.” He said that “Doing nothing is not an option.” Unfortunately, the government that announced that initiative is not the U.S. government, but the British government. Today, we will be sending a letter to Secretary of Health and Human Services, Tommy Thompson, urging him to lead the U.S. government’s effort to protect the health of America’s children. We are urging Secretary Thompson to:

- work with Congress and the FTC to halt junk-food advertising aimed at children;
- mount major educational campaigns to promote healthier diets to children and their parents;
- call companies on the carpet for marketing junk foods to kids;
- work with the Departments of Agriculture and Education to get junk foods and junk-food marketing out of—and good foods and nutrition education into—schools;
- convene a Surgeon General’s workshop on food marketing aimed at kids; and
- commission the Institute of Medicine to study the extent and impact of food marketing aimed at kids.

I would like to express my special thanks to two foundations, the Carmel Hill and Park foundations, that funded much of this work.