

WHO Forum on Marketing of Food and Non-alcoholic Beverages to Children

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Oslo Norway
May 2-3, 2006

Food marketing aimed at children has increased dramatically in the United States (U.S.) over the last two decades. Manufacturers and chain restaurants use aggressive and sophisticated techniques to attract children's attention, manipulate their food choices, and prompt parents to purchase products.

There is no disputing the fact that the goal of food marketing is to influence children's food choices. Studies, such as the U.S. National Academy of Sciences Institute of Medicine (IOM) report – *Food Marketing to Children and Youth: Threat or Opportunity?* – conclude that food marketing works and that it affects children's diets and health.

While parents bear much of the responsibility for feeding their children well, government has a role to remove activities that undermine parental authority and to protect children from practices that harm their health – including marketing of nutrition poor foods to children. By way of analogy, it is parents' responsibility to keep their children from playing in traffic, but it is government's responsibility to establish and enforce laws prohibiting speeding. In the area of food marketing, government clearly has a role to support parental authority and help make the healthy choice the easy choice.

To achieve this objective:

- Governmental authorities should set nutrition standards for the kinds of food that can and cannot be promoted to children of different ages. Standards should be set for portion sizes, calories, saturated and trans fat, refined sugars, sodium, and dietary fiber. Minimal amounts of healthful nutrients, fruits, vegetables, or whole grain should be required.
- Foods falling below nutrition standards:
 - should not be advertised during television shows where more than 15% of the audience is under the age of 12 or for which the target audience is children;
 - should not be promoted via product or brand placements, premiums, incentives, free samples, sponsorship of sporting or school events, fundraisers, educational materials, internet and video games, merchandise promotions, celebrity endorsements, and licensing agreements;

- should not put logos, brand names, spokes-characters, product names, or other marketing for low-nutrition foods/brands on baby bottles, children’s apparel, books, toys, dishware, or other merchandise made specifically for children;
- should not be promoted with images of healthful foods.
- Only food meeting nutritional standards should:
 - offer premiums and incentives (such as toys, trading cards, apparel, club memberships, products for points, contests, reduced-price specials, or coupons);
 - utilize licensing agreements or cross-promotions (such as with movies, television programs or video games) or use cartoon/fictional characters or celebrities from television, movies, music, or sports to market to children. This requirement includes depictions on food packages, in ads, as premiums, and for in-store promotions.
- In addition, all marketing:
 - including packages, should picture reasonable portion sizes and not encourage overeating. The calorie content of each item should be provided on menu boards of fast-food chain restaurants, and the calorie, saturated and trans fat, and sodium content of each item should be provided on printed menus;
 - should not link children’s self-image to the consumption of a particular brand, should avoid depicting rebellion against parents or other authority figures, and should not suggest that an adult who buys a child a certain product is more loving or better than an adult who does not.

Unfortunately, U.S. government agencies are not seriously pursuing such steps. Such measures have also not been achieved through self-regulation, although a few companies such as Kraft have made some reforms. Also, some state and city governments in the U.S. have improved the food environment in schools. Most notably, California has banned all carbonated soft drinks (but not sports drinks) from school vending machines starting in 2008.

Consumer organizations in the U.S. have begun to use the judicial system to push companies to make changes. Consumer organizations will continue to educate consumers, pressure individual companies, rely on the courts, seek federal, state, and local legislation, and monitor the effectiveness of the self-regulatory process. Eventually, we hope that the federal government will implement legislation and programs that would greatly improve children’s diets and health. We urge the World Health Assembly to call upon the WHO to draft a Code of Food Marketing to Children. An international model should help facilitate progress at the national level.