

Children's Health or Corporate Wealth?

The battleground for kids' hearts, minds and tummies



Why is reducing children's exposure to unhealthy food marketing important?

The waistlines of Australians are increasing. Almost sixty-three percent of Australian adults are overweight or obese.¹ Children are also affected, with 23% either overweight or obese.² Overweight children are more likely to become overweight adults, with 75-86% who are overweight at 8 years of age likely to be overweight at age 20.³ Obesity is a risk factor for many cancers, including cancers of the bowel, kidney, oesophagus, pancreas, endometrium and breast (post-menopause).⁴

73% of people in NSW support a ban on unhealthy food advertising that targets children.

Food marketing influences children's food preferences, food choices and the food they ask their parents to buy.

74% of parents want support from the government to protect children from unhealthy food marketing on television.

Recommendations

Cancer Council NSW recommends* reducing children's exposure to food advertising that promotes unhealthy foods by improving existing regulations.

Regulation should:

- 1** Protect the health of children over corporate interests.
- 2** Apply to all media and forms of marketing, including TV, radio and print advertising, online marketing, food

company websites and apps, social media, sports sponsorship, on-pack and in-store promotions and outdoor advertising, that is directed to children aged under 16 years, or to which a high number of children under 16 years are likely to be exposed.

- 3** Use independently-developed and consistent nutrition criteria to ensure only healthy foods are promoted to children.
- 4** Include independent, clear and transparent monitoring and enforcement processes.

The power and reach of advertising

We need to protect children's health over corporate interest. They are targets for marketers because:

- They have their own money to purchase,
- They can influence their parents to purchase,
- They are the consumers of tomorrow.

The large amount of unhealthy food marketing in Australia distorts the perception of a healthy diet, particularly for impressionable children. The diet presented by food advertising is one low in fruits and vegetables and high in fast food, chocolate and snack foods.⁵ Food advertising leads to 'pestering' by children that often results in parents buying the less healthy products requested.⁶



Unhealthy food advertisements feature prominently during the peak television viewing times of children. The largest numbers of children view television during traditional prime time hours from 6pm-9pm. Favourite television shows for children over six years old include family shows such as Australia's Funniest Home Videos, Masterchef and X-Factor while children 11 years and over like Home and Away, Modern Family and Big Brother.⁷ This is reflected in audience numbers with over 120,000 children watching channels 7 and 9 between 7:30pm and 9:30pm on weekdays.⁷

Brand and promotional messages are integrated into television broadcasts of sporting matches such as the State of Origin rugby league,⁸ the Australian Football League and International cricket⁹ with logos on the match ball, field advertising and in commercial breaks. A study in Western Australia found that three quarters of primary school aged children were able to match a brand to the sport it sponsored and even if children did not correctly identify the actual sponsor they often associated the sport with a sponsor from the same product category e.g. fast food.¹⁰

Food marketing to children is not just confined to television. Food marketers are increasingly utilising a range of media in a single campaign, including more subtle forms like product-based games (advergames), branded activities and information about the food or company disguised as education (advercation) and product placement in television shows or movies. Worryingly, these are the very areas that parents are less aware of, less likely to monitor and hence less able to protect their children from.

On the internet when children play product-based games featuring unhealthy foods, they are more likely to choose unhealthy foods for a snack.¹¹ Games are also effective because positive feelings are associated with game play, including a sense of achievement, fun or adventure, and these feelings can become associated with the brand.¹²

Almost half of children aged 8-14 had a computer in their bedroom, a third had internet access and a quarter had digital free-to-air television. Children spent an average of 3.7 hours per week on the internet via a computer and 1.7 hours per week accessing online content each on tablets and mobile devices.

Screen Australia 2013

Children are still being targeted by advertising



In Australia, food marketing to children is regulated under a combination of limited government regulation, implemented by the communications regulator and voluntary advertising and food industry initiatives. This may give the false impression that food advertising to children is well regulated. However, the loopholes, gaps and continued exposure of children to advertisements for unhealthy foods suggest that the current approach is inadequate. Such loopholes include:

- Junk food advertisements can appear during programs which are most popular with children, if the programs are also popular with other audiences such as Masterchef and Home & Away.
- Advertisements are allowed if they are directed to parents and not directly targeted to children yet these ads may still appeal to children. In one study of television advertisements, only 3% of food advertisements made a direct address to children, while many more used techniques that would appeal to children, such as images of children enjoying themselves, consuming the advertised product and playing with friends.¹³

An Oreo television advertisement with two children going through the ritual of ‘twisting, licking and dunking’ their Oreo biscuits together, and an advertisement for a KFC family dinner box clearly showing two children eating KFC with their parents were both supposedly targeted to parents.

- There is no uniform criteria to assess the ‘healthiness’ of foods advertised to children and companies establish their own nutrient criteria.¹⁴ For example, Kellogg’s Coco Pops contain 36% sugar and are low in fibre yet Kellogg criteria consider it a healthier food that is appropriate to market to children. In the case of fast food, only dedicated children’s meals are covered. This means that individual menu items such as burgers and limited time only offers and family meals can still be promoted to children even though a child’s portion of a family meal exceeds the maximum amount of unhealthy nutrients that a meal should provide.¹⁵
- Company-owned websites and apps often feature children’s games, however 35% or more of website visitors have to be children for the food marketing restrictions to apply.

Support for Government action

Almost 40 years of evidence clearly demonstrates that food marketing influences children’s food preferences and choices and the food they ask their parents to buy.¹⁶ Reducing children’s exposure to unhealthy food marketing has been recognised as an important obesity prevention strategy by the World Health Organization (WHO) in the Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases.¹⁷ Australia has endorsed the Action Plan that urges member states to take active steps to implement recommendations to help prevent a range of health problems associated with unhealthy food choices.^{17,18}

In 2009, Australia’s own National Preventative Health Taskforce recommended several strategies to reduce children’s exposure to unhealthy food marketing including: phasing out the marketing of unhealthy foods on television before 9pm; phasing out the use of toys, competitions and promotional characters to market unhealthy foods to children; and adopting

an appropriate set of criteria for determining unhealthy foods.¹⁹ In response, the Australian government committed to monitoring the effectiveness of current self-regulatory initiatives and to consider government regulation if these proved ineffective.²⁰

It is clear these self-regulations are not working to protect children from unhealthy food marketing and government regulation should be considered.

A recent survey of NSW adults showed that 73% support a ban on unhealthy food advertising that targets children and 74% of parents want support from the government to protect children from unhealthy food marketing on television.²¹

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* Detailed recommendations can be found in the Cancer Council Australia Position Statement Food Marketing to Children available at <http://wiki.cancer.org.au/prevention/Position_statement_-_Food_Marketing_to_children>

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