

NSW Community Survey on Cancer Prevention 2013

Community attitudes on food marketing to
children

support



Prevention



research

advocacy

NSW Community Survey on Cancer Prevention 2013

Community attitudes on food marketing to children

Key findings

- Parents in NSW are concerned about *all* forms of unhealthy food marketing to children.
- Few parents believe that current regulations dealing with television advertising to children are effective in protecting children from seeing unhealthy food advertisements.
- There is strong community support for a ban on unhealthy food advertising to children.

Why did Cancer Council NSW undertake this study?

With the high burden of cancer in the NSW community and strong evidence that more than a third of all cancers can be prevented through healthier lifestyle choices, it is important that Cancer Council NSW (CCNSW) understands the community's level of knowledge around cancer risk factors. This allows CCNSW to understand the barriers to, and enabling factors that support healthy choices and a 'cancersmart' lifestyle.

To better understand the community's behaviour, beliefs, intentions and attitudes relating to cancer prevention, CCNSW conducted a survey of adults living in NSW. Cancer prevention issues captured by the survey included knowledge and attitudes towards:

- risk factors for cancer
- sun protection
- smoking and tobacco control policies
- fruit and vegetable consumption
- food policy issues, and
- alcohol consumption

The results of this research will inform CCNSW in developing education and health promotion programs related to cancer prevention.

Why is Cancer Council NSW interested in food marketing to children?

Almost a quarter of Australian children are either overweight or obese.¹ Overweight children are more likely to become overweight adults.² Obesity is a risk factor for many cancers, including cancers of the bowel, kidney, oesophagus, pancreas, endometrium and breast (post-menopause).³ Food marketing influences children's food preferences, the foods they ask their parents for, and ultimately the food they eat.⁴ Reducing children's exposure to unhealthy food marketing is recognised as an important action to address the increase in obesity rates and the related health effects.⁵

This report presents the findings of questions included in the NSW Community Survey on Cancer Prevention that relate to unhealthy food marketing targeting children.

How was the research conducted?

Survey development and structure:

Survey questions were developed through a comprehensive review of other population health surveys (e.g. NSW Population Health Survey) and research exploring attitudes towards food marketing to children.^{6,7}

Food marketing questions explored:

- Parental concern about different types of unhealthy food advertising to children
- Parental knowledge of guidelines that deal with TV advertising to children
- Parental beliefs about the effectiveness of government regulation and industry codes of practice in protecting children from seeing unhealthy food advertising

- Parental support for stronger government restrictions on unhealthy food advertising at times when children watch television
- Community support for a ban on unhealthy food advertising that targets children

Administration and participant recruitment:

The survey was administered online during January and February 2013. Potential participants were invited by email to complete the survey. Demographic quotas were set to ensure the sample was representative of the NSW population.

Approximately 3,000 adults (18 years or older) living in NSW completed the survey. Questions covering food marketing were completed by 2,474 participants, with 842 being the parent or primary carer of a child under the age of 18 (referred to as ‘parents’). Certain questions included in this report were asked of parents only.

What did we find?

Parental concern about food marketing that targets children

Parents (n=842) were asked how concerned they were about certain advertising techniques that target children. Figure 1 shows parents’ concern about different types of unhealthy food advertising to children. As illustrated, the majority of parents (more than 60%) were concerned about all the types of unhealthy food marketing to children that were explored by the survey. About four-fifths of parents were very or somewhat concerned about the packaging of unhealthy food products being designed to appeal to children (82%) and using popular personalities or characters to promote unhealthy food to children (80%). Over three-quarters of parents were very or somewhat concerned about unhealthy foods sold in school vending machines (78%), the positioning of unhealthy food at supermarket checkouts (78%), promotions with unhealthy food (77%) and ads on TV at times when children are watching (77%).

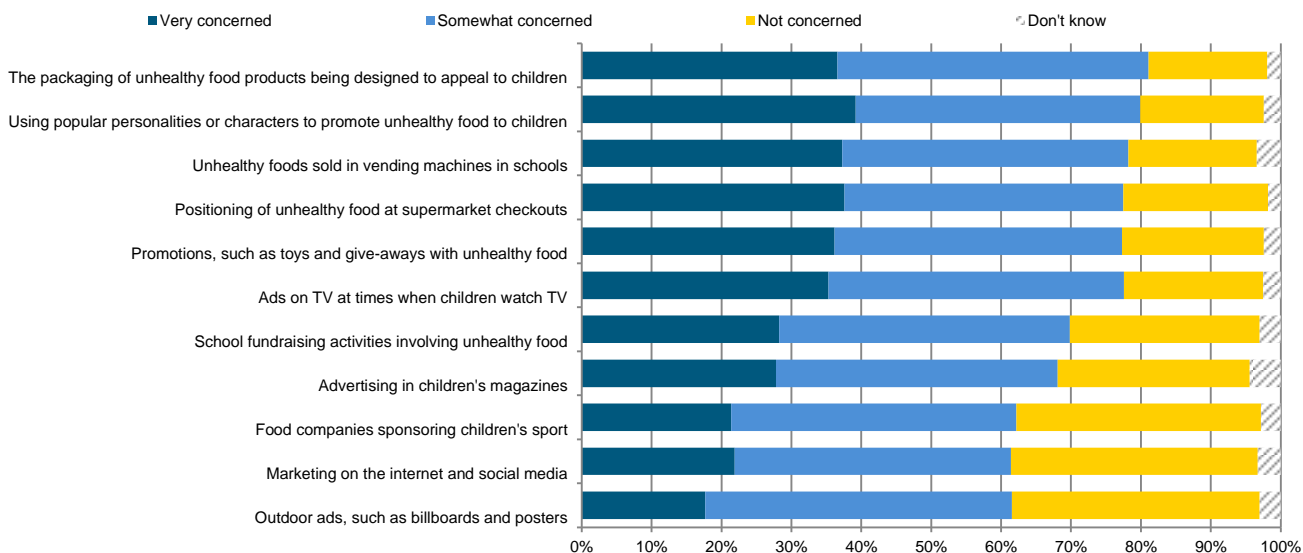


Figure 1. Parental concern about different types of unhealthy food advertising to children

Parents’ knowledge of and satisfaction with current guidelines dealing with TV advertising to children

There are currently limited government regulations and industry codes that deal with TV advertising to children. To understand parents’ awareness of these restrictions, parents were asked if they knew if there were guidelines dealing with TV advertising to children. As illustrated

in Figure 2, 19% of parents knew that there were guidelines and 54% believed that there were probably guidelines regarding TV advertising to children.

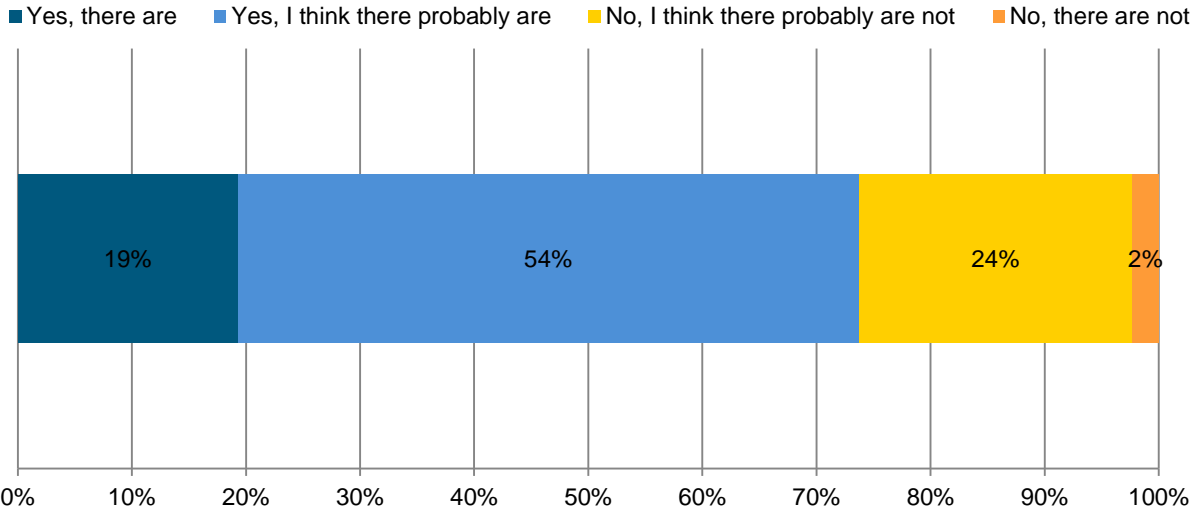


Figure 2. Parents' knowledge about whether there are any guidelines dealing with TV advertising to children

After indicating their current knowledge, parents were advised that there are government regulations and industry codes of practice regarding television advertising to children. Based on what they have seen on television at times when children are watching, parents were asked if they believed the current regulations were effective in protecting children from seeing unhealthy food advertising. As illustrated in Figure 3, most parents did not agree that current regulations effectively protect children from viewing television advertisements for unhealthy food (75%) and believed that the government should introduce stronger restrictions on unhealthy food advertising at times when children are watching (74%). Very few parents disagreed that stronger restrictions should be introduced (7%).

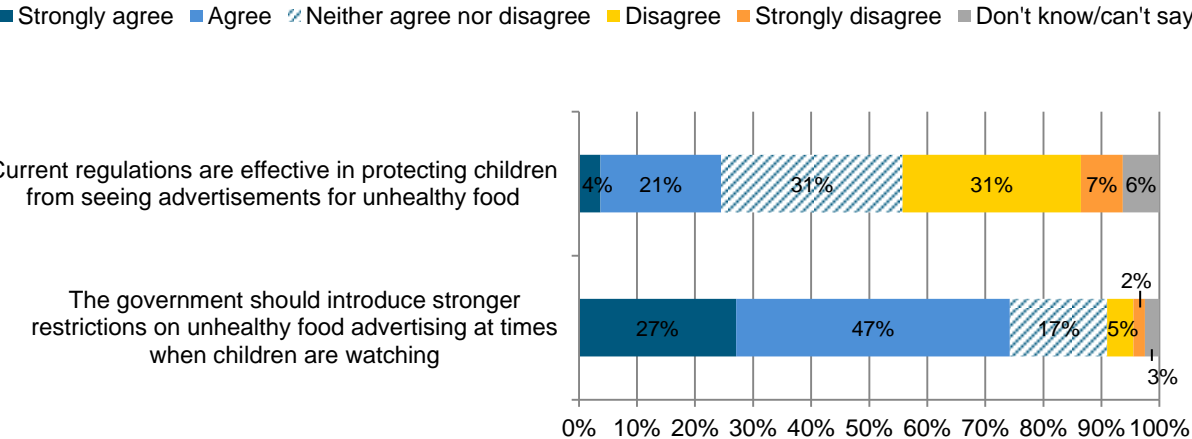


Figure 3. Parent's beliefs about the effectiveness of regulations on television advertising to children and support for stronger regulation

Community support for a ban on unhealthy food advertising that targets children

Parents and non-parents were asked whether they would support a ban on food marketing that targets children. Almost three-quarters (73%) of respondents from the NSW community (i.e not just parents) agreed that they would support a ban on unhealthy food advertising that targets

children (Figure 4). Those living outside of Sydney were significantly more likely to support a ban than those residing in Sydney and suburbs (75% vs. 71%, $p=0.022$), as were older age groups when compared to younger age groups ($p<0.001$). There were no significant differences by gender, educational attainment (university degree vs. no university degree) or household income (<\$55,000 vs. \geq \$55,000).

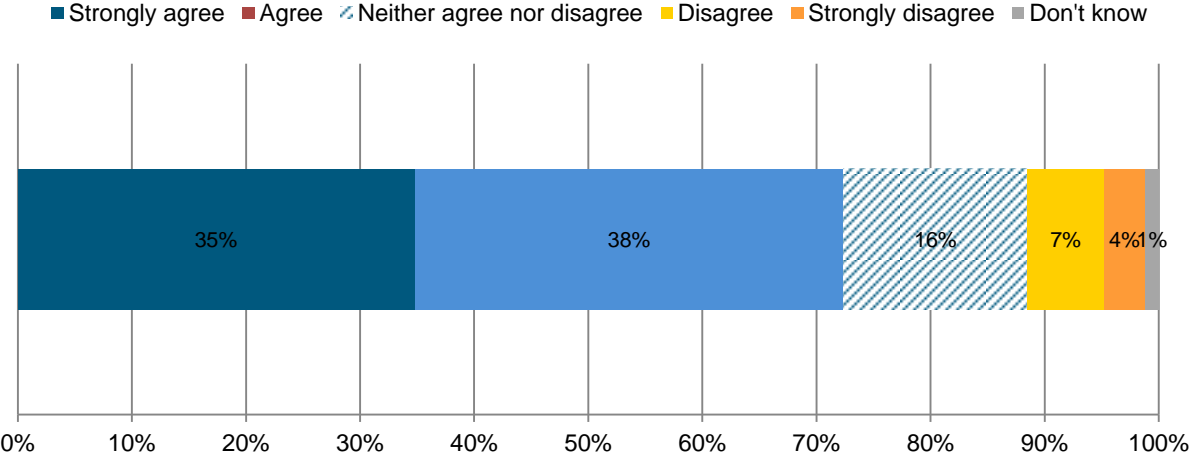


Figure 4. Participants' agreement with the statement 'I support a ban on unhealthy food marketing that targets children'

What does this mean?

Almost one in four school children in NSW are overweight or obese⁸ and the heavy advertising of unhealthy foods to children has been recognised as a probable causal factor in childhood overweight and obesity.⁹ The NSW Community Survey on Cancer Prevention provides more evidence that parents in NSW are concerned about unhealthy food advertising to children and that the NSW community supports a ban on unhealthy food advertising to children. Overall the survey found that more than 60% of parents were concerned about *all* forms of unhealthy food advertising and over 70% community members were in support of a ban on unhealthy food advertising to children.

The results indicate that parents are most concerned about food marketing techniques used at the point-of-sale. For example food packaging for unhealthy products appealing to children, and popular personalities and characters being used to promote unhealthy foods, were of high concern to parents. More than three-quarters of parents also expressed concern about the positioning of unhealthy foods at supermarket checkouts, and toys and giveaways being matched with unhealthy food products. These results are consistent with other research showing high parental concern about the appeal of point-of-sale marketing to children.⁶

Over three-quarters of parents reported that they were concerned about unhealthy food advertisements being aired on television at times when children are watching. While this result illustrates high parental concern about television advertising to children, a 2009 survey of parents in NSW found slightly greater concern.⁶ Since that study in 2009 the food industry has introduced self-regulatory initiatives covering both the grocery industry and fast food. While this may suggest that the voluntary initiatives have been effective in reducing children's exposure to food marketing, research has shown this is not the case.¹⁰ The development of these initiatives and the associated media may give some community members a false sense that it is not as important a problem as it has been in the past. In addition, more families are watching television via time shifting (i.e. recording a program to watch at a more convenient time) or the internet and so may believe their children are under less influence of television advertising.

Parents appear to be more concerned about outdoor and online advertising than they have been in the past.⁶ Earlier research has reported a disparity between parental concern about outdoor and online advertising and the extent that these types of advertising target children.⁶ While this earlier research found that about one third-of parents were concerned about these forms of advertising to children, the present study found that closer to two-thirds of parents were concerned. Parental awareness of the extent of outdoor and online advertising to children may therefore have increased since 2009, with the increase in concern about online advertising most likely reflecting the increase in use of the internet and mobile devices linked to the internet as well as the increasing use of this technology by food marketers.

Some limited government regulations and industry codes exist that deal with television advertising to children. However, the results of this survey found that only one in five parents are confident that such regulation does exist. Given that the monitoring and enforcement of current regulation relies on a consumer complaints approach, low parental awareness of the regulation may mean that many breaches go unreported. When parents were advised that such regulation does exist, only one in four parents believed that it was effective in protecting children from seeing unhealthy food advertising on the television. This perspective was based on parents own experiences of watching television at the same time as their children. Corresponding with the experiences of parents, quantitative observational research shows that industry codes of practice on responsible marketing to children have not been effective in reducing children's exposure to unhealthy food marketing.^{10;11}

There are no government regulations in Australia dealing with non-broadcast advertising to children (e.g. internet media and food packaging). The results of the NSW Community Survey on Cancer Prevention indicate that the NSW community would support a ban on unhealthy advertising that targets children across all media. This is consistent with earlier research reporting high parental support for government restrictions on the use of non-broadcast marketing to promote unhealthy foods to children.⁶ CCNSW believes that government regulation of food advertising to children is necessary, as industry self-regulation of food marketing has not adequately addressed children's high level of exposure to unhealthy food advertising or the persuasive marketing techniques commonly used by food companies to target children.¹⁰ Stronger government restrictions on unhealthy food advertising to children is one measure to improve the food environment to address childhood overweight and obesity.

The results of the NSW Community Survey on Cancer Prevention confirm high parental concern about unhealthy food advertising to children and community support for a ban on unhealthy food advertising that targets children. Food marketing is recognised as influencing children's food preferences, the foods they pester their parents to buy and ultimately their diet.⁴ In NSW about one-quarter of children are overweight or obese, placing them at an increased risk of cancer and other chronic diseases in adulthood. In response to community concern about unhealthy food marketing to children and to reduce the negative impact of unhealthy food marketing on the populations' diet, the government should introduce regulation to restrict all forms of food marketing to children.

Reference List

- (1) Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. 2007 Australian National Children's Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey - Main Findings. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia; 2008.
- (2) Magarey AM, Daniels LA, Boulton TJ, Cockington RA. Predicting obesity in early adulthood from childhood and parental obesity. *Int Journal Obes Rel Metab Disord* 2003 Apr;27(4):505-13.
- (3) World Cancer Research Fund and American Institute for Cancer Research. Food, nutrition, physical activity and the prevention of cancer: a global perspective. Washington DC: AICR; 2007.
- (4) Cairns G, Angus K, Hastings G, Caraher M. Systematic reviews of the evidence on the nature, extent and effects of food marketing to children. A retrospective summary. *Appetite* 2013 Mar;62:209-15.
- (5) World Health Organization. Global action plan for the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases 2013-2020. Geneva, Switzerland: WHO; 2013.
- (6) Kelly B, Chapman K, Hardy LL, King L, Farrell L. Parental awareness and attitudes of food marketing to children: a community attitudes survey of parents in New South Wales, Australia. *J Paediatr Child Health* 2009 Aug 21;45(9):493-7.
- (7) Morley B, Chapman K, Mehta K, King L, Swinburn B, Wakefield M. Parental awareness and attitudes about food advertising to children on Australian television. *Aust N Z J Public Health* 2008;32(4):341-7.
- (8) Hardy LL, King L, Espinel P, Cosgrove C, Bauman A. NSW Schools Physical Activity and Nutrition Survey (SPANS) 2010: Full report. Sydney: NSW Ministry of Health; 2011.
- (9) World Health Organization. Diet, nutrition and the prevention of chronic diseases. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2003.
- (10) King L, Hebden L, Grunseit A, Kelly B, Chapman K. Building the case for independent monitoring of food advertising on Australian television. *Public Health Nutrition* 2013 Dec;16(12):2249-54.
- (11) Galbraith-Emami S, Lobstein T. The impact of initiatives to limit the advertising of food and beverage products to children: a systematic review. *Obesity Reviews* 2013 Dec;14(12):960-74.