

Little Improvement on Food Marketing to Children

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The threat of food marketing on childhood obesity

Food marketing has never been more important, as childhood obesity rates in the United States and around the world remain high, and food and beverage marketing takes on ever new and more sophisticated forms.

In 2006, the U.S. National Academies' Institute of Medicine (IOM) threw down the gauntlet with its seminal report¹, *Food Marketing to Children: Threat or Opportunity?* After evaluating more than 300 studies, the IOM determined that food marketing causes children and adolescents to prefer, request, and consume foods high in salt, sugars, and fats. The report made 10 recommendations for how the food industry and the government could reverse this situation.

The current marketing environment still puts at risk children's health

After two comprehensive reviews assessing progress on the IOM's recommendations for parents, schools, food and beverage industry, and government, there has been little progress. In those studies, Vivica Kraak and her colleagues² found that "the prevailing marketing environment continues to threaten children's health and miss opportunities to promote a healthful diet and create healthy eating environments."

Children in the U.S. continue to grow up in environments saturated by food and beverage marketing, the bulk of it for foods low in nutrients and high in calories, sugars, salt or fats. With Kraak et al's studies, we learn that government has not done what it can to protect children from marketing that infiltrates family life and interferes with good health. This lack of progress undermines parents' ability to feed their children well and puts children's health at risk.

Just one example: with no progress on the IOM's recommendation for a national social marketing campaign, our government is ceding education about nutrition to the food and beverage industry, which spends \$2 billion annually inundating children with enticements to eat and drink the wrong foods. That amounts to more than \$5 million every day in the U.S. alone, \$360 million of it for toys fast-food restaurants give away with kids' meals.

Efforts in nutrition education are thwarted by advertising and unhealthy foods

According to Kraak and colleagues, the best news for progress on food marketing comes from schools³, where there has been moderate progress in establishing nutrition standards for competitive foods. In 2010, Congress passed a law that requires the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to set nutrition standards for vending machines, school stores, and other foods sold outside of the school meal programs. USDA should set strong standards; and state child nutrition programs, boards of education, and school districts should implement them. Those standards

should apply to all food and beverage marketing in schools. The marketing and sale of unhealthy foods undermine nutrition education, children's diets, and parental authority over their children's food choices.

State and local governments should set nutrition standards for those children's meals that can be sold with toys. Such policies address a major form of marketing (incentive items) for meals that too often consist of burgers, chicken nuggets, and pizza. By default these meals are served with a side of fries and a soda; defaults should be for healthier items like low-fat milk or water instead of soda. National, state and local governments also should ensure that healthy options and calorie labeling are available for foods sold through vending machines, cafeterias, and food programs on public property.

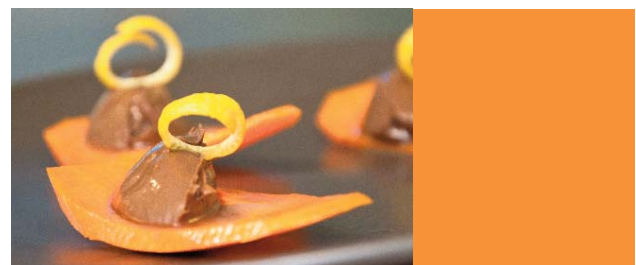
Sugary drinks are the largest source of calories in children's diet

As pricing is a key marketing strategy, governments should tax sugary drinks. Sugary drinks are the largest source of calories in children's diets and are directly linked to obesity. Tax revenues could be used to support a range of nutrition and physical activity policies and programs in the communities that suffer the highest rates of chronic disease.

In the U.S., the food industry has railed against even voluntary recommendations for what foods should be marketed to children, spending \$37 million to lobby Congress to oppose voluntary guidelines. This considerable opposition reveals the significant hurdle governments face in addressing food marketing.

Success requires an international effort

However, history shows that most meaningful nutrition policies, including trans fat labeling, menu labeling in restaurants, and national standards for school vending, faced such opposition in their formative years. To be successful, we will need a strong international effort to educate and mobilize organizations, health professionals, and parents in support of healthy food marketing policies. Without such a commitment to addressing food marketing to children, we are likely to see more sugary drinks than fruit in children's diets and see their long-term health suffer as a result.



BASED ON: Dorfman L. and Wootan M. [2012]. The nation needs to do more to address food marketing to children. *Am J Prev Med*; 42(3):334–335.

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