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Advertising, branding, and pediatric nutrition

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Abstract

The factors contributing to overweight and obesity are multifaceted and include a combination of genetic, sociological, and environmental influences. Children's exposure to food marketing is recognized as one such factor contributing to the obesity-promoting environment.

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Advertising, branding and pediatric nutrition

The factors contributing to overweight and obesity are multifaceted and include a combination of genetic, sociological and environmental influences. Children's exposure to food marketing is recognised as one such factor contributing to the obesity-promoting environment. Food marketing is broadly described as communication that establishes consumer awareness and creates desire for a product, thereby promoting commercial profit. Advertising is one specific component of this marketing process, which involves the announcement of a persuasive message, such as on television, in magazines or billboards. This entry reviews the nature and extent of food marketing to children, the dietary implications of this marketing and the public policy debate to restrict this type of marketing.

There is an accumulating body of evidence on the nature and extent of food marketing internationally, and the negative effects of this marketing on children's food knowledge, preferences and behaviour. Further, food marketing is thought to operate at both the brand and food category level; affecting children's brand choice as well as their broader consumption patterns. For example, advertisements for a particular brand of confectionery will not only assist in generating a desire for that brand but also for confectionery in general.

Children are viewed by the food industry as a major market sector; having influence over their own purchases, as well as that of their parents. Developing brand loyalty at a young

age will also ensure lifelong product purchases. From a psychological perspective, there is substantial evidence to suggest that children are highly vulnerable to marketing. Children, particularly those less than eight years of age, have an impaired ability to interpret marketing messages critically as they lack the necessary cognitive skills and experience. In effect, children are unable to evaluate marketing and tend to accept this as truthful, accurate and unbiased.

Authoritative and comprehensive reviews of studies on the nature and extent of food marketing to children indicate that globally children are exposed to high levels of food marketing, and that the 'marketed diet' is typically the antithesis of dietary recommendations; comprising predominantly energy-dense, micronutrient poor foods. Specifically, the most commonly advertised food and beverages include pre-sugared breakfast cereals, savoury snacks, fast food restaurants, confectionery and sugary drinks, such as soda.

Based on such findings, a joint report by the Food and Agriculture Organization in the United States and the World Health Organization, in 2003, concluded that the heavy marketing of fast food outlets and energy dense, micronutrient poor foods and beverages is a *probable* causal factor in childhood overweight and obesity and is a target for future interventions.

While the majority of research and attention has focused on television advertising to children, more recent studies have found high levels of food marketing across other

media. Importantly, the research and policy debate relating to food marketing to children must consider the full range of marketing tools deployed by marketers to encourage consumption of their products. In fact, food marketing encompasses: *broadcast media* including television, cinema and radio; *new technology* including the internet and SMS/text messaging; *print media* including magazines and newspapers; *promotions* including premium offers, celebrity endorsements, cartoon characters, health and nutrient claims and product placements; *places* including school canteens and vending machines, sporting events and supermarkets; *price* where products are sold at cheaper prices to make them more available and appealing to children; *packaging* that is appealing to children; *product expansion* by selling multiple variations of a product; and *public relations* by sponsoring television programs, sporting events, fundraising and establishing or donating money to charity.

The heavy and ubiquitous marketing of energy-dense, micronutrient poor food and beverages helps to normalise and reinforce these food products, while the development of unhealthy eating behaviours is likely to be acquired in environments where these behaviours are accepted, deemed to be normal, and are even promoted as desirable.

In recent times, there has been vigorous discussion regarding appropriate policy responses to the issue of children's high and diversifying exposure to the marketing of energy-dense, micronutrient poor food and beverages. In particular, there has been significant advocacy from health and consumer groups. Meanwhile, the food and advertising industries have been actively involved in promoting self-regulatory

approaches to limit this marketing. These may be seen as good corporate responsibility, or more likely, as a means of diverting criticism and impeding government regulations. Further, in some countries where trend data is available, food marketers are responding to pressures to reduce television advertising by increasingly using print and new technologies to target children. These other non-broadcast media are often used by children without parental supervision, making them more difficult for parents to monitor and control.

A key point in this debate has been whether the impact of marketing on children's food consumption is significant. While the absolute predicted effects of food marketing on childhood obesity are small, and are likely to account for approximately 2% of the variation in food choice and obesity, even small effects in statistical terms can have an appreciable effect when they affect a large population and are ongoing. Importantly, food marketing has as much impact on food consumption as any other single factor and is amenable to change.

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See also Food marketing programs; Obesity risk factors in children and adolescents;

Prevention of Obesity, Public Policy Initiatives

Further readings

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