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### Unhealthy sport sponsorship continues to target kids

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## Unhealthy sport sponsorship continues to target kids

### Abstract

In the final month of the countdown to the Olympic Games, our sports stars are probably not eating and drinking the Games sponsors' foods. Again, as in previous Olympics, the Olympic Games sponsors are Coca-Cola, McDonald's and Cadburys, whose foods and drinks are not good choices for athletes due to their lack of nutrition and high levels of salt, sugar and saturated fats.

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## THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

# Unhealthy sport sponsorship continues to target kids

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New research has found eight out of nine food and beverage sponsors of kids sport are bad for you.

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In the final month of the countdown to the Olympic Games, our sports stars are probably not eating and drinking the Games sponsors' foods. Again, as in previous Olympics, the Olympic Games sponsors are Coca-Cola, McDonald's and Cadburys,

whose foods and drinks are not good choices for athletes due to their lack of nutrition and high levels of salt, sugar and saturated fats.

Unhealthy sponsorship of sport filters all the way down through sport from the elite level to Saturday morning kids' clubs.

New research released by Cancer Council NSW has revealed eight out of nine food and beverage sponsors of children's sports development programs in Australia are classified as unhealthy. Brands including McDonald's, Schweppes, Gatorade and Nutrigrain are all competing for brand exposure in kids' sport.

Junior development programs are modified versions of popular adult sports, designed to increase children's participation in sports and encourage more children to be active. Beyond just providing physical activity, these programs should promote healthy behaviours, instead of undermining the healthy lifestyle the programs aim to promote.

Besides logo placement on website homepages, we found sponsorship gave companies naming rights to the development program (such as Nippy's Spikezone – Nippy's is a brand of flavoured beverages and Spikezone is kids' volleyball), branded participant packs (such as Milo in2cricket and McDonald's for Platypus Lagoon swimming) and branded equipment (McDonald's for junior cricket and basketball).

While the study was done in 2015, this year the sponsorship landscape for children's sports looks just as unhealthy. At the time of the study McDonald's was sponsoring three separate junior sports programs across the country.

In 2016, while no longer a sponsor of Little Athletics nationally, McDonald's is still involved in Little Athletics across five states, provides branded sports equipment to junior basketball and cricket, provides participant packs and sponsors swimming in Queensland and is a naming rights partner for the South Australian National Football League junior development program.





Sponsorship doesn't just mean a logo on the website, but naming rights and equipment. John Wardle/Flickr, CC BY

Schweppes, Gatorade and a local confectionery company are among state Little Athletics sponsors. Surf-lifesaving sponsors include Schweppes and Nutrigrain.

Our study follows on from a 2015 study that looked at sponsors on websites of state and national adult sports and found 10% of sponsors on adult sports sites were unhealthy. The 2015 study found only 14 of 53 different sports organisations in Australia didn't have "unhealthy" sponsors.

## **The influence of advertising on children**

Children are a major target market for advertising, as they influence their parents' spending, have their own independent spending habits and have the potential to become brand-loyal and life-long customers.

Sponsorship of development programs offers companies another avenue to expose children to their brand and foster a connection between children and their brand.

An Australian study of five- to 12-year-olds found they associated team sports with the products and messages promoted via the sports' sponsors.

Sponsorship and branding within sports can influence product recall and enhance children's attitudes towards that sponsor. Interviews of 10- to 14-year-olds found they think of food and drink companies that sponsor their club and favourite team as "cool". They even said they'd like to return the favour to these sponsors by buying their products.

## **Reducing the impact of unhealthy food marketing on children**

In recent years we have seen the closure of the National Preventive Health Agency. The agency was set up to drive preventive health policy and programs focusing on obesity, tobacco and harmful alcohol consumption.

One consequence has been the withdrawal of funding to sporting organisations that allowed them to have alcohol-free sponsorship. Some reports suggest these funding cuts have pushed sports to rely again on alcohol sponsorship in the absence of other

public funding.

The good news is many sponsors of children's sports development programs are not food or drink sponsors. It is encouraging that only 11 out of 246 sponsors were food, drink, alcohol or gambling companies. This indicates that many sports are able to seek alternative sponsors. Other major sponsors of kids' sports development programs included airlines and banks.

The World Health Organisation has made recommendations to reduce children's exposure to and the power of marketing of foods high in fat, added sugars or salt, including marketing in children's settings.

Currently, there is no Australian regulation that limits or restricts the type of companies allowed to sponsor children's sport. Sponsorship of children's sport should be included in food marketing regulation to reduce the impact unhealthy food marketing has on children.

In the absence of regulation, these companies should exercise responsible marketing practices and withdraw from sports sponsorship so sports consistently promotes healthy messages to those participating and watching.

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*Wendy Watson, Senior Nutrition Project Officer, Cancer Council NSW, and Clare Hughes, Nutrition Program Manager, Cancer Council NSW, contributed to this article.*



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