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### Building solutions to protect children from unhealthy food and drink sport sponsorship

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# Building solutions to protect children from unhealthy food and drink sport sponsorship

## Abstract

In Australia, and indeed across the world, the proportion of children who are overweight or obese is increasing. Almost one-quarter of school-aged children are now overweight or obese. While the causes of obesity are complex and many, children's exposure to high levels of unhealthy food marketing is one factor that affects the food and drinks that children like, ask for, buy and consume. Extensive research evidence has found that, in general, children are exposed to high levels of food marketing, most of which is for unhealthy or high fat, sugar and/or salt food and drinks. The most commonly advertised foods have been found to be sugar-sweetened breakfast cereals, savoury snacks, fast food restaurants, confectionery and soft drinks.

## Keywords

sport, children, unhealthy, food, drink, sponsorship, protect, solutions, building

## Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

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**Building solutions  
to protect children  
from unhealthy  
food and drink  
sport sponsorship**







## Key recommendations

The key recommendations based on the findings of the research undertaken by Cancer Council NSW and the Prevention Research Collaboration, University of Sydney are:

- Immediate action is required to reduce children's exposure to unhealthy food and drink, and alcohol marketing through sponsorship of community and professional sport. In the first instance, unhealthy sponsorship of children's own sports clubs should be limited, followed by restrictions at other levels of sport.
- Government should take the lead in developing and enforcing policies to restrict unhealthy food and drink, and alcohol sponsorship of children's sport.
- Food, drink and alcohol industries could play an important role in supporting sports clubs, through the establishment of an independent Sport Sponsorship Fund. This would allow a range of corporate companies not limited to food, beverage or alcohol companies to contribute to a centralised fund of sponsorship money, to be distributed to sports clubs. This would minimise unhealthy sponsorship promotions at individual clubs while maintaining funding for community sport. Funding would also support the development of other healthy club practices, such as healthy eating, responsible alcohol management, smoke-free facilities, sun protection and social inclusion.



## Background

In Australia, and indeed across the world, the proportion of children who are overweight or obese is increasing. Almost one-quarter of school-aged children are now overweight or obese.<sup>1</sup> While the causes of obesity are complex and many, children's exposure to high levels of unhealthy food marketing is one factor that affects the food and drinks that children like, ask for, buy and consume.<sup>2, 3</sup> Extensive research evidence has found that, in general, children are exposed to high levels of food marketing, most of which is for unhealthy or high fat, sugar and/or salt food and drinks.<sup>2-6</sup> The most commonly advertised foods have been found to be sugar-sweetened breakfast cereals, savoury snacks, fast food restaurants, confectionery and soft drinks.<sup>2</sup>

There is a range of ways that children are exposed to unhealthy food marketing. These include TV advertisements during their favourite programs, on-pack promotions such as competitions and giveaways, billboard advertisements, advertisements in children's magazines and online and interactive games on food manufacturers' websites.


Sport sponsorship is a significant form of unhealthy food and drink marketing that is increasingly being used to market these products to children.<sup>7, 8</sup> Sponsorship refers to either financial or in-kind assistance given to a person, organisation or event in return for promotional opportunities.<sup>9</sup> While sponsorship may be an important source of funding for sport, sponsorship by manufacturers of unhealthy food and drinks, and associated branding and promotions within clubs, can undermine the health promoting goals of sport. The promotion of food and drinks that are high in fat, sugar

and/or salt may undo some of the health benefits gained by children participating in physical activity and help to establish and reinforce unhealthy eating habits which last throughout life.

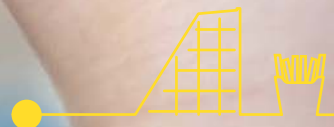
Specifically, sponsorship helps to form a connection between the company and the sporting event,<sup>10</sup> and allow children's positive feelings and attitudes to sport to then be transferred to the company as well.<sup>11, 12</sup> The more attached children are to sport, such as their physical and emotional attachment to their own sports teams or favourite elite sporting team, the greater the effect of this sponsorship on children's attitudes to sponsors and on creating a favourable impression of their company, brand and product. This can, in turn, favourably influence their product purchases.<sup>13</sup>

Currently in Australia, there are no regulations designed to limit children's exposure to unhealthy food and drink marketing through sport sponsorship. This is despite recommendations from the World Health Organization for the restriction of unhealthy food and drink marketing in settings where children gather, including sporting activities.<sup>14</sup>





**Almost  
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# Building the evidence on unhealthy food and drink sponsorship

Cancer Council NSW and the Prevention Research Collaboration at University of Sydney have conducted a body of research with the aim to determine:

1. the scope of unhealthy food and drink sponsorship of children's sport;
2. the effect of this sponsorship on children; and
3. potential solutions to create healthier sponsorship arrangements.

## The scope of unhealthy food and drink sponsorship

A large and representative sample of community sports clubs across New South Wales (NSW) and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) were surveyed to determine the scope of unhealthy food and drink sponsorship of children's sports clubs, as well as any sponsorship by alcohol-related companies. The sponsorship of state and national sporting organisations (peak sporting bodies) was also assessed.

## Sports club sponsorship

### What we did:

Sports officials from 108 randomly sampled sports clubs were interviewed. These clubs were from three large geographic areas (Sydney, Illawarra and Canberra/Queanbeyan) and represented the most popular sports for children in NSW, including soccer, swimming, netball, rugby league, tennis, cricket, martial arts, basketball and athletics.<sup>15</sup> We asked officials about their sponsorship arrangements, including: which organisations sponsored their club;

the funding support given to clubs; and the promotional opportunities for sponsors.

Food and drink sponsors were defined as either healthy or unhealthy based on the nutritional quality of the *majority* of food and drinks sold by the company. All alcohol brands and businesses whose main function was to sell alcohol were considered 'unhealthy' and not appropriate sponsors for children's sporting clubs. These criteria for judging the healthiness of sponsors were based on a survey of a panel of ten health promotion, physical activity and nutrition experts.

### What we found:

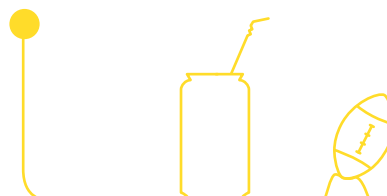
347 sponsors were identified across sports clubs, with two-thirds of clubs receiving some sponsorship. Food and drink companies made up 17% of all sponsors and a further 6% were alcohol related, including pubs and clubs. Another 8% of sponsors were businesses that had other functions but also sold alcohol, such as Bowling Clubs and Workers Clubs.<sup>16</sup>

Half of food and drink sponsors and 85% of alcohol-related businesses were less healthy, selling mostly high fat, sugar and/or salt food and drinks or alcohol. Clubs with mostly younger players (5 to 14 years) had the most unhealthy food and drink sponsors compared to clubs with older players ( $P = 0.05$ ) (Figure 1).<sup>16</sup> Clubs with mostly younger players also had a similar proportion of alcohol sponsors as those with mostly older players or a mix of ages (5% vs. 6% and 7%).<sup>16</sup>

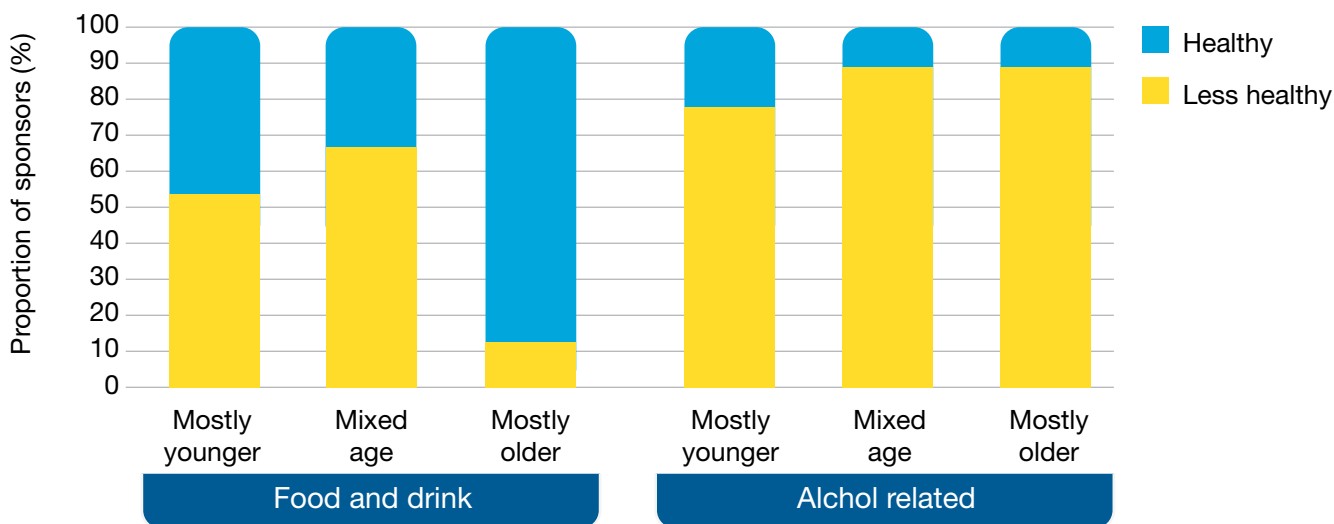


# 17%

Food and drink companies made up 17% of all sponsors







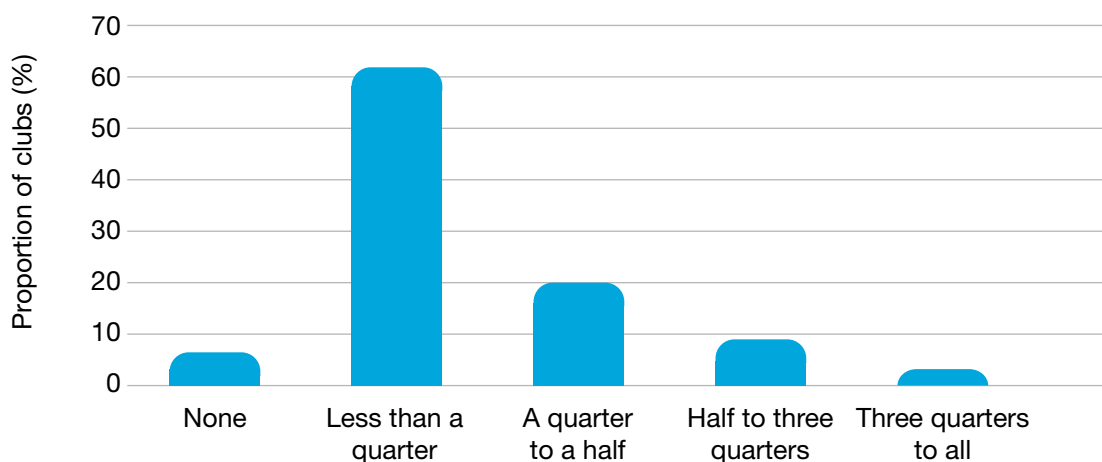
**Figure 1:** Healthy vs. less healthy food, drink and alcohol-related sponsors, by age of club members

Extensive opportunities were available for these unhealthy food and drink sponsors to promote their brand. For example, 53% of food and drink sponsors had their logo on players' uniforms, while 29% gave out vouchers for their products to players. However, only 41% of these

food and drink sponsors gave any direct funding to clubs, with many providing only in-kind support, such as the use of a fast food restaurant for a registration night.

For those clubs who did receive any type of sponsorship (funding or in-kind), most reported that less than

a quarter of their overall income came from this sponsorship (Figure 2). Therefore for most sports clubs, the relatively small amount of funding that clubs receive from food and drink sponsors is unequal to the large promotional opportunities provided to sponsors by these clubs.



**Figure 2:** Proportion of clubs' income from sponsorship



## Peak sporting body sponsorship

### What we did:

Websites for 55 national and state sporting organisations for the most popular children's sports were analysed for information on their sponsorship. State organisations from NSW, ACT, Victoria and Western Australia were included.

### What we found:

443 sponsors were identified across all websites, with an average of nine sponsors per organisation.<sup>17</sup> Of these, 9% were food and drink companies and 3% were alcohol manufacturers. One-quarter of sponsors for athletics organisations were food companies, while alcohol sponsorship was highest for rugby league and cricket. Almost two-thirds of food sponsors were less healthy. This is in-line with sponsorship at sports clubs, where athletics had the highest proportion of food sponsors and rugby league had the most alcohol-related sponsors.<sup>18</sup>

Websites also promoted sponsored sporting programs, with 16 programs identified, including the McDonald's Skill, Fun & Play basketball program and Milo-in-2-Cricket. Most of these programs (69%) were sponsored by unhealthy food companies and one was associated with an alcohol manufacturer.<sup>17</sup> These sporting programs heavily promoted sponsors through co-branding of the program and resources.

## The effect of sport sponsorship on children

After finding out about the level of sponsorship in children's sport, our research team interviewed the junior sporting community, including sports officials, parents and children about their attitudes towards food, drink and alcohol sponsorship. This was followed by a larger representative survey of parents and children from across NSW.

## Junior sporting community interviews

### What we did:

Interviews were conducted at 20 sports clubs in NSW and the ACT, known to have food and drink sponsors and representing some of the most popular sports for children. Interviews were conducted with 200 parents, 103 children aged 10 to 14 years, and 40 sporting officials, including a member of the regional sporting association (local peak body) for each club.

Parents and sporting officials were asked about their attitudes towards sponsorship and if they thought that children were influenced by sponsorship. Children were asked if they could recall sponsors of their own sporting club and favourite elite sports team; what they thought about those food sponsors; and if this sponsorship affected what they liked to buy and eat.

### What we found:

#### i) Parents and sporting officials

Most parents (86%) thought that elite sport sponsorship affected the products that children liked, asked for and bought.<sup>19</sup> Almost half of parents (48%) also thought that sponsors of children's own local clubs had this effect on children. Similarly, most sporting officials thought that children's food choices were influenced by elite sport sponsorship (95%) and children's local sport sponsorship (65% of sports club officials and 75% of regional association officials).

#### ii) Children

Two-thirds of children (68%) could name at least one sponsor of their own sports club,<sup>20</sup> with these children able to name, on average, two sponsors each, including one food or drink company. In comparison, half of children could name at least one sponsor of their favourite sporting team.





# 69%

**of children think  
that food and drink  
companies sponsoring  
their club are 'cool'**





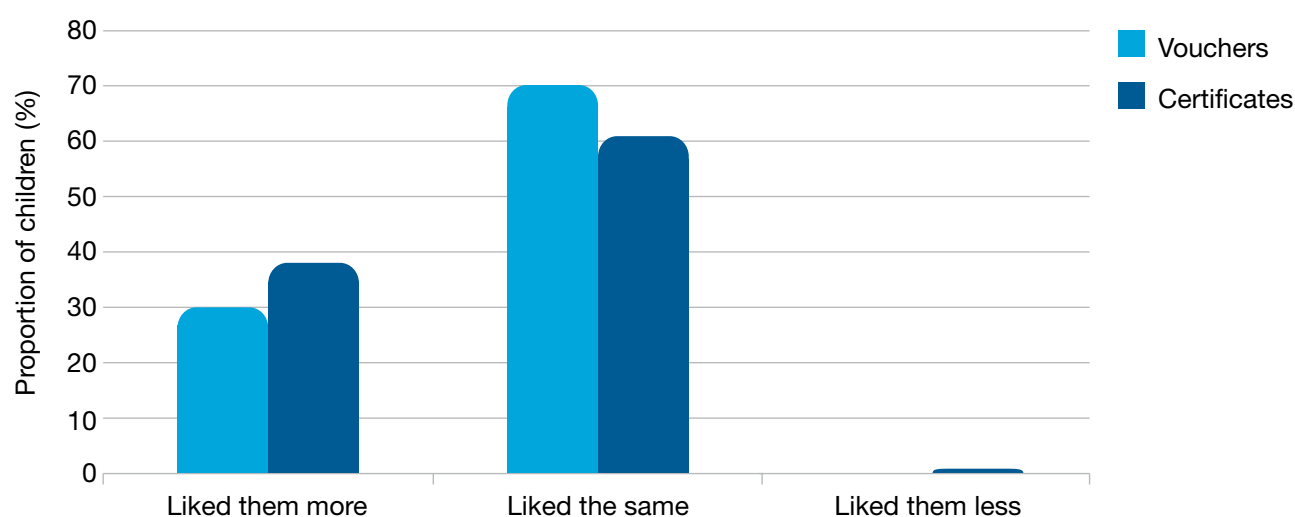
Most children thought that the food and drink companies sponsoring their club and favourite team were 'cool' (69%), and liked to return the favour to these sponsors by buying their products (59%) (Table 1). Most children also thought that other children bought food and drink products because these companies

sponsored their sport (66%). Younger children (10 to 11 years) were more likely than older children to think about sponsors when buying something to eat or drink ( $P < 0.01$ ); liked to return the favour to sponsors by buying their products ( $P < 0.01$ ); and thought that sponsors were 'cool' ( $P = 0.02$ ).<sup>20</sup>

Most children had been given a voucher (86%) or certificate (76%) from a food or drink company to reward their sport performance. Around one-third of children said that they liked the company more after getting these rewards (Figure 3).<sup>20</sup>

**Table 1:** Children's perceptions about food and drink sponsors

	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
Think sponsors are cool	69	31
<b>Motivations of sponsors</b>		
Think companies sponsor sport to help out sports clubs	85	15
Think companies sponsor sport to advertise their products	72	18
<b>Purchases following sponsorship</b>		
Think other children buy products because the company sponsors sport	66	34
Like to return the favour to sponsors by buying their products	59	41
Ask parents to buy sponsor's products	43	57
Would always buy sponsors' product over another product	35	65
Think about sponsors when buying something to eat or drink	30	70
<b>Consumption following sponsorship</b>		
Prefer to eat sponsor's products over other products	33	67



**Figure 3:** Children's feelings towards food and drink companies after receiving rewards

## Survey of parents and children across NSW

### What we did:

A telephone survey was conducted with a random sample of 825 parents living in NSW. In households with a child aged 10 to 16 years, children were asked to participate in an online survey. A total of 243 children completed the survey.

Again, parents were asked about their concern about unhealthy food and drink and alcohol sponsorship of children's sport and elite sport, and if they thought children were influenced by sponsorship. Children were asked if they could recall sponsors of their favourite elite sports team or athlete and sporting events; what they thought about these companies; and if this sponsorship affected the products that they bought and ate.

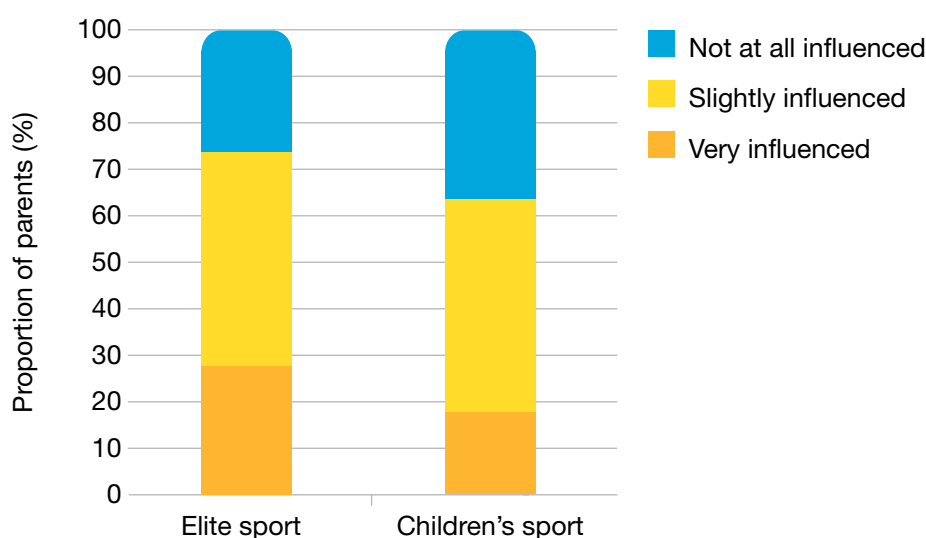
### What we found:

#### i) Parents

Around one-quarter of parents reported at least sometimes being 'pestered' by their child to buy a food or drink product from a company that sponsored their favourite elite sports team or their own local club. Three-quarters of parents thought that elite sport sponsorship influenced the products that children liked, asked for and bought (Figure 4).<sup>21</sup> Two-thirds of parents also thought children were influenced by the sponsorship of their own sport clubs.

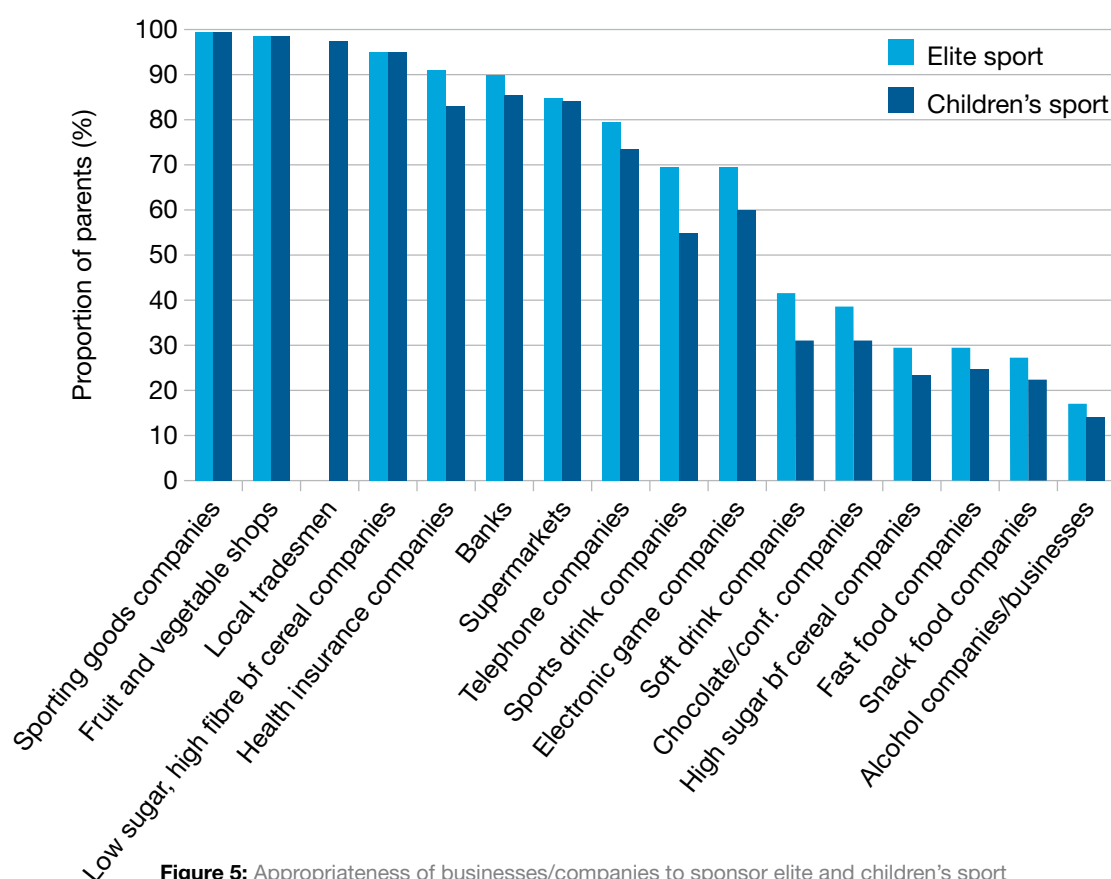


**Most children had been given a voucher (86%) or certificate (76%) from a food or drink company to reward their sport performance.**



**Figure 4:** Parents' perceived influence of sport sponsorship on children

Parents thought that the least appropriate companies to sponsor sport were alcohol-related companies (including pubs and clubs), companies that make snack food, fast food companies, companies making high sugar breakfast cereal, chocolate and confectionery companies and soft drink companies (Figure 5).<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 5:** Appropriateness of businesses/companies to sponsor elite and children's sport

More than half of parents (60%) were 'very' concerned about unhealthy food and drink companies sponsoring children's sports clubs, while 39% were very concerned about this for elite sport. Concern was higher again for sponsorship by alcohol-related companies, with 73% of parents very concerned about this for children's sport and 59% for elite sport.<sup>21</sup>

## ii) Children

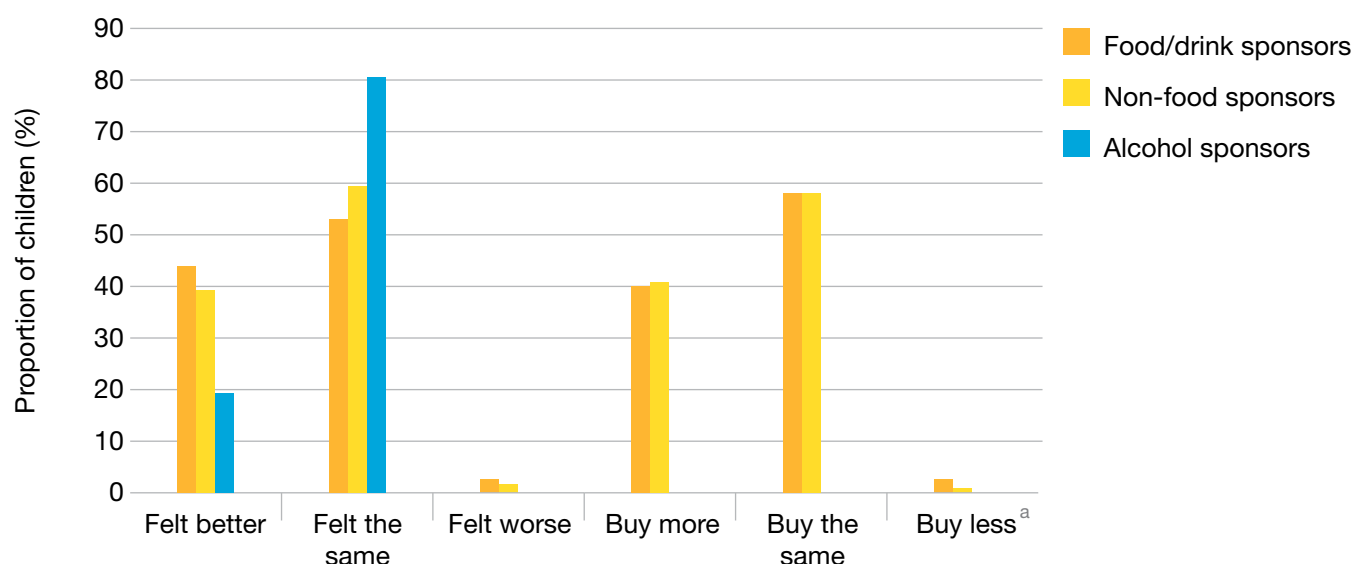
Almost two-thirds of children could recall at least one sponsor of their favourite elite sports team or athlete. Of the 366 correct current and past sponsors recalled, 11% were food and drink companies and 3%

were alcohol-related companies. In addition, 44% of children could correctly name at least one food, drink or alcohol sponsor of a sporting event or competition from the past year.<sup>21</sup>

More than half of children thought elite sport sponsors were either 'very' or 'a little' cool (59%), exciting (50%) and fun (51%). Around one in four children also said that they felt better about a company after finding out that it had sponsored their favourite elite sports team or athlete (Figure 6). Of those children who had bought the sponsors' product before, 41% said that this sponsorship had encouraged them to buy the sponsor's product more.<sup>21</sup>

One-third of children reported that they 'often' or 'sometimes' bought or asked their parents to buy sponsors' products, including from companies sponsoring their own sport or elite sport. Younger children (10 to 12 years) were significantly more likely to buy or ask for these products compared to older children ( $P = 0.01$ ). A sizeable minority of children thought about who sponsored their local sports team when buying something to eat or drink (15%), or when consuming food (21%). More than half of children (57%) believed that other children thought about sport sponsors when buying food and drinks.





**Figure 6:** Children's attitudes towards sponsors and purchases of sponsor's products

<sup>a</sup> Results not shown for alcohol as only three children reported ever buying these products

## Building solutions to create healthier sponsorship arrangements

There are a number of ways that sport sponsorship could be rearranged in NSW to reduce children's exposure to unhealthy food and drink, and alcohol sport sponsorship. This could include:

### 1. Compensatory funding (Government driven)

This could be similar to the funding provided to sporting bodies by government agencies in Victoria, Western Australia and the ACT. This funding was initially set up to replace tobacco sponsorship.

### 2. Sponsorship policies or guidelines (Government or sport sector driven)

Sponsorship policies could limit the types of companies that could sponsor sport.

### 3. Centralised funding system (NGO and industry driven)

This would involve the introduction of a brokerage system, managed through an independent non government organisation (NGO), for managing the collection and distribution of sponsorship funding for sports clubs in a way that is responsible and equitable. This would allow corporate organisations to contribute to a centralised fund of sponsorship money to be distributed to individual sports clubs and/or regional sporting associations. The 'Sport Sponsorship Fund' would be sponsored by industry, with this fund supporting individual clubs rather than the companies themselves. This would create a level of detachment between sponsors and sports clubs and limit children's exposure to company branding and additional promotional activities. This funding could also be used to

support clubs in adopting a range of other healthy practices, such as healthy eating, sun safety, smoke-free facilities and social inclusion.

In our surveys with parents and sporting officials, we asked them about their support of sponsorship policies to limit unhealthy sponsors, as well as the introduction of a Sport Sponsorship Fund.

**What we did:**

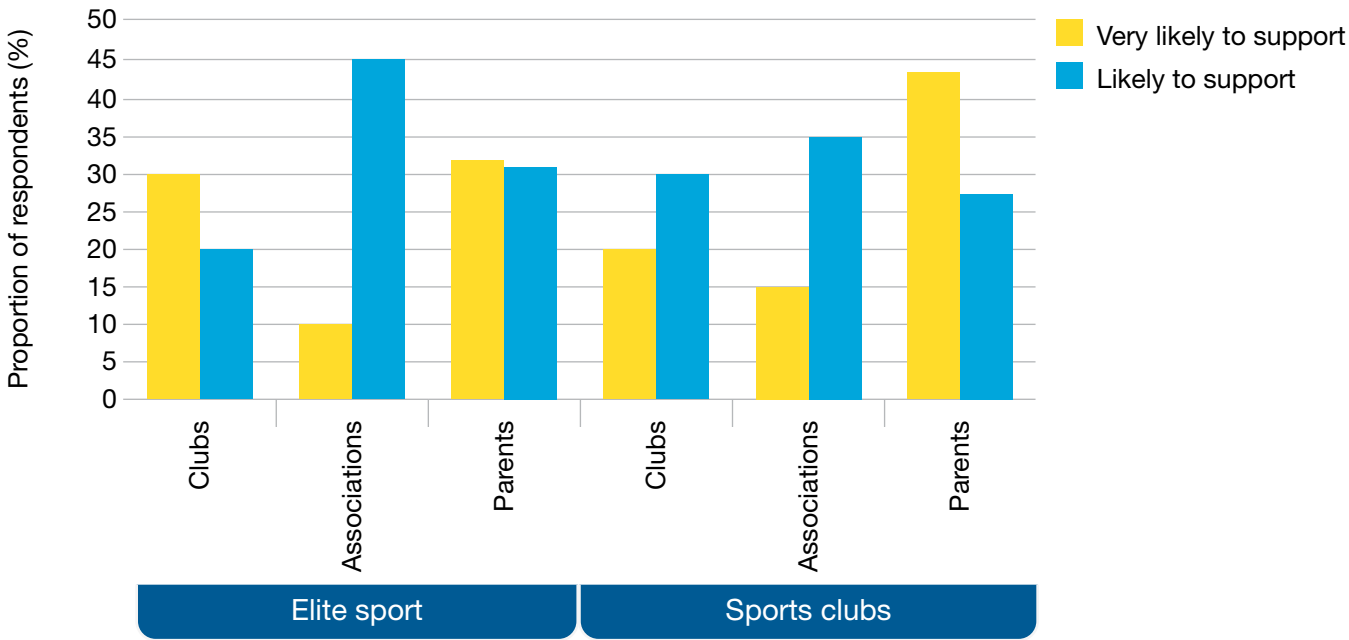
Forty sporting officials and 200 parents at sports clubs were asked about their support of policies to limit unhealthy food and drink sponsorship of elite sport and children's sport.<sup>19</sup> In the telephone survey with 825 parents, we asked about their level of support for both sponsorship policies and the introduction of a Sport Sponsorship Fund.<sup>21</sup>

**What we found:**

**i) Support of policies to limit unhealthy food and drink, and alcohol sponsorship**

**Sports club interviews:** Most parents interviewed at their local sports clubs said that they would support a policy to restrict unhealthy sponsorship of children's sport (70%) and elite sport (63%).<sup>19</sup> Around half of sporting officials also supported the introduction of such policies (Figure 7). Most sporting officials and

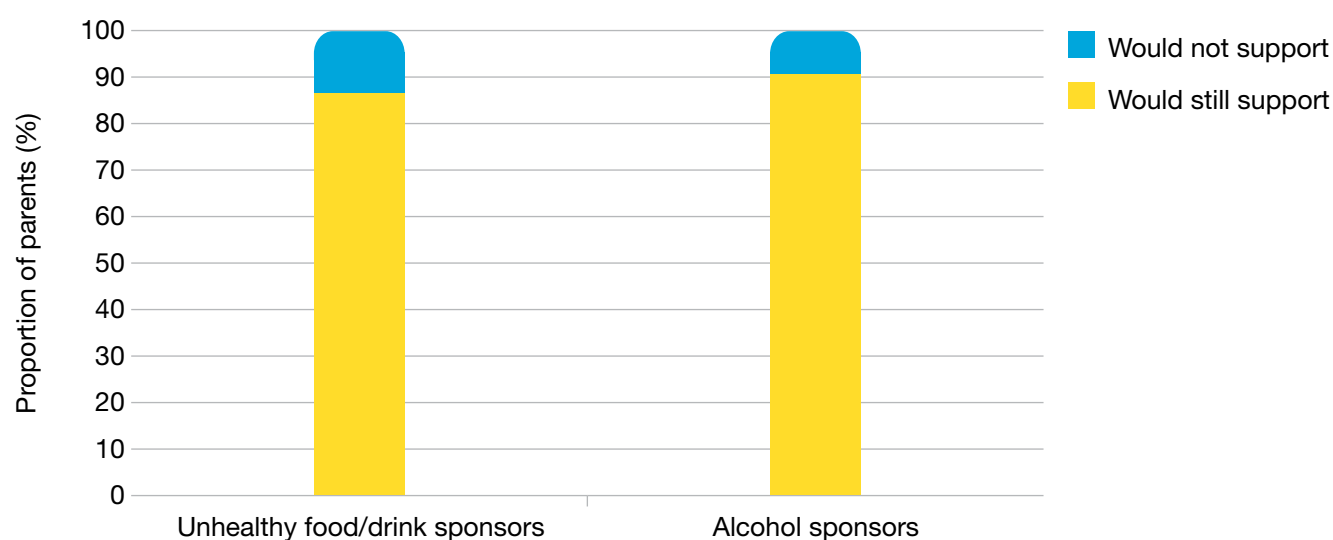
parents thought that government should be at least partly responsible for introducing these policies. Sporting officials and parents were particularly supportive of restricting the use of unhealthy food and drink logos on children's uniforms.<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 7:** Sports club officials', regional association officials' and parents' support of policies to limit unhealthy food and drink sponsorship of elite and children's sport.

**Parent survey:** Around three-quarters of parents said they would support the introduction of policies to restrict unhealthy food and drink sponsorship of children's sport (76%) and elite sport (71%).<sup>21</sup> Most parents were also supportive of limiting alcohol sponsorship for both these sporting levels (81% and 76%). Two-thirds of parents thought that government should be responsible for introducing these restrictions.

Of those parents who supported restrictions for children's sport, almost all (90%) said they would continue to support these sponsorship policies that limited food and drink or alcohol sponsorship for children's sport even if it meant paying higher registration fees for sport (Figure 8).<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 8:** Parents' support of policies to limit unhealthy food and drink, and alcohol sponsorship of children's sport if sports fees increased

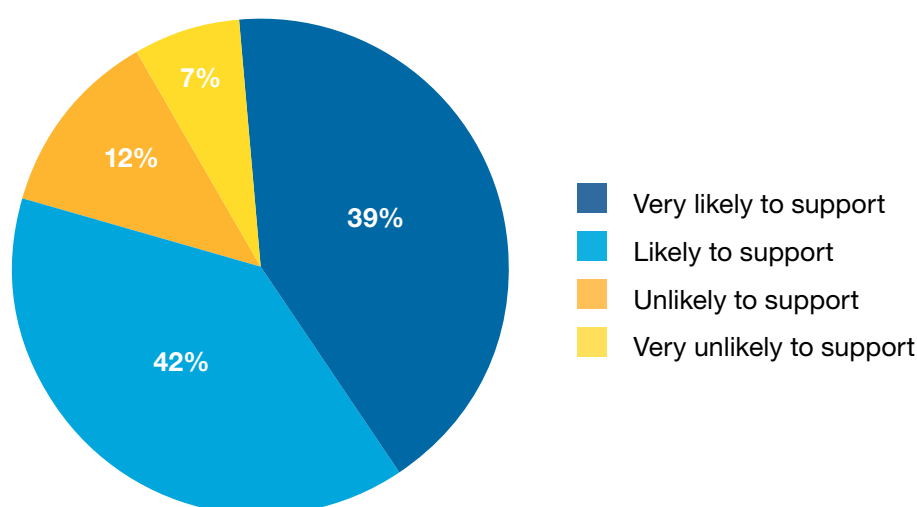
## ii) Support of a Sport Sponsorship Fund

**Parent survey:** Almost all parents (81%) said they would support the introduction of a sport sponsorship fund to allow unhealthy food and drink, and alcohol companies to

provide funding to sport as long as there were no visible promotions at clubs (Figure 9).<sup>21</sup>

This Sport Sponsorship Fund approach was more acceptable to parents than policies to limit sponsorship. Almost three-quarters

of parents who would not be supportive of sponsorship policies for children's sport said that they would support this fund.



**Figure 9:** Parents' support for a Sport Sponsorship Fund



## Key findings from this research

- Sponsorship by unhealthy food and drink companies of children's community sports clubs and peak sporting bodies is a significant concern because of the high levels of industry sponsorship and the influence this sponsorship has on children's impression of these companies and their purchasing habits.
- This sponsorship influences the food and drinks that children like, and prefer to buy and consume.
- Alcohol-related sponsorship of children's local sporting clubs is particularly concerning as these products are clearly not appropriate for children, and this marketing is likely to create a favourable impression on children, as demonstrated for food and drink sponsors. Other research has found that for adults, those personally receiving alcohol-related sponsorship have significantly higher levels of hazardous drinking.<sup>22</sup>
- Limiting unhealthy food and drink, and alcohol sponsorship of children's sport is not likely to lead to major financial difficulties for many clubs as this sponsorship only contributes a low proportion of sports clubs' income.
- Parents across NSW and the junior sporting community would support the introduction of policies to limit unhealthy food and drink, and alcohol sponsorship of children's sport. It is generally agreed that government should take the lead in introducing policies to reduce children's exposure to unhealthy food, drink, and alcohol sponsorship of local level children's sport, rather than industry or individual sports clubs.
- Community support for the introduction of a Sport Sponsorship Fund is particularly high. This funding system could help to ensure the financial viability of sports clubs while reducing children's exposure to unhealthy food and drink, and alcohol promotions at sports clubs. Funding provided to sports clubs through this fund could also be used to support the adoption of other healthy practices, such as healthy eating, sun safety, smoke-free facilities and social inclusion.



**Sports sponsorship influences the food and drinks that children like, and prefer to buy and consume.**

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