

### 2003-17 Food Marketing and Advertising Directed at Children and Adolescents: Implications for Overweight

The growing epidemic of overweight children has brought attention to the possible role that food and beverage advertising and marketing may play in influencing eating behaviors of youth. In recent years, the food and beverage industry has viewed children and adolescents as a major market force because of their spending power, purchasing influence, and as future adult consumers.<sup>1,2</sup> As a result, they are now the target of intense and aggressive food marketing and advertising efforts.<sup>3-9</sup> Multiple techniques and channels are used to reach youth, beginning when they are toddlers, to foster brand-building and encourage product use. These food marketing channels include television advertising, in-school marketing, product placements, kids clubs, the Internet, toys and products with brand logos, and youth-targeted promotions, such as cross-selling and tie-ins. Foods marketed to children are predominantly high in sugar and fat.<sup>10-15</sup>

Television advertising and in-school marketing are two of the most prevalent forms of marketing to children. Television is the largest source of media messages about food to children, especially younger children. The average child or adolescent watches an average of three hours of television per day.<sup>16</sup> It is estimated that children may view as many as 40,000 commercials each year.<sup>1</sup> Food is the most frequently advertised product category on children's television, accounting for over 50 percent of all ads.<sup>10-12</sup> Children view an average of one food commercial every five minutes of television viewing time, and may see as many as three hours of food commercials each week.<sup>11</sup> Several studies have documented that the foods promoted on children's television are predominantly high in sugar and fat, with almost no references to fruits or vegetables.<sup>10-12,14</sup> Because African American and Hispanic children, as well as most low-income children of all ethnic groups, watch more TV compared to middle and upper income white children<sup>17,18</sup> they are exposed to more food ads.

In-school commercial activities related to food and beverages include: 1) product sales,

through vending machines, soft drink "pouring-rights" agreements (exclusive contracts), branded fast food, and fundraisers; 2) direct advertising, such as food and beverage ads in schools; and 3) indirect advertising, such as corporate-sponsored educational programs, sports sponsorships, and incentive programs using contests and coupons.<sup>19,20</sup> The majority of the foods sold in vending machines and school stores are energy dense, low-nutrient foods,<sup>21</sup> which promotes purchasing and consumption of these foods while children are captive in an environment that is dedicated to education.

Studies suggest that food advertising and marketing is associated with more favorable attitudes, preferences and behaviors among children towards the advertised food product.<sup>12,13,22-24</sup> The research evidence is strong showing that children's food preferences and food purchase requests for high sugar and high fat foods are influenced by television exposure to food advertising.<sup>12,13,22-24</sup> A recent FAO/WHO report concluded that while the evidence that the heavy marketing of fast food outlets and energy-dense, micronutrient-poor foods and beverages to children causes obesity is not unequivocal, sufficient indirect evidence exists to place this practice in the "probable" category for increasing risk of obesity.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, the relationship between high sugar intake and dental caries is of concern.

Children and adolescents are currently being exposed to an increasing and unprecedented amount of food advertising and marketing through a wide range of venues. Young children have few defenses against such ads, and older children and teens can be manipulated and misled by them.<sup>1</sup> Children are a vulnerable group that should be protected from commercial influences that may adversely affect weight status and subsequent health problems. APHA therefore:

1. Encourages the federal government, states and school districts to designate schools as food advertising-free zones, where children and adolescents can pursue learning free of commercial influences and pressures;
2. Encourages collaboration with the United States Department of Agriculture, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,

Congress, state health and education agencies, school districts, and state and local legislatures to develop school policies that promote a healthful eating environment, such as the provision of healthier foods and bottled water while prohibiting the sale of soft drinks and other high-calorie, low-nutrition foods during the school day;

3. Urges legislation to eliminate food advertising aimed at young children on children's television programs, such as morning, after-school, and weekend children's programs. Interim means should also be explored, such as having stricter limitations on the amount of advertising permitted on children's television or placing a monetary surcharge on advertising for high-calorie, low-nutrition foods targeted at youth which would be used to develop nutrition and physical activity media campaigns and promotion programs to be overseen by a non-profit or governmental organization;
4. Encourages collaboration among nonprofit and governmental organizations to develop guidelines for responsible food advertising and marketing aimed at children and adolescents, and urges food companies, advertising agencies and broadcasters to follow these guidelines, once they are developed;
5. Urges the White House or Surgeon General to convene a conference on food marketing and advertising aimed at children and adolescents and its effects on their health and well-being and develop recommendations to address this issue;
6. Urges Congress and the Administration to appropriate funding for the National Institutes of Health and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to study the effects of food advertising and marketing on health behaviors of children and adolescents; and
7. Urges the development and dissemination of school-based initiatives to teach children, adolescents and their parents consumer media literacy.

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