

## Protecting children from unhealthy food advertising

“Children should be encouraged to eat fewer high fat snacks such as crisps and biscuits and to avoid consuming a large proportion of total energy from sweetened drinks.”

*Childhood obesity: time for action, not complacency, Editorial in the British Medical Journal, February 2000, vol. 320, p.328.*

### ❖ Children’s diet and health

The Government’s 2000 National Diet and Nutrition Survey confirms the poor state of children’s diets. British children eat less than half the recommended portions of fruit and vegetables a day, and the vast majority have intakes of saturated fat, sugar and salt which exceed the maximum adult recommendations.<sup>1</sup>

Population estimates indicate that 9% of boys and 13.5% of girls in England are overweight and the corresponding figures for Scotland are even higher (10% for boys and 15.8% for girls).<sup>2</sup> The rate of increase in the proportion of overweight children is alarming and childhood levels of obesity in the UK have been described as ‘epidemic’.<sup>3</sup> Between 1984 and 1994, the prevalence of obesity in English primary school children increased by 140%.<sup>2</sup> Eating diets high in energy-dense fat is a major contributory factor in the rising trend in overweight and obese children.

More than half of 4 to 18 year olds have some dental decay, largely caused by frequent consumption of sugar-laden products.<sup>1</sup> Recent research has also identified links between the consumption of sugar sweetened drinks and obesity,<sup>4,5</sup> and between low fruit and vegetable consumption and asthma.<sup>6</sup> In the longer term, a diet high in fatty, sugary and/or salty foods increases the risk of developing coronary heart disease, some cancers, hypertension, diabetes and numerous other health disorders.<sup>7, 8, 9,10</sup>

### ❖ Advertising targeted at children

It is estimated that the food industry spent in excess of £0.3 billion in 1999 promoting unhealthy food products.<sup>11</sup> These are processed foods which contain high levels of fat and/or sugar and/or salt and include confectionery, crisps and savoury snacks, soft drinks and other so-called ‘fast’ or pre-prepared ‘convenience’ foods. Children are persistently exposed to commercial messages promoting these foods: on television and radio, on the internet, at the cinema, in comics and magazines, on packaging, and even at school.

In July 2001 Sustain published *TV Dinners*, a report which examines the nature and extent of food advertising during children’s TV programmes.<sup>12</sup> The study shows that between 95% and 99% of the food advertising during children’s programming is for fatty and/or sugary and/or salty foods. Fatty and sugary foods are advertised in proportions up to 11 times higher than that recommended in official dietary guidelines, whilst fruit and vegetables are usually not advertised at all. In addition, adverts for unhealthy foods are shown with much greater frequency during children’s television compared with adult viewing periods.

Sustain believes that the effect of this imbalance in advertising is to reinforce children’s consumption of less healthy foods and undermine the efforts of parents and health professionals to encourage healthier patterns of eating. In the context of scientific evidence that diets high in fats (especially saturated fats), sugar and salt have a detrimental effect on children’s current and future health, this selective targeting of children by food advertisers is unjustifiable.

## ❖ The need for more protection

Television content analyses undertaken by Leeds University have shown that child-orientated adverts are more frequently repeated and are more likely to use animation, pace and central characters, magic and fantasy, together with a wide range of emotional appeals (fun, action, adventure and achievement). The researchers conclude that children's television adverts are designed in a manner to engage attention and emotional response.<sup>13</sup>

Reviews of related research confirm that young children, especially, do not grasp the motives behind advertising or realise that the products advertised may not be good for their immediate or long-term health.<sup>14,15</sup> Advertising is often viewed as either entertainment or as a source of reliable information, or both.<sup>16</sup> Even when children develop a better understanding of its purpose, they remain very vulnerable to peer pressure, upon which advertising feeds.

These findings are not new. Indeed, in response to concerns expressed over a number of years, advertising codes of practice acknowledge that children deserve special protection, including from inducements to eat unhealthy diets. Why, then, does there continue to be a very high volume of advertising for fatty and/or sugary and/or salty foods, targeted specifically at children?

First, the codes apply only to individual adverts, and not to the cumulative effect of advertising and marketing as a whole. Second, the codes are voluntary, and call only for restraint, not full protection. So far, only the Co-op has agreed, voluntarily, not to promote fatty and/or sugary and/or salty foods to children at all.<sup>17</sup>

### ❖ Policy statement

**We call upon the UK Government to introduce legislation which protects children from the advertising and promotion of foods that contribute to an unhealthy diet. These include confectionery, crisps, savoury snacks, soft drinks and other processed products containing high levels of fat and/or sugar and/or salt, excessive consumption of which is known to be detrimental to children's health. Voluntary approaches are not working, so statutory controls are needed to end commercial activities which promote these foods specifically to children, irrespective of the method used.**

We fully acknowledge that advertising is not the only influence on children's diets and, thereby, their health. Family and friends, teachers and other professionals, government and private sector policies all have their role to play. However, advertising also affects all of these influences, as well as appealing directly to children, and it is designed to be powerfully persuasive. Sustain believes that children have a right to grow up free from commercial pressures to buy – or pester their families to buy – fatty and/or sugary and/or salty foods that put their current and future health at risk.

*References supporting the statements made in this document are listed at [www.sustainweb.org/adcampaign](http://www.sustainweb.org/adcampaign)*

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### FAX BACK FORM

We call upon the UK Government to introduce legislation which protects children from the advertising and promotion of foods that contribute to an unhealthy diet. These include confectionery, crisps, savoury snacks, soft drinks and other processed products containing high levels of fat and/or sugar and/or salt, excessive consumption of which is known to be detrimental to children's health. Voluntary approaches are not working, so statutory controls are needed to end commercial activities which promote these foods specifically to children, irrespective of the method used.

My organisation is happy to support the principle of this policy statement.

We are considering whether we can support the recommendation.

We hope to let you know by: \_\_\_\_\_ (please insert date)

Name of organisation:.....

Address:.....

Phone:.....

E-mail:.....

Signature:.....

Date:.....

Print name:.....

Job Title:.....

We are able to distribute campaign literature on behalf of Sustain.

We have a magazine in which we can include an article supplied by Sustain.

We can put a link from our website to the campaign website.

We would consider funding the campaign.

*(If you tick this box, we will contact you with further details of ways in which organisations can contribute financially – large and small donations are most welcome - every little helps!)*

**Please return this form to:**

**Jeanette Longfield at Sustain**

**Fax: 020 7837 1141**

**E-mail: [jeanette@sustainweb.org](mailto:jeanette@sustainweb.org)**

## References

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<sup>1</sup> Food Standards Agency, (June 2000), *The National Diet and Nutrition Survey of Young People aged 4 to 18 years*, HMSO, London.

<sup>2</sup> Chinn S. & Rona R., (2001), Prevalence and trends in overweight and obesity in three cross sectional studies of British children, 1974-94, *British Medical Journal*, 322, 24-26 (6 January).

*See also:*

Bundred P., Kitchiner D. & Buchan I., (2001), Prevalence of overweight and obese children between 1989 and 1998: population based series of cross sectional studies, *British Medical Journal*, 322, 1-4 (10 February).

Rudolf M., Sahota P., Barth J. & Walker J., (2001), Increasing prevalence of obesity in primary school children: cohort study, *British Medical Journal*, 322, 1094-1095 (5 May)

<sup>3</sup> Dietz W., (2001), The obesity epidemic in young children, *British Medical Journal*, 322, 313-314 (10 February).

<sup>4</sup> Ludwig D., Peterson K., Gortmaker S., (2001), Relationship between consumption of sugar-sweetened drinks and childhood obesity: a prospective, observational analysis, *The Lancet*, 357, 505-508 (17 February).

<sup>5</sup> Bellisle F., Rolland-Cachera M., (2001), How sugar-containing drinks might increase adiposity in children, *The Lancet*, 357, 490 (17 February).

<sup>6</sup> Fogarty A. & Britton J., (2000), Nutritional issues and asthma, *Current opinion in pulmonary medicine*, 6, 86-89.

*See also:*

Figueroa-Munoz J., Chinn S. & Rona R., (2001), Association between obesity and asthma in 4-11 year old children in the UK, *Thorax*, 56, 2, 133-37.

Gillman M., (1996), Enjoy your fruit and vegetables, *British Medical Journal*, 313, 756-66 (28 September).

<sup>7</sup> Law M., (2000), Dietary fat and adult diseases and the implications for childhood nutrition: an epidemiological approach, *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 72, 1291S-1296S.

<sup>8</sup> Must A. & Strauss R., (1999), Risks and consequences of childhood and adolescent obesity, *International Journal of Obesity*, 23, Suppl 2, S2-S11.

<sup>9</sup> Woutersen R., Appel M., van Garderen-Hoetmer A. & Wijnands M., (1999), Dietary fat and carcinogenesis, *Mutation Research*, 443, 1-2, 111-27.

<sup>10</sup> Siani A., Guglielmucci F., Farinara E. & Strazzullo P., (1999), Increasing evidence for the role of salt and salt-sensitivity in hypertension, *Nutrition, Metabolism and Cardiovascular Diseases*, 2, 93-100.

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<sup>11</sup> It is very difficult to get accurate figures from the food and drink industry on advertising and promotion expenditure. This estimate is based on approximate figures which are presented in the Advertising Association's Yearbook 2000. However, market data from Haynet Marketing, ([www.marketing.haynet.com](http://www.marketing.haynet.com), original source AC Nielson) shows that in the year ending April 2000, industry spent £71m advertising the top ten selling soft drinks. The same source shows that £47m was expended on advertising the top ten selling confectionery lines and the advertising spend for the top ten selling crisps and snack products was £21m.

<sup>12</sup> Sustain, (2001), *TV Dinners – What's being served up by the advertisers?*, Sustain: The alliance for better food and farming, London.

<sup>13</sup> Lewis M. & Hill A., (1998), Food advertising on British children's television: a content analysis and experimental study with nine-year olds, *International Journal of Obesity*, 22, 206-14.

<sup>14</sup> Bjurnstrom E., (1994), *Children and Television Advertising: a critical study of international research concerning the effects of TV commercials on children*, The National Swedish Board for Consumer Policy.

<sup>15</sup> Jarlbro G., (2001), *Children and television advertising – the players, the arguments and the research during 1994-2000*, Swedish Consumer Agency.

<sup>16</sup> Young B., (1998), *Emulation, Fears and Understanding: A review of recent research on children and television advertising*, ITC, London.

<sup>17</sup> Co-operative Wholesale Society Ltd., (2000), *Blackmail – The first in a series of inquiries into consumer concerns about the ethics of modern food production and advertising*, CWS Ltd., Manchester.