



Briefing: Junk food marketing to children campaign

JUNK FOOD MARKETING INFLUENCES CHILDREN'S CHOICES

Around 30 per cent of children in the UK are overweight or obese¹, and research shows that children are eating too much saturated fat and sugar.² Obese children are more likely to become obese adults, which in turn increases their risk of developing a number of chronic health conditions, including cardiovascular disease, type II diabetes and some kinds of cancer. An unhealthy diet high in sugar also increases the risk of developing tooth decay. Children are also eating too much salt³ which increases the risk of high blood pressure, which in turn increases the risk of heart disease and stroke later in life.

Food and beverage producers aim to build long term relationships between young consumers and their brands, and research shows that food promotions can influence children's behaviour in a number of ways including their preferences, purchase behaviour and consumption.⁴

Children as young as 18 months can recognise brands and children as young as three have been shown to prefer branded, over identical unbranded food.⁵ Marketing therefore plays a significant role in influencing children's dietary choices. Sadly, the marketing of food and drinks to children is weighted heavily towards unhealthy foods,⁶ with very few advertisements promoting healthy options.⁷

Children are constantly exposed to junk food marketing: on TV, on radio, on the internet, in emails, social media and text messages, at the cinema, in comics and magazines, in supermarkets, on food packaging, and for some even at school. Children should be protected from commercial interests that encourage them to eat foods that are high in saturated fat, salt and sugar. To improve their dietary health and life chances, they must be protected from the marketing of unhealthy food and drink. The recommendations in this briefing are also made by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) in its June 2010 report on the prevention of cardiovascular disease.⁸

ACTION NEEDED

1. Move the responsibility for developing, monitoring, and evaluating advertising regulations to a body independent of the advertising industry.
2. Amend regulations to prevent TV advertisements for unhealthy food and drinks before 9pm.
3. Introduce consistent and effective regulations to protect under-16s across

all forms of media. The new regulations should:

- Include all marketing techniques
- Distinguish between healthy and unhealthy products using a validated nutrient profiling model
- Establish a means of determining whether a product or promotion is targeting children

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MARKETERS ARE EXPLOITING LOOPHOLES IN THE REGULATION

TV: Regulation is already in place that prevents advertisements for unhealthy foods from being broadcast during or around programmes specifically made for children. However, the broadcast regulations are not strong enough because children also watch shows which most people consider to be family entertainment shows. The advertising industry however, considers such programmes as 'adult' programming so they therefore fall outside of current regulations. Recent Ofcom statistics show that since the introduction of advertising restrictions, children's viewing habits have changed. They often watch television later in the evening, with their viewing during 'adult' commercial airtime now peaking during 8-9pm.⁹ A 9pm watershed on TV already exists to protect children from content which is unsuitable for a child audience. This should be extended to include unhealthy food and drink adverts to protect a vulnerable group.

Food manufacturers are using this to their advantage and advertising unhealthy products during some of the television programmes most popular with children, such as the X-Factor and The Simpsons, because these are not covered by the regulations. The case for stronger protection is reinforced by research which suggests that the current regulations are not working as children are exposed to the same number of advertisements for unhealthy food as before their introduction.¹⁰

In addition, there is considerable popular support for action: a recent survey found that 65 per cent of adults agree that junk food adverts should be shown only after 9pm.¹¹ The need for protective restrictions is recognised by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland. In 2013 it introduced a ban on the television advertising for foods high in fat, sugar and salt before 6pm, a 25 per cent limit on the advertising sold for these foods after 6pm and rules to prevent the use of celebrities, characters, health claims or offers to promote unhealthy foods.¹² It is now time for the UK Government and Ofcom to ensure that children in the UK are better protected.

ACTION NEEDED

Amend regulations to prevent TV advertisements for unhealthy food and drinks before 9pm.

Online and other non-broadcast media: The current self-regulatory system for non-broadcast advertising is weak and allows products which are outlawed from children's television to be marketed to children online. Websites for food and drinks almost exclusively promote products that are high in sugar and/or fat and/or salt, often using techniques which children will find difficult to identify as advertising - advergames, downloads, and competitions for example. Research shows that advergames, which are currently unregulated, are even more powerful than traditional advertising. This is because children are subconsciously targeted for longer periods of time, to engage with the brand or product through play rather than

We asked young people whether they thought that junk food companies should be advertising their products directly to children. Here are a few of their answers:

“ No, because if they are seeing food like this then they are more likely to want the unhealthy option rather than a healthier choice because they instantly think of the food they have most seen on the TV.

16 year old

“ No, it's leading children to pressure their parents into buying them junk food.

13 year old

“ Junk food adverts encourage children to buy unhealthy food and then they may become overweight.

14 year old

passive viewing.¹³ A BHF (British Heart Foundation) and Children's Food Campaign (CFC) report, The 21st Century Gingerbread House demonstrates the exploitative nature of this kind of marketing.¹⁴ The CFC's follow up report, Through the Looking Glass, demonstrates failings with the complaints procedure, which it finds weighted to the advantage of the food industry.¹⁵ Furthermore, in a BHF survey 73 per cent of respondents felt that companies should not be allowed to target children under the age of 16 with online adverts for junk food products.¹⁶

Underpinning this problem are vague rules which do not differentiate between healthy and unhealthy foods, and fail to cover some key marketing techniques such as the use of brand characters. For example, the advertising code states that "Marketing communications should not condone or encourage poor nutritional habits or an unhealthy lifestyle in children" – but what constitutes "condoning and encouraging" or "poor habits" is left open to interpretation.

The narrow remit of the advertising code also leaves a number of other marketing techniques – including sponsorship of events, placement at supermarket checkouts, and product-based marketing techniques such as packaging and food shape – completely unregulated, creating significant loopholes in the regulatory framework.¹⁷ Similarly, voluntary pledges such as the EU Pledge on responsible marketing are ineffective. The voluntary nature allows industry to set their own criteria for adhering to these pledges creating further loopholes in the system in favour of industry's self-interest.¹⁸

ACTION NEEDED

Introduce consistent and effective regulations to protect under-16s across all forms of media. The new regulations should:

- Include all marketing techniques.
- Distinguish between healthy and unhealthy products using a validated nutrient profiling model.
- Establish a means of determining whether a product or promotion is targeting children.

ADVERTISERS ARE WRITING THE RULES

The codes governing advertising in the UK are written and maintained by members of the advertising industry, through their membership of the Committee on Advertising Practice. The Advertising Standards Authority, which monitors adherence and enforces the code, is funded by voluntary financial contributions from the advertising industry. This means that the codes are developed and enforced by advertisers, creating an obvious conflict of interest.

ACTION NEEDED

Move the responsibility for developing, monitoring, and evaluating advertising regulations to a body independent of the advertising industry.

These changes would help protect children from junk food marketers and the pressure they create for them to choose unhealthy food and drinks, whilst still allowing the advertising and promotion of healthy products.

In partnership with:

The Children's Food Campaign wants to improve children's health and well-being through better food in schools and protecting children from junk food marketing. We are supported by over 150 national organisations and co-ordinated by Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming. childrensfood.org.uk



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