

# MARKETING UNHEALTHY FOODS TO KIDS

## Why Regulation is Critical to Reducing Obesity

### A Growing, Global Obesity Epidemic

- Worldwide, over 223 million children aged 5-18 years are now overweight or obese — 24 million more than in 2000 — and prevalence is expected to increase another 20% over the next decade to 269 million.<sup>1,2</sup> Prevalence has also risen 60% since 1990 for preschool-aged children, with 43 million now affected and a further 92 million at risk of becoming overweight.<sup>3</sup>
- Low- and middle-income countries have seen the most rapid rise in prevalence.<sup>4</sup> In Latin America, for example, overweight and obesity now affects roughly 15-20% of children and adolescents in Colombia, a quarter to a third in parts of Brazil, and well over a third in Mexico and Chile.<sup>2,5</sup>
- Even at a young age, obesity has serious health consequences, harming nearly every organ system and disrupting hormones that control blood sugar and normal development.<sup>4,6-9</sup>
- Being overweight in childhood and adolescence can also take a serious social and psychological toll with increased risks for depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, peer bullying, eating disorders, or poor performance in school.<sup>10-17</sup>
- Without intervention, overweight and obese children are likely to grow into overweight and obese teenagers and adults.<sup>7,18-21</sup> They are also more likely to develop diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and cancer at a younger age and face shorter life expectancies.<sup>4,6,9,21-26</sup>

### A Major Cause: Marketing to Children

- The World Health Organization and other major health organizations worldwide all point to pervasive, unhealthy food marketing to children as a significant risk factor for childhood obesity.<sup>8,27,30-35</sup>
- Children are exposed all day, every day to food marketing where they live, learn, and play — on TV, at school and sports practice, in stores, at the movies, on mobile devices, and online.<sup>28,35-37</sup>
- In the U.S., children ages 2-11 view roughly 13 ads for foods, beverages, and restaurants on TV every day, and 12- to 17-year-old adolescents see 16.5.<sup>38</sup>
- While TV has historically been the medium of choice to reach children, marketing via newer online, mobile, viral, and social media has exploded in recent years, with elements of immersion, interactivity, user-generated and peer-to-peer content, and sophisticated location- and demographic-based targeting offering marketers more tools to target young audiences.<sup>29,35,39,40</sup>
- Foods and drinks are promoted to children more than any other product type and in far greater proportion than to adults.<sup>27,30,41</sup>
- The vast majority of promoted products are calorie-dense and nutrient-poor, with added sugar, saturated fat, and sodium well above recommended levels (e.g., sugary breakfast cereals, soft drinks, candy, salty snacks, and fast foods).<sup>4,27,28,35-37,41-44</sup>

TV advertising remains the most popular way to reach kids, but marketers increasingly use more integrated cross-media campaigns that include:<sup>27-29</sup>

- Promotional packaging
- Point-of-purchase displays
- Product placements
- Video games
- Immersive, interactive online and mobile environments, e.g.,
  - Social media
  - Advergaming
  - Branded applications
- Viral marketing
- In-school marketing
- Sponsorship of charity events
- Athletic sponsorships

- Children are repeatedly exposed to marketing that portrays eating unhealthy foods in unlimited quantities as fun, cool, and exciting, and ultimately having only positive outcomes.<sup>37,45</sup>
- Marketing to children can have lifelong consequences, as childhood eating habits and preferences persist into later life, and the risk of overweight children becoming overweight adults is estimated to be at least twice that of normal-weight children.<sup>18</sup>
- The food, beverage, and restaurant industries spend billions of dollars every year to reach children with targeted marketing and millions of dollars lobbying against laws that might prevent them from doing so, demonstrating the value they see in the child market.<sup>36,43,46-49</sup>

## Food Marketing Leads to Poor Diet and Obesity

- Children are extremely vulnerable to food marketing. Developmentally, they are highly impressionable, cannot yet recognize advertising intent, lack nutritional knowledge, and are motivated by immediate gratification rather than long-term consequences.<sup>33,35,45</sup>
- Despite this, food companies target children because:
  - They have their own money to spend,
  - They strongly influence what families buy (via “pester power” or purchase requests), and
  - Establishing brand loyalty early in life will bring companies lifelong financial rewards.<sup>4,27,35,45,57-60</sup>
- An extensive body of research consistently shows that:
  - Marketing increases children’s awareness, recognition, and recall of brands and begins to affect them as early as preschool.<sup>4,27,35,45,60-62</sup>
  - Repeated exposure to marketing forges positive brand associations and preferences — not just for promoted products, but for entire categories of junk food.<sup>27,37,60,63-65</sup>
  - Time spent watching TV and exposure to unhealthy food advertisements on TV are associated with children consuming more fast food,<sup>66</sup> more of advertised foods (which are overwhelmingly unhealthy), and more calories.<sup>67-70</sup>
  - Marketing helps create and reinforce social norms around what foods are good to eat and how and when to consume them — often depicted outside of mealtimes, away from the table, and in unlimited quantities.<sup>37,45</sup>
  - Cues such as eye-level placement, appealing product packaging, and toy giveaway displays in grocery stores and restaurants increase both children’s immediate desire to purchase an item and “pestering” of their parents’ to buy it for them.<sup>27,60</sup>
  - Children consume more of promoted products and develop lasting preferences for them that play a role in forming their self-identity and lifelong eating habits.<sup>27,45,60,64,71,72</sup>

### Techniques to appeal to children:<sup>27,50-54</sup>

- **Endorsements** by celebrities, athletes, licensed characters, or branded spokes-characters
- **Tie-ins** (to popular toys, movies, or TV shows)
- **Purchase incentives** such as competitions or free toys
- **Animation** and kid-friendly graphics and sound effects
- **Anthropomorphized** food/beverage products
- **Downloads** such as screensavers, wallpapers, coloring pages, and e-cards
- Use of **child actors**

### Emotional and product appeals to children:<sup>27,51-53,55,56</sup>

- |             |                    |
|-------------|--------------------|
| • Fun       | • Action-adventure |
| • Cool      | • Anti-adult       |
| • Happiness | • Unique/new       |
| • Fantasy   | • Taste/texture    |
| • Humor     |                    |

## The Need for Comprehensive Marketing Restrictions

- Children’s constant exposure to marketing for foods and beverages that grossly misalign with their recommended diet is inherently unfair and exploitative, and it undermines parent, school, community, and government efforts to raise healthy children and prevent overweight, obesity, and costly disease.<sup>4,73</sup>
- In 1989, the United Nations declared in the Convention on the Rights of the Child that children have a fundamental right to healthy childhoods, free from economic exploitation and the metabolic

diseases and stress that come with obesity; these rights have been ratified by every country in the world except the United States.<sup>4,74</sup>

- The constitution of nearly every country in Latin America specifically guarantees children's basic rights, including Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico, who state that children must be protected against exploitation and provided with balanced diets to meet their nutritional needs, and that the rights of children take absolute priority.<sup>75-78</sup>
- Global leaders including the World Health Organization,<sup>4,79</sup> Pan American Health Organization,<sup>30</sup> European Union,<sup>80</sup> and World Cancer Research Fund,<sup>81</sup> among others,<sup>35,65,82</sup> unequivocally recommend protecting children from exposure to unhealthy food marketing as a crucial step in stopping the rise of childhood obesity — by restricting or banning marketing targeting or viewed by children, by improving the nutritional profile of promoted products, or by both means.

## Keys to Effective Regulation

Effective food marketing regulations should address the types of foods and beverages regulated, the channels through which they are marketed (e.g., television, schools, etc.), and the audiences reached. Key concepts for developing effective regulations include the following:

- **Partial measures are ineffective.** Industry will find ways to avoid restrictions and has the resources to achieve the same reach to consumers through alternative channels.
- **Industry self-regulation does not work.** Provisions are often weak, participation is voluntary, and enforcement and penalties are not strong enough to ensure compliance.
- **Rigorous enforcement with real penalties is critical.**

## Conclusion

- More and stronger statutory policies are needed with wide coverage across all marketing channels and clear nutritional standards.<sup>83,84</sup> Policymakers should consider:
  - Using more inclusive definitions of “child audience” (by increasing age cut-offs and/or reducing child audience percentage cut points for advertising restrictions),<sup>30,85-87</sup>
  - Adopting international, standardized nutrient profiling definitions to determine which products are unhealthy and thus should not be promoted to children as Chile did,<sup>4,30,43,85,86</sup>
  - Expanding restrictions to better cover non-traditional media such as social media, online advergames, and more indirect and stealth marketing tactics that target children,<sup>4,30,86,88</sup>
  - Cooperating between countries to minimize the impact of cross-border marketing,<sup>4,89</sup> and
  - Establishing independent regulatory bodies enabled to hold non-compliant companies accountable.<sup>4,30,85,86,90</sup>
- Better protecting children from harmful food and beverage marketing via strong, statutory action is a crucial and correct step towards reversing the trends of childhood obesity and securing the health of the next generations.

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