

Eliminating Marketing of Unhealthy Foods and Beverages to Children and Youth

May 2012

Issue:

Alberta children are exposed to a high volume of food and beverage advertisements every day through media such as TV, internet, and schools (i.e. scoreboards and signs). A 2006 review of over 100 research studies concluded that marketing strongly influences children's food and beverage preferences, requests and consumption habits and that advertising of food and beverages on TV is associated with obesity of children and youth (1). This is largely the result of the food industry's heavy promotion of energy dense, high fat, high salt or high sugar foods and beverages, and almost no promotion of healthier food such as fruit and vegetables. In an international comparison study of 11 countries, Alberta had the second highest rate of TV advertising of nutritionally poor foods and beverages (2).

The link between marketing to children and obesity is a significant public health concern. Childhood obesity has been associated with a range of health problems such as breathing difficulties, hypertension and other early markers of cardiovascular disease, insulin resistance, and mental health issues (3, 4). Further, the development of poor nutrition/unhealthy eating patterns at a young age may contribute to an increased risk of adult obesity (5).

Around the world, several countries and global health organizations are advocating to reduce marketing of unhealthy food products, particularly to children and adolescents vulnerable to the persuasive intent of advertising (1, 6). Research shows that until eight years of age children are unable to distinguish between program content and the persuasive intent of advertising (7) and that it is not until early adolescence that children understand the profit motive behind advertising (8). Emerging data also suggests that children and youth may require protection from new media (internet gaming and ads, text ads, social marketing, sponsorships, etc.) at an older age, as cognitive defences are continuing to develop through the teen years. The overt marketing intent may be less clear in these media, and exposure to the marketing/advertising message may be prolonged when sponsored games and contests draw youth to websites for extended periods of time (9).

Advertising in Canada is regulated by two industry groups, the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council and Advertising Standards Canada. This current system of self-regulation of marketing by the food and beverage industry does not provide children with sufficient protection from the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages (10). Companies currently set their own standards for what constitutes "healthy", creating a lack of standardization (11). For example, 80% of those foods promoted to children on television by corporations who have signed on to the voluntary Children's Advertising Initiative (CAI) can be classified as "unhealthy" by the UK nutrient profile model (12).

Limited marketing regulations in Canada and inadequate public/government funding of schools has also created a window of opportunity for businesses that market unhealthy food and beverages to actively seek and encourage schools to accept their funding to provide much needed revenue (13). For this reason, schools have become an important venue for food and beverage companies to aggressively market to children and youth to build brand loyalty and influence food choices (13, 14).

Benefits of Taking Action:

- Children and youth are vulnerable to the advertising and marketing tactics of food and beverage companies (15). Using policy to intervene to remove these influences supports healthy eating patterns for children and helps to reduce the risk for obesity and the incidence of cancers and other chronic disease in Alberta (15).
- Alberta schools, education stakeholders and the public are concerned about this issue and would support action to promote and protect the health of students in Alberta. When surveyed, 75% of responding Alberta decision-makers

in Government, schools, workplaces and the media reported that they would support prohibiting advertising and promotion of unhealthy foods and beverages to children under 16 years of age (16). Only 6.6% of respondents reported that they strongly opposed this policy action (16). Public support for government intervention on this issue is also confirmed by a recent Canadian survey conducted by Ipsos-Descarie, which found 82% of Canadian respondents would like limits to be placed on the marketing of low nutritional value foods to children (17).

- Government action to regulate marketing to children supports parents in their efforts to promote and protect the health of their children by limiting messages that undermine parental efforts to guide children's choices.
- Regulating marketing in schools will likewise support the efforts of schools to provide health education free from conflicting messages.

Considerations:

Marketing unhealthy food and beverages to children has alarmed a number of national and international organizations. In 2010, the World Health Organization (WHO) called for governments to take action to reduce the volume and impact of marketing of unhealthy food foods (those high in saturated fats, trans-fatty acids, free sugars, or salt) in order to protect the health of children (6). In the fall of 2011, during the UN Summit to address Non Communicable Diseases (NCDs), participating country representatives including Canada expressed their commitment to implement these WHO recommendations (18). Nevertheless, Canadian governments have done little to follow through on this promise. For example, to-date very few jurisdictions have established policies or guidelines for addressing corporate involvement in schools, while some, including Alberta, have explicitly left the decision in the hands of individual school authorities (13).

The province of Québec is the exception to the rule in Canada and is a leader in the area of marketing to children. Currently, the province has a total ban in place which prohibits print and broadcast advertising to children under the age of 13 (19). Québec was also one of the first provinces in Canada to implement laws restricting commercial activity in schools (14). Nevertheless, even in Quebec, increased government action is needed to strengthen the current model. Given the potential impact of emerging media on older youth, there is a need to expand restrictions to account for new media, such as internet and text advertising, and to increase the age of protection from 13 to 16 years. Provinces must also work together to expand legislation across all Canadian jurisdictions in order to address the possibility of cross-border "leakage" of advertising.

Canadian organizations such as Centre for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), the Quebec Coalition on Weight-related Problems, the Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance of Canada (CDPAC) and the Childhood Obesity Foundation are currently taking the lead to educate and advocate at the National level to restrict marketing to children in Canada in all settings including schools. These efforts to place this issue on the national policy agenda can support and reinforce efforts within Alberta to take action.

APCCP Priorities for Action:

- Advocate for the elimination of marketing foods and beverages that are inconsistent with the Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth (ANGCY) to children under the age of 16 in Alberta.

What's Next:

- In April 2011, the APCCP surveyed Alberta MP Candidates for the federal election to assess their level of support for efforts to address this issue. Please see the website for *Healthy Canada Now* survey results.
- The APCCP will continue to collaborate with other advocacy groups such as Coalition Poids and CDPAC to support efforts for national action on reducing marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children.

*As per the Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Healthy Children & Youth (ANGCY)

References:

1. Committee on Food Marketing and the Diets of Children and Youth, McGinnis J, Gootman JA, Kraak VI, editors. Food marketing to children and youth: threat or opportunity? Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Food and Nutrition Board, Institute of Medicine of the National Academies. Washington: The National Academic Press; 2006.
2. Kelly BM, Halford JCP, Boyland EJMM, Chapman KM, Bautista-Castano IMP, Berg CP, et al. Television food advertising to children: a global perspective. *Am J Public Health*. 2010 Jul 15.
3. World Health Organization. Population-based prevention strategies for childhood obesity. Geneva, Switzerland. 2010.
4. Public Health Agency of Canada. Obesity in Canada: A joint report from the Public Health Agency of Canada and the Canadian Institute for Health Information. 2011.
5. Law C, Power C, Graham H, Merrick D. Obesity and health inequalities. *Obes Rev*. 2007;8(Supplement):19-22.
6. World Health Organization (WHO). Set of recommendations on the marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization; 2010.
7. Kunkel D. Children and television advertising. In: Singer DG, Singer JL, editors. *Handbook of children and the media*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications; 2001.
8. Consumers International. The junk food generation: a multi-country survey of television advertisements on children. Kuala Lumpur 2004
9. Astral Media. 2008 annual report. 2008 [cited 2011 Sept. 16]; Available from: <http://astralmedia2008.com/en/>.
10. Potvin Kent M, Dubois L, Wanless A. Self-regulation by industry of food marketing is having little impact during children's preferred television. *International journal of pediatric obesity : IJPO : an official journal of the International Association for the Study of Obesity*. 2011 Oct;6(5-6):401-8.
11. Centre for Food in Canada. Improving Health Outcomes: The Role of Food in Addressing Chronic Diseases. Conference Board of Canada; 2012.
12. Potvin-Kent M. Food and beverage marketing directed at children in Canada and in Quebec: An update on the evidence. Ottawa, ON: Institute of Population Health, University of Ottawa; 2011. p. 32.
13. Canadian Teachers' Federation. Commercialism in Canadian schools: Who's calling the shots? Ottawa, Ontario: Canadian Teachers Federation, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Fédération des syndicats de l'enseignement; 2006.
14. Hawkes C. Marketing food to children: Changes in the global regulatory environment 2004-2006. *World Health Organization*; 2007. p. 96.
15. Raine K. Overweight and obesity in Canada: a population health perspective: Canadian Institute for Health Information, Canadian Population Health Initiative; 2004.
16. Nykiforuk CIJ, Raine KD, Wild C, the Alberta Policy Coalition for Chronic Disease Prevention team. Knowledge, Attitudes and Beliefs Survey - 2011. Edmonton, AB: School of Public Health, University of Alberta; 2011.
17. Ipsos Descarie. Quebec Coalition on Weight-Related Problems: Omnibus web survey results. . 2010.
18. United Nations (UN) General Assembly. Draft Political Declaration of the High Level Meeting on the Prevention and Control of Non Communicable Diseases. New York, USA: United Nations; 2011.
19. Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance of Canada. Background paper: marketing and advertising of food and beverages in Canada. Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance of Canada; 2006.

*As per the Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Healthy Children & Youth (ANGCY)