

Parents need help not hindrance in their role of ensuring children eat a healthy diet: Ban food advertisements on TV.

Column for Adelaide Advertiser, July 2004
Kaye Mehta, Chairperson, Coalition on Food Advertising to Children.

We all agree that ultimately it is parents' responsibility to bring up their children to be healthy and responsible consumers of food.

This includes:

- Educating children about healthy food choices
- Controlling what foods are purchased for the home
- Supervising and guiding the food choices of young children
- Modelling healthy eating practices.

These parental roles are important throughout childhood but especially vital in the early years, when eating habits are established that will follow the child into adult life.

No one would want to take these responsibilities away from parents. Neither, I am sure would we want to set obstacles in parents' ways to make their job more difficult than it already is. So let's remove the 'pester power' that makes children nag their parents to buy junk foods.

Television food advertising in Australia is saturated with advertisements for unhealthy foods such as fast foods, chocolate, confectionary and sweetened breakfast cereals. Australian children are eating too many of these foods and not surprisingly, they are getting fat! One in four children is now overweight or obese and this number is growing. Australian children are already paying a high personal cost with poorer health outcomes, and this will not get any better as they carry their obesity into adult life. The Australian health system will be crippled by the costs of obesity into the future. Health problems such as diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, asthma, arthritis will increase.

Why ban food advertisements on TV? Because television is the primary medium that advertisers use to market high fat, high sugar products to children. We also know that TV is a powerful source of information and education to children. They actually learn a lot from watching TV and there are indeed many good programs on TV.

But children's favourite television programs are full of advertisements promoting unhealthy foods. Research confirms that TV food advertisements are highly effective in encouraging children to want to eat junk foods. Advertisers actually use the concept of 'pester power' and specifically design advertisements that get children to nag their parents or care givers to buy the foods that they see on advertisements.

It is not fair on parents to, on the one hand lay the responsibility for children's diets squarely on their lap, and on the other hand to make this responsibility almost impossible to achieve. Any parent will know the debilitating effect of children's nagging on their sanity.

Australia needs a comprehensive approach to turn back the tide of childhood obesity. This will require many strategies to promote healthy eating and physical activity. We need strategies that make healthy choices easier for people, not harder. A ban on TV food advertising to children will remove an important source of unhealthy eating messages that children are currently being bombarded with. A ban on food advertising should make it easier for families to eat a healthy diet. It is not suggested as the only strategy to combat childhood obesity but it is a relatively easy one that will simply involve 'turning off the tap' on junk food advertising to children. Our parents and our children deserve giving this strategy a go.

h:\kaye mehta\foodadskids\cfac\media\advertisercolumn0407.doc