

Childhood obesity and television food advertising to children

Coalition on Food Advertising to Children

Report on NSW Childhood Obesity Summit.
Sept 2002.

In brief

The recent **NSW Childhood Obesity Summit** concluded with a comprehensive set of recommendations to tackle childhood obesity. Among these were two recommendations, which called for a government-led, independent, **review of the regulatory frameworks governing food advertising to children.**

The Coalition on Food Advertising to Children (CFAC) was invited to the NSW Childhood Obesity Summit, and spoke on the problem of television food advertising to children, in relation to the proportion of 'unhealthy' foods advertised, the impact on children's food choices and subsequent effects on childhood obesity. Many other public health experts, parents and children concurred with this position. Not surprisingly, television, advertising and food industry representatives refuted any link between food advertising and children's food choices or nutritional health.

It is a victory for children's health that the Summit concluded with support for structural intervention that will place children's interests in front of conflicting commercial interests.

CFAC is calling for a ban on all television food advertising during programs where children (aged 0 –12 years) make up a substantial proportion of the viewing audience, because:

- ◆ Young children are susceptible to manipulation by advertisers.
- ◆ All advertising should be directed at parents who are ultimately responsible for children's food choices.
- ◆ Food advertising during children's viewing times disproportionately promotes unhealthy foods.
- ◆ Ads for healthy foods have always been a minority and will not be significantly disadvantaged.
- ◆ The television and advertising industries have not curtailed their aggressive marketing to children in spite of considerable research evidence and calls for change.
- ◆ The current regulatory system, which favours industry self-regulation, has not worked to protect children's health interests.

NSW Childhood Obesity Summit

The NSW Childhood Obesity Summit held in September 2002, concluded with a comprehensive set of recommendations to tackle childhood obesity. Among these were two recommendations of significance to television food advertising to children.

Resolution 1.3 Early childhood.

That the regulatory framework for food advertising directed to children aged 0 –8 years be reviewed in recognition that food advertising is one of the contributing factors to the prevalence of eating habits that may promote obesity.

Resolution 8.2 Media

That it be noted that the NSW Childhood Obesity Summit recommends that the Commonwealth Government should conduct an independent review of the current regulatory frameworks governing food advertising in the media to children, to ensure:

a) Maximum clarity and effectiveness of the regulations and their operation;

And

b) A media environment that promotes balanced, healthy eating and lifestyle choices.

The above two resolutions are very similar and arose out of separate working groups (Early childhood and Media).

Both resolutions are underpinned by the understanding that:

- 1) Television food advertising directed at children contributes to the problem of poor eating habits and childhood obesity.
- 2) Addressing childhood obesity will require attention to obesogenic factors in the environment that promote unhealthy food choices.
- 3) The current regulatory frameworks are inadequate to the task of protecting children's interests against aggressive and unfair marketing tactics, and therefore need to be reviewed.

Coalition on Food Advertising to Children (CFAC)

The Coalition on Food Advertising to Children (CFAC) was invited to present at the NSW Childhood Obesity Summit, and spoke to the issue of television food advertising on a number of occasions. CFAC is still in its formation stage and members include Dr. Rosemary Stanton, Heather Morton, Public Health Association of Australia, Women's & Children's Hospital Adelaide, and Young Media Australia. CFAC is calling for a ban on all television food advertising during programs where children (aged 0 –12 years) make up a substantial proportion of the viewing audience.

At the NSW Summit, CFAC members presented the evidence on the extent to which TV food advertising promotes junk food to children, the impact on children's food choices and subsequent effects on childhood obesity. Most of the public health experts and many of the children and parents present at the Summit attested to the pervasive and detrimental influence of processed and fast food marketing on children's food choices. In opposition, representatives of the food, television and advertising industries argued that TV food advertising had minimal effect on children's food choices and that parents and families had far greater influences. Logic alone would defy this argument in the face of the billions of dollars spent on TV food advertising. It is impossible to believe that industry would spend as much money as it does on advertising, to no effect.

It is a victory for children's health that the Summit concluded with support for structural intervention that will place children's interests in front of conflicting commercial interests. The industries concerned with advertising junk food to children are deeply concerned about any potential loss of revenue that may arise out of changes to the current advertising arrangements. They are crying 'poor' and threatening that children's programs will be adversely affected. This is not accurate at all, as revenue for children's programs is derived from a number of sources including program sales. The industry lobby for maintenance of the status quo will be vigorous and it will be important for governments both State and Federal to have the mettle to stand up to this.

CFAC is pleased with the outcomes of the NSW Childhood Obesity Summit, in spite of not achieving a resolution calling for a ban on television food advertising to children. A review of the regulatory frameworks will at least allow for the deficits of the system to be revealed and tightened up. The current system of regulation clearly has not worked to protect children's interests in relation to the marketing of 'junk' food.

Problems with the system include:

- ◆ The complex and convoluted combination of self-regulation, co-regulation and government regulation in "P", "C" and "G" times, has resulted in a minimally regulated advertising environment and one that is very difficult to interact with.
- ◆ The system is not monitored for breaches but rather operates in response to complaints from the public. Informal feedback from the community highlights that people don't know about the existence let alone the working of the regulatory system, resulting in very few complaints being received, and authorities therefore concluding that the system is problem-free. Those complaints that have gone up have generally been refuted thereby discouraging further efforts at advocacy.
- ◆ The Children's Television standards are neither sufficiently robust nor explicit to protect children against aggressive marketing of junk foods.

Call to action

CFAC is calling for a ban on all television food advertising during programs where children (aged 0 –12 years) make up a substantial proportion of the viewing audience.

The rationale for a ban is:

1. Children under the age of 10 years are not able to critically discern the persuasive intent of advertising .All advertising to children therefore is potentially manipulative. Food Ads should be directed at parents and care-givers, which have ultimate responsibility over what foods are purchased for young children.
2. Over the last 10 years food ads that fall in the broad categories of basic foods (which includes all types of breakfast cereals) have comprised only a small proportion of total ads. The majority of ads directed at children have consistently promoted unhealthy foods, high in fat, sugar and salt. A total ban on food ads during children's viewing times will not be a loss to healthy food advertising because it hardly exists! All food ads, healthy and unhealthy should be directed to parents.
3. The current regulatory system is complex, convoluted and confusing. The standards are inadequate to the task and the system relies on industry self-monitoring and community monitoring. The system is inherently weak and very difficult to police compliance. A ban on food advertising during children's viewing times would cut through these obstacles and result in a much simpler and effective system of regulation.

CFAC is committed to making a positive contribution to the debate around TV food advertising to children, with the ultimate goal of creating a media environment that supports healthy food choices and is not therefore obesogenic. We look forward to participating in all state and federal forums into childhood obesity and welcome any opportunity to discuss these issues further.

Kaye Mehta

Chairperson

Coalition on Food Advertising to Children

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Chief Dietitian-Nutritionist
Noarlunga Health Service.
Ph. 08 8384 9218
E-Mail: mehta.kaye@saugov.sa.gov.au

Lecturer.
Nutrition Unit. Dept Public Health.
Flinders University of SA.
Ph. 08 8204 5692
E-Mail: kaye.mehta@flinders.edu.au

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