

The Nation Needs to Do More to Address Food Marketing to Children

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Food marketing has never been more important, as childhood obesity rates remain high, and food and beverage marketing takes on ever new and more sophisticated forms. Yet despite strong recommendations from the IOM, there has been little progress to address it, as Kraak et al.¹ demonstrate in their paper in this issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.

In 2006, the IOM threw down the gauntlet with its seminal report, *Food Marketing to Children: Threat or Opportunity?*² It answered the request from Congress to assess the evidence on whether food marketing influences what children and adolescents eat. After evaluating more than 300 studies, the Committee on Food Marketing and the Diets of Children and Youth determined that food marketing causes children and adolescents to prefer, request, and consume foods high in salt, sugars, and fats. The Committee made ten recommendations for how the food industry and the government could reverse this situation.

In this issue of the *Journal*, Kraak and colleagues¹ assess progress on five recommendations the Committee made for parents, schools, and government. Unfortunately, they found that there has been little progress. Their evaluation concludes that “the prevailing marketing environment continues to threaten children’s health and miss opportunities to promote a healthful diet and create healthy eating environments.” In a prior study,³ the same authors found equally disappointing results for the recommendations the IOM made for the food and beverage industry.

With the current study,¹ we learn that government has not done what it can to protect children from marketing that infiltrates family life and interferes with good health. This lack of progress puts parents at a disadvantage and children’s health at risk. For example, with no progress on the IOM’s recommendation for a national social marketing campaign, our government is ceding education about nutrition to the food and beverage industry, which

spends \$2 billion annually (the \$1.62 billion noted by Kraak et al.¹ plus the \$360 million the fast-food industry spends on toys⁴)—more than \$5 million every day—inundating children with enticements to eat and drink the wrong foods.

According to Kraak and colleagues,¹ the best news for progress on food marketing comes from schools, where there has been moderate progress in establishing nutrition standards for competitive foods. In 2010, Congress passed a law that requires the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to set nutrition standards for vending machines, school stores, and other competitive foods. USDA should set strong standards; and state child nutrition programs, boards of education, and school districts should implement them. Those standards should apply to all food and beverage marketing in schools. The marketing and sale of unhealthy foods undermine nutrition education, children’s diets, and parents’ ability to feed their children healthfully.

State and local governments should set nutrition standards for those children’s meals that can be sold with toys. Such policies address a major form of marketing (incentive items) for meals that too often consist of burgers, chicken nuggets, and pizza that by default are served with a side of fries and a soda; defaults should be for healthier items like skim milk or water instead of soda. Governments also should ensure that healthy options and calorie labeling are available for foods sold through vending machines, cafeterias, and food programs on public property.

As pricing is a key marketing strategy, governments should tax sugary drinks. Sugary drinks are the largest source of calories in children’s diets⁵ and are directly linked to obesity.^{6,7} The tax revenues could be used to support a range of nutrition and physical activity policies and programs in the communities that suffer the highest rates of chronic disease.

The federal government should finalize the recommendations made by the Interagency Working Group (IWG) for Foods Marketed to Children. The food industry responded to public and policymaker concern about its marketing with self-regulatory efforts^{8,9} that, as prior research shows, are having only a modest effect on improving the nutritional quality of the foods marketed to children.^{3,10} The IWG guidelines will provide much-needed advice for how companies can strengthen their

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nutrition standards and definitions for what is considered child-directed marketing. Once the recommendations are final, federal, state, and local governments; advocates; and parents should urge food, restaurant, and media companies to adopt them.

The food industry has railed against even voluntary recommendations for what foods should be marketed to children, spending \$37 million to lobby Congress¹¹ to weaken the IWG guidelines. This considerable opposition to voluntary marketing recommendations reveals the significant hurdle governments face in addressing food marketing. However, history shows that most meaningful nutrition policies, including trans fat labeling, menu labeling in restaurants, and national standards for school vending, face such opposition in their formative years. To be successful, we will need a strong national effort to educate and mobilize organizations, health professionals, and parents in support of healthy food marketing policies. Without a national commitment to addressing food marketing to children, we are likely to see more sugary drinks than fruit in children's diets and see their long-term health suffer as a result.

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