

Restricting the Marketing of Unhealthy Foods and Beverages to Children and Youth

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Issue:

Every day, Alberta children are exposed to a large volume of food and beverage marketing through various media, such as TV and Internet, and in multiple settings, including schools, recreation facilities, supermarkets, and restaurants(1). Television, in particular, is a primary advertising venue for food and beverage companies (2). In an international comparison study of 11 countries, Canada had the third highest rate of TV advertising of nutritionally poor foods and beverages (3). Nevertheless, how and where children are marketed to is continuously expanding (1) and food companies are heavily investing in the deliberate promotion of their products in settings where children and youth spend a large amount of time, such as schools (4, 5).

The link between marketing to children and obesity is a significant public health concern. There is extensive evidence 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 in children and youth (6-8). 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 foods such as fruits and vegetables. Childhood obesity, in turn, has been associated with a range of health problems, such as breathing difficulties, insulin resistance, mental health issues, hypertension, and other early markers of cardiovascular disease (9, 10). Further, the development of poor nutrition and unhealthy eating patterns at a young age may contribute to an increased risk of adult obesity (11). Around the world, several countries and global health organizations are advocating to reduce marketing of unhealthy food products, particularly to children and adolescents (6, 12, 13).

Research shows that children are unable to distinguish between program content and the persuasive intent of advertising until they are around eight years old (14). Further, it is not until early adolescence that children understand the profit motive behind advertising (15). Children and youth may also 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 (16, 17). The overt marketing intent may be less clear in these forms of media, and exposure to the marketing/advertising message may be prolonged (18) when sponsored games and contests draw youth to websites for extended periods of time (19).

Food and Beverage Marketing to Children in Canada

Television advertising in Canada is regulated by two industry groups, the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council and Advertising Standards Canada (20). However, food marketing to children is self-regulated by the food and beverage industry through the Canadian Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CAI). To date, this voluntary initiative has failed to adequately protect children from the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages (21, 22). For example, 80% of foods promoted to children on TV by corporations who have signed on to the voluntary CAI can be classified as "unhealthy" by the UK nutrient profile model (23). This is, in part, due to the fact that companies set their own standards for what constitutes "healthy" and there is a lack of consistency and standardization across companies (24). After receiving criticism for lacking standardization, the CAI plans to implement uniform nutrition criteria on December 31, 2015, to improve the nutrient profile of foods advertised to children (25). Further, evidence also suggests that children's exposure to food and beverage advertising has increased since the implementation of the voluntary CAI (between 2006 – 2009) (26). This may be due to the use of new or non-traditional advertising techniques that are not included in the CAI.

Food and Beverage Marketing in Canadian Schools

Corporate involvement of food and beverage companies in schools may include, but is not limited to: sponsorship of programs and activities, exclusive marketing arrangements, incentive programs, fundraising, and sponsored education materials (27). Marketing to children in schools can blur children's vision of healthy and unhealthy food products by giving the impression that the products are good because they are advertised in the school setting (28). Children in Alberta are thus learning in environments saturated with conflicting messages about what nutritional guidelines identify as healthy foods (29, 30) and what corporate advertising in schools promote as desirable to eat (31). Despite efforts underway within Alberta and other Canadian jurisdictions to develop and implement healthy nutrition guidelines and programs within schools, the success of these initiatives is undermined when schools enter into contracts with companies promoting unhealthy food and beverages.

Benefits to Taking Action:

- Children and youth are vulnerable to the advertising and marketing tactics of food and beverage companies (6). Using policy to remove these influences in media and various settings, such as schools, supports healthy eating patterns for children and helps to reduce the risk for obesity and the incidence of chronic disease in Alberta (32).
- 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 (13).
- Marketing unhealthy foods and beverages in settings, such as schools, undermines the efforts of other comprehensive school health initiatives, programs, and policies designed to increase healthy eating. Several school boards have already taken action to restrict the sale of junk food in their schools and are actively implementing the Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth (29). The removal of unhealthy food advertising in school environments will enhance return on these efforts by removing conflicting messaging.

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 unhealthy food marketing (those high in saturated fats, trans-fatty acids, free sugars, or salt) to protect the health of children (12). In the Fall of 2011, during the UN Summit to address non-communicable diseases, participating country representatives including Canada expressed their commitment to implement the WHO recommendations (33), one of which is to prioritize the "settings where children gather" in the development and implementation of marketing restrictions (1). Nevertheless, Canadian governments have done little to follow through on this promise.

The province of Québec is the exception in Canada and has been a leader in the area of marketing to children by enacting laws that prohibit print and broadcast advertising to children under the age of 13 (34), as well as banning all commercial solicitation in schools (35). Nevertheless, even in Québec, increased government action is needed to strengthen the current model. Given the potential impact of emerging media on youth, there is a need to protect youth up to age 18 through expanding restrictions to include new media marketing techniques, such as internet and text advertising (17, 36). Provinces must also work together to expand legislation across all Canadian jurisdictions in order to address the possibility of cross-border "leakage" of advertising (36-38).

Limited marketing regulations in Canada and inadequate public/government funding of schools have created an opportunity for food and beverage companies to actively seek and encourage schools to accept their funding for much needed revenue (5). Very few jurisdictions, to date, 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 (5). While many school boards in Alberta are concerned with the growing reliance on external resources and

fundraising to meet basic education needs (39), they may also feel unable to give up a revenue source without being provided with options for replacement funding.

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. According to a 2014 survey administered to 1,200 people in Alberta, the majority (75%) of survey respondents support prohibiting advertising and the promotion of unhealthy food and beverages to children under the age of 16 (40). Public support for government intervention on this issue is also supported by a Canadian survey conducted by Ipsos-Descarie, which found that 82% of Canadian respondents would like limits to be placed on the marketing of low nutritional value foods to children (41).

Canadian organizations such as Centre for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), the Quebec Coalition on Weight-Related Problems (Coalition Poids), the Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance of Canada (CDPAC), the Childhood Obesity Foundation, and the Heart and Stroke Foundation (HSF) are currently taking the lead to educate and advocate at the national level to restrict marketing to children in Canada. The efforts being made to place this issue on the national policy agenda can support and reinforce efforts within Alberta to take action.

APCCP Priorities for Action:

- Support national efforts to restrict the marketing of unhealthy food and beverages to children.
- Advocate to restrict the marketing of 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:

- The APCCP will continue to collaborate with other advocacy groups such as Coalition Poids, the Childhood Obesity Foundation, CDPAC, CSPI, and the HSF to support national action on reducing the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children.

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