

# Food and Beverage Marketing to Children and Adolescents: Limited Progress by 2012, Recommendations for the Future

## Healthy Eating Research

Building evidence to prevent childhood obesity

Issue Brief, February 2013

### Introduction

Although there has been some progress to improve the foods offered and marketed to American youths at home, in schools and in restaurants, children and adolescents are still surrounded by advertising and easy access to unhealthy foods and beverages.

Unhealthy foods and beverages are often inexpensive, typically contain few nutrients and have high amounts of excess calories, total fat, trans fat, added sugars, and sodium. The abundance, affordability, and widespread availability of unhealthy foods also discourages young people from consuming recommended levels of nutrient-rich foods, such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy, as well as essential nutrients, such as calcium, potassium, and fiber.

The marketing of high-calorie and nutrient-poor foods and beverages is linked to overweight and obesity in the United States. In 2009-2010, 34.6 percent of boys and 32.6 percent of girls were overweight or obese. An examination of research and policy trends related to food and beverage marketing shows that industry self-regulation has not substantially improved children's and adolescents' exposure to marketing for unhealthy foods and beverages between 2006 and 2012.

### The Evidence

- Although the food industry has improved self-regulation through the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI), there are loopholes and gaps in the initiative that allow food, beverage, and chain restaurant companies to market high-calorie and nutrient-poor foods and beverages to young people.
- Corporate lobbyists from the food and beverage industry have sought to influence legislators and the public to halt the release of comprehensive voluntary marketing guidelines to improve the nutritional quality of food and beverage products marketed to American children and adolescents.
- Emerging research shows that healthy products can be a profitable segment of the food business.
- Television advertising reaching millions of children predominately features advertisements for unhealthy products.



*This issue brief is based on a research review prepared by Andrew Cheyne, CPhil, Priscilla Gonzalez, MPH, Pamela Mejia, MPH, and Lori Dorfman, DrPH, Berkeley Media Studies Group, Public Health Institute. The full research review, which includes citations, is available at: <http://www.healthyeatingresearch.org/>.*



- Many digital media channels, such as advergames, are dynamic and effective channels for food marketing to children and adolescents.
- Nutrition claims and the use of popular characters on product packaging influence children's food preferences.
- The presence of competitive foods in schools where students are a captive audience is a marketing opportunity for the food and beverage industry, and research demonstrates the need for strong standards for foods sold in vending machines, à la carte lines, and school stores. Recently updated standards proposed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture are an important step forward in promoting healthy foods and beverages throughout the school campus and school day.
- Compared with White children and adolescents, African American and Latino children and adolescents—who experience higher rates of overweight, obesity, and diet-related chronic diseases, such as type 2 diabetes—are exposed to higher levels of marketing for unhealthy food and beverage products.

### Conclusions and Policy Implications

Research analyzing traditional and new media indicates that industry self-regulation through the CFBAI is unlikely to be effective at protecting children because there are significant loopholes that allow continued marketing of unhealthy products.

Policy implications of the research findings include:

- The CFBAI has developed a uniform set of nutrition criteria to be used by all participating food companies in 2014. All food and beverage manufacturers could further strengthen self-regulatory efforts by adhering to the drafted media and nutrition voluntary guidelines published by the Interagency Working Group on Food Marketed to Children (IWG).
- In May 2012, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) released a new report on accelerating progress in preventing obesity that reinforced the need for industry to implement comprehensive common voluntary standards to reduce the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children and adolescents ages 2 to 17. The standards cover a broad range of marketing and advertising practices, including digital marketing, licensed characters, and toy premiums. If the voluntary marketing standards are not adopted by 2014 by a majority of companies, the IOM has recommended that the government should set mandatory nutrition standards and ensure they are implemented.
- While the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution provides some protection to food advertising and marketing from government regulation, legal scholars have argued that government regulation of food and beverage marketing to children and adolescents would withstand a First Amendment challenge because children and adolescents are cognitively defenseless against marketing messages, making the messages “inherently misleading.”
- The food and beverage industry should support and implement the findings of the Federal Trade Commission's follow-up report on industry marketing expenditures. All companies marketing to children, including media firms, should participate in industry self-regulatory initiatives, and the industry should strengthen the CFBAI by adopting uniform nutrition criteria for foods marketed to children based on the 2010 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. The IWG, or some other independent group, should be able to evaluate the effectiveness of industry's voluntary actions for marketing products to children ages 17 and younger.



Scan to view the full research review.