
ADVERTISING FOOD TO CHILDREN

POSITION STATEMENT

Food advertising can and does influence children's eating habits – their food preferences, food requests, choices, and consumption.¹⁻³ Children watch a substantial amount of television and are exposed to high volumes of advertising, both from television and other advertising media.⁴ Depending on their age, children are especially vulnerable to the influence of food advertising as they may not distinguish the commercial nature of advertising nor differentiate between advertisements and programmes.⁵ This influence is occurring at a time when their food preferences are developing.⁶ These food preferences and food choices consequently influence both current and future health. Therefore, childhood is a key time to encourage healthy eating habits and food preferences. However, advertising and marketing of unhealthy food to children undermines these attempts. There is strong public support for greater protection of our children. In a 2007 survey, over 80% of New Zealand parents and grandparents stated they would like advertising of unhealthy food to children stopped.²

New Zealand has an ethical responsibility to create a safe and health-promoting environment for its children to grow within. A key part of this is ensuring healthy food choices are available for our children and they are protected from marketing of unhealthy foods. Restricting marketing of unhealthy food to children has been assessed as a highly cost-effective intervention to help reduce childhood obesity.⁷ The Heart Foundation supports actions intended to reduce the marketing of unhealthy foods to children. This requires restrictions on the type, volume, and location of food and beverage promotion to children.

New Zealand has taken a self-regulatory approach to managing advertising of unhealthy food to children, and has two main self-regulatory codes. These are the Advertising Standards Agency's 'Children's Code for Advertising Food' and ThinkTV's 'Advertising on Television: Getting it Right for Children'. Self-regulatory codes play a useful role in establishing key principles and there are opportunities to strengthen the Codes further by widening their scope and coverage, strengthening pre-vetting and compliance incentives, and using one consistent nutrient profiling system to define healthy and unhealthy foods. However, robust and independent evaluations of the Codes have not been undertaken, thus their impact on the marketing of unhealthy food to children remains unknown. Independent and robust evaluation of the Codes is a priority.

Most importantly, although the Codes could usefully be strengthened, the Foundation does not consider that a self-regulatory regime will ever have the scope and rigour to protect New Zealand children in the rapidly evolving marketing environment and recommends that government regulation is implemented to control the volume and extent of unhealthy food marketing to children. It is recommended that a combined or co-regulatory approach (a self-regulatory approach within a legislative framework) is established which will ensure that not only the content of advertisements is controlled, but volume, timing, repetitiveness, placement, use of persuasive techniques, and coordination across media is curtailed. This will ensure New Zealand's children get the protection they deserve from advertising of unhealthy food.

Goal:

To protect New Zealand children from marketing of unhealthy food and beverages.

Objectives:

1. That the government regulates to protect children from the volume and extent of marketing of unhealthy food and beverages targeted at them.

2. That within this regulatory framework, the existing voluntary Codes are maintained but independently and robustly evaluated and strengthened to ensure compliance and effectiveness.

BACKGROUND PAPER

For further information, see [Advertising Food to Children Advocacy Plan: background paper](#)

REFERENCES

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