

Debate

Is Marketing a Major Contributor to the Childhood Obesity Epidemic?

ISSUE: Is it necessary to create public policy to regulate the marketing of unhealthy food to children?

There is no doubt that childhood obesity is a crisis by any standard. Prevalence in the United States has more than tripled in just three decades. According to federal health officials, a whopping one-third of American children is overweight or obese. In some states, this figure is over 40 percent. These children are at a greater risk for obesity-related health problems like diabetes or heart disease. The question most people are debating over is what to do about it.

Everyone knows that American children are becoming fatter, but not everyone agrees on the cause. Reducing food marketing to children has been proposed as one means for addressing the global crisis of childhood obesity. In the United States, research has revealed that over 98 percent of the television food ads seen by children and 89 percent of those seen by adolescents are for products high in fat, sugar, and/or sodium. High levels of calorie-dense, low-nutrient foods are promoted to children in other types of marketing as well, including on children's websites, on cell phones, and in magazines.

Unfortunately, children are much more likely to take marketing messages at face value. Adults have a higher cognitive maturity and therefore have the ability to distinguish the bias built into marketing advertisements. Children lack this higher cognitive ability. Therefore, the ethics behind marketing unhealthy foods to children have come under increased scrutiny.

Although many food manufacturers have engaged in self-regulation to limit the types of marketing messages to which children are exposed, the obesity epidemic rages on. At particular risk are underserved areas, where supermarkets are scarce and fast food restaurants are prevalent. For these reasons, parents and governments have sought to take the matter into their own hands.

First Lady Michelle Obama is tackling the childhood obesity issue with her "Let's Move" action plan and task force. Local governments are also taking action. In 2010, Santa Clara County, California, voted to ban the use of toys in fast food meals that contain over a certain amount of calories. Several states have also instituted taxes on soda and candy. A movement to serve fresh nutritious meals in school lunch programs is developing support in many states.

Not everyone agrees with these recommendations, however, and some maintain that such restrictions violate the rights of both businesses and consumers. Restricting marketing toward children, for instance, might involve placing limits on commercial speech—a possible violation of the First Amendment. Organizations like Restaurant Associations and even consumers resent the fact that politicians can restrict the use of toys in certain fast food meals, calling them the "toy police." Studies also claim that current taxes on soda have not reduced childhood obesity, leading some to contemplate raising taxes on soda and candy products even further.

This material was developed by Amanda Solosky and Jennifer Sawayda under the direction of O.C. Ferrell and Linda Ferrell. It is provided for the Daniels Fund Ethics Initiative at the University of New Mexico and is intended for classroom discussion rather than to illustrate effective or ineffective handling of administrative, ethical, or legal decisions by management. Users of this material are prohibited from claiming this material as their own, emailing it to others, or placing it on the Internet. Please call O.C. Ferrell at 505-277-3468 for more information. (2010)

Opponents of such regulations maintain that too much government intervention could harm businesses and take the responsibility for a child's health out of parents' hands. Instead, they urge for greater self-regulation among businesses such as codes of conduct for child marketing and greater education for parents. Although most Americans agree that childhood obesity is a serious issue, the debate over how to tackle this issue continues to sweep the nation.

There are two sides to every issue:

1. Government regulation is needed to restrict the marketing of unhealthy food to children in order to combat the childhood obesity epidemic.
 2. Too much regulation violates the rights of businesses and individuals. Self-regulation and industry codes of conduct should be encouraged instead.
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