

Food marketing to children

Position statement



Childhood nutrition

Poor nutrition has a significant impact on health. It affects non-communicable diseases, such as obesity, dental caries, cardiovascular disease and some cancers, as well as immune status and recovery from infection and common deficiencies such as anaemia.

Around a third of children and young people are overweight or obese in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The effects of poor nutrition on non-communicable diseases build up throughout the life course. Food habits and taste develop at an early age. Childhood nutrition is affected by a wide range of factors. This paper focuses on food marketing.

Food marketing to children

Studies of food marketing to children have concluded that:

- Food and drink marketing to children is dominated by foods high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS).
- The majority of products fall within the 'Big Five' product categories: pre-sugared breakfast cereals, soft drinks, confectionery, savoury snacks and fast food.
- Children are influenced by a range of different types of media, including, increasingly, internet advertising and social media.
- Much food advertising operates at a subconscious level. The boundaries between socialising, entertainment and marketing are not clear for children.
- Themes of fun, fantasy and taste are used to promote food and drinks to children.
- Due to the range and scope of interaction children have with marketing, the opportunities for parents to mediate are limited.
- Food promotion is having an effect, particularly on children's preferences, purchase behaviour and consumption.
- Food marketing influences children's choice at both a brand and category level, eg. drink brand and fizzy drink; brand of snack and snack type.

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Marketing techniques

- Children and young people are engaging with media at younger ages.
- Major food and drink brands use a range of media such as TV, advertiser-owned websites and social networks, mobile phones and game consoles.
- A range of marketing techniques are developing including, product placement, viral marketing, adver gaming, social networking, sponsorship, peer-to-peer marketing, user-generated content, equity brand characters, licensed characters, celebrity endorsement, premiums, give-aways and brand promotion.
- Children have increasing exposure to marketing and promotions from around the world while opportunities for parental mediation are reduced
- Many HFSS brands have links to in-school marketing and sports sponsorship.

Policy

The World Health Organization (WHO) has developed a “set of recommendations on the marketing of food and non-alcoholic beverages to children”. The WHO calls on member states to work with stakeholders to put in place “a framework and/or mechanisms for promoting the responsible marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children, in order to reduce the impact of foods high in saturated fats, trans fatty acids, free sugars or salt”.

The Government commissioned *An analysis of the regulatory and voluntary landscape concerning the marketing and promotion of food and drink to children*. The Government is also addressing this issue through the Responsibility Deal, a partnership between the Department of Health, industry and other organisations working to reduce the fat, sugar and salt content in food products.

Northern Ireland’s obesity strategy ‘Fit Futures’, includes a call for the local food industry to “respond quickly and constructively to action planned at national level to introduce controls on the advertising and promotion of foods to children”.

The Scottish National Food and Drink Policy (SNFDP) has a workstream “to work with the food and drink industry to enable and support consumers to make healthy and more sustainable choices”. There are many recommendations from this workstream, which include improving education to the general public while addressing approaches used by the media, commercial marketing and the food industry.

Current regulatory landscape in UK

- The regulatory landscape of food and drink marketing to children is complex.
- Much of the marketing to children falls outside current regulatory regimes.
- Television is currently the only media to be covered by legislation. This legislation only applies to programmes classified as children’s programmes. These do not apply to many programmes commonly watched by children.
- Advertising of HFSS foods is prohibited during children’s programmes, as is product placement of HFSS foods.
- The Committee of Advertising Practice is responsible for advertising codes. The non-broadcasting code aims to ensure advertising is “legal, decent, honest and truthful”. It does not distinguish between healthy and unhealthy foods.
- The non-broadcasting code has been criticised for its enforcement, definitions of children and the foods covered, and vague language.
- Variation exists between legislation, self-regulatory codes and voluntary codes with respect to defining ages, child audience, categorisation of food and drink, for example some apply to children up to the age of 12, others 16.

FPH’s position

Food marketing influences children’s eating and drinking behaviours and is widespread. Much of this marketing is for fatty, sugary and salty foods, which is in conflict with public health efforts to improve nutrition.

FPH believes children and young people under 16 should be protected from all forms of marketing, advertising and promotions which encourage an unhealthy diet. Current food marketing regulation does not reflect the modern marketing environment.

FPH will:

- Lobby the UK administrations to use legislative and regulatory means to protect children and young people from all forms of marketing, advertising and promotions which encourage an unhealthy diet.
- Lobby to ensure these means are future-proofed to reflect rapidly developing new media.
- Lobby the UK administrations to regulate consistently with respect to food marketing, by defining children and young people as those under the age of 16.

- Continue to engage with all devolved UK administrations, to lobby to improve the nutritional content of foods and to reduce the marketing of foods high in fat, sugar and salt, in particular to children.

Directors of public health and their partners can:

- Clearly communicate to stakeholders what is defined as HFSS foods and drinks.
- Support schools, early years settings, youth, leisure and other settings 'where children gather' to:
 - discuss the reasons why children need to be protected from the marketing of HFSS foods and drinks
 - develop local food policies so that they are free from all forms of marketing of foods high in saturated fats, transfatty acids, free sugars or salt.
- Ensure that services commissioned by the NHS and local authorities do not have any marketing of foods that are high in saturated fats, transfatty acids, free sugars or salt, by including this in service specifications.
- Influence stakeholders to ensure cultural and sporting activities in the local areas are free from marketing of foods high in saturated fats, transfatty acids, free sugars or salt.
- Work with enforcement agencies such as environmental health officers and other partners to monitor these actions and explore further opportunities.
- Raise awareness and educate the wider public health workforce about the impact of food advertising to children, and the wide range of forms food marketing can take.
- Use local media to advocate.

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