

POSITION STATEMENT: JUNK FOOD MARKETING TO CHILDREN

KEY MESSAGES

- Junk food marketing has been proposed as an important area for action in the fight against childhood obesity.
- Junk food marketing is undermining public health guidance by promoting unhealthy food and beverage products to children across all media environments.
- Current broadcast and non-broadcast restrictions do not go far enough to protect children from junk food marketing.

Childhood health

Obesity is a multidimensional challenge. Experiencing obesity during childhood can translate into adulthood and have numerous long term negative impacts on mental health, social skills and life satisfaction [1]. Thus, the importance of healthy dietary habits from an early age cannot be underestimated.

The UK is facing a serious public health threat, with 1/5 of reception and 1/3 of year six aged children now overweight or obese. These figures rise even further within between regions, including the North West of England [2].

The marketing of food and drink and childhood obesity

Tackling the root causes of obesity has never been more crucial. Researchers argue environmental drivers, such as the marketing of unhealthy food and beverages, are creating an obesogenic environment that encourages populations to eat poorly and live sedentary lifestyles [3, 4].

The World Health Organisation (WHO) claims there is clear evidence that childhood obesity is influenced by the marketing of unhealthy food and drink products, or more commonly referred to as Junk Food Marketing (hereafter JFM) [5].

As there is no definitive definition, when we refer to JFM we mean the marketing practices which promote foods and beverages which are typically high in fat, sugar or salt (hereafter HFSS).

What does the evidence say?

- The majority of food and beverage advertisements aimed at children are HFSS [6].
- Sports sponsorship forms a significant part of JFM through athlete endorsement, product placement and visual aids within stadiums [7].
- Exposure to JFM substantially increases in energy intake, particularly in obese children [4].
- JFM increases children's brand recognition and fosters positive attitudes towards brands [7].
- Marketing techniques include using gender-specific colour themes, cartoon characters, celebrities and sports personnel [8].
- The majority of price promotions in supermarkets in the UK are on HFSS products [9].
- Some supermarkets promote unhealthy products to children by displaying at eye-level whilst waiting at checkouts [10].
- Modern methods of advertising online include social media profiles and collecting personal data for a more personalised marketing experience [11].
- Advergaming (online games promoting brand logo and products) increases energy intake in children [12]. The lines between advertising and entertainment are increasingly hard to distinguish, especially for children [3].
- Children are more susceptible to marketing due to their inability to understand persuasive intent [3].
- JFM expenditure is 30 times greater than that spent on promoting healthy eating by the Government [13].

Regulatory landscape in the UK

Ofcom restricts the advertisement of HFSS products on children-targeted TV programmes before 9pm. However, these regulations still allow JFM on general audience programmes such as the X-Factor. A report by the Obesity Health Alliance (OHA) found that almost 2/3 of advertisements on general audience programmes would be banned on children's TV due to the nutritional content. In the worst cases, during the study children were exposed to up to 9 HFSS advertisements in a 30 minute period during family TV shows. Children are not protected from HFSS advertising during family viewing, despite the fact many children watch more general audience programmes than popular children's programmes [14].

The Committee for Advertising Practice launched new voluntary codes to regulate online JFM to children in July 2017 [15]. Websites with an audience of children greater than 25% will prohibit HFSS advertisements. However, these restrictions echo the loopholes from non-broadcast media, with children still being exposed to JFM through general audience websites. The codes also work on a reactive basis, whereby a complaint about an advertisement must be filed then investigated, by which time the damage has been done.

The Government insist these regulations are among some of the toughest in the world [16].

Yet, in their last manifesto, the Labour Party stated they would ban all JFM before 9pm if they were elected [17].

Our Position and What We Will Do

Partnerships: JFM has significant negative impacts on children's health. As outlined by the OHA, protecting children from junk food marketing is the number one priority in tackling obesity. Food Active will continue to support the OHA to protect children from JFM across all platforms.

Policy Change: Within our Local Authority Declaration on Healthy Weight, we have highlighted JFM to children as a key driver in obesogenic environments. We will work with and support local authorities who have signed the Declaration to develop a strategic approach to prevent inappropriate marketing to children from the food and drink industry, such as the Coca-Cola Christmas Truck Tour.

Advocacy: We will continue to undertake research to further strengthen the evidence-base around JFM. Current research projects include: investigating parent's perspectives of JFM to children; and associations between online JFM and children's dietary intake. We are also currently developing work around educating and informing young people about JFM and giving them the tools to influence both their peers and policymakers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Actions need to be taken at both a local and national level to reduce children's exposure to JFM.
- Extend ban of HFFS advertising on TV to all programmes before 9pm.
- Monitor inappropriate relationships between the food and drink industry and companies which may be influential or popular with children.
- New non-broadcast media rules should be evaluated to ensure the number of HFFS advertising on children's online media is reduced.

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