

National Federation of Women's Institutes Resolution on Children's Diets, Exercise and Health for vote in June 2003.

"This meeting views with concern the increase in obesity and diet-related health problems in children, and the associated risk of chronic disease in later life, and urges HM Government to regulate the promotion to children of foods that contribute to an unhealthy diet and to ensure increased opportunities for exercise and practical food education in schools."

Food Advertising Unit Response

The advertising industry supports any calls to strategies that will improve children's health and favour increasing opportunities for exercise and practical food education in schools. However, **regulations on the promotion of foods to children already exist, are strict and statutory and further restrictions on promotion will not achieve the aims of this resolution:** to improve children's diets and counter the problem of obesity.

The regulatory context

Much of the effort made to introduce advertising regulations or restrictions is based on the false and misleading premise that controls either do not exist or are insufficient. These controls in the UK are in fact amongst the strictest controls in Europe and are provided by the Independent Television Commission Code of Advertising Standards, the British Code of Advertising, Sales Promotion and Direct Marketing and the Broadcasting Acts of 1990 and 1996 (for more details please see www.cap.org.uk). Furthermore, the advertising industry welcomes the guidelines produced by the Consumers' Association, in collaboration with Incorporated Society of British Advertisers on sponsorship in schools.

The industry recognises the need for these controls, and the record of the food industry in complying is exemplary. Around 1% of the complaints received by the Independent Television Commission and the Advertising Standards Authority in 1999 related to food advertising (of all food products, not just children's). Inquiries to manufacturers' customer care lines with regard to advertising represent an even lower percentage.

Relationship between obesity, marketing and other factors

Some say that advertising of fatty and sugary foods to kids is to blame for an ever-increasing calorific intake and therefore the growing problem of obesity. In actual fact, **calorific intake amongst children has actually decreased** by about 10% over the last 15 years, according to the National Diet and Nutrition Survey of young people aged between 4-18 (1999). Obesity and overweight however, are increasing. This must be due to even **greater decreases in the levels of physical activity**- a study by Sport England shows that the proportion of young people spending two or more hours per week in curricular sport has decreased from 46% in 1994 to 33% in 1999. Thus changes in lifestyle appear to be the major causes of obesity, rather than any effects caused by advertising.

As background, since 1984 advertising expenditure on foods as a percentage of total advertising expenditure has decreased substantially from 15.6% to 8.2% in 2001. The occurrence of overweight and obese children has increased dramatically. In Sweden, where there is a ban on all advertising to children on television, the prevalence of obesity, according to figures published in the Food Magazine in October-December 2002, is higher than in the UK. Therefore, **evidence questions whether there is in fact any relationship between advertising of food and obesity** at all.

This is further supported by research commissioned by the Ministry of Fisheries and Food in conjunction with the Department of Health in 1996, which concluded that there is no serious and methodologically sound evidence showing that food advertising leads to an increase in the consumption by children of whole categories of foods. At best, research has suggested advertising represents about a 5% influence on food choice. Therefore, **though advertising is a small influence on what people eat, it is not and should not be the main issue when addressing improvements in diet and health.**

So, why use marketing practices if they don't increase consumption? In mature (established) markets, promoting brands does not increase the overall consumption of categories of goods (eg to buy more

cereal). Brand advertising is competitive rather than generic and aims to persuade buyers of a particular product to **switch brand** (eg Kellogg's Crunchy Nut to Nestlé Clusters).

Parents' power and influence in this debate must not be underestimated. According to the National Audit Report on Tackling Obesity in England (2001), if one of the parents of a child is obese, then that child is at a higher risk of being obese. However if one of the parents exercise, the likelihood that their children will exercise increases substantially. This may highlight the importance of genetics but also of **the parental influence on the habits and attitudes towards diet and exercise that their children adopt.**

In fact, contrary to some widely voiced views and despite growing pocket money allowances, parents are still the gatekeepers of what their children eat. Research shows (BMRB, Mintel figures 2002) that over 70% of chocolate bought for 7-10 year-olds is bought by parents, this figure rises to over 80% for crisps. Therefore, any **effects that promotion of food may have on children, is dominated by what is available** at home and in the lunch box.

Conclusion

The advertising industry therefore agrees with two of the three suggestions made by this resolution (increase opportunities for exercise and food education), but believes that lobbying government for further regulation on promotions will not achieve the implementation of effective strategies. Promotion of healthy lifestyles and educating consumers on how to achieve healthy lifestyles is the key to long-term change and improvement of diets and exercise. Restrictions and prohibitions will not have any effect, particularly in the long-term. Obesity is a problem that needs to be taken seriously by all stakeholders - symbolic measures restricting a by-product of the food manufacturing industry would be counter-productive.