

Document 1 - Evidence Brief

Marketing of Food and Beverages to Children and Youth

The Issue: The impact of food and beverage marketing on children's health

Healthy habits and behaviors in adulthood begin in childhood. Unhealthy eating over a lifetime is associated with a range of co-morbidities¹. Unhealthy diet is also a key modifiable risk factor for non-communicable diseases. Unhealthy diets increase non-communicable disease prevalence in populations through raised blood pressure, raised blood glucose, abnormal blood lipids and overweight/obesity¹. While deaths from non-communicable diseases primarily occur in adulthood, the risks associated with unhealthy diet begin in childhood and build up throughout life¹.

Overweight and obesity continues to be a local issue, in children and youth. In a 2013 survey of Ottawa students in Grades 7 through 12, 15% identified as being overweight (10,300) and 8% identified as obese (5,800)². 19.8% of Ontario children aged 6-11 are overweight and obese based on Statistics Canada³. Obesity has tripled since the late 1970's. In terms of consumption of foods, children and youth who consume five or more servings of vegetables and fruit a day are less likely to be overweight or obese.⁴ In 2013-14, 41% of Ottawa residents aged 12 and older reported eating 5 or more servings per day of vegetables and fruits while 59% of residents reported eating less than 5 servings per day⁵. Nearly half (47%) of Ottawa youth (aged 12 to 19 years) reported consuming vegetables and fruits five or more times a day, similar to the rest of Ontario⁵.

Evidence from literature reviews from various health agencies, as well as systematic literature reviews, have demonstrated that there is a link between unhealthy food choices, unhealthy eating, childhood obesity and the marketing of unhealthy foods and drinks. Marketing refers to any form of commercial communication or message that is designed to, or has the effect of, increasing the recognition, appeal and/or consumption of particular products and services. It comprises anything that acts to advertise or otherwise promote a product or service¹. Marketing techniques include:

advertising, sponsorship, product placement, sales promotion, cross promotions using celebrities, brand mascots or characters popular with children, web sites, packaging, fun foods, labelling and point-of-purchase displays, e-mails and text messages, philanthropic activities tied to branding opportunities, product sampling and communication through "viral marketing" and by word-of-mouth^{6,7,8}. Television is an important source of advertising, however it is more and more complemented by other

forms of marketing that focus on branding and building relationships with consumers⁸.

Children are particularly vulnerable to food advertisements⁹. Before age five, most children cannot distinguish advertisements from unbiased programming and before age eight; they do not understand the intent of marketing messages and believe what they see¹⁰. Children aged 10 to 12 understand that advertisements are designed to sell products, but they are not always able to be critical of these advertisements¹⁰.

Evidence demonstrates that both children and youth need protection from marketing of food and beverages. The World Health Organization further stated that marketing targeted at older children and adults often reach younger children. Narrowly-defining age range may not adequately protect young children¹¹. A study of the Quebec regulation (restriction to under 13) and studies in the United States (restrictions to under 18) showed that when regulations only apply to children, food and beverage companies intensify their marketing efforts, targeting teens^{12,13,14}.

The research on the impact of marketing of unhealthy food and beverages is summarized below.

- Evidence shows that television advertising influences children's food preferences, purchase requests and consumption patterns¹⁵.
- Evidence from literature reviews by the Institute of Medicine and the World Health Organization shows that marketing of unhealthy food and sugar- sweetened beverages contributes to childhood obesity^{16,17}.
- The Institute of Medicine systematic review on the issue concluded that food and beverage marketing is a likely contributor to less healthful diets and may contribute to negative diet-related health outcomes and risks among children¹⁶.
- Advertising of unhealthy foods may be one of the many factors that contribute to poor food choices and potentially lead to excess weight gain¹⁷.
- Findings from the American Psychological Association Task Force on Advertising and Children demonstrate that food and beverage marketing is an element of the obesogenic environment that contributes to childhood obesity¹⁸.
- Research from the World Health Organization demonstrates that marketing and easy access to unhealthy foods high in fat, sugar, salt and calories, and sugar-sweetened beverages have contributed to rising caloric intake^{19,20}.
- The Pan American Health Organization demonstrated that increased consumption

of ultra-processed foods is correlated to changes in obesity rates and can be attributed to increased availability and marketing of these foods and beverages²¹.

- Studies show that foods children eat and ask their parents to buy can be influenced by advertising^{10,22}.

Policy in Marketing

Since 1980, the province of Quebec's Consumer Protection Act has prohibited commercial advertising targeted to children under 13 years²³. Compared to children in the rest of Canada, children in Quebec see fewer food/beverage ads, are not exposed to some food categories (i.e. sugary cereals, candy, child-targeted snacks like fruit gummies), and the advertisements they see are less powerful (i.e. they use fewer marketing techniques such as licensed characters and spokes-characters that appeal to children)²⁴. This type of regulation in Quebec is associated with decreased fast food consumption - as much as a 13% reduced propensity to consume fast food per week²⁵. This translates to 16.8 million fewer fast food meals sold in the province, and an estimated 13.4 million fewer fast-food calories consumed per annum in Quebec²⁶.

In 2014, 46.3% of Quebec residents 12 years and older, met the recommended intake of 5 or more servings of vegetables and fruit per day. As such, Quebec was the lone province above the national average; while most other provinces or territories were below the national average, except for Alberta (38.8%), British Columbia (39.7%) and Yukon (41.5%), which were about the same²⁷. They also have the lowest childhood overweight and obesity rates compared to the Canadian average among 6-11 year olds²⁸. Policies focused on improving our food environments help improve Canadians' eating habits²⁹.

Marketing to Children and Youth Municipal Policy Options identified by Heart and Stroke's the Children are Not Alright report - Supporting Literature

Option 1

Restrict food and beverage marketing to children on municipal property, such as childcare settings, libraries, public transit, recreation centres and parks.

Studies show that foods children eat and ask their parents to buy can be influenced by advertising. Food advertisements are often for products that are high in salt, fat, sugar and calories¹⁶. The World Health Organization reported that although television remains an important medium, food and beverage marketing uses multiple messages in multiple channels, including sports sponsorships¹. Observational research in 51 recreation

facilities in 4 provinces shows that 41-73% of ads shown were for unhealthy food and drinks³⁰. Little research has examined food and beverage advertising to children in day care centres, theatres, and other settings, which is an important limitation³¹.

Option 2

Restrict food and beverage marketing in schools.

Schools have broad authority to control commercial messages on their campuses. Commercialism in schools tends to fall into seven overlapping categories: sponsorship of school programs, exclusive agreements, sponsorship of incentive programs, appropriation of space on school property, sponsorship of supplementary educational materials, fundraising, and digital marketing³².

Students are generally unable to avoid these activities; moreover, they tend to assume that what their teachers and schools present to them is in their best interest³³.

Ontario PPM 150 is the School Food and Beverage Policy, which sets out nutrition standards for foods and beverages sold in publicly funded elementary and secondary schools in Ontario. School boards are required to ensure that all foods and beverages sold in schools meet the requirements of this policy³⁴. While PPM 150 places restrictions on the foods and beverages for purchase in school vending machines, research indicates that few schools achieve compliance with this policy³⁵. Additionally, the policy is not applicable to foods sold in schools for non-school purposes, or foods sold for fundraising activities, and the policy does not include any standards regarding the marketing of foods and beverages to children on school property³³.

Option 3

Limit access to food and beverages high in salt, fat, sugar or calories on municipal property.

A high consumption of sugary beverages and unhealthy, foods high in saturated and trans fat, sugar and sodium is associated with an increased risk of overweight and obesity, which is linked to other chronic conditions^{36,37,38,39,40,41,42,43}. Food environments can affect people's food purchasing and eating choices, the quality of their diets, and diet-related health outcomes^{44,45}. There is evidence for a positive relationship between increased availability of healthy foods in retail or food service outlets and better quality diets (i.e., consumption of fresh vegetables and fruits) in urban environments⁴⁶. A Canadian study looking at the food environment in British Columbia publically funded recreation facilities found that 68% of vending snacks were chocolate

bars and chips while 57% of beverages were sugar sweetened⁴⁷. Fundraisers held at the recreation facilities were also found to sell 'unhealthy' foods⁴⁷.

Option 4

Reviewing zoning restrictions close to child-focused settings, including schools and playgrounds.

Zoning and bylaws are being explored as tools to ensure availability of healthy food options in new developments or to limit access to fast food in specific communities or around schools⁴⁸. A United States study found that fast-food restaurants were statistically significantly clustered in areas within a short walking distance from schools, with an estimated 3 to 4 times as many fast-food restaurants within 1.5 km from schools than would be expected if the restaurants were distributed throughout the city in a way unrelated to school locations⁴⁹. Students from schools with 5 or more chain food retailers within 1 km from their schools were 2.5 times more likely to eat there⁵⁰. Furthermore, students with fast food restaurants or convenience stores near their school were found to be more likely to be overweight and have lower healthy eating index scores^{51,52,53}.

Option 5

Limit sole-sourced contracts with food and beverage companies to ensure the healthfulness of food and beverage options. This would include the numbers, content and placement of vending machines in child-focused settings.

Sole-sourced ('pouring rights') contracts between school districts and soft drink companies outline exclusive rights to sell one specific brand and are part of the commercialization of school food⁵⁴. These contracts, regardless of which setting they are in, elicit brand loyalty among children and youth who are especially vulnerable to this type of marketing. A 2015 systematic review on the influence of the food industry on obesity related dietary behavior among children found that schools without snack bars or pouring rights contracts showed significantly lower intake of sugar-sweetened beverages and energy-dense foods per school per child⁵⁵.

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