

Marketing Influences on our Children – Are We That Powerless? A Look at Current Practices in Other Countries

The sizzle, the crunch, the popping, the pouring, the frying, and even the munch! These are the sounds and sight our children can't escape. Very often children are wheedled by colorful, very attractive and tantalizing food ads on our TV & radio stations, see them plastered across the pages of print media or frequent pop ups on social media. Over the years the marketing and distribution of unhealthy foods within the Caribbean, especially Jamaica, has grown drastically. As a result, we've experienced an increase in the consumption of pre-packaged processed and ultra-processed products, as well as fast foods.

This has also resulted in an increase in the rates of overweight/obesity in our children. In 2013, there were an estimated 4 million overweight children aged under 5 years in Latin America and the Caribbean. Between 2010 and 2017, Jamaica experienced an increase in obesity among children aged 13-15 by 68%.¹ Previous studies published by the WHO and the American Academy of Pediatrics show that the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages engenders negative outcomes in children.

These ads influence children's eating patterns by increasing their current and future consumption of fast foods and the preference in types or brands of food.^{2,3,4} So what are we doing to curb these obesity/overweight rates in our children? Even more, what is Jamaica doing to reduce or prevent the "nag factor" behind these marketing tactics?



Based on numerous research findings and the growing concern, multiple countries have employed strategies to limit the effects of food commercials on children and their eating behaviours and overall health. Whether voluntary or in alliance with their local industries, these countries have all taken a similar stance in the call for action against the marketing of unhealthy foods to children and adolescents.

• Mexico

In 2010, the Mexican government designed a national plan to combat childhood obesity. A tax was passed on sugar-sweetened beverages leading to a decrease in purchases by 11.8%.⁵ The Mexican Health Ministry then restricted the advertisement of certain foods and sugar-sweetened beverages based on a nutrient profile. Restrictions apply to TV programs with more than 35% of the audience under 13 years old, between 2:30 pm and 7:30 pm on weekdays and 7:00 am and 7:30 pm on weekends. In July 2014, the government extended the restriction to films. Additional measures include front-of-pack labelling on food products and beverages.

• United Kingdom

The UK is the first to have passed marketing legislations against High fat, Sugar and Salt food to children. There are also "content rules" prohibiting the use of some promotional characters and product placement.⁶ The UK eventually saw a decline in the exposure to junk food ads by 37% in 2009. Their health department also reported a decrease in annual expenditure for these food and beverage ads aimed at children by 41% by year 2007.^{7,8}

• Chile

Chile has been noted to be an innovator of healthy initiatives especially as it relates to the food and beverage industry. Chilean law now restricts the advertisement of foods high in calories, saturated fats, salt and

sugar to children under 14 years, or audiences consisting of 20% children.⁶ The ban applies to televised media, magazines and websites. Also, these foods cannot be marketed within schools. The use of luring tactics such as promotional toys and coloring materials are also included in the ban.

• Sweden

In 1991, the Swedish government enforced a prohibition of all commercial ads aimed at children under 12 years. These bans targeted ads strategically placed before, during and after children's programmes.⁹ From a 2009 Yale University study, the rationale behind the Swedish government's action is that children of this age gap are unable to distinguish and discern between the actual TV programs and these ads.¹⁰ The government sought to protect children and their parents from these food and beverage ads, to prevent an increase in consumerism of unhealthy foods.^{9,10}

• Canada

The Quebec Consumer Protection Act was passed in 1981, which restricted the marketing of foods to children under 13 years old. The law states that marketing/advertisements are prohibited during children's programs on television or in newspapers, magazines, or in any other media targeting children.¹¹ The Quebec province experienced a decline in the rates of childhood obesity and fast food consumption.¹¹ The Government of Canada since 2017, started considerations for extending this ban to children under 17 in addition to revising the current Canada Food Guide.¹² The federal government saw that such an age group would be highly vulnerable. A part of the shift in restrictions included drinks high in caffeine and the government sought to raise the permissible age for purchasing and consuming caffeinated beverages.

• Poland

Poland's Act on Food and Nutrition Safety was first amended in 2006 to reflect the changes of sales and marketing restrictions

within pre-schools, primary and secondary schools. In 2014, Polish lawmakers moved to amend the Act, to prohibit the sale and promotion of foods which did not meet set nutrition standards.^{6,13} This was implemented with the aim of reducing the increasing rates of child and teenage obesity and to increase population awareness on healthy eating choices.

The policy took effect on September 1st 2015 and under the new measures implemented, only foods of significant nutrition benefit that were approved by the government could be provided within schools. A breach of the ban, resulted in fines of up to PLN5,000 (US\$1,500). Contracts with catering companies and suppliers who fail to comply with the new regulations would also be terminated.

• Ireland

Since 2013 the Irish have prohibited teleshopping, sponsorship and advertisements of foods high in fat, sugar and sodium/salt during children's TV and radio programmes where over 50% of the audience is under 18 years old. Sports stars and celebrities are banned from promoting any foods or drink products targeting

children under 15 years, unless as part of a public health campaign.^{6,8} In 2017, they later extended the law to print, cinema & digital media. HFSS foods are not allowed to be marketed via social media to children under 15 and where permissible, these ads must not exceed 25% of total ad space.⁶

• Finland

In 2005, the National Consumer Ombudsman of Finland published guidelines on the marketing of foods to children, after reaching a consensus about evidence-based current care guidelines on preventing and treating childhood obesity.¹⁴ Though there are no specific regulations restricting the marketing of unhealthy foods to children, authoritative recommendations have however been drafted by the Consumer Agency, Consumer Ombudsman and the National Public Health Institute. These recommendations focus on good advertising practices, misleading advertisements and means of marketing. In 2007, the National Board of Education and the National Public Health Institute recommended that schools should not provide vending machines selling sweets and beverages on their premises.¹⁴



A Call for Change

Far too many of our Jamaican children are eating too little healthy food, and too much unhealthy food! Our goal as a population should be that our children have nutritious, safe, sustainable and affordable foods. Bearing that in mind, we must then:

- Foster multisectoral cooperation to overcome our current challenges with obesity
- Strengthen our Jamaican governmental systems to better respond with policy changes

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