



# MARKETING AND CHILD OBESITY: QUESTIONING THE CLAIMED LINKAGE

by  
Adonis E. Hoffman

Childhood obesity has become one of nation's most troubling public health challenges, touching one in every three children under the age of twelve. Network news reports, reality television shows, congressional hearings and medical research have focused much-needed attention on what the Surgeon General dubbed America's most dangerous epidemic. While policymakers, public health experts and the food industry search for solutions, the implications for business are significant. Singled out as particularly egregious, the marketing of "junk foods"—those high in fat, sugar, and salt—to kids has been postulated as a chief contributor to childhood obesity. Despite disputable scientific bases for the claim, it has taken root among an activist sector that wants to limit or abolish children's advertising altogether.

Although most experts agree that childhood obesity results from a host of factors, including: lack of exercise, poor diet, larger portion sizes, sedentary activities, genetic predisposition and parental choices, food marketing, nevertheless, has become ground zero in the policy debate. Leading consumer advocates claim children are exposed to more "junk food" ads today than ever before, and that advertising leads to higher rates of childhood obesity because children are especially susceptible to marketing messages. They point to the United Kingdom's recent decision to eliminate all advertising of food products with high fat, sugar and salt content to children under sixteen as a viable solution to the problem in the U.S.

Several policymakers have challenged the food and marketing industries to examine the way they advertise to children and develop healthy food products on a voluntary basis, chiding companies to make changes or face the prospect of tighter government regulation. The Chairman of the Federal Trade Commission, Deborah Majoras, recently said: ". . . a government ban on children's food advertising is neither wise nor viable . . . [yet it] would be . . . equally unwise for industry to maintain the status quo...if industry fails to demonstrate good faith and to take positive steps, others may act in its stead."<sup>1</sup> Likewise, Senator Sam Brownback (R-KS) does not favor legislation or regulation and would prefer the industry to make measurable changes on its own. He warned that absent substantial progress, legislation could follow.<sup>2</sup>

***FTC Reviews Role of Media.*** Weighing into this contentious policy debate, the FTC has put forth conclusive research showing that children today see fewer ads on television for food products than in 1977. The report, *Children's Exposure to TV Advertising in 1977 and 2004: Information for the Obesity Debate* (The FTC Report)<sup>3</sup> reviews Nielsen data from the 2004 television season, and presents a comprehensive analysis of the exposure of children ages 2-11 to television advertising. The FTC Report disputes claims that kids see more television advertising today and casts doubt on the often-cited causal linkage between advertising, marketing and

<sup>1</sup>*Marketing, Self-Regulation & Childhood Obesity*, joint workshop, Federal Trade Commission and the Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, D.C., July 2005.

<sup>2</sup>Kaiser Family Foundation *Television Food Advertising to Children in the United States*, Mar. 28, 2007, Washington, D.C.

<sup>3</sup>Federal Trade Commission Bureau of Economics Staff Report, June 1, 2007. [www.ftc.gov](http://www.ftc.gov)

**Adonis E. Hoffman** is Senior Vice President and Counsel at the American Association of Advertising Agencies and Director of the American Business Leadership Institute's Center on Responsible Marketing and Media in Washington, D.C.

childhood obesity. “Our best estimates indicate that children’s exposure to food advertising on television has fallen by about 9 percent between 1977 and 2004. . . Our data do not support the view that children are seeing more advertising for low nutrition foods.”<sup>4</sup> The Report follows research first presented at a 2005 joint workshop with the Department of Health and Human Services on marketing, self-regulation, and childhood obesity in July 2005, and it tallies not just the number of ads aired during the time period studied in 2004, but also takes into account the size of the audience viewing the ads. The FTC had conducted earlier research on children’s viewing habits in connection with its Children’s Advertising Rulemaking in 1978.

The timeliness of the FTC Report cannot be overstated. It is the latest in a series of competing studies on the connection between media, marketing and childhood obesity and comes in the wake of research by the Kaiser Family Foundation (Kaiser Study) which found kids seeing more, not fewer, ads.<sup>5</sup> The Kaiser Study combined content analysis of TV ads with detailed data on children’s viewing habits and was guided in large measure by two earlier reports of the Institute of Medicine (IOM), both of which cited increased exposure to media as a major factor in the rise in childhood obesity.<sup>6</sup>

**Task Force on Media and Childhood Obesity.** In late 2006, Senators Brownback and Harkin, along with FCC Commissioners Martin, Copps and Tate called for a *Joint Task Force on Media and Childhood Obesity*, a public-private group dedicated to examining the impact of media and advertising on children’s health. With a mandate to develop new policy options, the Task Force met over a period of several months to discuss the problems associated with childhood obesity and what each stakeholder group could do to address them. The Task Force report is due in the summer of 2007 and is expected to present a range of recommendations, including changes in the way advertising is directed to kids and a media literacy campaign.

**Self-Regulation, Corporate Responsibility and Industry Initiatives.** Acknowledging both market and policy mandates for change, the industry has redoubled its commitment to self-regulation and corporate responsibility. In the past three years, food manufacturers have introduced thousands of new or reformulated products with improved nutrition, reduced saturated and trans fats, and lower calories, sugar and sodium. Restaurants have introduced healthier menu options and reduced portion size items.

In an unprecedented move, eleven of the largest food and beverage companies recently launched the *Children’s Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative*, a voluntary program pledging to: (1) Devote half their advertising to children to encourage healthier dietary choices and/or healthy lifestyles; (2) Limit products shown in interactive games to healthier dietary choices, or incorporate healthy lifestyle messages into the games; (3) Not advertise food or beverage products in elementary schools; (4) Not place food and beverage product placement in editorial and entertainment content, and (5) Reduce the use of third-party licensed characters in advertising.<sup>7</sup>

**Conclusion.** Taking cues from the market, and building on cooperation with advocates and government, food companies, marketers and media appear to be in the forefront of the battle against childhood obesity. As the policy debate continues, a strong case can be made for the value and efficacy of self-regulation. The recent FTC Report casts doubt on the linkage between marketing and childhood obesity and suggests that industry is moving in the right direction. Although marketing may not be a major part of the problem, it promises to be a big part of the solution to the childhood obesity crisis facing our nation.

<sup>4</sup>FTC Report, ES-7.

<sup>5</sup>*Food for Thought: Television Food Advertising to Children in the United States*, Kaiser Family Foundation Report (2007).

<sup>6</sup>*Food Marketing to Children and Youth: Threat or Opportunity*, Institute of Medicine, 2005. *Preventing Childhood Obesity: Health in the Balance*, Institute of Medicine, 2004.

<sup>7</sup>Participants include: Cadbury Schweppes USA; Campbell Soup Company; The Coca-Cola Company; General Mills, Inc.; The Hershey Company; Kellogg Company; Kraft Foods, Inc.; Masterfoods; McDonald’s; Pepsi-Co, Inc.; and Unilever. [www.cbbb.org/initiative](http://www.cbbb.org/initiative).