

Canadian Psychological Association
Issues and Recommendations about Advertising and Children's Health Behaviour
May 2011

There is significant public and government concern about the incidence and prevalence of lifestyle and behaviour-related chronic diseases among Canadians. The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) maintains that many chronic diseases that result in death can be prevented or delayed. In September of 2010, provincial, territorial and federal ministers of health agreed that in order to help Canadians live longer in health, there is a need to promote and support behaviours in children that include healthy eating and maintaining healthy weights. Unhealthy behaviours in childhood not only pave the way for ill health in adulthood, but the disorders associated with such behaviours (e.g., Type II diabetes) are increasingly being diagnosed in childhood.¹

The PHAC and its provincial and territorial partners intend to work together to curb obesity in children and have identified three key priorities: (1) creating environments that support healthy behaviour, (2) identifying factors that put children at risk for obesity and intervening early, and (3) making healthy food choices more available and accessible while decreasing the accessibility of unhealthy food choices².

There is a growing body of literature and concern that the accessibility and availability of unhealthy food choices is directly related to how such foods are marketed to children. A report on promoting healthy weights for Canadians, put out in 2006 by the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI)³, noted that in Australia one-third of all television advertising broadcast during children's viewing times were for food. Many were for food products high in fat and sugar, with fruits and vegetables the least advertised among food products. The report goes on to say that in the United Kingdom, children who are overweight and obese are more familiar with food advertisements than those who are of a healthy weight.

In 1980, Quebec led Canada in placing restrictions on advertising to children, and other countries have done similarly. In 2004, the American Psychological Association (APA) released a report of its task force on advertising and children. Although several of its recommendations were directed to the discipline of psychology and the need for further research, two were directed toward government and the advertising industry. The report called for a ban on television advertising to children under 8 years of age and recommended that when advertising to children, any disclaimers about a product be stated in a way that children can readily understand.⁴

In May of 2010, the Centre for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), along with 18 other Canadian not-for-profit organizations interested in health and children, called on Canada's

¹ <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hp-ps/hl-mvs/framework-cadre/intro-eng.php>

² <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hp-ps/hl-mvs/framework-cadre/intro-eng.php>

³ http://secure.cihi.ca/cihiweb/products/healthyweights06_e.pdf

⁴ <http://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/advertising-children.pdf>

Minister of Health to support and extend Quebec legislation by federally regulating marketing to children⁵.

In 2010, CSPI brought this issue - a ban on television advertising to children under 8 years of age - to the attention of CPA and its Committee on Public Policy. The psychological literature relevant to advertising to children has considerable breadth and involves findings in developmental, social, industrial-organizational, and health psychology as well as research in other related fields (paediatrics, public health, economics, marketing and advertising, communications). Further, there are significant ethical considerations attendant on limiting, or not, advertising to children.

A summary of the psychological literature on the impact of advertising to children follows...

- There is research to support the view that children, especially those under 8 years of age, lack the cognitive capacity to understand the advertising directed to them. They might not understand the difference between programming and an advertisement. They might not understand that a company that promotes a product is doing so out of self-interest and not solely out of the best interests of the child. They might not understand the disclaimers that accompany the advertisement –that it may have no fat (which is good) but does have lots of sugar (which is not). As a result, children are at risk of being manipulated unfairly by advertising. Society has a duty to protect children and should therefore eliminate this risk. This literature and the associated position are well articulated in the APA task force report (see footnote 3).
- There are some studies showing a relationship between children’s exposure to advertising and requests made of parents to buy the items advertised, parent-child conflict, and preferences for foods of lower nutritional value.
- There is some evidence that eliminating advertising aimed at children changes behavior (e.g., the rate of family visits to fast food restaurants seems to be lower in Quebec than elsewhere in Canada; children in Sweden make fewer purchase requests than children in the United Kingdom).
- There is evidence that teaching children to resist advertising (i.e., to become "educated consumers," as advocated by some advertising councils) is not effective in changing actual consumption. Children may learn to critique the ads, but still want or buy the products advertised.

Other considerations impacting decisions of whether to ban advertising to children...

- In absence of a total ban on advertising to children, what benchmarks should be recommended about what products to ban and to whom. When does yogurt become a

⁵ <http://cspinet.org/canada/pdf/comment.protectchildrenfrommarketing-19ngos.pdf>

dessert? If bans are age-related (e.g., no advertising to children under 8 years old) how do we decide that an ad marketed to children 9 years or older really has no appeal to, or impact on, children who are 8?

- Purveyors of some of the food or lifestyle products that many might consider unhealthy (e.g., fast food burgers or French fries) also support healthy activities and events like youth soccer and hockey teams or literacy programs. What will be the impact of a ban on advertising on these activities in support of children and youth?
- Is there sufficient evidence that instituting a ban changes behaviour when the ban exists in a larger context where there is no ban? Children in Quebec have access to Ontario programming. Canadian children have access to American programming. Further, there appears to be limited evaluation of the impact of legislation to ban advertising on children's weight and behaviour⁶. It would be worth considering a collective and cooperative engagement among neighbouring countries for a ban to have its maximum intended effects.

CPA's position...

The CPA shares in communities' concerns about the rising incidence of obesity and associated disorders in childhood. CPA underscores the importance of supporting behaviour in childhood that will lay the foundation for health and healthy behaviour in adulthood. The kind of information made available to children about diet and lifestyle undoubtedly impacts their preferences and choices and the choices they endeavor to get their parents to make on their behalf. Children may be too young to be informed consumers of the products being advertised to them, but they are not too young to be persuaded to choose these products – products that may not be in the best interests of their health now and into the future.

CPA's recommendations...

CPA calls on researchers and practitioners of psychology to contribute to knowledge about the most effective ways to help children to develop healthy behaviours. CPA is supportive of messages to children that promote behaviours in the service of a healthy lifestyle. CPA calls on government, corporate and individual citizens and communities to do the same in the best interest of Canada's physical and mental health.

⁶ http://secure.cihi.ca/cihiweb/products/healthyweights06_e.pdf